Pixel Fold review: The first foldable that actually feels like a tablet

Enlarge / The Pixel Fold’s inner display.
Ron Amadeo

reader comments

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After years of rumors and at least one canceled attempt, Google is finally releasing a foldable smartphone. Samsung has been in the foldables business for four years now, and with a ton of Chinese OEMs following in Samsung’s footsteps, you could be forgiven for thinking that the Pixel Fold would simply copy what Samsung is doing. But Google is entering the foldable world with a vision of its own, and it’s one I really like. This is the foldable I have long wished for: a device that’s a phone when folded up and a tablet when unfolded.

The usual Android tablet app selection problems—which are getting better—are still present when in tablet mode. When you do find a tablet app, though, this feels like the first foldable that delivers on the promise of letting you do more on the big screen.

The Pixel Fold hardware also feels shockingly advanced. Google has turned in both the thinnest foldable on the US market *and* the one with the biggest battery, which is not what you would normally expect from the software company.

The elephant in the room, of course, is that durability is a

concern. In fact, I was the first person to break a Pixel Fold. Companies like to talk up the “ultra-thin glass” used as a middle layer in foldable screens, but since you can break it with almost anything, including a scratch, it’s not really *protective*. The only actual protective layer is a thin plastic sheet.

And at $1,800, the Pixel Fold was always going to be a luxury item instead of a practical workhorse.

The “tablet-first” foldable

What shape should a foldable be? That’s still an open question.

The inner screens are all some kind of rectangle, sure, but the industry hasn’t settled on a standard set of aspect ratios for them. One school of thought says a foldable should be “two normal smartphone screens next to each other,” which prioritizes using split-screen mode. This is where the Galaxy Fold lands, with its 2176×1812 inner display. That’s usually reported as a “6.5” aspect ratio, but you could also call it 21:17, or very close to two normal 21:9 smartphone screens next to each other.

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Samsung-style hardware has a certain practicality to it, as the selection of big-screen Android apps is still small. The display on a Samsung-style foldable, being taller than it is wide, tends to keep apps in phone mode. When the phone is closed, you get a phone app; when the phone is open, you get a double-width phone app. Samsung tends to prioritize multitasking with two (or three!) phone apps in a split-screen view. App scaling in Android is complicated, and though there are settings you can change, this is how it works for most apps.

Enlarge / Many of Google’s interfaces go with this 50/50 split, and the left and right sides are often different colors.
Ron Amadeo

Google is going in a totally different direction. The Pixel Fold opens up to a screen that is 1840×2208—wider than it is tall, making it look, feel, and run like a mini-tablet. When you open the device up, apps kick over into a dual-pane interface much more readily than they do on tall devices.

A look at the spec sheet might make you wonder if the screen is just a sideways Galaxy Fold display. That may be true for the hardware, but the software doesn’t work like it does on a Galaxy Fold. The Pixel Fold software package feels like a new, foldable-focused release of Android. We’ve seen bits and pieces of tablet design on a Samsung foldable, but it still

feels geared toward multitasking, while the Pixel Fold has a “tablet-first” design for both the hardware and software.

For starters, Google is releasing 40-plus in-house “foldable-optimized” apps along with the Pixel Fold, and many of the heavy hitters, like Google Maps, Gmail, Gboard, and Calendar, look great on this screen, with dual-pane views and controls in all the right spots. A bunch of third parties are releasing foldable apps now, too, including WhatsApp, TikTok, Spotify, Evernote, Dropbox, and Microsoft apps like Office. The core Android OS also feels like it has been given some foldables polish, with the settings, clock, calculator, contacts, and phone apps all getting new interfaces for foldables and a new taskbar showing up throughout the OS.

Google often fails at providing a cohesive ecosystem, either because the software and hardware aren’t on the same schedule or because it gave up on an idea halfway through making it. The Pixel Fold shows surprisingly good coordination across Google’s OS and app selection. There are plenty of things Google could improve, but as a first-generation release, the Pixel Fold is impressive.

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