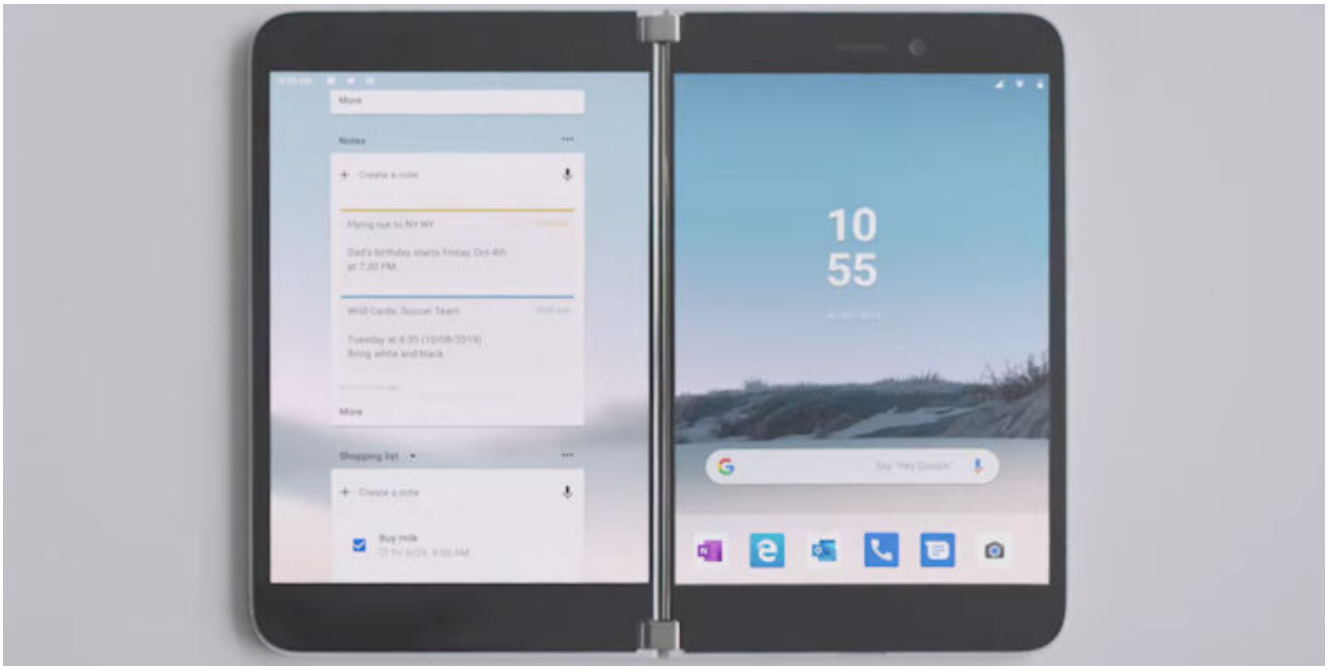
The Surface Phone is real! Microsoft surprises with a dual-screen Android phone



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- The Microsoft Surface Duo. It’s a dual-screen Android phone.
- This back view shows off the Windows logo and the hinge.
- It folds up like this for easy carrying.
- You can also fold it around the other way, with the screens out.
- I think it’s mandatory at Microsoft to add pen support to all products. So naturally, there’s a pen.
- What are you supposed to do with two screens? Well, use two apps at once, of course!
- Here, if you drag an email app to the hinge, you’ll put

the app on both screens.
- In two-screen mode, you get the inbox on one side and a message on the other.
- Long-press the Google Maps link, and drag the link to the other screen.
- You'll keep your app open while opening Google Maps on the other screen.
- Let's talk form factors. You can use it like a mini laptop, with a keyboard at the bottom.
- The keyboard. Also note what looks to be a volume rocker and a power buttons on the bottom edge.
- The bottom can also hold game touchscreen controls.
- The Duo can be used book-style, for reading.
- Prop it up on a table like a tent.
- It's got the Google apps.

Which narrative should we go with for this one? *The long-rumored Surface Phone has finally arrived! The Microsoft Courier is back from the dead! After the death of Windows Phone, Microsoft finally gave in and made an Android phone!*

However you want to frame this news, meet the Microsoft Surface Duo, a dual-screen Android phone made by the company that makes Windows.

Microsoft did not say a lot about the Surface Duo during its big Surface press event. The release date is "Holiday 2020″—that's right, the company announced the Surface Duo more than a year before it is scheduled to go on sale. We have no idea what specs the Duo has other than two 5.6-inch displays, and there's no announced price.

Microsoft's chief product officer for the Devices group, Panos Panay, said the device was designed to bring together the "best of Microsoft" with the "best of Google." This means the Duo is a fully Google-approved Android device, with a full suite of Google apps plus pre-loaded Microsoft apps.

Between two screens

Between the two screens, the device has a 360° hinge. You can fold the phone closed with the two screens protected on the inside, or you can fold it all the way in the other direction with the screens on the front and back. In this form factor, the Surface Duo looks like an extra-wide smartphone. Microsoft demoed all the usual configurations of a 360° hinge on a laptop: lay it out flat on a table in horizontal or landscape orientation, hold it like a book, use it like a mini-laptop, fold it over and use it like a normal, single-screen phone, or prop it up in a tent position for movie watching. The hinge can do it all.

The inside of the Duo is not particularly handsome. I'll say it—the bezels are far bigger than display bezels need to be on a modern device design, and Microsoft doesn't seem like it's doing anything with the space. The bottom-screen typing demo is particularly painful to see: the person has to stretch their hands across the bezel on either side to reach the landscape keyboard. If you look closely in the video, you can see that most of the normal smartphone parts seem to live on the right half of the device. In the "book" orientation, the USB-C port is on the bottom of the right screen, the earpiece and microphone are above and below the right screen, and the power and volume rocker is on the right side.

Microsoft's suggestions for the dual-screen device were things we've mostly seen before. You can run two apps side-by-side and drag links and other items between them. Some Microsoft apps have special support for the dual-screen interface. One example of an email app worked a bit like a tablet UI: you get a inbox on the left screen with an individual message on the right.

[embedded content]
Why announce a product a year ahead of time? Just before the Duo's unveiling, Microsoft made a big deal out of the Surface

Duo. But this device doesn’t look like huge innovation. Dual-screen Android devices like this have been tried numerous times, and the expense and bulk of the extra screen has never caught on. The first one was the Kyocera Echo, a dual-screen Android 2.2 phone that came out in 2011. After that came the Sony S2 “Tablet” with two 5.5 inch displays. We had the ZTE Axom M in 2017, and most recently there was the LG V50, which had an attachable second screen.

The one thing the Surface Phone has going for it is that it’s remarkably thin. When folded, it doesn’t seem like it has the pocket-busting thickness that other dual-screen smartphones have. It is very wide though, and without knowing the battery or processor, we can’t be sure how much of a tradeoff you’ll have to make for that thinness. Maybe thinness is enough to finally make the dual-screen phone concept catch on. Other than that, all the productivity demos Microsoft showed today were also shown years ago when these other dual-screen phones launched.

Samsung, Huawei, and others have been investing in smartphones with foldable OLED displays that unfold into a big tablet, and Microsoft’s phone can kind of be seen as an answer to that trend. The dual-screen idea is missing the ability to turn into a big, single screen, though. The one-big-screen concept is great for games and other media.

Announcing a phone like this a year in advance is a strange move, and doing so gives the whole endeavor a whiff of vaporware. Shortly before the unveiling, Panay bragged to the journalists in attendance that this was the one device that didn’t get leaked. Announcing a product more than one year ahead of time is certainly a way to make that happen. Maybe Microsoft just thought it couldn’t keep the device a secret over the next year. Maybe Microsoft wanted to announce the Duo on its own terms before the leaks start. If anyone thinks the Surface Duo is a good idea, a full year should be plenty of time to see some Chinese clone devices pop up.

Check back in the holiday season of 2020, I guess.

Listing image by Microsoft

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