The world’s first foldable phone is charmingly awful

The Royole FlexPai is the sort of device that companies rush out when they feel the absolute imperative to be first with some new technology. I don’t blame Royole — a five-year-old company literally founded for the purpose of developing and selling flexible displays — because it faced the existential threat of Samsung coming in and stealing its thunder with a rival foldable device. So Royole hurriedly threw the FlexPai together and let the world gawk at its wondrous, foldable awfulness.

I got to grips with the FlexPai today and I was amused by how dysfunctional most of its software was. But let’s talk hardware first. Measuring 7.8 inches diagonally, this is an Android tablet in its extended mode which becomes two, not just one, Android phones when it’s flexed closed. Yes, Royole is apparently a hyper-ambitious company. It provides two SIM slots and *tries* to provide an auto-detection system that only shows content on the half of the folded screen that you’re facing at any given time. One of the two phones is assigned as the primary, and its content spills out onto the full tablet when the device is opened.



You get a 1920 x 1440 resolution on the full display, which shrinks to less than half when you're in phone mode, thanks in large part to the huge swath of disused OLED screen that wraps around the wide-arcing hinge. Still, a 308ppi pixel density is sufficient for the screen to look reasonably sharp. The bigger issue with it is that it's simply of poor quality. In my 40 minutes with the FlexPai, I noticed color banding, weird dim areas right in the middle of the screen, and the sort of hyper-saturation that was characteristic of Samsung's first and second-generation AMOLED screens from many years ago.

Royole has done a good job of making the FlexPai robust. I initially feared I would break it when approaching the fully folded position, but that's when it just snaps cleanly into a stiff, closed form. It actually requires a fair amount of force from the user to open and close it, which gives me a reassuring sense that it can withstand rough handling. A substantial cause for my reluctance to get too hyped up about foldables is the preconception that they'd be even more fragile than modern-day smartphones. But the Royole FlexPai

seems to have been engineered well enough to dispute that notion.

The biggest failure of the FlexPai is, predictably, its software and basic operation. Any time you rotate the device or fold / unfold it, it gets deeply confused and freaked out. I saw apps stacking on top of each other and overlapping with widgets as the tablet was transitioning into phone mode. I launched the camera accidentally more than once. There's nothing intuitive about the automatic switch between the two phones. Royole's software is called Water OS, and I definitely felt out of my depth. Logic and predictability are at a premium anytime you pick this device up.

Lest you think the Royole FlexPai is some sort of distant-future concept, you should know that it's already on sale in China for 8,999 yuan. That equates to roughly $1,320 in US currency, and Royole would happily sell you a developer edition for the same price over here in the States if you're into the sort of awkward, goofy weirdness this folding tablet provides.

Photography by Vlad Savov / The Verge

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