

PERSONAL TECHNOLOGY: REVIEW

Samsung Galaxy Fold Review: The \$2,000 Phone of the Future Is Here—Please Don't Break It

Samsung's relaunched foldable phone fixes some of the first issues, but the Galaxy Fold is still too fragile and limited for its hefty price tag



By

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A bottle of 100-proof whiskey? Around 40 words on the warning label.

A bottle of NyQuil? 60 words.

A box of fireworks? 100 words.

A Samsung Galaxy Fold? 115 words!

To be fair, the world's first foldable smartphone demands some added caution, especially for those of us who have become so accustomed to handling, well, smartphones:

- Don't press the screen with a sharp object, including pens. (Yes, the company that taught us to use a stylus is saying don't use a stylus.)
- Don't expose it to liquids or small particles. (This from the company that beat Apple in releasing a water-resistant phone.)
- Don't attach stickers or screen protectors to the screen. (Enough said.)
- Don't put near credit cards, medical devices or anything that could be impacted by magnets. (Good thing phones are never in the same pocket as credit cards!)

Yet I'm thrilled to report that unlike Samsung Electronics' original Galaxy Fold—whose release was canceled in April after screens started to break and reviewers (like me) started to question its



The Galaxy Fold starts as a phone with a 4.6-inch display, then folds out to a tablet with a 7.3-inch display. PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

survivability—the new version still works after a week and a half of testing.



Size-wise, the Galaxy Fold's 7.3-inch screen sits between the largest iPhone and the smallest iPad. PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Of course, all the warnings made me petrified to take the \$1,980 phone-tablet hybrid out of the box. I kept it in its ugly case much of the time and even brought it to a bubble of security to review it in my video. But when you put all of that aside, it's a true step forward.

Smartphones have become boring—so boring that the best thing I can do is advise upgrading every three to four years, because the innovation leaps are so few and far between.

But not the Galaxy Fold. It's the most exciting smartphone in years. I've been stopped multiple times by onlookers after they've seen me pull a modern-day Mary Poppins, removing a 7.3-inch tablet from my pocket. It's bananas!

But do I recommend that you buy a \$2,000 phone that needs more careful handling than a Fabergé egg? No way. The Fold has escaped the South Korean tech giant's labs too early, but it teaches us (and Samsung) the following about the future of mobile devices.



The Galaxy Fold comes with not one but two warning screens—one in a plastic wrapper around the device, the other on the startup screen. PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

No. 1: The Future Is Big

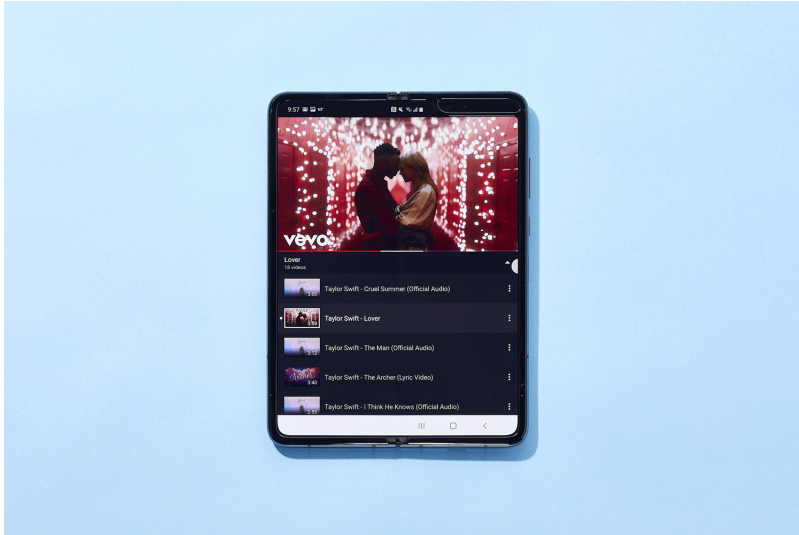
We no longer call phones “phablets” because all smartphones now have gigantic 5-to-6-inch screens. The Fold is proof that phone screens can get even larger, while the phones themselves stay manageable in size.

The big 7.3-inch screen, despite the crease in the middle, was preferable to my iPhone's 6.1-inch screen in a handful of situations. Watching the new Bill Gates docuseries on Netflix during my morning commute was far more immersive. At my daily morning meeting, I took notes on the left side of the screen and kept an eye on my inbox on the right. You feel like you're in the map when navigating with Google Maps. And reading on the Kindle app in bed was far more like reading on a dedicated e-reader.

I have very few—if any—nice things to say about the folded phone's 4.6-inch outer screen, however. I yearned for doll hands when it came to sending back a quick text message or even dialing a phone number. Nine times out of 10, I just gave up and unfolded the big tablet screen, which I still can't do one-handed gracefully. The best thing about the folded phone was holding it

to my ear for clear and loud phone calls. Better that than a massive tablet, unless I want to block out the sun.

Huawei's Mate X folding phone has a 6.6-inch outer screen that unfolds into an 8-inch tablet. This seems far more practical for daily use—but it has been repeatedly delayed. Further evidence: This is not the year of the folding phone!



The best thing about the Fold? The immersive full-screen tablet apps. PHOTO:F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

No. 2: The Future Is Software

The Fold's hardware gets lots of attention, but its Android software tricks deserve some, too. Open an app on the small screen, unfold the phone, and the app automatically supersizes. (In some cases, I got a pop-up that the app needed to restart.) Samsung has also worked directly with Android app makers, including Instagram and Spotify, to refine the apps for the squarish tablet.

Placing two apps side by side works well, too. I often had my email on one side and a calendar or web browser on the other. You can actually position three apps on the screen, but that's overkill.

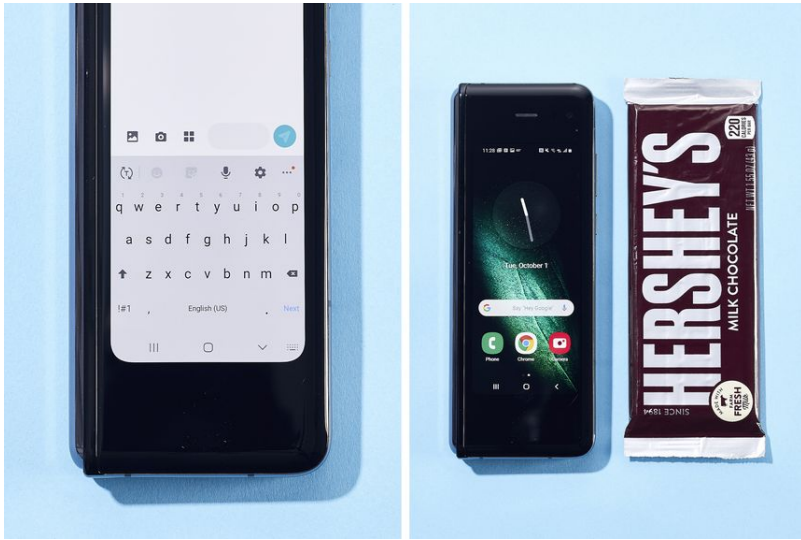
All these tricks point to something that we'll be seeing more often across our phones, tablets and computers—software that adapts to the screen we're on and lets us pick up where we left off. Apple recently took similar steps by giving software developers tools to create apps that work on iPhones, iPads and Macs.

My only real problem with the Fold's software? All of the preloaded AT&T crapware. I counted 10 apps from the cellular carrier.

No. 3: The Future Is Wireless

With two batteries inside, the phone lasted the full day on a charge and up to two days when I didn't use it much in the unfolded tablet mode. On my test, the unfolded screen streamed video

for 14.5 hours straight.



The outer surface of the folded-up Galaxy Fold isn't necessarily small, but the 4.6-inch screen that's built into it feels cramped.
PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

When you do need to charge, you can use a wireless charger or the fast charger in the box. Like the Galaxy S10 and Note 10, the Fold also supports Wireless Powershare. Turn on the setting, then place another Qi-compatible wireless-charging device on the back and the Fold will share its power—even with an iPhone.

Of course, headphone jacks are a thing of the past. Samsung includes its \$130 wireless Galaxy Buds in the box. For \$2K, it had better!

No. 4: The Future Is Expensive

The past few years have taught us that phone prices know no bounds. They have also taught us that a subset of buyers are willing to pay \$1,000 or more for innovation. In addition to its dual screens, the Fold is a loaded Samsung, with the full complement of cameras found on the Galaxy Note 10 and 512GB of storage. (No 5G, but that might be a good thing.)

The Fold isn't the innovation to buy right now—but even when it is, you can bet the price won't have fallen by much. Heck, even Samsung's Note 10 now starts at \$950, and a version of that with 5G and 512GB of storage costs \$1,400.

No. 5: The Future Is NOT Fragile

There's nothing like opening up your brand-new phone from the future to find not one but two lists of “care instructions”—one in a plastic wrapper around the device, the other on the startup screen.

Plastic—or, as Samsung says, “polymer”—is key to understanding this fragility. Glass can shatter, but it doesn't give, so a thin piece can easily protect the electronics that lie beneath it. Plastic



Samsung improved the Fold's screen protections, including strengthening the hinge, extending the screen protector under the frame and adding those 'T' caps to prevent debris from getting under the screen. PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

won't shatter, but it is easily bent, stretched, punctured or scuffed. That explains why there's still a small nick on the Fold's polymer screen from my fingernail.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

What would you do with a folding-screen phone? What's your dream big-screen phone app? Join the conversation below.

In addition to listing all the life-changing adjustments required of Fold buyers, Samsung did some adjusting of its own. The cover on top of the display now extends underneath the frame (as I suggested in my first Fold column) so it's no longer easy to peel off. Samsung says the hinge has been strengthened, the screen now has a metal layer underneath it and small caps have been put on top

of the screen hinge to prevent dust and dirt from getting under the plastic layer. Still, it feels fragile—even flimsy—next to a Galaxy S10.

Samsung does offer some assistance to those who do end up breaking it: a one-time \$149 screen replacement in the first year (\$599 afterward) and 24/7 “concierge” service.

“It’s important to remember that Galaxy Fold is a first-of-its-kind device that features new technologies and materials,” a Samsung spokeswoman said in a statement. “We are committed to continued innovations in the foldable space and are excited about the launch of Galaxy Fold.”

Still, I don't imagine that many people will rush out and buy a Fold, and any who actually do so aren't waiting for my permission. But I do recommend heading to a Best Buy, AT&T or Samsung store to check out the most exciting experiment in smartphones yet. While you're there, just steer clear of any knives, magnets, stickers, water, credit cards, lint, scissors, dust...



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The Galaxy Fold opens and closes like a book. PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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