

THE REGEX KING

/^Research for personal theory that Regular Expressions & cheat codes extend into the real world\$/ (email me)

Flip phone review

09 Dec 2021

I was inspired by [Laurel's phones post](#), and want to describe my flip phone rig.



Left to right: really old LG flip phone, hibernating Alcatel Go Flip V, active Sunbeam Orchid. It's too bad they get bigger over time!

My current phone

I currently use a Sunbeam Orchid, which is a flip phone running on a fork of Android called “BasicOS” that doesn’t have a browser or apps.

I like the philosophy of the company — they’re mennonites making specific technology choices — but I’ve actually never had a phone with a browser or apps before, so a lot of the thoughtful software constraints of this phone go over my head.

Because I don’t use apps, I don’t need a data plan, and so having a phone is pretty cheap (around 30 bucks a month). I’m at my computer most of the day, and have an iPad, so I’m app literate but I don’t choose or need to bring apps with me when I leave the house.

The one “spec” I genuinely care about is battery life. Unfortunately, the Orchid doesn’t fare well here: I only get about a day and a half on a charge. My previous flip phone (an Alcatel Go Flip V) had a battery that would last about 7 days or so. The one I used before that lasted around 2 weeks. I don’t generally agree with the sentiment that technology has gotten worse during my lifetime, but having been largely free from a charger until relatively recently, it sucks to re-enter a charger tethered lifestyle. Sunbeam is at least transparent about this mostly being the fault of VoLTE radios. We’ll see how long I last with the Orchid’s smartphone-esque battery life; I might just return to my older Alcatel flip phone, even though its software for things like group

texting is really bad compared to the Orchid.

How I get around

Most of my friends bought a smartphone sometime in the past ten years, but there are a couple of holdouts (Josh and Nobu) and sometimes we compare notes on how you can make it work. Here are a number of useful patterns that have supported my flip phone lifestyle:

- When I'm going somewhere, I'll try to study directions beforehand. It's relatively easy to memorize major transit or bike arterials, but the trick I've learned for remembering someone's house address or apartment number is to write a temporary little song with it in the lyrics (something like this). This works really well! If a route is super torturous, or I've got multiple stops, I'll take notes before-hand on a tiny piece of paper.
- When I'm lost, there's usually a physical map nearby. Many subway stations have detailed bus maps, but by far the best tool for unexpected wayfinding is a Citibike kiosk. Even if you're not a Citibike user, the kiosk lets you use a little map showing where you are, and you can zoom and drag it and see street names and everything. The LinkNYC kiosks are also sometimes useful when you just need to Google something nearby.
- Because my phone's battery life is usually pretty long, the fear of being "out of battery" largely goes away, and so the worst case scenario when I'm out and about is that I have to figure out who might be sitting near the internet and can help me look something up. I usually call Kathryn when this happens; it sort of feels like a quotidian version of when they call an "operator" in The Matrix.
- I sometimes end up in a situation where some kind of gatekeeper has made an assumption that everyone is expected to have a smartphone in order to do something. This happened most recently at my dentist, where they wanted me to sign a waiver on a website to get my teeth cleaned. It's oddly freeing to show them your phone and say "I can't do that"; sometimes this works, and they'll happily let you use some paper-based alternative instead. When that doesn't work, my hail mary strategy is to ask to use the gatekeeper's smartphone. Something about the personal phone boundary is so sacrosanct that often a gatekeeper will blink and just let you do whatever it is you were trying to do without requiring whatever website or app they wanted you to use (which is probably how it should be anyways!)

sms2tweet

TTT unfortunate

One of the great pleasures of having a phone without a data plan used to be that I could tweet stupid stuff out in the field, untethered from the feedback loop of Twitter's website, by texting an official Twitter phone number which is 40404. In a textbook case of one person ruining something fun for everybody, Twitter shut down tweeting via SMS in 2019 when its former CEO Jack Dorsey was hacked.

I'd always imagined it would be pretty easy to rebuild a simple tweet via SMS app myself, but it was perpetually one of these software projects that never quite justified the effort whenever I sat down to pre-write the code in my head. And so I just never built it. But when I got my latest flip phone I decided it was time to treat myself to this capability again, and I wrote a piece of software called sms2tweet that has reinstated write-only tweeting from my phone. It's fun to truly shout into the void this way!

To my fellow flip phone freaks

I love hearing from other people who use a flip phone. At this point I think I know about 4 or 5. But if you're reading this and use one: email me!