

Pebble Steel is good for the time being

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More tech companies are rolling out smartwatches, the latest in high-tech gear that, in terms of design, only gadget-lovers can appreciate.

But now there is another option for consumers looking for both style and function.

Unlike the original Pebble, which looks a bit techie, the Pebble Steel comes with a frame that is available in either black matte or brushed stainless steel. Both versions look elegant and each comes with two bands: one of leather and the other of metal.

I got a stainless-steel device and wore it with the leather band. The device weighed about the same as any other wristwatch I've worn and felt comfortable.

The only difference between a regular wristwatch and a Pebble Steel is that the smartwatch features a small black-and-white e-paper screen that is used to tell the time and display apps, games and other features.

I wore the watch at restaurants, bars and around friends, and no one ever noticed that it was anything other than a classy wristwatch until I started to play with it.

Before users can take the Pebble Steel out into the world, they first have to set it up, but that takes only a few minutes.

First, users download the Pebble app for either their iPhone or Android

device and use Bluetooth to pair the device with the watch. The Pebble app on the smartphone is used to manage the apps running on the smartwatch as well as selecting types of watch faces.

The smartwatch is controlled by four buttons on the sides. One button is to the left of the watch face, and the others are on the right. The left button is typically used to go back to a previous screen, and the middle button on the right is used to make selections and go to new screens. The top and bottom buttons on the right side are used to scroll through options in menu screens.

There were a few flaws on the Pebble Steel, but the Pebble app was the most frustrating. The app is sluggish, especially when users try to look for new apps to install on their smartwatch. Compared with other commonly used smartphone apps, the Pebble app often took longer to load new screens.

This isn't a major issue, but on mobile apps, speed should be a priority. Fortunately, the company could fix the speed of the Pebble app through a simple software update.

I found myself primarily using the Pebble Steel to check the notifications that I received on my iPhone. Any time somebody sent me a text, liked a photo of mine on Instagram or whenever I received any alert that showed up on my iPhone's notification center, it would also flash on the Steel's screen.

The advantage here is that users don't have to take out their phone every time it buzzes. Users simply glance at their watch to see what's happening.

Among the Pebble apps I tested during my trial, a few stood out. One of my favorites was Foursquare.

I use the geo-location social network daily, and the Foursquare app for the Pebble Steel makes it quicker to check in than using a smartphone. When I launched the Pebble version of Foursquare, the app came up with a list of places where I might be. The app's first recommendation was usually where I was already, so I just pressed the middle right button on the watch, and it checked me in. I didn't need to pull out my iPhone at all.

Another useful app was the Pebble Cam. This one required that I also buy a \$2.99 companion app for my iPhone.

Once I downloaded and set up both apps, I could stand the iPhone on its side on a flat surface, walk away, and check the screen on the Pebble Steel to see the camera's view on my smartphone. If I liked what I saw, I used the Pebble Steel like a remote control to tell the iPhone to snap a photo. Pebble Cam is a helpful app for when a selfie simply won't do and there's no one else around to take a picture.

Besides helpful apps, there are entertaining games available for the Pebble Steel.

One of the games I played was called Tiny Bird, which seemed like a rip-off of Flappy Bird but just as fun. Users press the top button on the right side of the Pebble Steel to keep the bird flying and from hitting any deadly pipes.

Another game was TrapBall. That one required that I move my wrist around and use the smartwatch's accelerometer to guide balls into little holes so that I could move up to the next level.

And of course, the Pebble Steel can also be used to skip or pause a song or go back to the previous tune that was playing on my smartphone. This feature is useful when users have their smartphone plugged into a

speaker and not in their hands.

Steel is not ideal for fitness, however. Users looking for a wearable device that they can use for fitness might be better served with a FitBit Force or another product.

The Pebble Steel requires users to install fitness apps, and most of them also require companion apps that users must install on their smartphones.

So if you're hoping to leave your smartphone at home and go running with just the Pebble Steel, that probably won't be possible. Also, running with a leather and metal watchband isn't the best idea or look.

In terms of durability, the Steel seemed up to the task.

At one point, I dropped the device on its face on a tile floor, but it was perfectly fine. The watch also can get wet without any negative effect on its performance.

The device's waterproofing is rated 5 atmospheres, meaning you can shower with it or swim with it in shallow water, and it'll be fine.

When it came to battery life, the Pebble Steel performed respectably. Pebble says the Steel is capable of delivering five to seven days of use from one charge. I managed to go less than five days before it warned me that the battery had fallen below 20 percent.

Still, the battery life was much better than the rival Samsung Galaxy Gear, which requires a charge every day.

So should you buy a Pebble Steel? It depends.

The smartwatch market is still very young, and many more companies

are expected to jump into it soon, including Apple and Google. It may be worth waiting another year to see what other devices come out before putting down \$249.99 for the Pebble Steel.

But if you really want a smartwatch right now and you are looking for something you can wear at the office or with your best clothes, the Pebble Steel is a fine option.

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