

Google's Pixel 2: A phone built for artificial intelligence

October 17 2017, by Anick Jesdanun



In this Wednesday, Oct. 4, 2017, file photo, a woman holds up the Google Pixel 2 phone, left, next to the Pixel 2 XL phone at a Google event at the SFJAZZ Center in San Francisco. The phones set themselves apart with promises to bake in Google's powerful artificial-intelligence technology for quick and easy access to useful, even essential information. You get some of that right away, but more will come later through free software updates and a wireless accessory. (AP Photo/Jeff Chiu, File)

What's most fascinating about Google's new Pixel 2 phone is what's to

come.

The phone sets itself apart with promises to bake in Google's powerful artificial-intelligence technology for quick and easy access to useful, even essential information. But much of the neat stuff will come later. The phone coming out Thursday is more of a teaser.

To be sure, the Pixel 2 is a solid phone. It's not as elegantly designed as an iPhone or a Samsung Galaxy phone. But it delivers a strong tie-in to Google's services, including those intended to fetch what you need automatically.

VISUAL SEARCH ENGINE

The Pixel 2 comes with Google Lens, a way of searching Google just by pointing your camera at a landmark, object or storefront. This can give you quick access to reviews and store hours. It might help identify that mysterious building you walk by every day. Google Lens will also pull out web addresses and phone numbers from signs so you can browse or call with just a tap.

The feature correctly identified paintings of obscure figures in American history at a museum in New York, and it knew which Starbucks I was standing in front of, out of several in the neighborhood. But it's not foolproof: The iconic United Nations building came across as a generic tower.

I found Google Lens slightly more reliable than a similar Samsung feature, Bixby Vision. Bixby tended to miss on identifying businesses; a Chinatown bakery serving pork buns was thought to be a CrossFit gym—quite the opposite. On the other hand, Bixby identified a plaque

dedicated to a Titanic victim, while Google just said, "Hmm."



In this Wednesday, Oct. 4, 2017, file photo, a woman looks at a Google Pixel 2 phone at a Google event at the SFJAZZ Center in San Francisco. What's most fascinating about Google's new Pixel 2 phone is what's to come. To be sure, the Pixel 2 is a solid phone, and what you're getting is a strong tie-in to Google's services, including those intended to fetch what you need without requiring much effort. (AP Photo/Jeff Chiu, File)

It's a good start, but both still have work to do. And for now, Google Lens requires you to take a photo first. Seamless, instant analysis is "coming soon." All you'll have to do is squeeze the bottom of the phone for the Google Assistant to pop up.

Last year's Pixel phone will also get Google Lens, though without the squeezing capability. Eventually, other Android phones and iPhones

should get it, too, but Google isn't saying when.

BETTER CAMERA

Last year's Pixel had a great camera, but it fell short in some shots because software processing made colors look too strong and clean at times. With the Pixel 2, colors look good without looking fake.

The Pixel 2 also introduces a "portrait" mode, which blurs out backgrounds to focus attention on the subjects. Apple's iPhone 7 Plus and 8 Plus and Samsung's Galaxy Note 8 manage this effect via a second [camera lens](#) to sense depth. Google does it all with software, so the regular-size model gets the capability as well, not just the larger XL.

Google says the feature works best with people and small objects. I got it to work for flowers and selfies (yes, it works with the front camera, too, something limited elsewhere to Apple's upcoming iPhone X). But I couldn't blur out tourists ambling behind statues; Apple and Samsung phones managed that with the depth [lens](#). Not to mention that second lens offers a 2x zoom without a reduction in quality.



In this Wednesday, Oct. 4, 2017, file photo, Google's Mario Queiroz speaks about the Google Pixel 2 XL phones at a Google event at the SFJAZZ Center in San Francisco. (AP Photo/Jeff Chiu, File)

MORE SMARTS

When locked, the phone continually listens for songs and automatically identifies the name and artist. There have been times songs ended before I could pull up SoundHound to do this. Google says all this is done on the phone itself, so it's not sending your music tastes to its servers. Google says the battery drain should be minimal.

Next month, \$159 wireless headphones called Pixel Buds will offer real-time audio translation, so two people can communicate using different languages, while hearing instant translations in a native tongue. A separate Google Translate app offers this now, but having the feature

built into Pixel should make it easier to use.

And speaking of translations, I'm hoping Google Lens will one day translate signs instantly when traveling. A camera feature in the Translate app isn't as automatic as Lens tends to be. Google says more capabilities are coming to Lens, but it didn't provide details.

PATIENCE, PLEASE

The fact that the Pixel is unfinished shouldn't deter would-be buyers. This is common these days, as more power comes through software updates rather than hardware. Samsung's Galaxy S8 phones shipped this spring without its much-touted Bixby assistant ready.

What you get in the \$650 Pixel 2 is a great workhorse. For elegance, you need the \$700 iPhone 8 or the \$750 Galaxy S8. The larger Pixel 2 XL starts at \$850, more than the iPhone 8 Plus and the S8 Plus. Apple and Samsung include headphones; Google doesn't. But the Pixel 2 comes with a USB-C adapter so you can plug in ordinary headphones; like the latest iPhones, the Pixel 2 has eliminated the standard headphone jack.

Verizon is again the only U.S. carrier to offer the latest Pixel, although you can buy models that will work with other carriers—and Google's own Project Fi service—at Google's online store. The [phone](#) is also coming to the U.K., Canada, India, Australia, Germany, Italy and Spain.

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