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TECH / APPLE

Pebble smartwatch review

Can Pebble make the first smartwatch for regular people?

by **Nilay Patel**

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0 Comments





pebble review hero 1020



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The Pebble smartwatch is a lot more than just a watch — it's the latest attempt to turn your wrist into the launchpad for a wearable computing revolution. It's also the preeminent symbol of the Kickstarter hardware revolution. After 85,000 orders, 10 million crowdfunded dollars, and one or two slipped ship dates, the Pebble is finally here, ready to pipe emails and texts directly to your wrist. So is the Pebble a gimmick or the start of a bold new platform? Has an indie hardware startup managed to produce the first smartwatch for regular people, or is this just another toy for nerds to eventually discard like almost every other smartwatch before it? What did our 10 million dollars actually buy us? Let's find out.

Video Review

Video Review

Design and hardware

Design and hardware

The Pebble stands out by not standing out

The Pebble stands out by not standing out — almost every other smart watch is a bulky, chunky affair, but chances are most people won't even realize you're wearing the Pebble until you tell them. It's slim and sleek, and when the backlight is off the screen blends in seamlessly with the borders of my black review unit. On the right side you'll find up / down

and select buttons, while the left side has a back button and a set of contacts for the Pebble's magnetic power connector, which aligns and latches on like Apple's familiar MagSafe system. It's a clever way to keep the Pebble waterproof without resorting to clunky port covers or flaps.

As for the screen itself, I would call it just okay: Pebble calls it "e-paper," but it's really a 114 x 168 "transflective" LCD that's designed for watches. It's functional, but ultimately it's a low-resolution black and white LCD, and low-resolution black and white LCDs are not renowned for their beauty. It's also covered by a curved plastic lens that can reflect light in weird ways — it's not a huge problem at all, but you'll notice it from time to time.

Let's hope Pebble finds a better screen next time

The screen itself always has content on it, whether it's the time, the music player, or a notification, and it's fairly readable in daylight without the backlight on. But the backlight makes a big difference: when it's off, the screen is roughly black and white, in the same way a Nook or Kindle screen is roughly black and white. But incoming notifications and particularly fast movements trigger the backlight, which adds an unexpected bluish tint to the screen. It works fine, but there's no way for it to feel super-premium if the screen looks cheap — the experience here is fundamentally all about the display, after all. I hope Pebble finds a better part the next time around.

The Pebble's polyurethane watchband is entirely unremarkable. It's there, and it holds the thing to your wrist comfortably. But it's tremendously boring and even somewhat cheap feeling, and I'm already shopping for a replacement — you can fit any standard 22mm band, so your options are basically unlimited.

But overall, the Pebble is a very nice piece of hardware — it's comfortable and small, and it works. You could put it in the designer watch case at a department store and it would blend right in, which is a big accomplishment. Holding it in your hand, it's amazing to think that it was designed and assembled by an independent hardware startup funded by Kickstarter. But we've known the Pebble looks cool for months now. The big question is — does it work?





Using Pebble
Using Pebble



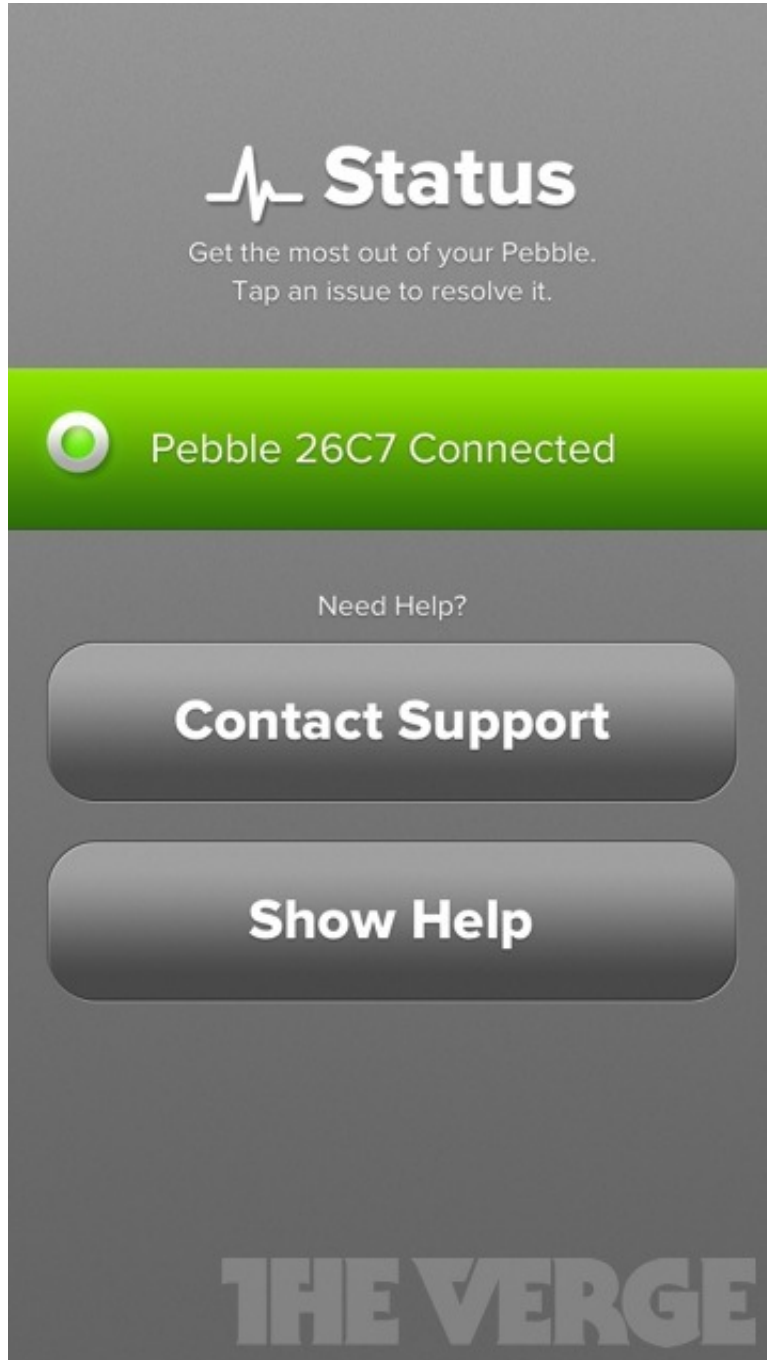
Out of the box, the Pebble is basically useless — it's designed to be used as a secondary display for your phone, and that means the experience of using a Pebble starts with setting up the Pebble app. And that's where things get interesting: Pebble supports both iOS and Android, but how that support works is wildly different on each platform.

iPhone

The Pebble app for iOS is basically a placeholder — you can download new watchfaces and troubleshoot connection problems, but that's about it. Everything else happens at the iOS system level: you pair the Pebble and select "show notifications," and you're theoretically off to the races. Well, sort of. iOS has the necessary underlying frameworks for supporting devices like the Pebble, but there's virtually no interface for managing any of it — you can't selectively send some app notifications to the Pebble but not others, or only get pings from one email account, or tweak any other settings. It's a little messy, and there's some real weirdness in the mix.

For example, getting third-party apps like Twitter, Facebook, and Gmail to send notifications requires a strange dance: you open each app's Notification Center preferences, select a

different notification style, and then reselect whatever one you actually wanted. That seems to link the notifications to the Pebble, and from there everything works just fine. But be warned: if the Bluetooth connection disconnects for any reason, you'll have to re-re-select all your notifications all over again. It's irritating, but it's clearly not Pebble's fault; Apple just hasn't built the right management tools into iOS yet.



And there are other places where it seems like iOS just doesn't know how to deal with Pebble: at first my phone seemed convinced that Pebble was actually a Bluetooth headset, and tried to route call audio and Siri to it. The music player controls worked fine with every app I tried,

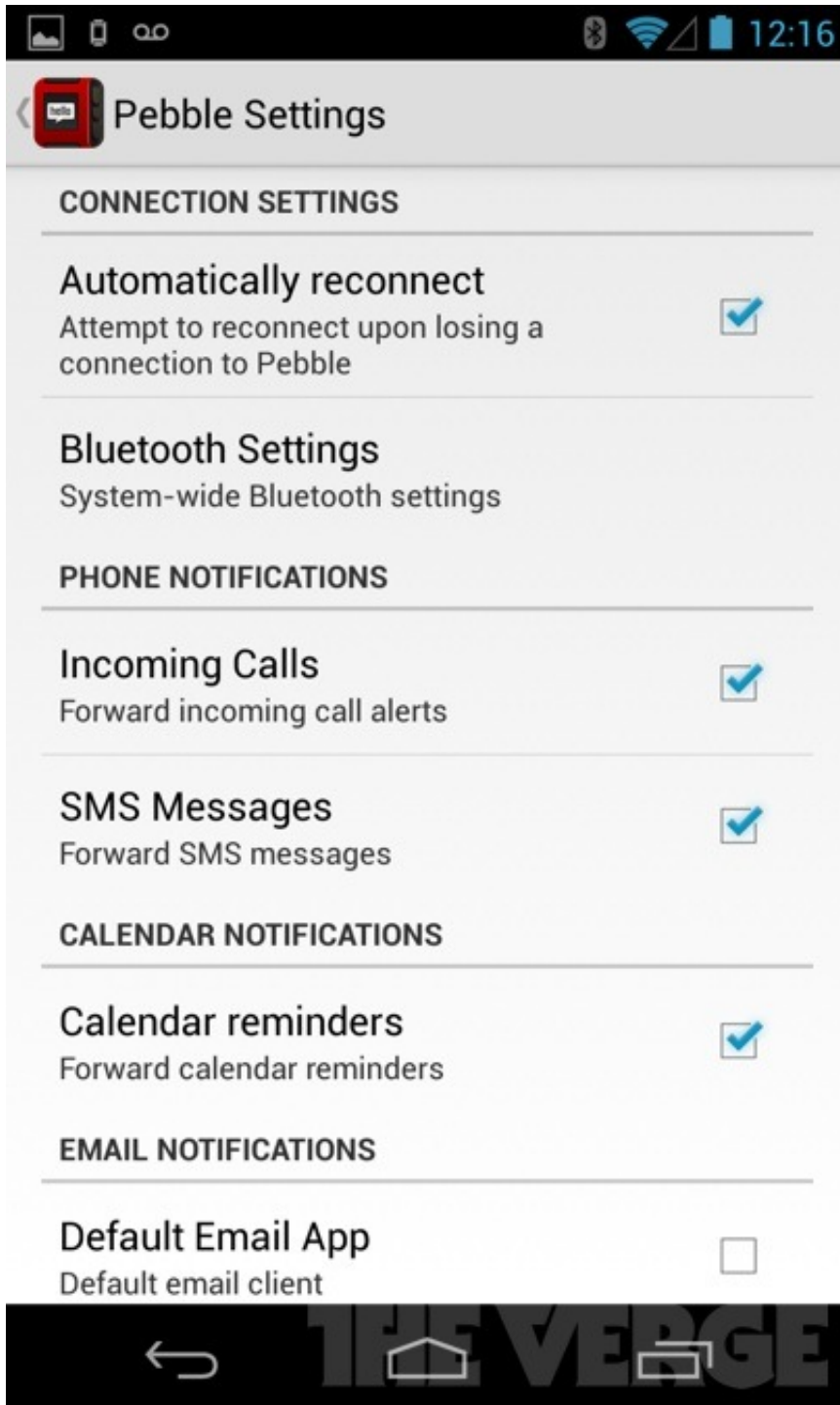
including Music, Spotify, and Rdio, but sometimes the track info displayed on the Pebble didn't update.

These are all fairly minor irritations, though: once you get the Pebble up and running with your iPhone, it works perfectly, assuming the two don't disconnect often. And leveraging Apple's Notification Center frameworks might involve some funky setup, but it means that every app's notifications work with Pebble out of the box, which isn't the case with Android. I'm assuming Apple will continue to build and improve these tools in future version of iOS (perhaps for its own watch), and that should make the Pebble better as well.

Android

Unlike the iPhone and iOS, which offer skeletal native support for devices like the Pebble at the system level, Pebble on Android is all about the app. That's where you manage everything, and at first glance it makes far more sense: all the settings are in one place, and you can quickly and easily make tweaks like having the watch show alerts for one email account but not another.

But there are some drawbacks to having an all-powerful app take the place of system-level support: Pebble's Android app needs broad permissions to your phone, including your Gmail account passwords. (Android users see more of each email on the Pebble than iPhone users because the app is actually checking your email over IMAP, not just seeing notifications.) You also need to turn on Android's accessibility features so the app can read your notifications and send them along to the phone, which pops up a scary warning about the app reading all your text input. I trust Pebble to behave itself, but that's a lot of leeway with my data and personal information.



And because everything on Android happens within the Pebble app, you're also limited to getting notifications from only the apps Pebble's had time to support. That means you can get Facebook notifications but not Twitter, for example. WhatsApp is supported but not GroupMe. I assume the company is feverishly working to support more apps, but if your favorite isn't on the list, you could be waiting for a while.

As with Pebble's iPhone support, these are minor irritations, and once you've got Pebble up

and running, it works perfectly as intended. But it's an interesting tradeoff: in many ways the Pebble experience on Android is better than the iPhone today, but it feels a little hackier.

I particularly enjoy screening calls from my wrist

Once you've got Pebble set up with your phone, you just pick whatever watch face you like and go about your day. As a watch, the Pebble is completely unobtrusive — it's so small that most people won't ever think it's anything but a regular watch. Pebble's watch faces range from the classic to the incredibly cryptic; I personally left it on the classic analog display. Oddly, there's no classic digital watch face, but I assume some enterprising developer will solve that problem soon enough.

Any incoming notification will quietly buzz the Pebble and light up the screen. Frankly, it's great — being able to see who's texting, emailing, or calling you without looking at your phone changes the entire dynamic of being connected. The upside is obvious: only reaching for your phone when it's something important means you reach for your phone much less often. (I particularly enjoy screening calls from my wrist.) The downside is that it's harder to simply ignore your phone and let messages stack up while you focus on something else; having the Pebble buzz your wrist for every email and text means you're hyper-aware of your inbox at all times. Some filters and priority settings would go a long way — having a Pebble changes the contours of distraction, but doesn't reduce it. But once you're used to having notifications on your wrist, it's hard to live without them.

Once you've seen a notification, you simply hit the select or back buttons to dismiss it. (Pebble's web site claims you can shake the watch to dismiss a notification, but I never got that to work.) I'm curious to know how the forthcoming Pebble apps will eventually make use of all three buttons, but for now everything is very straightforward, and the UI moves along smoothly and quickly.

It changes the entire dynamic of being connected

The Pebble also offers basic control of music on your phone: it'll display song titles and let you pause and skip tracks. It works with every music app I tried on iOS, but it's limited to apps that support the Bluetooth AVRCP protocol on Android — meaning Spotify doesn't work. But getting to the music controls from the watchface involves a number of button pushes; I found it faster to just pull out my phone and rarely used the feature.

Pebble promises that more apps will come in the future. The company has an SDK for developers, and the idea is that you'll be able to download and install watch apps directly from within the Pebble phone app. It's easy to imagine everything else a Pebble might do: the company has already shown mockups of a golf rangefinder, a biking app, a running app, and

more. They're all clever ideas, but it's just promises right now — and there's no timeline for app support just yet.

Battery life

Battery life



Pebble claims the watch will run for about a week on a single charge, and while I didn't have enough time to test that, I never once worried about the battery. Part of that was simply that there's no battery indicator on the device — you'll get a low battery warning, but otherwise you simply don't know. It's liberating, in the sense that being ignorant of death frees you from fear. Will you see a clock the next time you look at your wrist, or will you see the dead plastic talisman of a society shattered into pieces by information overload? Chances are you'll see a clock.

Using the Pebble will also impact your smartphone battery by somewhere between five and ten percent — running that Bluetooth radio all the time isn't free. I found that power usage on my iPhone seemed a hair better than on Android, possibly because the Android app was always running in the background. The Pebble supports the lower-power Bluetooth 4.0 standard but doesn't use it just yet, so there's a chance power consumption will improve with an update.

Being ignorant of death frees you from fear



8.2
Verge
Score

Pebble Pebble

THE GOOD

Looks like a regular watch
Works well with iPhone and Android
Solid battery life

THE BAD

iPhone support limited by iOS itself
Android support limited by app development
Screen is just okay

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The Pebble's charming simplicity and fundamental competence inspires confidence

After using the Pebble for a few days, I realized that I was daydreaming about it: I wanted it to do more. That's unusual — I rarely trust new products to work correctly, especially new products from unproven companies. But the Pebble's charming simplicity and fundamental competence inspires confidence. It's so good at what it does now that it's easy to imagine all other things it might do in the future. There's no reason it can't replace a Fitbit or Nike Fuelband, for example, and I'd love to be able to send replies to emails and text directly from the device. And Pebble's promised app support means we'll eventually see even more uses for it.

At \$150, the Pebble isn't cheap, and it's definitely not yet a must-have device. But it's close — if the Pebble team can deliver on the rest of their promises, they'll have created the first mainstream wearable computing platform. And even if they don't, the Pebble as it exists right now will make a lot of people very happy.

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