Is the Samsung Galaxy Note II Too Big?

One of the most interesting things about category-defining devices is that they tend to polarize opinions based on one or several unique characteristics. Also, these standout features typically survive into the products' sequels, which typically launch before anyone's finished arguing about their worth.

That's certainly the case with the recently-launched Samsung Galaxy Note II [1], bursting onto the market almost exactly a year after its predecessor, and touting the same standout features such as its S Pen stylus and massive display.

Like its predecessor, the Galaxy Note II is massive. Samsung has slimmed the newer device somewhat, stretching its vertical axis to make it a bit more palm-friendly, but there are only so many tricks possible with casing design when you're dealing with a 5.5-inch display. The result is, once again, a device that seems impossibly huge — if you consider it a smartphone.

Samsung hoped to blur the line between smartphone and tablet with the original Galaxy Note. Despite the gloom-and-doom predictions of some of us in the tech press, it succeeded brilliantly [2]. But even all those millions of units sold can't overcome the confusion on some folks' faces when they first handle the new device, as I recently discovered.

Carrying the Galaxy Note II around my rural hometown for the past few days, I've been entirely unsurprised at the reaction of the public to this monstrosity: from flabbergasted to awestruck to what-the-hell-were-you-thinking-you're-insane, people always have an opinion. Again, that's not surprising in this area of the U.S., where networks aren't yet robust enough [3] to make the case for widespread smartphone adoption, but people here still know smartphones and tablets when they see them. Laying eyes on a phablet, though, is still a new experience for most, so the natural assumption is to say "that's a giant phone!"

Breaking out the S Pen and showing some of the multitasking functionality available on the Galaxy Note II certainly changes that perception somewhat, and people have generally thereafter been more accepting of the beastly mobile device riding shotgun in my pocket. Still, more often than not, the conversation ends on the mildly bemused note of "but I could never carry something that big."

Popular as it's likely to be, it's unlikely the Galaxy Note II will be able to single-handedly catapult the "phablet" concept into mainstream awareness. Many people will continue to perceive it as an oversized smartphone, and you can see why. Holding the Note II up to your head is possible; that's not the case with tablets. It's somewhat pocketable; tablets generally aren't. Wireless carriers will sell the Note II with traditional voice-minute cellular plans; they don't do so with tablets. In many ways, then, on paper, the Galaxy Note II *is* in fact a scaled-up smartphone.

So the question is a good one: Is it too big? And the answer is a simple one, one that often crops up in off-color jokes, and discussions about mobile devices: "it's not the size of the boat [that matters], it's the motion of the ocean." Or, if you prefer: "it depends how you use it."

In my short time with the Note II, I've pondered the question myself: Is this a product I see myself carrying as a daily driver? Could I make this my primary mobile device? And my answer has stayed relatively consistent: "Yes. If I were still a student."

My test-drive of the Galaxy Note II has thus far enhanced my perception of it not as a large general-purpose smartphone, but as a specialized tool. The large screen, S Pen support and fancy features I mentioned in last week's initial-impressions piece [4] would have made my life as a student much easier. That's true to an extent of tablets as well; an iPad or Nexus 7 would have served a similar purpose in those days, but the Galaxy Note II would have carried the added bonus of serving as both my smartphone and my tablet.

The specialized nature of the phablet category actually *is* helpful in the two occupations that take up most of my time today; writing for *Pocketnow* and acting. In the former application, I'm able to stay on top of news faster using the Note II by using the pop-up browser feature; I load pages from links while I'm browsing my Twitter feed. In the latter occupation, I'm able to see more of a script in my hand by virtue of the larger display, keeping me from being that guy who holds up rehearsal every four seconds because he's scrolling to keep his PDF on the screen.

There's all kinds of specialized examples where a larger device is preferable: truck drivers using GPS applications; artists and graphic designers in frequent need of a large canvas; road warriors who need the added longevity a larger battery (theoretically) delivers; videographers and photographers who want to share rough shots around a room without forcing their customers to squint. The list is extensive.

With all these useful applications, it's easy to see two things: how Samsung sold millions upon millions of original Galaxy Note devices, and why the device has built up such a loyal following in only a year. But it's also important to realize that it's not going to be a device for everyone … because it really, truly is a behemoth.

This weekend, I had a bit of time off from those two occupations I mentioned, and I spent a lot of that time off alternating between boating and traveling via bus and train. In both instances, I was folded in half in a small space on a rapidly-moving vehicle, and trying to extricate the Galaxy Note II from my pocket proved very difficult. Also, once I got it out, manipulating the device's features with one hand was tough, and I didn't always have another hand to spare.

If you frequently find yourself in situations where one-handed usability is a priority, then, you're probably the consummate example of someone the Galaxy Note II would be too big for. We've talked before [5] about the importance of preserving choice in the mid-size phone categories, but being stuck using the Galaxy Note II with a single hand is almost doubly a tragedy– because you're also losing all of the S Pen functionality, the other half of what makes the device truly special.

As a phablet, the Galaxy Note II is forced to carry the heavy burden of serving as both a smartphone and a tablet. You'll have to wait for our full review to see how well it ultimately accomplishes that goal, but in the interim it's safe to say that the gigantic dimensions it requires as a result of its nature will be off-putting to some, and ecstasy to others. With the Galaxy Note II, as with any other mobile device, the question of "How (x) Is Too (x)" will ultimately depend on the user. It just happens to be a bigger, more critical distinction in the case of this massive slab than with other devices.

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