Apple TV+: Can it be saved before everyone’s free trials run out?

Enlarge / When Apple TV+ landed on November 1, it did not include all of these original series, thanks to its “soft launch.”

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When Apple TV+ launched in November 2019, it was the first of four major video-streaming services that would launch between then and May of the next year. It was also one of the riskiest of the set, coming from a company that had zero experience in creating entertainment. With the service’s 90-day mark fast approaching, it’s time to take Apple TV+’s temperature.

And, yes, it’s ice-cold. But is Apple TV+ really as dead in the water as it appears? And what do we expect for the rest of its first year?

So many devices, so little excitement

From the jump, Apple seemed an odd addition to a lineup of players, all of whom were already in the content-creation business. Apple has never been interested in producing its own fare so much as using others’ content to promote its closed hardware ecosystem. But that hardware component was Apple’s

claim to enter the derby. The company boasts two billion devices in pockets around the world. If just 10 percent of those users signed up after getting a free year of Apple TV+ with the purchase of a device, it would give the company 200 million subscribers worldwide, dwarfing Netflix's 158 million.

But 10 percent may be an ambitious reach. Disney+ (launched two weeks after Apple TV+) or NBC Peacock and HBO Max (starting in April and May of 2020 respectively) have or will arrive with vast libraries of movies and TV series, highlighting their family-friendly fare to bolster their appeal for subscription dollars. (Disney+ is the most obvious one aiming for "family" right now, but both NBC and HBO have focused on kiddie offerings on their upcoming services as well.) Apple TV+, in contrast, launched with just four shows, all brand-new originals targeting an adult-level audience, with nothing as backfill that might appeal to an all-ages crowd.

This proved foolhardy when even the best of Apple TV+ offerings, *Dickinson* and *For All Mankind,* came with caveats not to take it too seriously or that it started slow. The most ambitious project, *See*, was a masturbatory disaster, while the star-studded *Morning Show* was barely mediocre. Even a few modest nods from the Golden Globes to the Hollywood A-list stars of *The Morning Show* like Jennifer Aniston and Reese Witherspoon didn't do much to percolate interest—at least, not in the shadow of Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon's *years* of award-winning, streaming-only content.

Second seasons already?

Apple TV+ was also run over by Disney+'s far more successful launch with *The Mandalorian*. The first-ever *Star Wars* live-action series sucked the oxygen out of the streaming room, leaving Apple struggling to catch anyone's attention with follow-up shows like *Servant*, despite a stellar cast and M.

Night Shyamalan's name plastered all over it. (The lawsuit that followed *Servant*'s first season isn't helping either.) Perhaps the most damning issue is that Apple did not build itself to be a nimble player, despite the light load of shows. Convinced it had the next big things, the company greenlighted second seasons of all of the launch shows beforehand, essentially committing itself to these vaguely dud titles for at least another year.

Now the service is launching what is inarguably its best series to date, *Little America*, from *The Big Sick* writers Kumail Nanjiani and Emily V. Gordon along with Lee Eisenberg of *The Office* fame. The docu-series is "inspired by true stories featured in Epic Magazine" of the immigrant experience in modern America. For the first time on Apple TV+, all 10 episodes will drop at once, instead of a weekly release schedule, in the hopes of getting it more attention.

But once again, the timing is terrible: *Little America* arrived all of 12 hours after Peacock shook up the streaming landscape by undercutting what had been Apple TV+'s rock bottom cost of $4.99 with the even lower subscription price of *free*. (As in, free with ads, or $5/mo for more content and fewer ads.)

What Apple TV+ needs now is a return to its parent company's comfort zone: the hardware. Apple TV+ has its own "free" tier: a year of service to anyone and everyone who buys or updates their Apple-branded product. The average upgrade timeframe for a smartphone is roughly every 2.8 years, and in the case of Apple products, that timeframe can be even longer. But iPhone and iPad users are likely to do it sooner if Apple rolls out a must-have product. MacRumors suggests this is the year the company goes 5G and all-OLED. (We know why 2019 wasn't.) Apple's Tim Cook can use the company's regularly-scheduled product-reveal events to stir consumers into purchases. That would put Apple TV+ in front of them at no charge; it could be enough to let shows like *Little America* catch on via word of mouth.

HBO Max’s loss is…

Meanwhile, Cook recently took the first step in righting this ship in the longer term: hiring Richard Plepler. After 25 years with HBO, Plepler, who had a hand in greenlighting everything from *Game of Thrones* to *Succession*, left the company in the wake of AT&T’s acquisition of parent company Time Warner. Cook snapped him up in one of the first significant entertainment news announcements of the new year, and it’s the first good news Apple TV+ has had since before it launched. The streaming service while take a while to turn around, but there is hope for it yet.

In the meantime, 2020 is going to be a long, hard slog, filled with dodgy-looking shows like the forthcoming *Mythic Quest: Raven’s Banquet*. (One can only pray the show is better than the trailer.) Here’s hoping a free year with purchase/upgrade will slowly build the base, so when content worth subscribing shows up, Mac, iPad, and iPhone users are there to start streaming.

This article has been updated to reflect studies about average users’ hardware upgrade cycles.

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