

Privacy, policy, and emoji: inside the Apple developer conference

Apple's Worldwide Developers Conference (WWDC) creates a convincing version of reality that can, at times, seem too good to be true. Hosted again earlier this month at the San Jose McEnery Convention Center, the conference is a place to geek out over Swift code, meet fellow programmers and iOS app makers, and celebrate all things Apple. But you do so inside a carefully crafted environment that's designed to maximize the iPhone maker's image as a benevolent overlord of its sprawling software kingdom.

There are clean, Apple Store-like wooden tables equipped with USB-C Ethernet adapters where you can sit and work and enthusiastic greeters who high-five you on your way in the door. Conference rooms come equipped with HomePods that play family-friendly synth-pop on loop. The pastries are decadent, and the conference badges are cleanly designed and colorful.

WWDC is designed to maximize Apple's image as a benevolent overlord

The Mac Pro showcase across the street looked like an Apple product video come to life: everything perfectly arranged, the light calibrated to catch every inch of aluminum in a positive angle while intense ambient music played overhead. I accidentally leaned on a table displaying the new \$5,999 desktop machine, and an Apple employee scolded me before wiping the countertop with a cloth. The image must be preserved.

In prior years, that squeaky-clean image has been presented mostly to win favor with the public, who are not developers but nonetheless tune in to big dev keynotes like the one Apple

held for WWDC to get a glimpse at future products, like the next versions of iOS and macOS or that new Mac Pro.

Apple knows it speaks at these events on two levels simultaneously, trying to convince consumers that it's still putting out the best, most advanced versions of its software, services, and hardware, but also trying to remind developers of the benefits of building within its ecosystem.



Photo by Nilay Patel / The Verge

This year, however, Apple seemed to have a slightly different message aimed more squarely at developers: build on our platforms and use our products because we're not Facebook or Google. That's partly because the company can win easy PR points for beating the privacy drum and also because it's trying to win back the die-hard professional market that it hopes will use its iPad Pro and new Mac Pro.

It's also partly because the company is facing down perhaps the most aggressive regulatory challenges it's ever faced, all amid a swell of anti-tech sentiment that's been brewing for

years in the EU and is now making its way Stateside. But if developers are happy and consumers trust Apple, the company just might avoid the same level of scrutiny facing other tech titans.

Compared to Facebook or Google's conferences, both of which I attended this year, there isn't the ever-present feeling at WWDC that you're being placated into forgiving grievous sins. At Google's conference, protestors flew an airplane banner overhead during the keynote lambasting the company's effect on local news and its positions on privacy. Later on in the week, Google hired The Flaming Lips to perform for attendees. At Facebook's F8 keynote, CEO Mark Zuckerberg offered a stunning admission of fault, telling his keynote crowd, "We need to change a lot of ways we run this company." Facebook then gave every attendee a free Oculus Quest headset.

Compared to Facebook and Google, Apple's privacy record is sterling

While Apple did give away an emoji-covered reversible jacket at WWDC, it also set itself apart from its Silicon Valley rivals with an unusually strong stance on privacy and an aggressively self-satisfied tone. "We believe privacy is a fundamental human right, and we engineer it into everything we do," Craig Federighi, Apple's senior vice president of software engineering, said onstage during the WWDC keynote.

Strangely enough, the attitude felt earned. Apple sees itself as one of the last bastions of not just consumer privacy, but also a generation of tech companies that simply make solid products and sell them without ulterior motives at play. Anytime a company purports to not have an ulterior motive, your sonar for bullshit should ping very loudly. I don't think anyone should take anything Big Tech says at face value, but Apple's actions spoke loudly, too.

At WWDC this year, Apple introduced a way for developers to create login credentials using disguised email addresses,

called Sign In with Apple, and it risked controversy by forcing developers to use the feature whenever they use similar options from Facebook and Google that can track users more easily. The controversial move sent a clear message that Apple cares about privacy enough to put users before developers, something it hasn't always communicated successfully in recent months.

Apple also announced a new framework for coding with SwiftUI that promises to be much faster than previous methods, a dedicated iPad operating system, and new tools for taking those more robust iPad apps and quickly transforming them into Mac apps in just a matter of hours. In each case, the company can confidently say none of these changes or new features have ulterior motives baked in: Apple does not make money off ads or design products that collect copious amounts of user data in the background, even if some developers try to.

"I think Apple's stand on privacy is to be applauded. You won't find many developers who don't appreciate Apple's position on privacy," says Drew McCormack, an iOS app developer and co-founder of Momenta B.V., a Netherlands-based software studio that develops a popular note-taking app called Agenda. "Some might consider it cynical – a marketing ploy – but I think people in Apple really do believe in user privacy, and they clearly put their words into actions, even when it makes things technically more difficult to achieve."



Photo by Vjeran Pavic / The Verge

Apple may take a ton of flak for messing up MacBook keyboards and pricing its products at exorbitant, almost comical levels – a \$1,000 monitor stand for the \$4,999 new 6K HDR monitor to go with its \$6,000 Mac Pro earned Apple some vicious condemnation at WWDC – but attending WWDC and hearing the way Apple talks to its developers and the way developers talk about Apple, it's easy to walk away convinced that the company does sit above, or at least removed from, Silicon Valley's more sinister underbelly.

Saying you work for Facebook these days can leave a bad impression on a stranger, more so if you're talking to someone who actually keeps up with the whirlwind tech news cycle. Saying you're an Apple employee or an iOS developer still feels like a point of pride, and nowhere was that more apparent than at WWDC.

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But even if Apple has largely avoided the privacy and platform

moderation controversies plaguing its social network-owning rivals, the threat of regulation also loomed over its developer conference this year – from antitrust regulators at the US Department of Justice and Federal Trade Commission and from politicians on the 2020 campaign trail eager to capitalize on a growing swell of anti-tech sentiment. Some of the developers I spoke to at WWDC were ready to grumble about today's status quo.

Right in the middle of its big WWDC press conference, news broke that the DOJ has been given the authority to open an antitrust investigation into Apple. The following day, a pair of app developers filed a lawsuit seeking class action status, claiming Apple “stifles innovation” by requiring all apps go through the App Store and abide by the strict rules of its developer agreement. The lawsuit wants to break Apple’s “improper monopolization of this market,” while a Supreme Court decision last month says consumers can now sue Apple for driving up prices in the App Store.

While Apple can argue that nobody forces consumers to use iPhones, meaning neither app developers nor consumers are forced to use the App Store, critics say Apple’s anti-competitive practices are more subtle than the company having an outright monopoly. It is true that Apple strictly controls what kinds of apps third-party developers can sell to iPhone owners and that it mandates Apple take a 30 percent cut of all sales. The fee is a long-standing point of contention that’s come to a head with Spotify in the EU, where regulatory authorities plan to open an antitrust investigation into the so-called “Apple tax.”

Apple tends to compete with its own developers, and often on an uneven playing field

Apple also tends to compete with its own developers, creating products or services similar in design to long-standing App Store options, but with the added benefit of coming preloaded on the iPhone and having access to core system features of iOS

that allows that software to perform functions third-party apps cannot. Amid all the WWDC news last week, Apple quietly snuck in a change to its App Store Review Guidelines restoring access to certain developer tools, ones it shut off specifically to lock out parental control apps the company claimed were risks to user privacy. Yet some of those apps happened to also provide features similar to those found in Apple's new Screen Time dashboard.

Apple's willingness to squash smaller apps on its platform and its zealousness around rule enforcement is familiar to any developer who has witnessed the evolution of the App Store over the last decade. "I've developed for Apple platforms since before the iPhone existed. I think iOS is much more open now than 10 years ago, with one exception: exposing user data," says Ben Sandofsky, an app developer who's developed a pair of iOS camera apps, Halide and Spectre Camera, that compete directly with Apple's native camera app.

"Years ago, you could access the user's address book without their permission. That ended when a company was caught secretly uploading people's address books to their servers," Sandofsky adds. "The last 10 years have taught Apple that creepy companies have no shame, and this is why we can't have nice things." He says that while Apple competes with his own apps, the company "has been incredibly generous" with its placement and promotion of his apps in the App Store.



Photo by Vjeran Pavic / The Verge

But not every developer thinks Apple is acting solely out of an abundance of caution. According to Steve Troughton-Smith, an app developer and popular source of Apple commentary online, the company has a long history of making arbitrary, inexplicable decisions and acting in hostile ways toward third-party developers.

“There are countless examples of Apple rejecting perfectly valid apps, or entire categories of app concepts, based on Apple’s emotional response rather than on the apps’ own merits, or making up new rules as it goes along without informing developers, leaving everybody guessing at what they’re doing wrong,” he says. “I’ve had apps outright rejected for spurious reasons, and there are plenty more apps I don’t bother writing just because I know Apple will never allow them. The chilling effect is real.”

What makes evaluating Apple’s potential overreach so complicated is that every criticism you can levy at the company interlocks. Requiring all apps go through strict

review and be solely distributed through the App Store – presumably for the sake of privacy and security – necessitates that all developers follow Apple’s lead on privacy and fork over 30 percent of all earnings made on iOS.

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That may mean developers price their software higher on iOS as a result of the Apple tax, while at any moment, Apple could deem the 30 percent it gets from a third-party app less important than developing an alternative that’s baked into iOS by default. It’s hard to have an opinion about any of these elements of Apple’s business without it informing your overall opinion on whether Apple is anticompetitive.

“Apple doesn’t compete on even ground with its developers. Apple can do all kinds of things with the OS and its platforms that do not abide by the rules that third-party developers have to follow. Yes, they do enable developers, of course, but rarely do they enable them to build apps ‘as good’ as Apple’s own offerings,” Troughton-Smith says. *“It’s ridiculous that you have to phone up Netflix and ask them how to subscribe on iOS just because they refused to continue charging users 30 percent more on iOS because Apple skims it off the top.”*

Sandofsky says he doesn’t have an issue with the 30 percent cut, but that’s also because he believes that the App Store is fundamentally no different than other closed software distribution platforms.

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“I don’t see how the App Store is any different than the PlayStation or Nintendo ecosystems. If anything, it’s way easier to get your software on an iPhone than a game console,” he says. *“Apple’s commission has no effect on our pricing. We price our software based on what people will pay. Of course it would be great if Apple took a smaller cut – who would pass up free money? But we think Apple earns their 30 percent. They*

offer frictionless payment, piracy prevention, and a curated store that helps surface great work. It's very likely we'd be worse off in a more fragmented ecosystem."

Other developers, like McCormack, say the only things that have changed are Apple's position in the market and the atmosphere for tech regulation. "Apple has always competed with its own third-party developers," he says. McCormack cites the act of getting "Sherlocked," which is an old software development term for when Apple develops a competing feature or app of its own, as it infamously did with its app Sherlock 3 that critics say borrowed ideas from a third-party app called Watson. And the graveyard of apps that have died due to pressure from native Apple software is ever-growing.

"The difference now is that Apple is huge, and it also controls the only route to market. I can see why that would prick up ears in Washington," McCormack adds. He says the App Store makes his life easier, but he'd appreciate if the 30 percent fee were lowered. "In the early days, you could win that back because Apple would feature your app, but there are so many apps around today, only the very lucky ones get featured. So lowering the fee would be welcome."

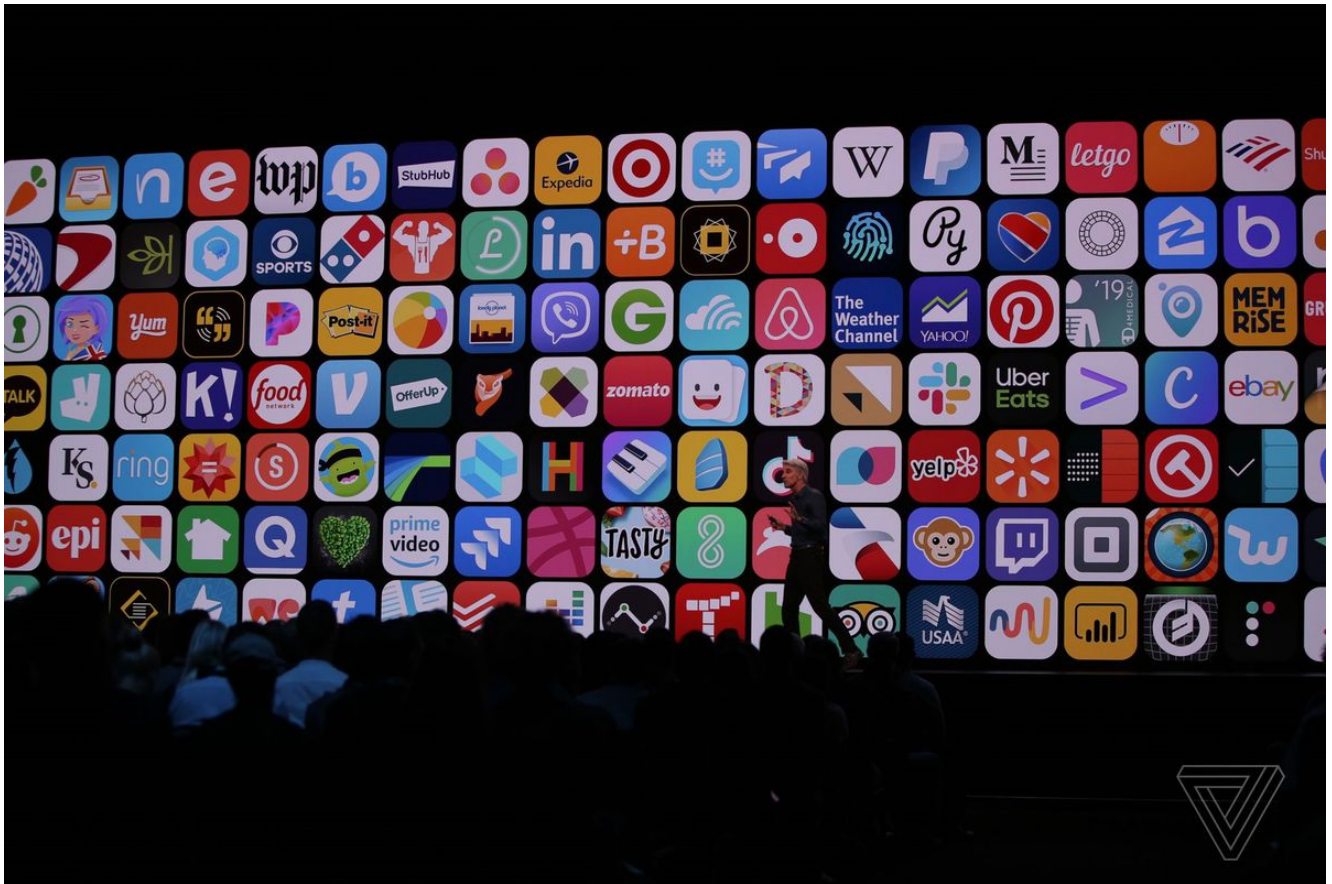


Photo by Vjeran Pavic / The Verge

McCormack also thinks an alternative to the iOS App Store could help Apple stave off antitrust concerns. For instance, he points out how, on macOS, developers can submit software to Apple to be “notarized,” which does not involve reviewing it based on App Store guidelines, but simply checks the software for malicious code. That way, users can still download the software independently from the internet and get at least a partial Apple seal of approval.

Ultimately, that Apple may be forced to be friendlier, out of fear it gets roped into investigations currently ensnaring its more seedy tech rivals, is perhaps the best devs can ask for. Developers like Troughton-Smith, who thought this month’s WWDC represented a “monster year” for Apple and proof it’s “firing on all cylinders,” still have immense faith in the company.

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But these same Apple proponents are starting to realize that some of the company’s tactics can no longer be waved away as

the cost of doing business on the iPhone. What started as inconveniences to developing on Apple's platform that, over time, became the status quo are now being reexamined by critics with far fiercer opinions of the tech industry, and that could mean serious changes to Apple's business are on the horizon.

The question now is whether those changes will come from Apple or from Washington. "I think this isn't a problem that will just go away. If Apple wants to keep tight control of its platforms, it will have to agree to external oversight. Apple could also solve these issues by opening up more of its platform to developers, without the restrictions it has today," Troughton-Smith says. "There are major consequences to both of these paths, but I don't see the status quo as tenable in a just world."

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