The Verge 2017 tech report card: Apple

If you only care about Apple's products and not Apple as a corporate entity, I'm going to have to be the bearer of bad news: this year was the year it became impossible to disassociate tech products from the humans and corporate cultures from which they sprung.

It was the year the tech industry's ugly side was exposed. As *Wired*'s Erin Griffith put it, it was the year tech workers became the world's villain, not bankers. It was the year we expected big, important tech companies to be *better*, and in large part, they failed.

So it's difficult to assign a grade to Apple, the world's biggest and most important tech company, without looking at the company holistically. The good news is that Apple stepped up its product game in 2017. Even more good news is that, relative to its tech peers, Apple didn't get busted for using super-secret technologies to evade local authorities, become a megaphone for Nazis, or get infiltrated by Russians seeking to wield foreign influence on our democracy — at least that we know of.

The bad news is that Apple could always be *better*, given its size and its $900 billion valuation. And it's had plenty of big missteps in 2017 — the most recent one being an admission from the company that it issues software updates that slow down the processing speeds of older iPhones, in order to compensate for aging batteries. It let iPhone users run with conspiracy theories about this for years before confirming that it was actually true. It goes without saying that stuff like this affects consumer trust.

2017 made it impossible to disassociate tech products from the humans and corporate cultures from which they sprung

Apple’s biggest product announcement in 2017 was undoubtedly the iPhone X, a buttonless, face-scanning, OLED-display smartphone that was long-rumored and then all but confirmed when it was leaked in iOS 11 firmware documentation. It marked 10 years since we all became obsessed with these personal pocket computers. So far, the iPhone X has been well-received, despite its high price tag and the adjustment period it demands.

The Other Phone announced this fall wasn’t shabby either: chief executive Tim Cook said during the company’s fourth-quarter earnings call that the iPhone 8 and iPhone 8 Plus “instantly” became Apple’s top-two selling products at launch.




Photo by Amelia Holowaty Krales / The Verge

And the Mac is back. Last year we dinged the Mac laptop line not only for losing key ports, but also, for not running on the absolute newest Intel processors. This year, the new MacBook, MacBook Pro, and iMac computers were upgraded to include Intel’s Kaby Lake chips — not the newest, but new-ish.

The new laptops still lack standard USB or SD card slots, and if you got one with a bum keyboard then you probably don’t think this 2017 refresh was a very good one. Either way, Apple sold 5.39 million Macs during the fourth quarter, a 10 percent increase from a year ago. To cap it off, the company’s “one more thing” for the year appears to be the release of its gorgeous new $5000-plus iMac Pro.

For now, Apple has failed to capture a piece of all the original content binge-watching
But the HomePod was also expected to be out by the end of year, and it’s delayed somewhat inexplicably. Other product slip-ups this year include a software glitch that prevented the Apple Watch Series 3 from connecting to cellular the way

Apple promised it would at launch; a ridiculous bug in iOS 11 that turned the letter “I” into the letter “A” with a symbol; and a much more critical security flaw in the new macOS High Sierra software that let anyone with physical access to a Mac become a system administrator on it.

As for Apple TV, the moniker remains firmly attached to a streaming media box rather than a more encompassing streaming *service*. Apple made more attempts to make original TV this year; but its *Planet of the Apps* series for Apple Music was panned, and that’s a nice way of putting it. 2018 may bring more original content, with names like Reese Witherspoon, Jennifer Aniston, and Steven Spielberg already attached to Apple projects, but for now, Apple has failed to capture a piece of all the original content binge-watching we’re doing on Netflix and Amazon Prime Video.

iTunes is still a stinking piece of garbage on the desktop.

Still, there is something about the relationship with Apple products that is straightforward, especially when you compare it to using other products and sites. With Amazon, Facebook, Twitter, and Google, their core businesses are wholly dependent on their ability to mine your data and sell you more stuff through their platforms. Let’s not even get into Uber.

There is still something refreshingly straightforward about the relationship with Apple products, especially when compared to other tech products

Apple isn’t interested in learning more about you through your data (though it *is* interested in giving you the same features as other companies, like virtual assistance, through local data). With Apple products for the most part, you buy the hardware at a high cost, in exchange for the reasonable expectation that your phone won’t be filled with malware, your data is mostly secure, you’re not going to see crummy ads, and that Apple services will deliver a premium experience.

The nature of our transactions with these tech companies has

always been known to some extent. But in a year when the tech platforms we use the most have been exposed as completely vulnerable, whether to foreign interference or corporate incompetence, the simplicity of the relationship with Apple products and any sort of commitment to privacy and curation is worthy of some extra credit.

And Tim Cook, for his part, seems determined to establish himself as a Good Guy in Tech and not one of those evil villain types, by tweeting in defense of Dreamers, openly condemning racism and white supremacy in the wake of Charlottesville, and donating $2 million to anti-hate and anti-defamation groups. But again, an executive of Cook's stature and a company as large as Apple could always do a lot *more* — like openly support human rights and free expression in China, and not remove VPNs from the App Store.

Final grade: B

B 2017 Grade

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Gold Stars

- iPhone X
- Mac is back
- Not hacked by Russia (that we know of)

Needs Improvement

- Software and security issues
- "Apple TV" still just a set-top box
- iPhone throttle-gate
- Where is HomePod?

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