

Apple's big wow moments: a voice speaker and augmented reality

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Apple fans, don't fear. The iPhone maker has finally jumped into two of the hottest tech trends of the last two years—augmented reality and voice-activated speakers, with a promise to dominate these markets pioneered by its rivals.

Two years after Amazon introduced its sleeper hit Echo device, and a year after Google Home, Apple now has the voice-activated HomePod, a

high-end music speaker priced at \$349 that will be powered by Siri. That often maligned but widely used artificial intelligence assistant is also getting an upgrade, though for HomePod, Siri's main task is clear: play music.

Apple also unveiled a new augmented reality developer kit that would help Apple app developers integrate this technology that overlays digital images on the physical world, made popular by Pokemon Go. Facebook and Google have been showcasing such distorted reality tech at their own demos, with plans to revolutionize commerce and communication. Apple's entrance into augmented reality on iPhone could jump-start the industry that's mostly been a playground for games.

The availability of AR technology on hundreds of millions of Apple's mobile devices has the potential to help make iOS "the largest AR platform in the world overnight," CEO Tim Cook said.

More:

Apple has been playing catch-up on a variety of cutting-edge tech fronts, allowing competitors to take the lead on the next big computing platforms, all driven by artificial intelligence.

In the case of both HomePod and ARKit, Apple is banking on fans of the brand potentially abandoning rival products in favor of whatever its in-house developers and independent developers create for the space.

"Today's WWDC announcements show that Apple is building the infrastructure for a whole new decade of engagement with AI ([artificial intelligence](#) at its core," Raj Aggarwal, co-founder and CEO of Localytics, who worked with Steve Jobs on the launch of the original iPhone.

"The last 10 years since the introduction of the first iPhone were focused on the mobile revolution, but the mobile innovation has now hit its plateau," he says. "AI really unlocks the power of what mobile offers. Now brands can take that data, make sense of it and interact with their users in real-time in a truly individualized way."

There were few wow moments, though, extending a trend in recent years of incremental refinements that keep loyalists happy but which fail to carve out huge new markets, like the first iPhones or iPods did.

Among the offerings: The ability to pay friends with Apple Pay. An iPad with a larger, sharper screen. How about an industrial strength iMac for \$5,000?

"What was in there for developers?" asked Holger Mueller, principal analyst at Constellation Research. "It's more WWDC—the D is for Demo. Or product demo."

Wall Street reacted with indifference: Apple shares were down 1%, to \$153.93, in trading Monday.

Mainly, WWDC 2017 was just over two hours of jargon-filled tech-speak aimed not at consumers but rather developers, who are the lifeblood of any large technology company. These conferences, which include Google I/O and Facebook F8, are recruiting tools for companies to build hardware and software based on their computing platforms and products.

The biggest pitch was left for the very last, when CEO Tim Cook announced the 7-inch, \$349 HomePod, which ships in December.

HomePod seems in many ways like an echo of existing products on the market, in everything from form to price. But where Amazon and

Google are peddling a robotic home assistant, Apple leaned on its music roots with its pitch.

Phil Schiller, Apple's senior vice president of worldwide marketing, announced HomePod by taking a shot at the quality of the speakers in competitors' products. Apple purchased Beats Electronics a few years ago, and is hoping to pull fans of Beats headphones and wireless speakers over to HomePod.

Beyond using Siri as "a great musicologist," Schiller said HomePod users could ask Siri—which now has a more natural sounding voice and can translate up to five languages—about the weather, news and sports, as well as dictate a text message and activate appliances that use Apple's HomeKit technology.

Apple finally made good on months of talk about the coming age of augmented reality with its new AR Kit, part of iOS 11 that is available now for developers and scheduled as a free software update for iPhone and iPad this fall.

The developer toolkit leverages iOS devices' built-in cameras, processors and motion sensors to overlay digital images onto the physical world. A demo of a steaming coffee cup next to a lamp on a table drew hoots and hollers from the [developer](#) audience, although the first vestiges of the technology are likely to emerge in gaming environments.

As for when an iPhone will be able to deliver an [augmented reality](#) experience, the only hint at timing from WWDC was when a representative from director Peter Jackson's Wingnut AR studios showcased an AR gaming demo that he said would arrive later in the year.

Some of the more meat-and-potatoes news zeroed in on making iPad,

iMac and iPhone a bit easier to use. For example:

—A new iMac Pro is menacing in sleek black with a 27-inch screen and technology that makes it the company's "most powerful Mac ever" and will be available in December for \$4,999.

—A new version of Apple Pay now allows person-to-person payments.

—A do not disturb option for the iPhone eliminates distracted driving by making the screen go black and sending notifications that you're behind the wheel.

—The smaller iPad Pro bumps up around an inch in diameter to 10.5-inches and the iPad lineup gets features such as searchable handwritten text, an effort to goose slowing sales.

—Toy Story heroes Buzz, Woody and Jessie join Mickey and Minnie Mouse as Apple Watch faces.

Experts anticipate that Apple will pull the covers off a significantly revamped iPhone at its annual event in September, likely named not the 8 but the X, or 10, in a nod to the 10th anniversary of the iPhone's debut in 2007.

The main iPhone updates announced at WWDC were a single-screen Control Panel, a new feature that disables the phone while driving, and a redesigned App Store that makes navigating the site easier on a phone.

Machine learning was a repeated buzzword throughout the keynote. The Apple Watch now leverages its data-crunching power to automatically populate its screen with the day's most pressing events, while Photos features improved facial-recognition capability to create Memories of recently photographed events.

Apple also took the opportunity to trumpet its ubiquity to the 5,300 developers who attended WWDC from 75 countries (the event moved from its 15-year home in San Francisco to accommodate the larger crowd).

Cook noted that Apple has 16 million registered developers, up 3 million in 2016 alone, and has paid out \$70 billion to developers since the store opened in 2008.

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