

Review: iTunes video upgrade makes the new Apple TV worth it

September 21 2017, by Anick Jesdanun



In this Friday, Sept. 15, 2017 photo, the Apple TV is displayed, in New York. The new Apple TV streaming device heralds the onset of ultra high-definition 4K video for the mass audience. (AP Photo/Mark Lennihan)

It might seem odd to review the new Apple TV streaming device—one specifically designed to display super-sharp video known as 4K—without actually owning a 4K TV.

But in a way, that's the point.

Most people still don't have 4K TVs, so the new Apple TV model doesn't offer them much. But if you're an Apple fan and already have 4K, the choice is clear. The new Apple TV 4K is out Friday starting at \$179, or \$30 more than the regular model. It's a small difference compared with the price of your TV.

It's worth noting that alternatives to Apple TV are cheaper and equally capable at a basic level. All of the devices connect to a TV so you can stream most major video services on a big screen. Roku and Amazon have 4K models for less than \$100 and non-4K versions for even less. Both are even ahead of Apple TV in being able to stream Amazon video now; it's coming soon to Apple TV.

But none of the rivals will play movies or shows purchased from Apple's iTunes, at least without clunky workarounds. To watch those on a big screen directly, you need an Apple TV. And Apple has just sweetened the deal on that front.

THE FUTURE HAS ARRIVED

Apple's embrace of 4K is significant, despite the fact that Roku, Amazon and other rivals beat Apple to that milestone. Apple often waits until there's broad enough appeal for new technologies. That time is now, given growth in sales of 4K TV and more movies and TV shows released in 4K formats.

Parallel to that is the rise of high-dynamic range technology in television sets. HDR increases color range and produces brighter whites and darker blacks. Better contrast means details in bright scenes aren't washed out.

Apple TV 4K supports HDR, too.

PATH TO UPGRADES

4K is coming, just as high definition earlier replaced standard definition. The consulting company Futuresource says a third of TVs sold worldwide this year will be 4K capable, up from 25 percent last year. But people tend to keep TVs for many years, unlike high-turnover phones.

In demos with tech companies and visits to Best Buy, I find superior [picture quality](#) in 4K. Your couch needs to close enough to the screen to see the difference. My next TV will likely have 4K, but my 4-year-old Vizio HD TV still works fine (though I'm sure I just jinxed it).

ITUNES UPGRADES ITS VIDEO ... AND YOURS

Many Hollywood blockbusters now have 4K versions of home video releases. Netflix and Amazon are also trying to make their original shows available in 4K. But many indie and older titles remain in HD; even older shows like "The Wonder Years" are still stuck in standard definition.

Fortunately, Apple isn't making you choose now. If you buy something in HD through iTunes, you'll automatically get the 4K [version](#) when it's out. And if a 4K version is available now, it will cost the same as its HD counterpart. It's never been clear why HD video is more expensive than SD when actors, directors and others behind the movies were paid the same.

Lots of people were peeved at how the music industry tried to get them to repurchase the same songs on cassette tapes, CDs and then digital files. I have a collection of DVDs and don't feel like paying again for higher-quality Blu-ray or digital versions.

So Apple's decision to treat 4K and HD the same is a good one. That only applies to iTunes, though. Netflix is charging extra for a plan that includes 4K, even when viewed on Apple TVs.

A word of caution: While the new iPhone 8 and iPad Pros unveiled this past June will support HDR, they won't display 4K. Even the upcoming iPhone X falls short in that respect.

BEYOND VIDEO

The new Apple TV gets a faster processor, which should make high-end games better to play. A new remote offers more precise motion control and a raised menu button to make it easier to orient yourself without looking. These features alone aren't enough to justify an Apple TV 4K unless you're a gamer. The non-4K version is getting the new remote, too. Picture quality is the same for both versions on regular HD sets like mine.

In any case, Apple TV—with or without 4K—will be most useful if you're already tied into Apple's system with iDevices and iTunes. Given that rival devices are cheaper, what you're buying isn't the device, but an experience—integration and syncing with all your other Apple gadgets. For instance, 4K video taken on an iPhone will play easily on an Apple TV 4K.

If you're in that camp and are thinking of buying a new TV in the next

few years, there's a good chance it will be 4K, so you might as well choose the 4K version of Apple TV now. But if it's longer, a better Apple TV will likely be out by then. The non-4K version will do just fine for now.

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