

Apple TV review: The good, the bad and the ugly

400+ Cult of Mac by Leander Kahney / 2d // keep unread // hide // preview



The new Apple TV looks like the old one, but it's a complete overhaul of the little black puck. It now comes with a full-blown App Store, a touch-sensitive remote and voice controls via Siri.

You can preorder it now, and it'll ship Friday.

We got our hands on a developer model and have been playing around with it. We like it *a lot*. Setup is fun, the interface looks stunning, and the touch remote works beautifully. If the Music app is any indication, apps on this thing are going to be great. There's just one little thing wrong. And it's not little, actually. It's big.

Here's the good, the bad and the ugly about the 4th-generation Apple TV.



The new Apple TV's UI is simple and striking.

Photo: Leander Kahney/Cult of Mac

Apple gave some developers early access to the new Apple TV so they could get their software ready for the new tvOS App Store.

Unfortunately, there's no App Store yet, but we gave the built-in apps a good tire-kicking.

We watched movies and TV shows from the online iTunes store, loaded Photos from our photo stream and explored the fantastic Music app, which is *sweeeeeet*. We watched, mesmerized, as the fantastic aerial screensavers played time after time. And we did a lot of talking to Siri, which you'll hear about in a bit.

All in all, we got a pretty good picture of how the new Apple TV works.

Setup is the best yet



Setup of the new Apple TV is so easy, you barely need the remote. It'll pull settings right off your iPhone.

Photo: Leander Kahney/Cult of Mac

The new Apple TV brings a vastly improved setup procedure. Instead of jumping through screen after screen, laboriously entering all your passwords, the new device can be paired with an iPhone or iPad via Bluetooth. It then copies your Wi-Fi and Apple ID settings. Admittedly, it didn't work the first time we did it, but it did the second time, and I was just delighted!

Performance: New Apple TV is snappy

The new hardware is fast and fluid. The surprisingly small motherboard holds a 64-bit, dual-core A8 processor, a super-speedy little monster that debuted in the iPhone 6 and 6 Plus (now a generation behind the new 6s).

The chip is a screamer, and runs hot, so the new box is about half as tall again as the old one (iFixit's teardown shows the increased size accommodates a giant heat sink). The small set-top box boasts 2 GB of RAM, also a step up from the previous version.

It's not just the chips, though. Networking is fast. The new Apple TV utilizes the fastest Wi-Fi currently available (802.11ac) as well as Bluetooth 4.0 and an IR receiver. It's not clear yet what the IR receiver is for — the remote works over Bluetooth. (I was able to connect Bluetooth speakers and a pair of Bluetooth headphones for listening to music in private — another new feature.)

On the device's back, you'll find only a few ports. There's HDMI to connect to a TV at 1080p resolution. Unlike some other boxes on the market (the new Amazon Fire TV, Nvidia Shield and Roku 4), the new Apple TV does not support 4K video.

There's an Ethernet port for wired networking and USB-C for service and support. Like its predecessor, the power supply is built-in so there's no chunky power brick, a small and welcome blessing.

One thing I missed: The new Apple TV doesn't have an optical digital audio output port, which I used to hook my old Apple TV to a bookshelf stereo so I could stream tunes via Airplay.

Under Apple TV's hood: storage

If you're going to buy one of these things, the only choice you'll have to make is between storage options. The new Apple TV will be available in two versions: a 32GB model (for \$149) and a 64GB model (for \$199).

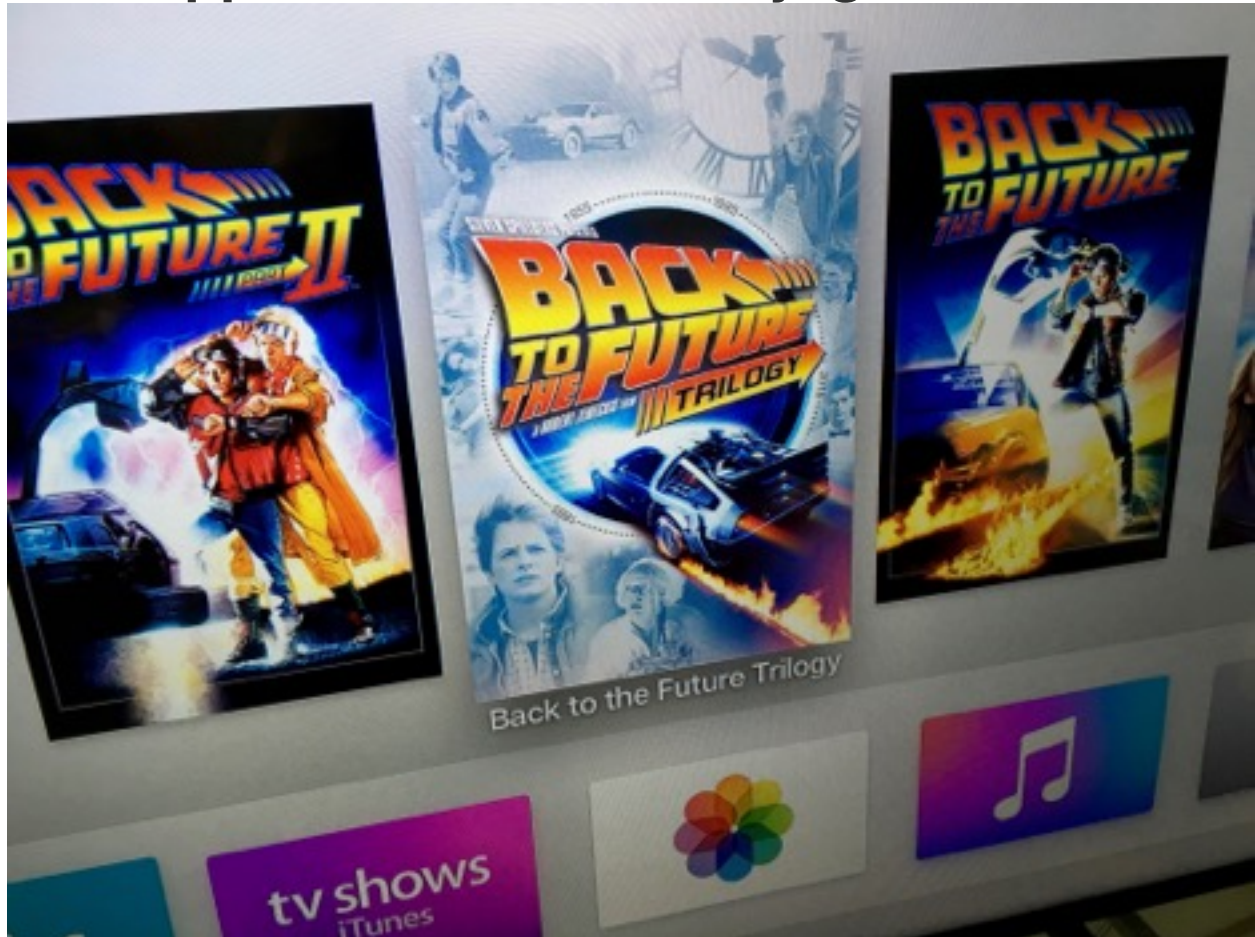
At this point, it's unclear how important storage space will be. The current Apple TV comes with 8GB, just enough to buffer whatever it's streaming. Nothing is stored locally.

This will probably be the case for the new TV too. Movies, games and music will be streamed to the device. To save space, Apple has all kinds of clever tricks up its sleeve, like deleting levels of games you've completed to make room for unplayed ones.

However, apps *will* be stored on the device, and it's possible you'll fill it up pretty quickly.

Should you get the bigger one? Probably, because \$50 isn't a lot to pay for some headroom.

New Apple TV interface: Hey, good lookin'!



The new Apple TV UI is big and bold.

Photo: Leander Kahney/Cult of Mac

I love the new interface. It'll be immediately familiar to current Apple TV owners because it uses the same tiled UI. It's fast, fluid and very easy to use. There's no getting lost. Each screen delivers lots of big, bold images and eye-catching carousels. The graphics are big, bright and colorful. The menus are logical and well laid out. Everything is fast and smooth, especially with the new touch-sensitive remote.

Apps and games coming to Apple TV



Apps galore will be coming to the new Apple TV.

Photo: Leander Kahney/Cult of Mac

The most important change coming with the new Apple TV will be a real App Store, with apps and games galore from third-party software developers.

Apple has said it'll be a real app store, with thousands of third-party apps that users will be able to download or delete as they see fit. Apps may be "universal," so that apps bought for an iPad will also work on the new Apple TV.

It'll get the usual selection of video apps from YouTube, Netflix, HBO, Showtime and Hulu. The one big missing app will be Amazon's Instant Video. There was no mention of it during the September announcement, and Amazon just announced it will no longer sell the Apple TV or Google's Chromecast streaming stick. The new Apple TV looks like it'll be an Amazon-free zone.

No biggie, perhaps. I streamed video from the Amazon app on my iPhone via AirPlay and it was great. AirPlay is a killer feature, BTW, and criminally underrated. It's a super-easy way to get stuff onto the TV from unsanctioned sources like Amazon or the BBC's iPlayer (if you're outside the U.K. and have a VPN.)

During the September event that gave us our first look at the new set-top box, Apple showed off several games, including *Crossy Road* and *Guitar Hero*. The games were controlled by the touch-sensitive remote, which has a three-axis gyroscope for Nintendo Wii-like gameplay. The hardware looked more than capable of the demands of HD games.

Also shown at the event were apps from Major League Baseball, Zillow (real estate), Airbnb (rental properties) and Gilt (shopping). No mention was made of HomeKit, Apple's home-automation framework, which is potentially a killer app for the new device.

All in all, the App Store promises to bring a ton of functionality and fun to the living room TV when it debuts.

Touch remote: Take a swipe at TV



The top part of the new remote is touch-sensitive. You'll love it.

Photo: Leander Kahney/Cult of Mac

The new Apple TV remote is great — a vast improvement on the slim silver stick of yore. It's been completely redesigned, with a large touchpad at the top and some new buttons. In addition, the entire touchpad is one big button — a change that took me an embarrassingly long time to figure out. (When I first got the remote out of the box and started setting it up, I tried hitting various buttons to proceed. I didn't realize that the whole top surface was one big button. I discovered it by accident when I pinched the thing in frustration). About 5 inches long, the remote is a little longer and wider than the current silver one. It adds some extra buttons, like volume controls and a dedicated "Home" button that takes you back to the main screen. I grew to really like the Home button. It's a handy shortcut when you've drilled down through a bunch of screens. One click and you're back to the top.

The touch-sensitive trackpad is also a blessing. It acts much like Apple's Magic Trackpad or the trackpad on a MacBook. You can quickly move anywhere on the screen, tracing your finger through wide circles or swiping through a bunch of thumbnails. It's not tricky or fussy at all, and it's a huge improvement on the old system of clicking through items one at a time. It even makes entering long and complicated passwords less of a chore.

The remote connects via Bluetooth 4.0, so you don't need a line of sight. It also includes that mysterious IR transmitter. Perhaps Apple will enable it to control other devices, turning it into a universal remote (watch out, Logitech Harmony).

The remote also packs an accelerometer and gyroscope for games and the like. Apple hasn't announced a console-like gaming controller, but has said the new Apple TV supports them. For now, Apple is telling developers that all games and apps must be controlled with the included remote.

The remote charges via a standard Lightning cable (which comes in the box). Apple says the battery will provide months of happy clicking on a single charge.

Beautiful new screensavers

Apple has added dozens of new video screensavers. These slow-moving aerial shots of cities like London and New York are totally mesmerizing. Only a couple of screensavers get stored at a time. To get new ones, you tell the device to download new ones every month, week or day. I sat, slack-jawed, as I gently floated over the Golden Gate.

Siri: The fly in the ointment



Siri should be the Apple TV's killer app. Instead, it kills you.

Photo: Leander Kahney/Cult of Mac

Here's the bad news about Apple TV: Siri is the weak spot. Everything works great except Siri. Apple's AI assistant was maddeningly inconsistent.

The ability to control the new Apple TV with Siri's voice commands was one of the big tentpole features during September's keynote. This capability puts the Apple TV on par other streaming boxes like the Roku 4, Amazon Fire TV and Comcast's X1 — just hit the dedicated Siri button on the remote and speak into the built-in mic.

Oddly, Siri understands just about everything I say (even with my British accent). I can see my commands transcribed onscreen. It also understands my American colleagues and kids. Siri has no trouble understanding *what* we say — but it is unable to obey all our commands.

For example, I cannot for the life of me get Siri to find *Game of Thrones*, despite repeated attempts. It transcribes the search perfectly, but responds that it can't help me. And yet I have no problem finding the hottest show on TV when I go looking for it with the remote. Most basic voice controls work fine. I can instruct Siri to rewind, pause or play. All that works great. In fact, Siri quickly becomes a natural and easy way to control the TV. Just squeeze the remote, speak a command and it executes. After just a couple of days it became fluid and easy, and natural, and it bothered me to navigate a TV with a traditional remote.

But Siri is comically inconsistent.

Say, "Search for Sylvester Stallone movies," and sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't.

I can ask Siri, "What did they just say?" and it rewinds one minute. But say, "Play The Clash," and it brings up a bunch of *Sesame Street* and Elmo videos. "Play Led Zeppelin" works fine.



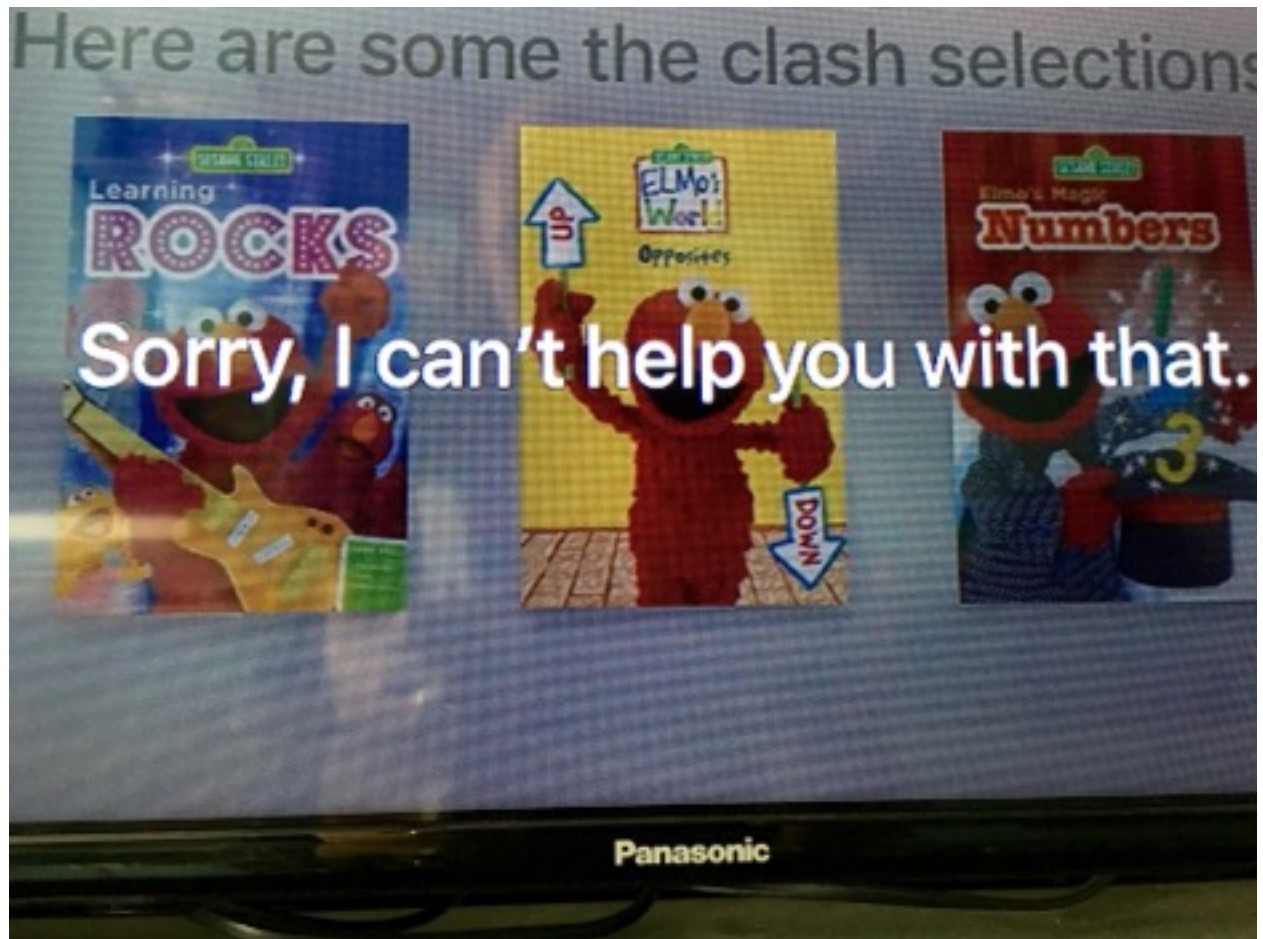
Ask Siri to play The Clash, and you get Elmo.

Photo: Leander Kahney/Cult of Mac

It's baffling.

There is no rhyme or reason to the maddening inconsistency.

I even tested some of the searches featured in Apple's September keynote: "Show me action movies" and "Show that *Modern Family* episode with Edward Norton" and "What did she say?" The last two commands work, but the first one doesn't.

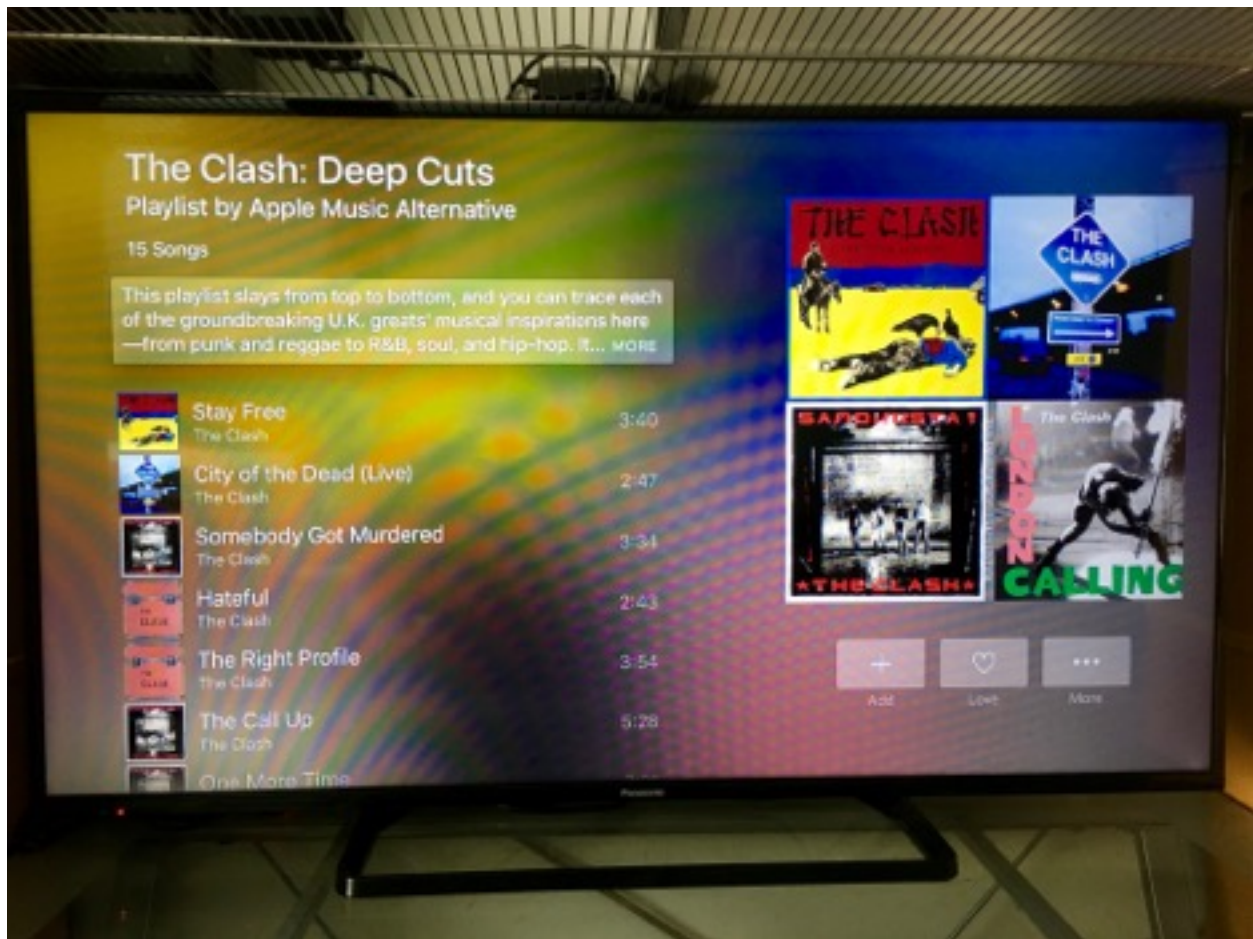


Pretty much my experience with Siri.

Photo: Leander Kahney/Cult of Mac

By comparison, the Amazon Echo we have in the Cult of Mac offices works by voice pretty much flawlessly. It makes smart, educated guesses when it can't execute commands to the letter, like searching the Amazon Prime store for music that's not in its library.

Music to my ears



I really dig the Apple TV's Music app, which serves up a cornucopia of music.

Photo: Leander Kahney/Cult of Mac

Talking of music, I really dig the Music app. I'm a subscriber to Apple's unlimited Music service, so the app enables a vast library of music as well as all the songs in my iTunes collection.

The Music app's first screen, "For You," is well-populated with a wide variety of music. The selections are nicely laid out, with albums from particular artists interspersed with curated playlists. It appears to be based on a mixture of my music library and my recent listening habits — mine had hip-hop interspersed with classic rock. A rap playlist called "State of Emergency Rap Songs" followed by "The Who: B Sides and Rarities."

There's also a "New" tab that's populated with a ton of stuff, divided up into various categories — music videos, recent releases and so on.

You'll also find Beats 1 radio, which I'm a big fan of, and you can create Pandora-like radio stations based on a particular artist or song. I played around with playlists and custom radio stations, which can be tuned, Apple says, by hitting a little heart icon that pops up with each song. Supposedly this helps the algorithms tune the station to your tastes, but I had limited success. I much preferred Beats 1 and the surprising choices that occur when a human DJ picks the tunes.

The future of Apple TV

There's a lot of rumored Apple TV functionality that we're still waiting to see. Cross-app search will be coming, and it will be interesting to see if it pulls content quickly and easily from the libraries of iTunes, Netflix, Showtime and HBO. Apple's own TV service, which supposedly will offer a cable TV-like package of channels over the Internet, is also on the horizon. And then there's HomeKit, which promises to make the Apple TV the center of home automation, if Apple enables it.

Conclusion: Apple TV review

When it comes to consumer electronics, interface is king, and the new Apple TV has nailed the basics. The updated remote works great, and its trackpad makes it far better than the previous version.

More importantly, the apps will make the 4th-generation Apple TV a winner. It'll be fascinating to see all the new apps coming down the pipeline. I know there's a killer app that'll blow everyone away.

Gaming on the device will depend on support for game controllers, and that seems likely.

If only Siri could get her act together. Talking to the remote is a great way to interact with the Apple TV — if only it were consistent (and consistently good)!

Come on Siri, get it right!