

'BlackBerry' review: The comedy and tragedy of the innovator's dilemma

It's funny, dramatic and one of the best movies about tech.



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BlackBerry has everything [Apple's Tetris film](#) lacked: human drama grounded in actual history, without the need to spice things up with car chases and fantastical storytelling. On the face of it, the rise and fall of Research in Motion's keyboard-equipped smartphone may not seem inherently compelling. But the brilliance of the film – directed by Matt Johnson, who also co-

wrote it with Matthew Miller – is that it makes the BlackBerry's journey feel like a genuine tragedy.

It's driven by two dramatically different people: RIM's co-CEOs Mike Lazaridis, a nebbishy genius of an engineer, and Jim Balsillie, a ruthless and perpetually angry businessman. They struggled on their own, but together were able to rule the mobile industry for more than a decade. And then came the iPhone, which instantly reversed their fortunes.

BlackBerry - Official Trailer ft. Jay Baruchel & Glen...



Like many former titans, RIM fell victim to [the innovator's dilemma](#). As described by Harvard professor Clayton Christensen, it's what happens when large and successful companies are entirely focused on iterating on existing products and appeasing customers. That leaves room for a more nimble newcomer to come along and develop something revolutionary that the incumbents could never have imagined.

In this case, it's Apple's iPhone, which lands like a nuclear bomb in the technology world. The film shows Lazaridis and his engineering team watching Steve Jobs' iconic iPhone keynote in disbelief. Lazaridis is the genius protagonist we've seen come up with the idea of a handheld, keyboard-equipped pocket computer that's efficient enough to run on unused, low-bandwidth wireless signals. Even after BlackBerry takes off, we see him have another stroke of inspiration with BlackBerry Messenger, a service that delivered free messaging to RIM's customers at a time when carriers charged 10 cents per SMS text. It was a brilliant maneuver that made BlackBerry users even more loyal, since BBM wasn't accessible on any other device.



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Even though he was no stranger to game-changing innovation himself, Lazaridis didn't think the iPhone would work. It was too expensive. It didn't have a physical keyboard. And it was built to gobble up mobile data (something RIM took pains to avoid). Who would want that? Turns out everyone did. While the iPhone was indeed pricey at launch, carrier subsidies made it easier to stomach. Its large screen, (eventual) App Store and revolutionary OS made up for its touch-based keyboard. And it arrived just as 3G networks were rolling out, which gave carriers more of an incentive to charge customers for data instead of cellular minutes. Just as the BlackBerry gave us a glimpse of an always-connected world in 1999, the iPhone promised to put the full power of the internet in your pocket.

Spoilers for real life, I guess: BlackBerry dropped from having 20 percent of the global smartphone market share in 2010 to 0 percent in 2017, [according to Statista](#). For people who weren't around for the company's heyday, the film serves as a valuable history lesson.



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Crucially, though, it's not just like reading a Wikipedia entry. Johnson tells us exactly who Laziridis and Balsillie are from the very first scenes of the movie. As Laziridis and his RIM co-founder Doug Fregin prepare for a pitch meeting with Balsillie, he can't help but notice a buzzing intercom in the room. It's made in China, which to him is a red flag for bad engineering. So, almost without thinking, Laziridis tears it open and fixes a defective component. Balsillie, meanwhile, spends that time scheming to take the limelight away from a co-worker, simply because he thinks he's smarter than everyone around him.

While that first meeting doesn't go well, it's almost as if Laziridis and Balsillie's lives are destined to intertwine. The engineer needs someone with business smarts to sell his vision, and the business man needs something hot to sell. As played by Jay Baruchel (*This is the End*, *How to Train Your Dragon*), Laziridis is practically a poster child for socially awkward engineers. Glenn Howerton, meanwhile, channels the childish energy of his *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* character to portray Balsillie as a coked-up ball of rage. He may get results, but he also has the uncanny ability to turn every room into a toxic workplace.

BlackBerry succeeds by making us care about Laziridis and his cadre of geeks, and by making Balsillie's antics relentlessly entertaining (even when he's being a complete jerk). But what's most impressive is that it gives the story of *Research in Motion* a compelling dramatic shape: the rise of the genius, the defeat of his enemies (Palm's potential hostile takeover of the company is particularly harrowing) and the inevitable downfall. It'll forever change the way you view BlackBerry. And for the tech titans of today, the movie is a textbook example of how quickly you can fall from grace.

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