

iPhone 6S Review: Come for the New Features, Stay for the Screaming Speed

While Apple nailed 3D Touch and supercharged the smartphone camera, speed makes the biggest difference in the iPhone 6S.

The new iPhone 6S and 6S Plus are great. If you're in the market for a smartphone, you should buy one—but not for the reasons you might think.

As is usually the case in an “S” year (or a “tock” year, which follows the “tick” of an entirely new device), Apple has refined last year's model. There are some new features alongside the processor-upgrading and general screw-tightening we've come to expect.

Naturally, the new features are getting the most attention. By my count, there are three this year: 3D Touch, Live Photos, and upgrades to the front-facing camera.

3D Touch is a pressure-sensitive layer that's been added to the iPhone's display, allowing you to access shortcuts and previews when you press down on an icon or link. You can jump to a new text or a frequently called phone number from the home screen, see a preview of a message in your inbox, check the pictures on your camera roll without leaving the camera app. It's a bit like right-clicking on a mouse.

It's easy to imagine how another manufacturer would try to do this and how it would be a mess. You wouldn't know how hard to press; you'd press too hard; there'd be a lag and you'd press again, only to find that you had pressed twice, probably causing you to throw the phone across the room. The new iPhones don't have this problem, though there can be a little confusion at first. If you don't press hard enough, you activate the old-fashioned “jiggle mode” whereby your apps shake, inviting you to move them around the home screen. But Apple has added haptic feedback to guide your actions. Press until you feel a crisp click under your finger, and you'll know you've done it right. Audio and visuals move in perfect synch.

So 3D Touch is executed perfectly. The question remains: What can you do with it? Right now, not all that much. Sure, it's nice to be able to see a preview of an e-mail or a link on a Web page. It's even cool to jump straight to the alarm settings when you press down on the clock app. But some choices are less straightforward: Press on Safari, and one option that arises is “New Private Tab.” Who needs to get to a private

browsing tab, like, immediately? (Don't answer that.) Fortunately, 3D Touch is a work in progress: Since third-party developers can and will take advantage of it, 3D Touch will probably benefit from additional programmers futzing around and coming up with new applications.

The second big change is something Apple's calling Live Photos. In addition to upgrading the iPhone's rear-facing camera, from eight to 12 megapixels, the company has added a new way to take a picture. When you open the camera app, the phone is already buffering the second and a half of audio and video before the shutter is released. When you decide to take a picture, the camera includes brief, lo-res video from the moments before and after you release the shutter. It's more than a photo and less than a video, almost like a GIF.

Apple and others have hailed Live Photos as something revolutionary. I'm not so sure. Maybe my expectations were too high, but the feature seems little more than a nice, extra mode for the camera. If 3D Touch is something that reflects Apple's obsession with detail and perfect understanding of how hardware and software come together, Live Photos seems a bit gimmicky. Consider: If Live Photos had been announced by, say, Samsung, would you care?

The last upgrade of note is the way the 6S and 6S Plus can take selfies. The problem with front-facing cameras is that they often lack a flash capacity. If you shoot in a dark bar, your photo is going to be dark. Instead of adding a second flash, Apple has turned the display into one when needed. When you are taking a picture of yourself, the phone's display will brighten to three times its normal level to illuminate your face. Apple even went so far as to design a specific microprocessor to control the color of the display's glow. The phone can sense the ambient color of a room and make sure you're lit in a flattering hue. It's mightily clever and, like the best features, completely automatic.

Maybe that's what's most impressive about the new iPhones—the things that fade into the background. We're used to hearing that New Phone has a faster processor than Old Phone, but in this case, Apple's A9 processor just screams with speed. Moving between apps is lightning fast. Fast-moving games are as smooth as Billy Dee Williams on a silk surfboard. The Touch ID sensor is instantaneous: By the time you've pressed the home button to wake up the phone, you've already authenticated yourself and are on the home screen. The new iPhones can get on faster Wi-Fi and, where available, 4G networks.

These otherwise-unglamorous performance boosts don't get the crowd on their feet at product launches, but they're exactly what a great smartphone needs to achieve its ultimate goal, which is to get out of your way. With prodigious speed, well-thought-out interfaces, and flawless hardware-software integration, these new iPhones provide the tool for whatever it is you're doing and just let you do it. The best thing about the 6S and 6S Plus isn't all the new stuff to pay attention to, it's all the stuff you never notice.