

# 'BlackBerry' film hails the must-have gadget that the iPhone turned into a forgotten relic

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This image released by IFC Films shows Jay Baruchel, left, and actor-director Matt Johnson, center, with cast members on the set of "BlackBerry." Credit: IFC Films via AP

Almost everyone knows Steve Jobs' uncanny vision, relentless drive and technological wizardry hatched the iPhone, a breakthrough that

continues to reshape culture 16 years after the late Apple co-founder introduced the device to the world.

But when Jobs unveiled the first iPhone in 2007, another smartphone was the must-have gadget. It was the BlackBerry, a device so addictive that it became known as the "CrackBerry" among tech nerds and power brokers hunched over a tiny keyboard that was best operated with both thumbs clickety-clacking.

Now the BlackBerry is "that phone people had before they bought an iPhone," a relic so irrelevant that the Canadian company that made it is now valued at \$3 billion—down from \$85 billion at its 2008 peak when it still controlled nearly half of the smartphone market.

But its legacy is worth remembering—and audiences will get a chance to learn more about its origins in the new film, ["BlackBerry."](#) The film out Friday in theaters is the latest movie or TV series to delve into technology's penchant for groundbreaking innovation, blind ambition, ego clashes and power struggles that turn into morality tales.

That formula has already spawned two Academy Award-nominated movies written by Aaron Sorkin, 2010's "The Social Network" delving into Facebook's founding and 2015's "Steve Jobs," dissecting the Silicon Valley icon. Then came last year's flurry of TV series examining the scandals enveloping WeWork ("WeCrashed"), Uber ("Super Pumped") and disgraced Theranos CEO Elizabeth Holmes ("The Dropout"), which won Amanda Seyfried an Emmy for her turn in the starring role.

Unlike any of those biopics, "BlackBerry" is told as a dark comedy revolving around two amiable but bumbling nerds, Mike Lazaridis and Doug Fregin, who can't seem to execute their plan to create a "computer in a phone" until they bring in a hard-nosed, foul-mouthed businessman, Jim Balsillie.

Although "BlackBerry" is based on a meticulously researched book called "Losing the Signal," director and co-star Matt Johnson acknowledged taking more liberties in the movie during an interview with The Associated Press. Among other changes, Johnson cited shifting some timelines, shaping the company culture through his view of the 1990s and infusing the key characters with "our own personalities and our own ideas.

"But our lawyers wouldn't let us put anything in the film that was an outright fabrication," Johnson stressed.

Johnson had to do a lot of guesswork in his role as the enigmatic Fregin, who sold all his stock in BlackBerry's holding company—then known as Research In Motion, RIM—around the same time Apple released the first iPhone and has kept a low profile ever since.

"Doug is true cipher, he has never done a taped interview," said Johnson, which led him to portray Fregin as a "kind of mascot figure who is tying the culture of the office together."



This image released by IFC Films shows Jay Baruchel as Mike Lazaridis in a scene from "BlackBerry." Credit: IFC Films via AP

Ironically, Johnson got a lot of his idea on how to depict Fregin from one of RIM's early employees, Matthias Wandel, who posted [a YouTube video](#) critiquing inaccuracies that he saw in the "BlackBerry" trailer. Before that, Wandel talked extensively to Johnson about RIM's history and even provided diaries that he kept while during the BlackBerry's development.

"I think when he sees the film he is going to be quite charmed by how much of his original notes are in the film," Johnson said of Wandel. "It's so funny that he has released that video (because) so much of my character is based on him. I stole everything from that dude. I owe him huge."



Balsillie, RIM's co-CEO with Lazaridis, emerges as the film's most intriguing character. Actor Glenn Howerton (best known for his role in the TV series, "It's Always Sunny In Philadelphia") portrays Balsillie in a way that casts him as both the story's chief antagonist and protagonist dropping f-bombs in tyrannical temper tantrums at the same time he is making savvy moves that turned the BlackBerry into a cultural sensation.

"It always felt like this was a guy who weirdly felt a little outside of sort of what people would consider to be sort of a titan of technology or business," Howerton said of Basillie during an AP interview. "I played him as someone who had something to prove at almost all times, that he could play with the big boys."

Balsillie eventually became entangled in legal problems tied to improper changes [to the pricing of stock options](#)—a tactic known as "backdating" that also ensnared [Apple's former general counsel](#) and former chief financial officer in 2007 for their handling of compensation packages awarded Jobs. Both Balsillie and Lazaridis left RIM in 2012.

Now that BlackBerry has faded from the public consciousness, Balsillie seems to be welcoming the renewed attention from the new film even though he quibbled with some aspects of his character during [a recent interview](#) with The Canadian Press.

Unlike Lazaridis and Fregin, Balsillie attended a recent showing of the film in Toronto and even walked the red carpet with Johnson and Howerton.

"In many ways, (Jim) was the hero, he was the character who changed for the better (in the film)," Johnson said. "The audience was just with him. It was almost a psychedelic experience to be in theater watching the movie with Jim, with Jim being the person who was laughing the loudest."

Balsillie, who is mocked in one of the film's scenes for having never seen "Star Wars," confided to Howerton that he enjoyed watching "BlackBerry" so much that it was the first movie he had ever seen twice in his life.

*Correction note: This story was updated on May 11, 2023 to correct the title of a book to "Losing the Signal."*

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