**The new iPhone is AI-ready. So where’s the AI?**

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Let’s see ... a falling stock market, waning consumer confidence, a raging trade war between the United States and Canada. Yes, it’s beginning to look a lot like a recession.

Maybe it isn’t the ideal moment for Apple to kill off its least expensive smartphone, the $429 iPhone SE, and replace it with the new $600 iPhone 16e. But with iPhone sales slumping lately, the product line needed something more than a facelift. Instead, Apple has delivered a trim, muscular phone that features almost as much digital horsepower as the company’s thousand-dollar iPhones.

The goal is an economical smartphone capable of running the latest artificial intelligence software to keep Apple competitive with AI-powered phones from Samsung, Google, and a horde of Chinese competitors. That means loading it with the latest Apple-designed processors instead of cheaper chips, and that probably explains the price bump.

For the money, you get a blazing-fast phone, with a gorgeous screen and an excellent camera. But buyers won’t get as much as they may have hoped for, at least not this year. Because while the new ­iPhone offers some useful entry-level AI features, the really good stuff is months away.

Last week, Apple announced that a major upgrade to its Apple Intelligence AI system, which was supposed to happen in April, has been pushed back to sometime “in the coming year." That could mean early 2026. It’s bad news for Apple, whose competitors won’t be taking the year off. And it’s also no fun for iPhone buyers.

Still, the 16e has enough Apple Intelligence to keep things interesting.

Some of it is gaudy and gimmicky, like Playground, an app that generates cartoon-like images of pretty much anything you can describe. I asked it for a cover from a 1950s science fiction magazine. The image nailed the giant-robot look, but instead of enticing taglines such as “Martians Attack!" I got incoherent symbols that looked like text but weren’t.

More useful is a handy photo editing tool that uses AI to delete anything from a photo. I’ve got lots of photos that could benefit from this. There’s also a feature that records and transcribes phone calls and generates a brief summary of the conversation. There’s a similar feature in the email app that will summarize incoming messages and can help you rewrite your messages to make them sound more professional or more casual. And the phone’s visual search feature uses Google and OpenAI technology to describe the user’s surroundings and identify specific objects.

On the downside, a bunch of cool promises haven’t been kept. We were supposed to get a feature that could generate summaries of incoming news notifications. But this feature was turned off after the AI generated several wildly inaccurate news bulletins, such as a false claim that a famous athlete had come out as gay.

Also, Apple’s having a nightmarish time updating its venerable Siri voice-activated assistant. The company promised to make it capable of answering questions in context. For instance, you could say, “What’s the best way to get to the airport on time?" Siri was supposed to check your calendar to get your travel schedule, get the latest traffic reports, and check public transportation schedules to see if a subway was the best option, and then generate an answer, all without any further human prompting.

Now that’s real Apple Intelligence — or it would be if Apple could get it to work.

And if that weren’t enough, Apple on Monday said it’s in the midst of a massive overhaul of all its operating system software for the iPhone, iPad, and Mac. That could slow down the company’s AI transformation.

But the news isn’t all bad. The iPhone 16e proves that Apple’s getting the hardware right.