

# The rise and fall of the BlackBerry

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A decade and a half ago, there was no bigger status symbol than the BlackBerry. Lady Gaga tweeted from hers. Madonna slept with one under her pillow. Kim Kardashian owned three of them. When he became president, Barack Obama fought tooth and nail to be able to keep his device. When Naomi Campbell lost her temper with a housekeeper in 2006, which household object did she choose to use as a projectile weapon? That's right, it was the humble BlackBerry. Without any overstatement, they were everywhere. And yet, when was the last time you thought about BlackBerry? A year ago? A decade ago? More? The BlackBerry currently occupies a genuinely strange space in the culture. It swept in with such gamechanging ferocity – here was a phone that allowed you to send emails, liberating its user from the tyranny of the office – only to be displaced just as quickly when Apple announced the iPhone. BlackBerry's ups and downs were so sudden and violent that they're now almost impossible to comprehend. Luckily, a new movie is here to tell the BlackBerry story from start to finish. Based on the book *Losing the Signal: The Untold Story Behind the Extraordinary Rise and Spectacular Fall of BlackBerry*, BlackBerry is a propulsive comedy-drama that zips us all the way across the whole rocky journey, as two out-of-their-depth Canadian engineers named Mike Lazaridis and Douglas Fregin invent the world's first smartphone and – aided by Glenn Howerton's livid capitalist Jim Balsillie – ride a rocketship to the moon before crashing back to Earth. In an age when people are making films about the creation of almost every conceivable real-life product, from shoes (Air) to video games (Tetris) to crisps (Flamin' Hot), BlackBerry stands up as one of the most purely enjoyable. It might even rewrite history a bit, too. From today's perspective, it's easy to condemn BlackBerry as an out and out failure, as the thing we had to make do with until Steve Jobs got his act together. Without much effort at all, you can lump BlackBerry in with all the other dinosaurs who didn't see the revolution sharking in behind them, like Blockbuster Video or Friends Reunited or journalism. And yet the film does an excellent job of showing us that, for a time, BlackBerry had it all. It pinpoints the exact moment when people worked out the device's potential, and their worlds shifted accordingly. "I was in New York working on a book, and I noticed everyone had these things called BlackBerrys," recalls author and tech writer Jonathan Margolis. "People were telling me they could send emails, and I remember thinking 'No, you must be mistaken, you're sending SMS text messages'. But a friend sent me an email from their phone, and I had to go home and pick it up on my PC. It was incredible." But however amazing the technology, the film came about because of something else. Speaking over Zoom from his home in Toronto, BlackBerry director Matt Johnson – who also co-wrote the script and plays Fregin – explains that he was first attracted to the mix of personalities at the company's heart. "I felt kind of a kindred spirit with both Jim and Mike," he says of the two ideologically opposed figures at the core of the film. On one hand, Lazaridis was a visionary perfectionist who obsessed over every detail until it was exactly as it should be. And then there's Balsillie, whose naked hunger for money cuts

through every scene. Which part of him did Johnson see in himself? “The idea to basically seize as much power as possible for no reason,” he laughs. “Just to have power. Yeah, the dance between those two things, I really recognised it; I found it very easy to understand why they each were doing what they were doing.” The BlackBerry might have a tang of nostalgic kitsch about it now but the impact it had on the world was incalculable. The iPhone, remember, was designed specifically to usurp the BlackBerry. In the late 2000s, trying to become a BlackBerry killer was the tech equivalent of walking up to the biggest guy in prison and punching him out. And it was all so overt. Steve Jobs had BlackBerry so firmly in his sights that he flashed an image of one onscreen dismissively during its launch, to show the world exactly what he wanted to destroy. If we had still lived in a world of flip phones and numerical texting, there is a chance that Jobs wouldn’t have tried so hard to make the perfect phone, and the world would be unrecognisable as a result. Because it wasn’t just an accessory that celebrities occasionally used to assault their employees. The BlackBerry was instrumental in changing the way that humans worked. Owning a BlackBerry – and, really, owning any smartphone subsequently – meant that you didn’t have to be stuck at a desk in a strip-lit office to remain connected. It meant you carried the office around with you at all times. You could reply to emails at night, or on holiday, or on the toilet. This is commonplace today but, at the time, this was a hell of a flex. If you had a BlackBerry, you were signalling to the world that you were busier than most people. It meant you were needed. People contacted you around the clock and, thanks to your choice of phone, you could finally respond in a timely manner. It was also extremely addictive. Not only was a BlackBerry pleasingly nubby to hold but – thanks to its incessantly blinking notification light – it would remind you constantly of a whole world of digital Fomo that you were missing out on. For this reason, the word “crackberry” (the term given to the phone’s ability to inspire obsession) became the 2006 Webster’s New World College Dictionary word of the year. They could also lead to injuries. For example, “BlackBerry thumb”, another term for De Quervain tenosynovitis, was dubbed “the plague of the wired generation” in 2007. But, arguably, it was worth the pain. Because – and this might not be something that you can appreciate unless you were there at the time – the BlackBerry had a keyboard. A full Qwerty keyboard that you could tap away at with both thumbs, making light work of typing. Before this breakthrough, written communication had been a genuine nightmare. Cast your mind back to the horror of sending text messages on a numerical keypad, where you had to press each key a certain amount of times to scroll through to the right letter. Remember how hard it was to type the word “fizzy” on a brick phone? First you had to press the three button three times, then the four button three times, then the nine button four times, then pause to let the cursor move, then the nine button four more times, then pause again, and then press nine three final times. It took forever. If the BlackBerry generation can be defined by anything at all, it is probably the sheer relief of only having to press one button once for each letter. But the thrill was shortlived. As soon as the iPhone was announced, BlackBerry sales fell off a cliff and would never recover. Margolis suggests that some amount of hubris on the part of BlackBerry might have hastened its downfall. “BlackBerry had become quite smug,” he explains. “There was a time when they thought that typing on to a flat sheet of glass wouldn’t work, but within a year the clicky-clicky BlackBerry method of typing seemed completely antiquated.” Interestingly, however, Johnson’s film suggests the writing was on the wall as soon as BlackBerry lost its vibesy, good-natured co-founder Fregin, who was forced out as the walls of big business started to encircle the company. “It’s something I believe in deeply,” says Johnson. “This idea that there’s something that doesn’t quite obviously seem to affect the bottom line, but creates a harmonious, egoless positive environment, where people are people and are willing to do more than if they were asked to do something.” For Johnson, Fregin’s removal represented nothing less than the spiritual death of the company. As an entity, BlackBerry is now actually dead. No phones have been manufactured since 2016, the same year the popular photo blog Celebrity BlackBerry sightings shut down with the message: “Unfortunately, all the celebrities now own an iPhone, this is so sad.” Finally, last January, the company shut down all its services for any phones still using its operating device. But that hasn’t deterred some diehards. “I’ve met hundreds of them,” Johnson explains. “The problem that they’re experiencing is that there are no more servers in Waterloo to send and receive information. The BlackBerry holdouts don’t have a dedicated network in the way they used to, but there are lots of people who hacked their BlackBerries to run off whatever 5G networks are in their area. But it’s not the same.” It’s hard to know what the long-term legacy of BlackBerry will be. Reverberations from its genesis still linger in the real world. On one hand, the work-from-home revolution we’ve seen since Covid could never have been possible pre-BlackBerry, and we’re still moving towards a future where many jobs can be performed anywhere. On the negative side, though, this freedom to work anywhere has led to burnout and exhaustion, and the slow dissolution of the boundaries that have always existed between work and life. If you’ve ever had an email from your boss at 11pm, and been expected to reply instantly, the truth is that it’s probably BlackBerry you should be cursing. Matt Johnson sees things a little differently, though. Since making a film about BlackBerry, he’s found that people keep unloading their memories of it to him, regardless of how outwardly indifferent he is about the company. And one sentiment has come through time and again. “The general legacy of the BlackBerry is one of a company that couldn’t see the writing on the wall,” he explains. “But everybody kind of has a ‘Oh, isn’t it too bad?’ feeling about it, too. It’s so funny, because it’s so rare to have a citizenry that sympathises with a billion-dollar corporation. So often they’re the bogeyman, and yet here’s one where everybody regards it almost as a dead relative. Hundreds of massive companies fail, and nobody gives them a second thought. But for some reason BlackBerry invokes a human response.” Why could that be? “I wonder if it’s because the product was so tactile,” he continues. “But BlackBerry’s reputation is almost like a mom-and-pop company, which is so absurd given the scope and power and ambition of that company. In many ways, I think the response to the company these days is the exact

opposite of what someone like Jim Balsillie would have wanted. It's almost like, 'Oh, you ran a company? Oh, that's so nice. Oh, I'm so sorry'. Which is so demeaning. It's a humiliating response. But I mean, that is the irony of BlackBerry in many ways." Johnson also makes the point that what happened to Blackberry won't be the only time something similar happens. Public tastes are fickle, and it only takes one new competitor with one gamechanging invention to upend an entire industry. We might look back at BlackBerry with a kind of bewildered nostalgia now, but one day it is inevitable that something will come along to surpass the iPhone. And what a movie that would make. BlackBerry is out in UK and Irish cinemas now