

Apple Bits

NORTHEAST OHIO APPLE CORPS
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Inside the HomePod

NEOAC

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ABOUT NEOAC

We are an informal group of Apple users and enthusiasts. We have members of all levels of computer expertise using all types of Macs and Apple products.

Annual dues are \$20.00 per family. In September, the cost for a new membership through the end of the year is \$10. To join or renew your membership, you can either pay at a meeting, on our web site or mail a check made out to "NEO Apple Corps" and send to the post office box noted above.

Dues include access to our listserv (an online bulletin board where you can post questions and/or comments at any time), a PDF of our monthly newsletter and the opportunity to participate in our monthly raffle for valuable Apple and Apple-related products.

MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL

Thanks to those members who have renewed. Dues are \$20 and include any family members that you can claim on your taxes. Membership privileges include participation in the raffles, the listserv, and picnic attendance. Prospective members should fill in the form on the last page.

MEETINGS

Unless otherwise noted, NEOAC meetings start at 9:30 a.m. on the fourth Saturday of each month at the Strongsville Public Library.

Strongsville Public Library
18700 Westwood Drive
Strongsville, OH 44136
(directly behind the police station)
440-238-5530

<DIRECTIONS>

NEXT MEETING

March 24

UPCOMING MEETINGS

April 28

May 19 (1 week early)



iWork Apps Add Apple Pencil Support, Pages Gains Ebook Creation Features

JOSH CENTERS

<https://tidbits.com/2018/03/27/iwork-apps-add-apple-pencil-support-pages-gains-ebook-creation-features/>

Good news for those who rely on Apple's iWork suite for content creation: the company is once again lavishing the apps with attention, adding Apple Pencil support, book creation, and other goodies. Updates for macOS, iOS, and iCloud are available now.

(Our condolences to Michael Cohen and Sharon Zardetto, the hard-working authors of the just-updated "Take Control of Pages" and "Take Control of Numbers." They'll undoubtedly be diving back in soon.)

First up, all three iWork apps — Pages, Numbers, and Keynote — gain Apple Pencil support on the iPad. You'll be able to draw, sketch, and write directly in those documents, and you'll also be able to annotate them with Apple's new Smart Annotation feature, currently in beta. Apple says: "With Smart Annotation, comments and proof marks will dynamically anchor to text. And as a user integrates feedback and the document changes, remaining annotations will stay with the text they were attached to."

The long-ignored iBooks Author may be low on ink, but Apple hasn't given up on ebook creation, adding more ebook creation features to Pages for macOS, iOS, and Pages for iCloud. (See "[iBooks Author Conference](#)

[Highlights Worries about iBooks Ecosystem](#)," 24 October 2017, for discussion of concerns that Apple had given up on publishing.) You'll be able to start a book with a template and then add your own drawings and other media. You'll also be able to collaborate with others when authoring a book.

From what Michael Cohen has told us, Pages' capabilities are still far inferior to iBooks Author, which remains [available in the App Store](#). In fact, per iMore's Serenity Caldwell, Apple says that it's still [actively developing iBooks Author](#), despite a seeming lack of attention. We know of one upside to Pages over iBooks Author: collaboration with others when authoring iBooks.

Apple also slipped in some other little goodies into Pages for iOS. Most interesting is a new Presenter mode, which lets you turn your iPad or iPhone into a teleprompter for distraction-free reading. It sounds useful, if an odd feature for a word processor — we hope it appears in the next version of iBooks too.

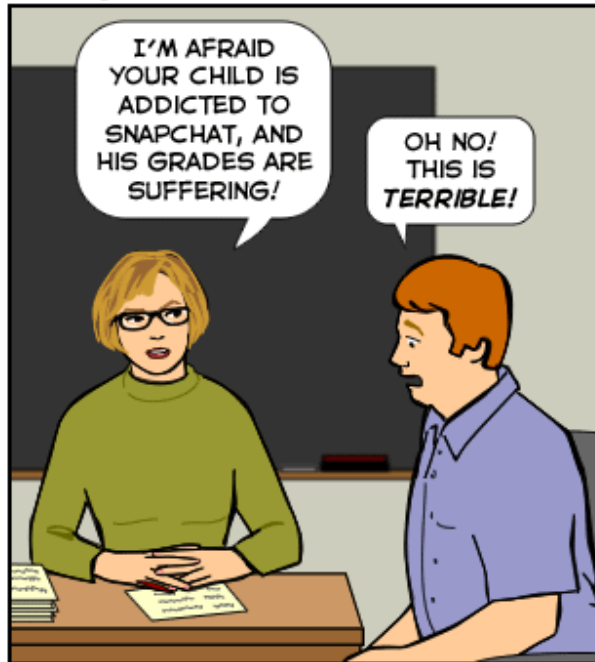
Also new is [Box](#) integration with the real-time collaboration features in the iWork apps, which lets you collaborate on iWork files on the Box file sharing service. Previously, those features were available only for documents stored in iCloud.



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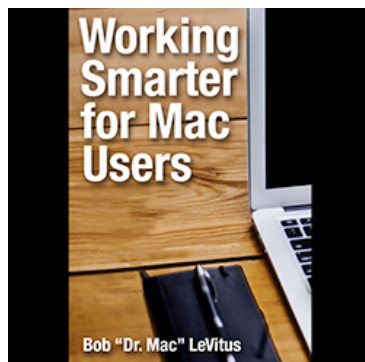
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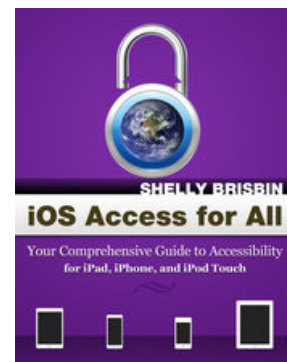
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HomePod review: Stop, Look, and Listen

Jason Snell

<https://sixcolors.com/post/2018/03/homepod-review/>



I've spent the past few weeks listening to Apple's HomePod. In my office and in my living room, on top of a piano and down on an end table. I've listened to it while working, cooking, and lazing on the couch. I've played it at full volume and low volume.

It's a very good speaker that excels at connecting me to my Apple Music library and playlists. As a voice assistant, it's got a lot of issues. Two years ago, the HomePod could've taken a bite out of the Amazon Echo's

market presence; today it's just a face in the crowd, by no means a bad product but one that's not necessarily different enough to stand out.

Listening to HomePod

I am not an audiophile or a professional audio reviewer, but I do like music and listen to an awful lot of it. There's been at least one networked music player in my living room for fifteen years, dating back to Slim Devices' groundbreaking SLIMP3. In recent years most of my

music playback in my house's common spaces has either come from products from Sonos (a Sonos Connect attached to the speakers in the living room and a Play:1 in the bathroom) or Amazon (the original Echo and now the Echo Show, in the kitchen).

Adding voice control to music, especially in an open space like your house, is a major step forward. Instead of needing a remote control or an app, with just a few words you can conjure up just about any music you can think of—especially when a voice-controlled player is connected to a streaming service's huge music library. The more time you spend using your voice to control music playback with a device like an Echo, HomePod, or Sonos One, the more you resent needing to find an iOS device in order to start a new playlist going.

All the reviews of the HomePod compare its audio quality to the Amazon Echo, because it created this product category, but it's not really fair—the Echo (whether it's the original, the new version, or even the Show) is not a device optimized for music quality. In head-to-head tests, all of these high-end connected speakers—HomePod, Sonos, and even the Google Home Max—reveal themselves to be speakers of far better quality than those in the Echo. If you really care about playback quality, they all provide a better experience.

That said, plenty of people enjoy listening to music but don't care about playback quality. Growing up, most of the music in my house came via AM radio—a format so bad at reproducing music that it's since been entirely abandoned to talk and news.

Eventually I found rock FM radio stations and cassettes and CDs, but my first love of music came from an atrocious listening experience. The Amazon Echo reminds me of that, a little—though it provides a decidedly better audio experience—because for a whole lot of people it's good enough. Even in my house, where we have access to far better speakers than the Echo, it's ended up as the preferred player because of the ease of voice control.

In any event, the HomePod's audio is really good. It's slightly better than my Sonos Play:1, with better bass and clearer treble. Both of them are essentially mono speakers, even though HomePod boasts seven different tweeters arrayed in a ring. If you play a song with familiar left and right panning on the HomePod, you won't hear any of that directional stuff. Instead, the HomePod will do its own processing and try to separate items in the soundscape. For true stereo effects, you'll need a second HomePod (or a second Play:1 or Sonos One) and in the case of the HomePod, you'll need to wait for a forthcoming software update that will enable stereo pairing.

The HomePod's processing of audio can lead to interesting results: Some of my favorite music sounds spectacularly good when processed by HomePod, while some of its sounds flat and lifeless. I suspect HomePod has also been tweaked with specific kinds of music in mind; modern stuff tended to sound a lot better than studio stuff from the 80s, for whatever reason.

While I'm happy with the sound of the HomePod, it's not what I'd call a room-filling speaker. The fact that it broadcasts in a full 360 degrees makes it superior than something like the Sonos Play:1, which has a sweet spot right in front of it. The Sonos Play:5 will fill a room, but it's directional and quite large—I've got one and it doesn't live in my living room because there's just no good place for it. The HomePod is compact, so it fits just about anywhere and is audible throughout the room. That counts for a lot, but in larger rooms it may disappoint.

Looking at HomePod

The HomePod is a remarkable physical specimen. It's a curvy cylinder wrapped in fabric that's slightly squishy to the touch and surprisingly dense. I bought the Space Gray model (it's also available in white) and have been impressed at what a good job it does at blending in wherever I put it. This is what a product like this should do. As I mentioned above, the HomePod's

compact size is one of the things I like about it, in that I was able to find a half dozen different places in my kitchen and living room where I could plop it down and have it do its job without getting in my way.

The top of the HomePod features a glowing blob that pulsates in various colors to indicate when Siri is active. It's also got three touch-sensitive areas—one over the blob that works more or less like a headphone clicker, with one tap for play or pause, two taps to move to the next track, and so on. There are also plus and minus symbols that light up and which you can touch to adjust the volume.

It's the weak point in the HomePod's design. Since the top is not visible unless the HomePod is lower than your vision, forget putting the HomePod high up. I placed the HomePod on the top of our upright piano and my wife complained that she couldn't tell that Siri was activated—she couldn't see the color blob. In contrast, the Amazon Echo's colored activation ring goes around the edge of the device, so it's visible even if you can't see the top. You can't feel for the volume controls, either, because there's no tactile element to them at all. Even when I could see the top of the HomePod, I frequently tapped in the wrong place. I get why Apple doesn't think physical buttons are cool, but the top of the HomePod isn't a screen—and it would be better served with three buttons and an

indicator light (that's visible from the side as well as above).

The bottom of the HomePod has a silicone ring that can apparently interact badly with certain types of stains or oil finishes on wood. I never experienced any issues with the HomePod and my furniture, but I have seen bad interactions between silicone and wood in the past—a glow-in-the-dark banana slug from UC Santa Cruz once melted itself into the top of a bookshelf; the outline remains more than a decade later. It's unfortunate that this happened, and it would've been a good idea for Apple to test this and provide guidance for HomePod buyers, but it's not even the only device in its class to have this issue. If you have really nice wood furniture you might want to put the HomePod on a coaster or a doily. My mom used to put doilies under just about everything we owned; then again, she listened to music on AM radio. Your mileage will assuredly vary.

Talking to HomePod

One of the most important features of HomePod is its support for voice control. This is the first device from Apple to sit in your house and listen to commands, something I've been dreaming about since 2016. I know that Apple's been building devices that listen to your voice for years, but it's different when it's a device sitting in a common area waiting for anyone to trigger it.

On the hardware side, HomePod excels at listening for commands. I was able to trigger it while it was blaring music by saying its name at a completely natural volume, which felt like witchcraft. Its multiple microphones and the signal processing capabilities of its chip are doing their job, and quite well.

However, Apple's still got some work to do when it comes to arbitrating which device gets to act on a "Hey Siri" command. At several points I discovered my Apple Watch was intercepting HomePod commands because I had made the mistake of lifting my arms just before speaking. Friends who have lots of devices with "Hey Siri" turned on report that it's a real crapshoot about which device activates when they provide a command. Apple's devices are trying to do the right thing, but they're failing more often than they should. There's more work that needs to be done here.

Compounding the issue is that Siri is not so much a product as a loose confederation of different products on different platforms. So if you try to give a command to your iPhone and the HomePod intercepts it, that command may fail—because Siri on HomePod can't do all the same things that it can on iPhone. Likewise Apple Watch and Mac.

This is not good for a few reasons. Siri needs to be better everywhere, but it also needs to be more consistent

across platforms. Why can't I use Siri on macOS to control HomeKit devices? No idea. You can't start a phone call from HomePod, even when an iPhone is linked and nearby—instead, you have to start the phone call on the iPhone and then tap to transfer the audio to HomePod.

And all of these Siri-enabled Apple devices need to talk to each other. If I give HomePod a command that only works on the iPhone, why does it not let the iPhone handle that command? Or offer to transfer it? I realize that this isn't an easy problem to solve, but it's one that needs to be addressed for Siri to be more usable, especially when you've got a HomePod listening to everything you say with its remarkably discerning microphones.

Once Siri is activated, it's... fine. It makes mistakes, and I've seen reviewers take Apple to task for them as they should, but as an Amazon Echo user for several years I think it's fair to point out that all of these voice assistants are unreliable. Siri may feel a bit less reliable than Alexa, but in the grand scheme of things I'd categorize both as occasionally brilliant but frequently frustrating.

Because I'm an Apple Music subscriber, I'm happy to have voice access to my playlists, and Siri does an admirable job playing them. I'm less impressed with its choices when it comes to playing individual songs—I frequently got live versions when I asked for songs, which I just don't

understand. Shouldn't the canonical studio album version always be the choice when you ask for a specific song? Apparently Siri doesn't think so, because several times I had to construct lengthy commands that named the song and the album before I could get the right track to play.

On the bright side, Siri does provide seamless access to Apple Music and tracks I uploaded from iTunes that don't appear on the service; I was able to play a track from a friend's album that I digitized from the cassette he sent me 20 years ago without any trouble. That was pretty cool.

Because the HomePod is a device whose primary interface is Siri, it really exposes all of Siri's flaws. I admit to being a bit mystified by where Siri is today compared to when it launched in 2011. Yes, it's better, but it hasn't evolved as fast as I expected, and it's lost ground to competitors like Alexa and the Google Assistant.

I'd like to believe that a product like HomePod, which is so dependent on Siri, would be a prompt for Apple to dramatically upgrade Siri, but when I give it a little more thought, that's a silly thing to believe. The HomePod may expose Siri's flaws more dramatically, but Siri is also a key component in the iPhone, the product line that accounts for two-thirds of Apple's revenue. If the iPhone hasn't been successful motivation for Siri to get dramatically better and leapfrog its

competitors, there's no point in hoping that HomePod would do the trick.

But I don't want to avoid praising Siri in the places where it has advanced, so here's a good one: You can play podcasts on Siri now, and it works quite well. When I said, "Hey Siri, play the Clockwise podcast," after a few seconds the latest episode began to play. That's a good step forward. There just need to be many more of those.

Considering the competition

The HomePod is the Siri Speaker I dreamed about in 2016. Unfortunately, it shipped in 2018, and it's got a lot more competition now. With the launch of Apple Music, Apple had a great opportunity to come out with a superior voice-controlled music device and claim the high ground in this market; HomePod is good, but it feels like a product that's two years late to market (and yet still has features missing, such as stereo pairing and multi-room support).

The Sonos One may not sound as good as the HomePod, but it's awfully close—and you can pick up two for the price of a single HomePod and put them in a stereo pair today. The Sonos One even supports Apple Music—but not with voice control, as the built-in Alexa assistant works with Amazon Music, Spotify, Pandora, and a few other services, but not Apple's.

So where does the HomePod fit? In the end its biggest differentiator is that

it's the only way to listen to Apple Music via voice commands. Even as someone who fits in the target demographic for HomePod, that's slicing a market awfully thin. If you're the user of another music service, you can use AirPlay to play music from your phone to the HomePod, but at that point, why would you choose HomePod over something like Sonos One? Keeping in mind that Sonos One is half the price.

Two years ago things would've been different. But the competition in this category is fierce, and Apple has some catching up to do. Will HomePod end up being, like the Apple TV, an expensive product that is notable because it supports Apple's ecosystem in a way that no other product does?

The good news is, it's still the very earliest days of voice assistants. Apple has plenty of time to catch up to Alexa and Google Assistant and the rest. As a leader in wearable hardware, though, Apple needs to keep pushing Siri forward—because when you're wearing your computers, a voice interface becomes that much more important. There are a lot of janky things about Alexa, but right now it does a better job than Siri, which is why even though there's a HomePod in my living room, I'm keeping an Echo in my kitchen.



Membership Renewal

For those members who wish to mail in their renewal, simply print and fill out this page, include check or money order for \$20 (made out to NEO Apple Corps) and mail to:

NEOAC
P.O. Box 361782
Strongsville, OH 44136

Name (first last):

Email address (Please include even if opting out of Google Group, so an acknowledgement of the receipt of your check can be issued; a written receipt will be available at the next meeting.):

Street Address:

City, State & Zip Code:

Form

New or Renewal: circle one

1. New
2. Renewal
3. Lifetime member

Are you part of a family membership?
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1. No
2. Primary member (the one who paid)
3. Secondary member (everyone else)

What computer model(s) do you own?
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What is the primary OS you use?
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2. 1-3 years
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