



Blackberry

119 min

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The idea a buyer. The money rolls in, the stakes grow higher and the fun disappears, elbowed aside by competitiveness, followed by greed, aggressiveness and desperation. It's a scenario that can be viewed in close-up in the Canadian film *BlackBerry*, which anatomises the success and subsequent decline of the BlackBerry, now a distant milestone in the history of the smartphone. In the 1990s, Canadian engineering graduates Mike Lazaridis and Doug Fregin produce an interactive pager with a network allowing it to incorporate email. Lazaridis is the electronics whiz – a prematurely grey-haired young dreamer with a way of staring into the distance as if enthralled by something no one else can see. Fregin is his antithesis. With a large wardrobe of T-shirts and long, curly hair held down by a sweatband, he's a funster which, in this domain, makes him a natural team leader. He's aware his fellow nerds in their rickety office in Waterloo, Ontario, need video game breaks and movie nights to work the long hours required if their tiny company is to get anywhere. Matt Johnson, who plays Fregin, directed and co-wrote the film, which is a Canadian production reflecting the grainy urgency of documentaries. The fun begins to evaporate when Fregin and Lazaridis (Jay Baruchel) realise they lack the skills to sell their invention. So they make a deal with Jim Balsillie (Glenn Howerton), a fast-talking, hard-driving marketing man who has just lost his job with another tech company. In love with the rewards brought by wealth and power, Balsillie introduces the concept of discipline to the company and Lazaridis goes along. Fregin, feels as if he's being edged out. In a sense, it's a study in stereotypes. Balsillie, who spends much of his time raging and hectoring, emerges as the story's villain, yet it's plain the happy-go-lucky state of controlled chaos prevailing under Fregin's leadership will no longer get the job done. Crises are popping up everywhere and one look at Lazaridis' increasingly anguished stare confirms he needs help in handling them. All the pressures and compromises of corporate life are on show, magnified by the speed at which the tech industry moves. Each brilliant achievement provides fodder for the next, with the threat of instant obsolescence looming around every corner. Implicit in this constant state of simmering tension are the reasons for BlackBerry's failure to anticipate the changes to come with the arrival of Apple's iPhone in 2007, a development that transforms Lazaridis' career into a struggle to keep up. With a taut screenplay adapted by Johnson and Matthew Miller from Jacquie McNish and Sean Silcoff's 2015 book *Losing the Signal: The Untold Story Behind the Extraordinary Rise and Spectacular Fall of BlackBerry*, Johnson crafts a fast-paced biopic which is as funny as it is ultimately tragic. The former of course largely has to do with the casting of comedy stalwarts Howerton and Baruchel in particular, the latter's performance offering surprising depth and nuance to the figure of Lazaridis who, despite this being ostensibly an ensemble piece, is surely the heart and soul of the film.

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