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A Declining Trajectory

[Oct 4th, 2016](#) [Tech](#) 4 min read

My wife doesn't swear too often. Nowhere near as much as I do. She uses [profanity](#) when it's truly warranted, but her default position is to vaguely frown upon it. It's not prudishness; she just feels that there are better forms of expression for most contexts. She's right enough.

Lately, though, it's been on the increase for both of us, and always with the same cause and target: something shiny, with an Apple logo etched into the rear shell. Laptops, phones, and very much Watches. The tools of work, leisure, communication and empowerment that have become accursed objects in our household.

Why doesn't this fucking thing work properly?

There's a declining trajectory here, and it's no surprise. Right now, in terms of hardware, Apple is updating phones and tablets at least yearly, smartwatches every two years, Macs periodically throughout, and then there are iPods and Apple TV devices too. Smart keyboards and pencils. Assorted wireless peripherals, docks, cases, cables and adapters. Two different form-factors of desktops. Three styles of laptops. And that's just the hardware.

There are also the OS variants for the Macs, iPhones, iPads, Watches, and Apple TVs — each in assorted versions for the various generations, and with a nightmarish matrix of hardware features to support. All the built-in and separately-available apps. The iWork suite. The developer tools. There's *iTunes*, for hell's sakes.

There's iCloud, the notoriously fickle and spotty set of online services. The App Stores in all their guises. The iTunes Store, behemoth that it is. The sprawling Apple site with its regions and districts and neighbourhoods and warrens of alleys. There's Apple Music. The backend stuff for Apple Maps. There's the whole of the Apple Store itself, both online and as it integrates with the physical outlets. There are also fifty other things that have temporarily slipped my mind.

It's a lot of stuff to maintain, let alone update and improve. And for much of the flagship product line-up, there's a yearly march of new releases, presumably compelled by stakeholder demand and market scrutiny. There has to be a new iPhone — and accompanying major iOS version — in autumn. Ditto for macOS, and watchOS. The cycle never stops.

And now, the cracks are showing.

Visual glitches. Bugs in functionality. Odd behaviour. Battery drain. The occasional but too-frequent hardware failure. Stuff we used to associate with that other company, expressing our derision at every opportunity. And the updates themselves tend to fall into two categories: genuine advances in hardware, and lukewarm sprinklings of demo-suitable features in software, invariably introducing dozens of regressions in stability and intuitiveness. The number of things that an iOS device's *Home* button does these days is dizzying, and confusing. And the Watch... ugh. It's the most hated piece of hardware I can ever recall owning. I've also never known my wife to so detest something that she nevertheless keeps in her daily toolset.

Instead of loyalty, we characterise the relationship as something more like a mortgage, paying the interest of frustration and increasing disillusionment against our years-long investment in familiarity and proprietary formats. We'd jump if we could. Even that statement alone is arresting for me.

Another year, another OS version, and another batch of broken things that had finally reached a stable state just a few months before. Another set of new things that are of passing interest at most, with their own byzantine quirks yet to be ironed out.

As I write this paragraph, my wife is in the kitchen preparing her lunch for work tomorrow. In the last two minutes, she has muttered "What are you doing now?" to her Watch, "Does any of this stuff work?", "Apple is such a pile of crap", and in reference to her new iPhone 7, "I've literally spent *seven hundred pounds* this month on their crappy products". That's just in the last two minutes. She's also had to charge the Watch several times today because the battery gauge is dropping like a stone since she installed watchOS 3.

She is not a happy customer.

My Watch is misbehaving too, regularly losing its ability to track heart-rate and thus update in-progress workout calories for ten or twenty minutes at a time. Its battery life is vastly reduced. My iPhone's battery widget shifts itself around on the widgets screen, and regularly vanishes altogether. There's an unfamiliar street-address hovering

in the Spotlight screen that I don't recognise, beneath the app suggestions. It's hit-or-miss as to whether the emoji suggestions feature works in the new on-screen keyboard. I quickly disabled my Apple Music trial after it deleted several of my rare live versions of Dire Straits tracks. And Apple Support finally conceded that my immaculate, obsessively-cared-for 2015 MacBook was beyond repair after three warranty parts-replacements, and gave me the new upgraded 2016 model I'm now typing on. I don't have high hopes for it.

I am not a happy customer either.

There's something wrong here. A death-march upgrade cycle is producing substandard software at the very least, and it's diluting a hardware brand that's probably unmatched in the industry, if not the world in general. It's with mixed humour and genuine fear that people assert they'll never get into version 1.0 of an Apple-made self-driving *car*. Perish the thought.

Courage is apparently what it takes to [remove a headphone port](#), according to Phil Schiller. I can only imagine which laudable value might lead to slowing down, making the upgrade cycle biennial, and focusing once again on quality and dependability above all.

The practical impact of all this for me is small, but meaningful: I don't trust this stuff anymore. It was the very reliability of it — in user-friendly design, as well as stability of functionality — that was the basis of my choice in the first place, and continued choices for decades since. I don't care about the brand itself, and I have no intellectual investment in the platforms as a developer anymore. I just need things that work, and that I can *rely* on working.

I say this with the utmost regret, sadness, and no small sense of betrayal: Apple doesn't seem to make those things anymore.

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