



The Irresistible Appeal
of Old Technology:
Why We Struggle to Let Go



by Akshata Shanbhag

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Written by Akhshata Shanbhag

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We thought that in 2016 floppy disks would be obsolete. Black plastic squares with pathetically low storage by today's standards. By now, they should only serve us as **coasters, shoulder bags, and planters**.

We were wrong because **the U.S. nuclear weapons force still uses floppy disks to store data**. Why? Most likely because of the logistics involved in **upgrading to modern technologies** in such an intricate and critical setup. That's understandable, even if it's hard to digest.

But what about individuals who use old, aging, or outdated hardware and software or avoid current tech altogether? What drives them to do so?

Why Do Many of Us Stick With Old Technology?

What makes people like you and me brave security threats and stick with Windows XP? What pushes them to choose **a life without email**? Why do they use internet Relay Chat (IRC) in the era of **WhatsApp, Facebook, and Slack**? Why do they have **feature phones instead of smartphones**?

As **Calestous Juma**, Harvard professor and the author of *Innovation and Its Enemies: Why People Resist New Technologies*, states in **Saying Goodbye To Old Technology — And A Legendary NYC Repair Shop**, getting rid of certain technologies can be like “removing a species from a wider environment”. Surely, there's more than **nerdy nostalgia** behind this death grip that many of us have on old technology?

It's the comfort of the familiar (and the automatic). For many people, “old” **translates to simpler and nicer**, sometimes even when it isn't. Tech that you have used for a long time requires no thought — you can operate it in your sleep. You love it, and you have even made peace with its flaws.

Besides, who can resist objects that carry an old-world charm? It's why we're **reviving Polaroid cameras** and are in love with **Instagram's** take on Polaroid photos.



Indeed, familiarity with existing technology is the main reason people refuse to give it up or keep returning to it. But just as often, it's something more, as we'll see further.

It's a matter of principle, of refusing to fix what isn't broken, answering needs over wants, saving money for something better and more useful, and/or of wanting to keep **the environmental impact of tech adoption** to a minimum.

Writer and technology consultant **Patrick Rhone** refers to this minimalist and mindful approach to technology as “enough”. In almost six years of writing and curating the popular blog **Minimal Mac**, he featured several setups built around less-than-modern technology. Rhone's own primary computer is a six-year-old 11-inch MacBook Air. At one point he even **had a functional 13-year-old Powerbook 1400c**. Of his current setup he says:

I started out with the base 64 GB model. The storage has been enough for me during most of that time but, last year, I upgraded the SSD myself to 128 GB. Even with that, I still have about 58 GB available at any given time. I try to work mainly with plain text files and standard file formats whenever possible. I keep all of my music, photos, and video on a Mac mini that is dedicated to those activities, so I don't need a ton of storage.

Even though the machine is six years old, Rhone considers it “more than enough”. Moreover, he can “see it continuing to more than serve my needs for at least a few more years to come”. And he adds:

I knew when I purchased it that it would be usable and serviceable enough to be my primary machine for several years.

It's the thrill of making the “impossible” possible. People who are tinkerers at heart can't resist making technology do things it wasn't meant to do. Sometimes, that means stretching the capabilities of a technological relic – like **plugging a 1986 Mac Plus into the modern web**, for example. A lack of resources can drive people in a similar direction. Take the case of this **woman who cooks everything in a coffee maker**.



It's the fear of the learning curve. Another reason why people make do with old technology is that they feel incapable of handling something more modern. It's the uncomfortable feeling of not knowing what to expect. When it comes to technology, members of the older generation in particular are prone to such fears. It may be unfounded, but it's real.

Don't we all know someone who has refused to upgrade to a smartphone because of the touchscreen? Regardless of age, we can all learn a thing or two about stepping out of our comfort zones from [this tech-savvy 90 year old](#).

It's because old doesn't always equal outdated or dysfunctional. When it comes to technology, "old" seems to be a relative term. After all, email is almost half a century old. Nevertheless, it continues to serve a purpose, even as various technologies that have come after it have disappeared. Although, we must remember that functional is not synonymous with safe or ideal. Old technology can come with its special share of security vulnerabilities, energy inefficiencies, and little to non-existent manufacturer support.



It's a lack of time and motivation. My secondary machine is a desktop running Windows 7. I haven't upgraded it to Windows 10 yet. Sort through 500 GB worth of marginally useful data and [deal with annoying upgrade issues](#)? Thanks, but no thanks. I haven't even reserved the upgrade, despite being well aware of the [Windows 10 free upgrade deadline](#). I think I'll ignore that 10-year-old PC for a couple more years and then format and donate it. Besides, I prefer Windows 7 to Windows 10 anyway, and it's enough for now.

Many other users have also [refused the free Windows 10 upgrade](#), for various reasons. Microsoft's deceptive tactics to get people to upgrade have a lot to do with it. That's why the trusty old Windows 7 is not going anywhere anytime soon. Even [Windows XP looks like it's here to stay](#). Of course, Microsoft is not the only company that has become increasingly intrusive. And that brings me to my next point about the USP of older technology.



It's the promise of privacy. As our **gadgets and homes get smarter** and our governments more nosy, “dumb” technology can seem like a lifesaver.

For example, unless someone is looking for it, **your paper journal** hidden in the back of your closet is safe. In case an emergency calls for drastic measures, you can burn your journal or swallow its pages. You might get indigestion from doing the latter, sure, but your secrets are still secret.

It's the desire to carry on a legacy and pass down a tradition. The less sentimental among us might scoff at the idea of treating old technology as anything but junk. But aren't there many who rejoice in, say, inheriting vintage record players and music collections or passing down a watch that has been in the family for generations? Maybe our tech legacies will include Apple devices and coveted domain names.

Doesn't Productivity Suffer?

George R. R. Martin – the man who **sparked worldwide madness** with the fantasy series *Game of Thrones* – writes his novels using a word processor (WordStar 4.0) from the late 1980s. On a DOS-based machine, of course.

Physicist, author, and MIT professor Alan Lightman has blazed many a trail with his work (**read his bio**), and he has done it all *without* using email.

Actor, filmmaker, and comedian Woody Allen gets all his writing done on a manual typewriter from the late 1950s. He bought his Olympia portable SM-3 when he was 16.

You would think that these prolific people couldn't afford to ignore the convenience of the latest technology to stay productive. Yet they have and they continue to. And guess what? They're prolific as ever.



This is not to say that modern technology isn't making our lives better in many, many ways. **It's the idea that achievement hinges on the use of the technology, rather than the individual using it, that's absurd.** Deep down we know that this line of reasoning is illogical, but we buy into it anyway.

In his book *Geek Heresy: Rescuing Social Change from the Cult of Technology*, **Kentaro Toyama**, who co-founded Microsoft Research India to bring about social development using technology, gives us a clear, logical perspective on the true role of technology:

[T]echnology's primary effect is to amplify human forces. Like a lever, technology amplifies people's capacities in the direction of their intentions.

We can all take a cue from Canadian author Margaret Atwood about **letting technology inspire but not dictate** our work, **creativity**, and communication. She has embraced the likes of **Twitter** and **Wattpad**, and even come up with a remote signing device called **LongPen**. But she has also contributed to an ambitious project that revolves around a technology whose future many would claim is uncertain – paper. The project is called **Future Library**. It's set to turn books written by a different author every year into an anthology a hundred years from now.

What's Wrong With Our Current Approach?

Want to see just how many ridiculous gadgets exist to solve problems that don't? Hop over to [Unclutterer](#) and check out their [Unitasker Wednesday](#) feature.



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Yes, we might disagree on [whether smarter technology is dumbing us down](#). But can we deny that problem solving often works in reverse these days? That we're looking for problems to solve because we have the technology to solve them? That on many occasions we use technology because it exists and not because it answers a *genuine* need?

Of course, this is not to say that we shouldn't have [fun with technology](#), that we should use technology only for problem solving, or that we should quit experimenting. When it comes to tech, there is a place for the fun, funny, and the frivolous as well as a place for serendipity. But by and large, we need to be more discerning about the tech we let into our lives.

For Rhone, "the challenges [of working as a technology consultant] are what they always have been which is helping my clients take a reasoned and mindful approach to their technology needs". He says:

That upgrading to the "latest and greatest" right away sometimes comes with unexpected extra costs and burdens. That personal productivity, time, and experience are all "costs" that should be put into any equation as well. Also, to help find new homes and/or uses for tech that is replaced instead of sending it off to a recycler.

Striking a Balance Between the Old and the New

We don't have to jump through hoops to restore technology that's beyond hope. We don't have to be stubborn about continuing to use technology that isn't working for us. But we do need to let go of what I like to call "filler" or "because we can" technology. **We need to be less impulsive and reckless about our choice and adoption of new technology.**



It's time to ask ourselves a few important questions about the tech that's coming into or leaving our life.

How can we make better technology choices? Rhone urges you to “consider if the tech you own is easily upgradable or repairable”:

One reason my 2010 MacBook Air is continuing to serve me is it's pretty easy to upgrade or replace components and they are readily available from companies such as [Other World Computing](#). [iFixit](#) is another good source for repair guides, parts, and tools for all manner of tech products.

When it comes to software, Rhone suggests that you “at least wait a bit before upgrading — especially to a new OS. Let them work the bugs out for a point revision or two. Take the time to see if it is worth the upgrade.” He also recommends that you “use open formats whenever possible so it's easy to take your files and move elsewhere if a new software version ruins things.”

How can we put a new spin on old skills and habits with existing technology? Sketching apps like [Procreate](#) are games that [teach kids financial skills](#) are showing us the way.

In [Using New Technology to Rediscover Traditional Ways of Learning](#), Stacey Goodman, an artist and educator from California, delineates how digital technology “can help teachers and students rediscover traditional ways of learning by using touch, movement, sound, and visuality”.



If used right, the mix of old and new technologies and approaches can be dynamite, especially in the field of education. Educator Sugata Mitra's **School in the Cloud** project is a great example of that. Autodidacticism (self learning) and the **Socratic method** are not new concepts. Yet Mitra has given them wings by pairing them up with a **Skype**-based network of volunteer mediators (Grannies) to enable poor children to teach themselves.

How can we **repurpose old gadgets** instead of bringing in new ones? How can we **dispose old gadgets responsibly**?

Rhone says, "My wife is a Non-Profit and Arts Management Consultant and many of my small business clients are happy to see the tech that is no longer being used by them donated to the non-profits and/or arts organizations my wife is involved with who will continue to use it.. To them it's free and perfectly suitable to the tasks at hand."

What may not be serving your needs might make someone else perfectly happy. My daughter uses the 1st generation iPad mini that my 4th generation one replaced last year. She was over the moon happy as that one replaced the 1st generation iPad she had been using up until that point. She's 8 years old so a device that is three or four years old is as good as new to her.

You Don't Need the Latest Thing

No, seriously. **You don't need the latest thing**. A generation or two ago, using technology (or anything else) till it became unusable was never a point of contention. It was just what people did. They cared for their tools and took pride in them. When the time came to replace worn-out tools, they chose thinking in terms of "a lifetime" as opposed to "the next season". Is it time to revive this approach? Would such an approach even be sustainable, given that we live in **an era of planned obsolescence**, i.e. where things are no longer "built to last"?

Sticking with tech that's outdated by consensus as opposed to outdated by practicality may be difficult, but it's not impossible. I know someone who uses a refrigerator that's almost 70 years old.



In pursuit of retaining old functional technology, we must not shy away from adopting new technology altogether. After all, the old tech that's now attractive to us was once new. It elicited as much outrage as current-day tech does for being “unnecessary,” “intrusive,” or “a corruptive influence”.

What's the oldest piece of technology that you own and continue to use? What are your top concerns while upgrading tech? Share your ideas on how can we make old and new tech co-exist, [in the comments](#).

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