

Planned Obsolescence: Origins and Futures  
by Kacey Willard | October 2012

In 1929 the stock market crashed and overnight the Great Depression began. In an effort to save America's future, the idea of planned obsolescence was born. It may not have been the direct solution to the depression, but it certainly was an idea that far outlasted the depression itself; an idea eventually put into practice that ultimately would run this country's economic system for the next eighty years. Although the proposal of planned obsolescence might hold a great deal of economic merit, it remains controversial for designers and consumers alike. This paper aims to give a brief history of the reasons behind planned obsolescence and highlight the problems that have occurred because of it.

Bernard London first proposed the idea of planned obsolescence in the early 1930's (White). London believed that planned obsolescence was the answer to ending the Great Depression. Concerning America's economic status at the time, London said: "The existing troubles are man-made, and the remedies must be man-conceived and man executed" (London). To London, the problem with the economy was America's refusal to continue purchasing goods and to him, planned obsolescence was the solution.

London argued that the Great Depression was causing a vicious cycle of unemployment and lack of spending, killing the economy. He suggested that in order to stop this cycle from continuing, the government must step in and mandate people get rid of their old products so that they will have to buy new ones. London said:

Briefly stated, the essence of my plan for accomplishing these much-to-be-desired ends is to chart the obsolescence of capital and consumption goods at the time of their production (London).

Among many tax reforms, London thought it best for the economy if the government were to start taxing those who used their products for too long without replacing them. He wanted every object ever made to be given an artificial "death date" at the time of production. After any given object reached this expiration the owner would begin getting taxed for still owning it. This would encourage the consumer to do what he or she does best: get rid of his or her old things so that he or she can buy more.

London extended his reasoning to manufacturing companies as well. They would be

required to get rid of their machines after a few years of use, regardless of their working order. He believed this would produce more jobs or prevent the loss of ones that already existed. He felt that after a few years of use a machine had paid for itself, and that it should be mandatory for it to be replaced so that the job of the persons who made that machine in the first place could continue to be employed (London). Many agreed with London on his ideas of planned obsolescence, but also had their own ways of believing it would be seen to fruition.

Earnest Elmo Calkins, head of the advertising firm Calkins and Holden in New York and an extremely influential advertiser of the time, believed planned obsolescence was a way out of the depression and that it also was a way to increase the standard of living in America. Calkins explained his version of planned obsolescence:

Goods fall in two classes, those we use, such as motor cars and safety razors, and those we use up, such as toothpaste or soda biscuit. Consumer engineering must see to it that we use up the kind of goods we now merely use (Gorman 132).

Calkins seemed to be referring here to the type of planned obsolescence that many people are familiar with today: Unlike London's active or compulsory requirement for goods to be bought and discarded, Calkins proposed limiting the utility of goods through an artificial, limited lifespan so they would be replaced at a faster, more regular rate.

Brooks Stevens, an industrial designer from Milwaukee, was another key player in the planned obsolescence revolution. In fact, he is quite often mistakenly given credit for originally coining the term "planned obsolescence." Along with owning his own design firm, Stevens would give lectures about how industrial design played a part in the larger industry. To Stevens, planned obsolescence meant "instilling the buyer to own something a little newer, a little better, a little sooner than necessary" (Wisconsin Historical Society). Both Stevens' and Calkins' ideas of planned obsolescence were in-line with what still exists today.

There are many types of planned obsolescence tactics present in today's society. One of the more concerning types is known as planned function or technical failure (R2Launch). These are the objects that do not withstand prolonged use even though they very well could be made to do exactly that. One example of this would be the nylon stocking. Nylon stockings, before being engineered to tear or get "runs" with almost every use, used to last for many uses before showing any signs of wear. Of course though, if the stocking was made to last too long, the companies producing them would not make any money, so they built in some obsolescence to the nylons.

The light bulb is another example of this type of obsolescence. In 1924 light bulbs were advertised to last up to 2,400 hours but up until quite recently, due in part to competition with LED's, light bulbs were made to last only about 1,000 hours. This was caused by the Phoebus Cartel, a group of big-name light bulb manufacturers that issued fines around the world if companies did not follow the 1,000-hour lifetime standard (The Bizarre Business of Intentional Product Failure).

Another common type of planned obsolescence is due to changes in style (R2Launch). Fashion is a great example of this. Multiple times each year, fashion shows, catalogues and advertisements are produced to let everyone know that what they are wearing is out of style. This prompts consumers to replace their not-so-worn-out clothes much sooner than necessary. The automotive industry is also a leader in this category. Harley Early, the man who created the first styling department at General Motors, and subsequently every other car company in the country, was the first to suggest this idea. He believed that with changing the cars style slightly and coming out with a new model every year, people would want to trade in their old vehicles for new ones (Wilson). The word clearly does not need a redesign of every automobile every year, but the concept is so widely accepted today the consumer may not even recognize it as planned obsolescence anymore.

Printers and ink cartridges are another quintessential example of obsolescence by the unnecessary reduction of resources. One may notice that his or her ink cartridges run out of ink much sooner than expected and usually while there is still plenty of ink to be used (Designed to Fail). There are a multitude of resources online proving this. YouTube videos and instruction pages exist on how to trick the printer and cartridges to printing long past their built-in death date.

Even more suspicious about the printer industry is their pricing model. When a printer runs out of ink, it is usually less expensive to buy an entirely new printer with some ink already in it than it is just to replace the ink cartridges. It is unimaginable how many printers have been accumulating in the landfills of other countries and our own over the years.

Planned obsolescence is even working its way into the technology space through forced product updates or subscription-based software services. New computer software comes out for any product at least every few years, if not sooner. Usually these products are so very slightly improved to the point where an entire new package of software is completely unnecessary. Many

people will wait a few versions of the software to come out before they decide to buy these new programs so that they feel like they are paying for enough improvements and that they got their money's worth out of the old program. Even if these people were not ready to buy newer software, they would eventually be forced to.

A change to the system in which a product operates is another type of planned obsolescence (R2Launch). When computer systems are no longer compatible with computer software and vice versa it is required that the consumer to upgrade. At times, it is necessary to move on with technology and these improvements are good and right for the consumer; however, sometimes these system changes are built-in on purpose to the new software to render older software obsolete.

The last type of planned obsolescence is notification obsolescence. This is when products let the user know when they need to be replaced. Originally, this started out as a good thing. These notifications were put in place to actually let the user know when the product had reached an actual expiration date, but now that date has been artificially pushed forward causing these products to be replaced much sooner. Some examples are razors with indicator strips and water filters that show when the need to be replaced at a predetermined time (R2Launch).

Amongst all these types of obsolescence is the growing awareness of disgruntled consumers. The fact that planned obsolescence has kept our economy moving forward for the past eighty years or so is not enough anymore to justify it. There are ethical concerns. In producing these objects, we are producing waste and this waste must go somewhere. Dumping our own unwanted objects on someone else's land, China, Ghana and India, with less regulation has never been ethical and over the last few years this issue has been publicized much more (Wong). People of today do have more foresight than the originators of this plan. Elmo Calkins had only a one-track sort of mind when he said: "Does there seem to be a sad waste in this process? Not at all... Any plan which increases the consumption of goods is justifiable if we believe that prosperity is a desirable thing" (Gorman 131).

Planned obsolescence might have some benefit, but the environmental concerns alone are troubling. At the heart of planned obsolescence is the idea that goods are just disposable, and that doing otherwise or creating things that last stymie progress—maybe it's even bad. It is the consumerism mindset that planned obsolescence has brought on. Want and greed have become acceptable and normal feelings of our society. The feeling that what one has is never good

enough is an American sentiment. We lust for things not only that we do not need but also for things that are completely unnecessary for anyone to have.

Consumerism is here to stay. Products in shiny boxes and advertisements telling us that the stuff one owns is outdated has created a mindset that is hard to reverse, but some people choose to fight it. They choose to fight it by keeping their perfectly good clothes for another season and using the same cell phone longer than their two-year contract. They fight it by resetting their ink cartridges to use every last drop and by continuing to shave with the razor that's strip has faded to white a few uses ago. They fight in by designing and creating products meant to last. These are admirable actions to take against a consumerism mindset, but perhaps they are not the long-term solution for the masses.

Planned Obsolescence was first suggested as a means to end the Great Depression and while those exact tactics were never implemented, the overall principal was applied to our country's economic system. For its time and for its means to an end, it was a good idea that kept our economy moving forward. As planned obsolescence still exists so does our economy's dependence on it. To get rid of planned obsolescence, as one economist says, "...is to take the wind out of our economy's sails. It doesn't take a rocket scientist (as an economist will suffice,) to see that choking out consumption is certain to send the economy into depression and create unemployment on a massive scale" (Wong).

The question now is, is there a way to end our addiction to consumerism? To quote again the man that made this all possible: "The existing troubles are man-made, and the remedies must be man-conceived and man executed" (London). But now the existing trouble is planned obsolescence and our country is still working out how to fix it. Short term fixes are certainly being proposed.

In 2008, one organization called The Greener Grass was certainly making steps to make exactly that happen. They were proposing a new phone service system where, not only the data plan, messaging, and calls were a service, but the phone itself was as well. This idea means that a customer is only renting the phone and when they are finished with it, they can simply send it back for a newer model. The organization proposes that these phones, referred to as LINC, be designed for "automated disassembly" where the parts have no adhesives or paint so that recycling is quite easy (Dunn). The Greener Grass seems to have recognized the waste part of planned obsolescence and hope to tackle it by embracing the idea of consumerism rather than

squandering it all together. While this idea, of many, is quite admirable in its efforts to help save the environment, it does not solve the bigger picture of the mindset that consumerism has put this country in. Perhaps though, it is baby steps that will solve the larger problem.

From its origins of the Great Depression to today's capitalist dependency, planned obsolescence has ruled not only this country's economic status but also its social and moral values for far too long. Time has proven that this idea did work but all things do have their time, and the time of planned obsolescence is coming to an end. People are aware of its damages and solutions are beginning to appear. Hopefully, the remedies for this man-made problem have more foresight than the last.

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