

Peripherals: the remainder and reminder of obsolescence

Theme four: Cultural Perspectives on the Throwaway Society

Most writing on product obsolescence and longevity has tended to focus on the leading identifiable products of consumer culture; 'white goods', computers, automobiles, domestic appliances, electronic 'gadgets', and so on. There has been much less consideration of the various peripherals which constitute the 'extended' product; cables, attachments, connectors, chargers, tools, and paper peripherals including instruction manuals and other accessories (leaving aside 'disposable' elements including packaging, tags, labels, etc.). A full account of obsolescence and longevity needs to take account of these peripherals.

There are different types of peripherals and their consumption tends to be obligatory: Allen keys for assembling flat-packed furniture, instruction manuals, etc., which are included with the products they 'support'. Others are bought from 'outside' to the product; batteries and data storage cards being common examples.

This paper focuses on peripherals and argues that they constitute both the remainder and the reminder of product obsolescence. The remainder as they tend not to be subject to the same processes of 'disposition' which characterise the flow of obsolescent and obsolete objects. Rather, they tend to accumulate and add to the clutter which increasingly occupies specific domestic locations. Indeed, the semi-permanent storage of peripherals may represent an attempt to symbolically delay the acceptance of the obsolescence of objects and to hold onto a sense of the value which they once had. Peripherals, may then, be functionally obsolete to the owner due to the dispossession of the products they once formed an extended aspect of. However, lack of durability or longevity is not their chief failing. Often unused, or little used, and usually being functionally simple, they have the ability to 'hang around' interminably.

Peripherals, then, are also the reminder is so much as they bring back to attention the scale of product consumption and disposition. However, they may do this in a rather ambiguous manner as they are prey to the same dynamics of technical and stylistic obsolescence as the products they support; they often become obscure while suggesting an aspect of their former use and value. For example, changing computer connection standards have left a tangle of cables which no longer work while innovations in data storage technologies have made obsolescent a range of previously central formats; floppy discs of different sizes, ZIP drives and discs, CDs, and so on.

Overlooked often is the sheer scale of peripherals. Though all were conceived, designed, engineered and manufactured—using scarce energy and resources, they have become obsolete; there is little that can be functionally recovered or improvised from them. They are not easily recyclable or 'upcyclable' or repurposed and there is no secondary market for many of them.

The central purpose of this empirically-driven paper is to consider the scale and variety of the world of obsolete peripherals and to open up the subject to wider debate. How to sensibly include a consideration of peripherals within the broader analysis of product longevity is the long-term aim.