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The Cutting-Edge Genius of Old Gadgets

Superseded objects often do stuff better than their replacements



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I am dying of thirst because the hapless man in front of me in line is having trouble with his debit card. The way the hapless man in front of me in line is *always* having trouble with his debit card.



ILLUSTRATION: NISHANT CHOKSI

cards had been invented first and cash was invented later? Wouldn't the person who brought the long green to market be treated with the same reverence as Marconi or Edison or Gutenberg?

"Wait a minute! There's no password required?" a shocked debit-card user might say, disbelievingly, using cash for the first time.

"No. You just hand them a piece of paper, and they give you change."

"Where do I punch in my password?" he asks the cashier. I stand behind him, bottled water in hand, dying of thirst, clutching a \$5 bill.

"How do I erase it if I made a mistake?" he asks the cashier. I stand behind him, clutching my bottled water and a \$5 bill, dying of thirst.

"Oh, I think I do want cash back," he says. "Should I start all over?"

I stand there behind him, clutching my bottled water and my \$5 bill. And a thought occurs to me. What if debit

"And

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there's no way you can swipe the bill the wrong way? And there's no way your request can be denied because you don't have enough cash in your bank account? And there are no overdraft fees?"

“No, no and no.”

“And there’s no way some perfidious cabal of depraved Eastern European gangsters can steal your password and empty your bank account, reducing you to abject penury?”

“No way.”

“Gee. Why didn’t somebody think of that sooner? “

This is the very crux of the enigma. If cash had been invented after debit cards, the public would welcome it as one of the great timesaving innovations of all time. They might feel the same way about the telephone.

“Wait a minute! You mean to tell me that there’s a device that not only allows me, but requires me, to actually talk to my girlfriend, instead of texting her?”

“That’s what I’m telling you.”

“So I can hear her voice? Actually hear her sultry, smoky, breathy voice while she’s thousands of miles away?”

“That’s right.”

“So I can scream at my kid when he tells me that he’s backpacking through Iraq with a bunch of garishly attired mimes and a perky Swiss lutenist? Instead of texting him MEGO? Or LOL? Or WTF?”

“You heard it here first.”

“And I won’t get repetitive stress syndrome or arthritis in my fingers or blisters on my thumbs by talking to people on the phone?”

“Precisely.”

“And I won’t accidentally type ‘I wish you were her’ when I meant to type ‘I wish you were here,’ thereby bringing my fledgling romance to an abrupt and rather tragic demise?”

“The technology was devised specifically to preclude such mishaps.”

“Gee. Why didn’t somebody invent that before?”

There are many, many devices or traditions or foods superseded by exciting new inventions that in some ways are inferior to the thing they rendered obsolete. What if Caesar salads had been invented after kale? What if sound systems with powerful speakers and booming bass had been invented after tinny MP3 players?

What if department stores where you can actually try on the shoes had been invented after online shopping? What if Mustangs followed Priuses, and ice cream arrived after frozen yogurt? What if real beer that packs a wallop and actually has a detectable taste had been invented after lite beer? Wouldn’t everyone stand up and pay attention?

Let’s not even talk about lovingly crafted, beautifully illustrated, limited editions of “Romeo and Juliet” being invented after e-books. Let’s just leave that topic alone.