

Sometimes the next big thing is no big deal

May 7 2009, By Pete Carey

I unpacked my vintage earphones and compact disc player on a recent flight to Washington and settled back for a few hours of uninterrupted fumbling with CDs and untangling various cords and wires.

No problem, really, because I've always lugged this stuff with me on trips. I'm used to it, although the bulbous [earphones](#) resemble those worn by World War II tank commanders.

Then a fellow about my age sitting next to me donned a pair of earbuds, reached in his shirt pocket and fired up his iPod.

I was chagrined -- after all, I live in [Silicon Valley](#) -- and I wondered if the time had finally come to upgrade.

It hadn't. I'm still using the old technology, and this is why: I had already made my last upgrade in that department.

There's a point at which upgrading to something new just isn't worth the trouble and cost, whether it's the latest version of a product or a new technology that does the same thing, only better. After a few decades of relentless upgrading and dumping old hardware and software in the back of a closet already cluttered with old upgrades, I've become fairly selective.

I don't want to spend weekends loading my CDs into an iPod, even though I was offered one for free.

"You can have my old one," my daughter said. "The big, bulky one."

I don't really need the new, sleek earphones either. The old ones do the job.

You have to pick your upgrades, and lately I've been picking fewer and fewer, when I have a choice. The [recession](#) also has focused my attention on what I need, rather than what I'm told I need.

My [laptop](#) still runs on XP, which wags call the upgrade to Vista; but I always upgrade Firefox, which is both essential and free.

When it comes to sound equipment, I'm a mixture of high end and old hat. I don't feel compelled to get the latest equipment, and I get a good deal of pleasure from stuff that became obsolete years ago.

I sometimes get out a couple of long-playing records and listen to a Bach cantata or two, or a classic Dizzy Gillespie recording. I bought many of these albums for \$2 apiece when CDs made them "obsolete." There are performances unavailable on CDs, and the sound is great. A CD may be more convenient, but is a piano convenient? A violin?

I'm already weighted down with old upgrades that I can't bring myself to throw away. I've got a bunch of old PCs I haven't gotten rid of -- after all, I may want to try my hand at "Robot Odyssey" again someday. There's a fax that I don't want to unplug because I might get a fax someday. I have four film cameras, some containing half-shot rolls of film, waiting for that day when I turn film-camera hobbyist and join an OM-1 club. Probably won't happen, but still ...

Sometimes I even retrograde, buying an old model of a good digital SLR camera at one-third the price of a new one. The man who sold me the camera at Keeble & Shuchat's consignment counter in Palo Alto, Calif.,

thought it was a good idea -- spend \$300 now, become familiar with the digital SLR, and then upgrade. I never have. The older one takes great photos.

To be sure, owning the newest version of something is the obvious approach for many first-time users, and there are a couple things I believe are revolutionary, rather than evolutionary. I don't count them as upgrades. One is the iPhone, a true paradigm-shifter, not a better cell phone.

But the iPhone can shift someone else's paradigm for the time being. Someone I know upgraded a trusty, vintage cell phone that had an LCD screen and the letters on the keypad worn off. Now he can browse and listen to music on the new (not an i) phone, but he also spent a lot of time trying to get it to work properly.

My spouse recently upgraded her 9-year-old G4 to an iMac. The new computer is beautiful, the best in the world, but I've watched her struggle to get her wireless mouse working. There apparently are user groups dedicated to discussing such arcana. It reminds me that Bill Gates stole part of my life _ the part I spent learning MS-DOS, only for that knowledge to become irrelevant with Windows 3.1.

When I told her I was writing about "the last upgrade," my wife replied, "Oh, yeah, and then you move to something better."

Not exactly.

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