

Who had never been frustrated to buy again a toaster due to a resistor which doesn't work anymore? To see the lifetime of his cellphone reduce a lot only one year after buying it? This phenomenon has a name: **planned obsolescence**. A way for makers of every kind of goods (clothes, electronics, etc.) to reduce their products' durability in order to make us buy again<sup>1</sup>. It goes from mechanical or electronic pieces of low quality to the creation of collections (because it is well known that we need to change our clothes every 6 months).

During our stay in [San Francisco](#) last June, we met Peter, founder of the [Fix It Clinic](#). His goal is to help citizens to understand why their goods don't work anymore. And, if it is possible, to give them the tools to fix the problem.



Figure 1 Fixit Clinic volunteers © Fixit Clinic

## An alarming observation

### Questioning our consumers' habits

*"However we are practicing consumption right now is unsustainable for the planet on terms. Maybe no, the planet will be fine. It is about survival of the human kind,"* Peter told us. And we note this every day.

Whether it is clothing or everyday life goods, occidentals' societies seem to deal with **overconsumption of goods**. Owning more and more became a social standard. Not only, we clutter our lives of objects which have few or no utility, but, moreover, the production of these generates serious environmental issues. And what about the waste management

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<sup>1</sup> Definition: **Planned obsolescence** in industrial design and economics is a policy of planning or designing a product with an artificially limited useful life, so it will become obsolete (that is, unfashionable or no longer functional) after a certain period of time. Ref: **Bulow, Jeremy** (November 1986). "An Economic Theory of Planned Obsolescence". *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. **101** (4): 729–749.

after? These objects which had served a few (or not at all) are **often hard to recycle** once they don't work anymore.

## A Waste of Natural's and Humans' Resources

**“This cellphone may have taken 500 pounds of rare materials to be made. And this item is very hard to recycle at this point.”**

A lot of questions are raised since a few years about **precious ores used in the making process of our electronic devices** (laptops, cellphones and tablets). From their extraction mode, to the workers' conditions or also hazardous wastes' releases, the smartphone and his companions made the headlines. It is hard to know if our new favorite device is **ethically** made.

What is certain, it is that because of their little lifetime and incapacity to be recycled, they are environmentally unfriendly objects. Also this has an **ecological cost**. Not to be able to know how to get rid of these, once they can't be used anymore, stop consumers to do the right thing. *“I think as a society, we have to realize that the cost of these items is much greater than the price we are paying in store for it.”*

## Why counter planned obsolescence?

Of course, Peter admits that the Fixit Clinic allowed citizens **to save money**. But what showed up more from his encounters during FIC meetings is the **will to own stuff that last longer again**. People are more and more aware that their consumption has an impact on environment. And it is what they are looking for by participating to these workshops. To do their part to protect the planet and its resources.

But counter planned obsolescence is also trying to sensitize companies about their goods management from A to Z. Nowadays, manufacturers produce without being preoccupied of the e-waste it makes. Once your object is unusable, it is our responsibility as consumers to get rid of it properly.

Peter told us about the [Extended Producer Responsibility](#). In the USA, associations fight in a juridical way to recognize **makers' responsibility** to take care of these goods once their lifetime is over. According to him, it is a way to make them think of real recycling solutions.

**“If you are a manufacturer, if you have to be responsible for it, on the other hand, then you would probably be more motivated to do something that lasts a long time. And easy to de-manufacture when its lifetime is over.”**

The solution: To Fix and have better consumption habits

Let's fix this!

## How the Fixit Clinic works?

Waiting for governments and company to take their responsibilities, citizens are organizing themselves to find solutions. Peter is presenting his initiative as *“an Anonymous Alcoholics reunion for broken things.”*

**“We really emphasize that the person is responsible for fixing it himself.”**



Figure 2 Workshop during various events © Fixit Clinic

The aim is not that people come with their stuff, drop them and come back to pick it back like new two hours later. We come, we present ourselves, and we explain what doesn't work anymore. Volunteers offer **solutions** and give you **tools** to disassemble your object. Once it is done, they will take a look and see that it is possible to do or not. Peter thinks that volunteers and people coming to repair their goods are equally important. *“Because everybody knows something. [...] And the idea is to teach and disseminate those skills with everybody in the community.”*

Finally, a **volunteer reparation workshop is easy to set up**, even if it takes a lot of time! You need to find a place ready to host enough people (sometimes meeting can gather as many as 100 participants in San Francisco suburbs). For this, the easiest way is to go to community centers or libraries, which often have appropriated spaces for this. And, don't forget to gather **volunteers and tools** (basics: a screwdriver and a welding machine).



Figure 3 Volunteers group © Fixit Clinic

Their goals!

According to Peter, it is a bit of everything said before, an **ecological awareness and a reasonable consumption**. But it is also a reaction to the companies' bad habits. Some are tired of being considered as slot machines as consumers, always ready to waste more and more money.

Especially that some companies are doing everything they can to prevent us to fix. In the USA, the *Digital Millenium Copyright Act* is used to protect makers of any kind of homemade maintenance. Now that most of our goods are a **combination of electronics and software**,

the majority of citizens are incapable to fix themselves their possessions and are more dependent. Some use copyright to punish legally those who could try to have some kind of maintenance on their devices<sup>2</sup>.

**“There are several initiatives, in several States to pass that is called *Digital Right to Repair*. This idea that we bought something, we own it! We have the right to dispose of it as we want.”**

So some people created the [Digital Right to repair](#) which aim to allow consumers to really own their goods and to use them as they want. The idea is if we bought something, we possess it.

## Consuming: Citizens' power

### Awareness

And this is our superpower: **consumption!** Even if, as mentioned earlier, our consumption is way off limits now, we can use it to support our interest. *“We are the consumers, we choose which goods and services to buy,”* Peter told us. As the American farmers, we can unite to **assert our rights** by collecting information. *“These things are made well, these things are not done so well, these things are made pretty well but be aware that this thing can go wrong that is easy to fix.”* The idea is to buy knowing which **goods are the most durable**. The final goal is to make companies realize that we are no fools and that *“if they make higher quality and more doable goods, people will buy them.”*

### Training

It goes through integrating upstream from the construction **a new way to create**. And for this, Peter *“look to include FIC in Universities and Colleges because a lot of their programs are moving toward ‘design thinking.’”* Because change also comes from the mentality and engineering. If students don't learn how to integrate **durability and maintenance** notions in the device from the beginning, it can't work. *“This is something you do as part of your design process for anything you are going to build in the future.”*

And you what are your solutions against planned obsolescence?

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<sup>2</sup> It is the case for John Deer, a company making beside others things tractors, which prevent farmers from fixing themselves their vehicles.