Episode Book

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Proprietary Plugs and Formats Nobody Wanted

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SYNOPSIS

Tech companies regularly wager that customers will accept locked-down formats and expensive proprietary ports just to access their hardware. This look at tech history covers the biggest format gambles that collapsed under their own corporate terms: Circuit City's phone-home DIVX discs, Apple's power-squatting Display Connector, the one-dollar licensing fee that sank FireWire against USB 2.0, and Sony's decades of proprietary walled gardens spanning Memory Stick, ATRAC audio, and the PSP's solitary Universal Media Disc.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Every few years, a boardroom falls in love with the same sentence: everyone will have to buy ours. Today Daniel wants to walk through the wreckage of that sentence. His prompt is about failed file formats and connectors, the proprietary plugs and disc standards that companies launched fully expecting the world to follow, and the world declining. His phrase for the aftermath is "failure, obscurity, frustration, or all of the above." He wants the best examples of formats nobody wanted, and what people actually went through because of them.



Herman

The thread that runs through all of it, I think, is that most of these things weren't bad engineering. Some were clever. What killed them was that the cleverness was pointed at the company's benefit and not the user's.



Corn

So let's start with the most spectacular flameout of them all.



Herman

DIVX. And here's the first thing to get straight, because it trips up everyone: this has nothing to do with the DivX video codec people used to rip DVDs. Different thing, nearly the same name. DIVX, all caps, Digital Video Express, was a disc format. It was announced in September of nineteen ninety-seven as a partnership between Circuit City, the electronics retailer, and a Los Angeles entertainment law firm, Ziffren, Brittenham, Branca and Fischer. Note that carefully. A retailer and a law firm. No technology company anywhere in the founding story.



Corn

A lawyer-invented DVD. What could charm the public more.



Herman

The pitch was a DVD you bought in a store for about four dollars fifty, and it played for forty-eight hours from the moment you first watched it. After that you paid again for more days, or paid a bigger fee to unlock it permanently. The slogan was "No returns, no late



Herman (continued)

fees." The player had a modem in it, and it phoned home to report what you'd watched and bill your account accordingly.



Corn

Every aspect of that is a hostage negotiation. The slogan even admits it — no returns, no late fees, because you own a disc that won't play.



Herman

It needed a phone line. That's the part I find staggering. In nineteen ninety-eight they expected households to run a phone jack to the television so their movie purchases could file reports overnight. The trial launched in June ninety-eight with exactly one player, a Zenith, at four hundred ninety-nine dollars. That's the entry fee. Five hundred dollars to be allowed to then pay per view.



Corn

Renting, but with extra steps and a landline.



Herman

By the September rollout they'd got to one hundred fifty titles and one hundred ninety stores, all in the western US. Then the numbers come in for the final quarter of ninety-eight, and this is where it gets grim for them. Eighty-seven thousand players sold. Five hundred thirty-five thousand discs sold. Sounds alive, until you look at the accounts actually created: fewer than seventeen thousand. Whatever those sales looked like, very few of them turned into customers. There was an online poll of under eight hundred people where ninety-seven percent disapproved, which you expect from an angry forum. The December poll is the one I can't get over. Eighty-six percent disapproval even if the format were free.



Corn

Free, and the answer was still no.



Herman

One critic described it as, quote, holding my VCR hostage. Which is exactly the mechanism. Circuit City killed it in June ninety-nine and took a one hundred fourteen million dollar after-tax loss. The wind-down is its own tragedy. Registered players could still play discs until the end of June two thousand one, owners got a hundred dollars back per player, and every account was cut off on the seventh of July two thousand one. Your entire movie library, switched off on a Saturday by a modem that no longer answers.



Corn

And the discs nobody bought were destroyed, which may be the kindest ending in the story. If DIVX was the format that tried to control content, the next one tried to control hardware, and it came from a company that knew better.



Herman

Apple Display Connector, July two thousand. And I want to be fair to it, because the idea is elegant. One cable carrying digital and analog video, USB, and up to a hundred watts of power, straight from the computer to the monitor. You plugged in a Cinema Display and that was it, no brick under the desk, no USB cable snaking to the tower. It shipped first on the Power Mac G4 and the G4 Cube.



Corn

One cable instead of five. Now do the price of admission.



Herman

The adapter, if you had a DVI machine and wanted to use an Apple display, was a hundred forty-nine dollars at launch. Ninety-nine by two thousand two, which is Apple generously knocking fifty dollars off the toll. A hundred and forty-nine dollars to plug in a monitor.



Corn

I'd have paid it in leaves and they'd have been worth more.



Herman

The hundred-watt power budget is where the engineering optimism shows. It just about covered Apple's own seventeen-inch CRT, but most nineteen-inch and larger CRTs of the era drew more than that, so whole categories of display were locked out by physics. Then there's my favourite detail in the whole story, the one that tells you no standard is safe. ADC sent part of its power through pins three and eleven of the AGP slot, pins that were unassigned when Apple chose them. Then the AGP eight-x spec came along and assigned those pins for its own use. Those cards needed the pins disabled before they'd work in most Power Mac G4s. Apple wired power through pins the standard later claimed.



Corn

They squatted on unclaimed territory and the deed arrived.



Herman

Apple dropped it in June two thousand four when the aluminium Cinema Displays came out with separate DVI, USB and FireWire connectors and their own power supplies. Four years. The port hung around the Power Mac G5 into two thousand five like a guest who hadn't heard the party ended.



Corn

But the one that actually hurts, Herman, is FireWire, because that one worked. Would you have bet on it at the time?



Herman

In nineteen ninety-nine, absolutely, and I would have been right to. FireWire was the better bus. Peer to peer, daisy-chained, real-time guarantees for audio and video, the reason a generation of MiniDV cameras could edit tape as if it were a file. It wasn't a failure of engineering. It was a licensing decision. The story, as it's usually told, is that Steve Jobs heard what IBM was collecting in patent income, got inspired, and authorised a one dollar per port fee. Two ports on your device, two dollars. Multiply that across the whole electronics industry's shipment volumes and the industry's response was, roughly, no.



Corn

A dollar a port to lose a billion.



Herman

Intel's chief technology officer went to meet Jobs about it, the meeting went badly, and Intel dropped FireWire from its chipset plans and put its weight behind USB two point zero at four hundred eighty megabits a second. Same speed class, no per-port toll. And that's the whole war decided in one meeting and one dollar. FireWire survived in audio interfaces and storage for years, so I wouldn't call it a flop, but the mass market went to the free option, and who wouldn't.



Corn

You can hear the grief in your voice. I lived with that grief for a decade, every time you brought home a FireWire peripheral.



Herman

It was faster and it was smarter, Corn.



Corn

It was, and it cost a dollar, and now it's in a drawer. Speaking of drawers, let's go live. You've been following the failed formats story all day — Zippy, what's the situation on the ground?

z

Zippy

I am live at the back of a car park behind a garden centre in Reading, where a man in a fleece has just admitted his drawer contains a FireWire cable, a Memory Stick and a disc he cannot play, and I have never been more alive.



Corn

Does he know what the disc is?

Zippy

The tension here is unbelievable, a queue of one, and I am told the connector talk is coming up next, so I am staying right where I am, absolutely not answering that.



Corn

Fair enough.

Zippy

Zippy, reporting live from the car park behind the garden centre in Reading.



Herman

The man in the fleece is all of us, honestly. Every household has that drawer. Which takes us to the company that turned the drawer into a business model.



Corn

Sony.



Herman

Sony, and I want to be careful here, because it's not one failure, it's a portfolio. Sony tried to own the entire chain, card, disc and codec, all at once. Start with Memory Stick, launched in nineteen ninety-eight, about the size of a stick of chewing gum, with an original ceiling of a hundred twenty-eight megabytes. It actually did okay for a while, about a quarter of the flash card market in spring two thousand one. By November two thousand three, SD was at forty-two percent, CompactFlash at twenty-six, Memory Stick down to sixteen.



Corn

A sixth of the market, and falling.



Herman

The ceiling is the part I find most Sony about it. They couldn't exceed a hundred twenty-eight megabytes in the original design, so in January two thousand three they announced Memory Stick Select. Two separate hundred twenty-eight megabyte partitions on one card. A physical switch on the card to flip between them. Corn, sit with that. You fill up half your card, and instead of a bigger card, you flick a switch and your camera forgets the first half exists.



Corn

Two memory cards pretending to be one, with a switch. That's not a workaround, that's a riddle.



Herman

Sony's cameras finally added SD slots in twenty ten, and the twenty nineteen Alpha seven R Four dropped Memory Stick entirely for dual SD slots. Two decades from big idea to punchline. Now, do you want UMD next, or the Walkman codec, because they're the same lesson wearing different hats?



Corn

The Walkman one. A portable music player that refuses music is the most concentrated form of this whole story.



Herman

ATRAC. Sony's own audio codec, and for the first stretch of the digital music era their players played only ATRAC. You'd rip your CDs through Sony's software, it converted everything to ATRAC, and your MP3s, the files you actually had, were not welcome, because MP3 was resisted over copy protection. Then in January two thousand five, Ken Kutaragi, the father of the PlayStation, stood in front of the Foreign Correspondents' Club in Tokyo and admitted out loud that Sony had missed the MP3 player market by being over-protective of content. That's a company confessing on the record. They dropped ATRAC from Walkmans in two thousand seven.



Corn

The man who beat Nintendo couldn't beat the mp3 file. Meanwhile UMD, from what you were saying off-air, never escaped the PSP at all.



Herman

Never. Universal Media Disc, launched with the PSP in two thousand four, nine hundred megabytes single layer, one point eight gigabytes dual layer, in a little caddy. Movies came out on it, because a handheld with a big screen for the time, why not. But no other device on earth ever used the format. Wal-Mart was reported to be cutting UMD movie shelf space as early as two thousand six, film releases ended in twenty eleven, game releases in twenty thirteen. And along the way, the two thousand nine PSP Go shipped without a UMD drive at all, the only PSP without one, and the Vita that followed had no UMD support either. So the format's own parent stopped backing it.



Corn

Buy the movies again for the new player, said the company that also sold you the movies the first time. Sony didn't have one proprietary format, they had a hobby.



Herman

They had a strategy that assumed everyone else would adopt Sony's plugs for the privilege of selling to Sony's customers, and most of the industry looked at the terms and went with SD instead.



Corn

Herman, connect the connector side of this for me. The phone ports. That's where I think people suffered most, and I say that as someone with three claws who has to plug things in like everyone else. A thirteen-contact plastic tab is a personal insult.



Herman

Nokia's Pop-Port. One metal pin at each end, a plastic tab in the middle with thirteen contacts, carrying audio, data, accessory power, and an authentication bus, which means there was a proprietary chip inside the accessories. Nokia's own customers complained about audio dropping out when the phone was in a pocket, dust in the contacts, and the little hook that held the plug wearing loose. And what did all that engineering buy the user? One port doing several jobs, badly, in a world where headphones and computers already had standard sockets. The party it served best was Nokia's accessory business.



Herman (continued)

Gone by early two thousand seven, replaced by USB plus a standard audio jack, which is what it should have been from the start.



Corn

A port whose best feature was that other plugs didn't fit.



Herman

Sony Ericsson's FastPort deserves equal billing, roughly two thousand five to twenty ten. Power, data and audio in one proprietary port, including on the Walkman phones, which shipped with no three-point-five-millimetre jack at all. Corn, a Walkman with no headphone jack. The headphones everyone already owned, useless without an adapter. Every spare lead in the kitchen drawer, useless. You needed Sony Ericsson's own leads for music on a music phone.



Corn

A music player you couldn't plug your own headphones into. That's not a port, that's a tollbooth with a song playing.



Herman

Replaced around twenty ten by micro-USB and the three-point-five jack, same as everyone else, and the whole proprietary era of phone ports just evaporated as if it had never been necessary. Because it never had been. Now the quieter failures, and I'd argue XPS isn't even dead, just neglected. Microsoft shipped it with Vista in two thousand six as a PDF rival, standardised as Ecma three eighty-eight in June two thousand nine, and then Windows eight moved to the dot O-X-P-S extension, which older Windows couldn't open natively. Near enough the same format, new extension, mutual incompatibility, for reasons. Since the April twenty eighteen update to Windows ten, the XPS Viewer hasn't even come in clean installs.



Corn

A document format whose main achievement was being incompatible with itself.



Herman

Kodak Disc is the one I have a soft spot for, because it's the failure with no villain. Nineteen eighty-two, a disc of film about sixty-five millimetres across, sixteen exposures, each frame ten by eight millimetres, tiny. The idea was convenience: drop in a flat disc, no threading film. Over twenty-five million cameras sold. Commercial hit. But those tiny negatives needed printing enlargements the emulsion couldn't deliver, prints came back soft, and production ended around nineteen eighty-eight. That one failed for the honest reason: users looked at the pictures and said no. No lock-in, no licensing, just physics.



Corn

Twenty-five million cameras sold, and the format still died of soft prints. That's the most humane death in the whole catalogue.



Hilbert

The Kodak one at least kept its promises badly. My cousin had one of those. Years later I priced a Memory Stick camera. Sony camera, the little blue one, forty below the SD version, and I stood in Ronny's shop for the best part of an hour while he explained it was cheaper because the cards were expensive. I bought the camera anyway. Corn, you were mid-sentence on something earlier and I've had the fader down since, so carry on, don't mind me. Ronny ordered the card reader when the USB lead didn't fit my laptop. Forty dollars. It worked if you held it at an angle of about thirty degrees, and it worked at no other angle, and I have kept that angle in my wrist ever since. Ronny never charged me for the three weeks it sat in the drawer behind his counter, which he did not have to do. The format itself was fine. It lost the way Betamax lost, the adult industry went with VHS and that settled it.



Herman

That's actually a myth, the adult industry story. Betamax mostly lost on Sony's licensing and VHS recording longer tapes.



Hilbert

Every account I heard at the time had it the other way, and I heard plenty.



Corn

You still use the camera?



Hilbert

Occasionally. I blow on the Memory Stick before it goes in. I know it does nothing. I've known that for twenty years. Ronny sold me the batteries for it right up until he retired, out of a box he kept under the till, and the man never once tried to sell me a newer camera in all those visits. That's rarer than it should be.



Herman

Twenty years of holding a reader at thirty degrees, that's the user experience nobody puts on the box.



Corn

He kept the angle. The angle outlived the format, if you think about it.



Herman

Which is the fallout half of Daniel's question, really. The losses we've counted are the corporate ones, a hundred fourteen million here, a market share there. The user-side losses were quieter and more durable. Drawers full of proprietary leads that charged one phone. Walkman owners who carried a specific cable because a standard jack was withheld from them. People whose UMD libraries worked in exactly one device and then in no device. The cost wasn't measured in millions, it was measured in small evening irritations repeated for years.



Corn

And the obscurity half. Every one of these formats had a moment where it looked inevitable, and now XPS is something you have to go looking for, Memory Stick is a museum piece, and there are adults who have never heard of DIVX and never will. The formats didn't just die, they got unremembered.



Herman

If you take one thing from this episode, take the DIVX poll. Eighty-six percent rejection at a price of zero. People don't weigh features and prices on these things. They notice who the arrangement serves, and they answer the question in one glance.



Corn

And the glance is usually right. The connector that serves you survives. The connector that serves the company gets blown on, held at thirty degrees, and forgotten.



Herman

The open question is how much of today is the same story in softer materials. Subscription printers, e-books you license rather than own, ecosystems where the cables are standard but the doors are not. The plugs got honest. The formats are still arguing.



Corn

Which is, now I think about it, the exact position Ronny's drawer occupied in the economy.



Herman

Speaking of drawers, our producer Hilbert Flumingtop has kept this show running out of one for years, and we're grateful as always. If you want more of this, try episode fifty-two oh eight, on why tech consortia keep the stack from flying apart, and episode eighteen ninety-eight, on why Laserdisc refuses to die. This has been My Weird Prompts. If you've enjoyed this one, a rating and a review wherever you listen helps other people find the drawer.



Corn

We'll be back soon.



Herman

See you tomorrow.