Apple was never pro-creative

by Aidan Cornelius-Bell

Published: 2024-08-16

Dear friends,

Do you remember the glory days of Apple as the underdog? From early scrapes with Microsoft, through years of struggling management, the triumphant return of Steve Jobs, and the iPod boom. For decades of its existence Apple had been, and held closely its title of, underdog. Microsoft, IBM, HP, Dell, and other "big players" in the personal computing arena held majority market share. Apple envied the position of those with more market share. Not because it was the creative underdog –but because it was greedy [1].

As a marketing strategy Apple cornered creatives. Offering software with particular affordances to a limited set of creative professionals, and emphasising lock-in. Little to no Apple software had been successful outside of Apple platforms, and barring iTunes, little has remained available on other operating systems. The prototyping of control, ownership and entitlement starts here with the Mac –and it has festered into the pinnacle of entitled, greedy, and overbearing techbro bullshit that dominates silicon valley, the Fortune 500, and most of American capitalism today.

The process, though, of slowly gaslighting creatives to drag their friends to Apple's platforms was gradual. Apple knew, above all else, that building decent software, selling overpriced commodity hardware in nice chassis, and fostering an ecosystem of devices would serve their profit motive. But they knew one thing above all else. Build a brand on the underdog status. Sell "premium" consumer hardware. Monopolise on services. This is the post-iPod Apple. And it has only metastasised with its explosive growth over the last ten years.

Decision after decision about the approach, marketing, and practices of the Company are now so clearly driven by an entitled greed that many "creatives" , intellectuals, and core platform users (from the "real" underdog days) are abandoning ship [2]. With Apple' s treatment of developers over the last 10 years [3] much of the innovative force of new software, tools and artistic expression has left the platform for greener pastures. Unsurprisingly, the newest platform entry has been an abject failure, and yet shamelessly still sells for basically the going rate of an uninsured MRI in the US [4]. However, this is only symptomatic of a much deeper issue.

There continues to be developers working on Apple platforms. Indeed, many large corporations develop for Apple' s platforms now, at minimum for iOS and iPadOS, and accordingly many large corporations support, at minimum through BYOD policies, the use of Apple' s tools in workplaces. If you went down the cultural studies line of reasoning, you might argue that ever since Apple climbed into bed with corpos, the cool, creative and indy folks jettisoned – think digital hipster (with neither configuration being particularly "cool"). But this is a well-covered gripe –indy devs, small startups, and -people with ideas- are, mostly, not welcome on any "platform" today. The best app in the world might be on the Google Play Store right now, but without a million dollar marketing budget, a pocket full of hegemonic "content creators" , and more fair-weather friends than one billionaire could reasonably count, you' ll never find it.

The contemporary "marketplace" of apps, media, "content" and so on have gone the way of television. I mean this in the sense that what was once an open internet, open "marketplace" if you will, has been replaced with broadcasters – or, perhaps more fittingly, narrowcasters. Instead of the limited role of discovery that was stumbling upon niche Mac apps on websites far and wide, has been replaced with App Stores and mainstream channels. With the rise of the Play Store, App Store, and Microsoft Store, software distributed 'elsewhere' is increasingly less visible -and it was rarely visible to begin with. Even on smartphones which are -allowed- to sideload (i.e., install applications from somewhere beside the Play Store or App Store) the practice has barely taken off.

Instead, Apple, Microsoft, Google, Amazon and a small handful of other players control the platform. They have become the Channel 7, 9 and 10 of apps. If you want to sell an app, an electronic interactive art piece, a song, a movie, whatever -you go to the only market in town. And the companies behind these markets are like Apple, and worse. Freedom of choice? Not on corporate America' s watch. Anyone reminded of neoliberalism at this juncture?

The problem deepens, however, as corpos are regulated (by countries and unions that still have something vaguely resembling teeth for being pro-consumer) and then fight back against nations. Yes, these companies, often acronym' d to FAANG, bring their revenues higher than most countries GDPs to employ lawyers to fight against the very consumers they purport to supply and "love" . When they fail to comply, they keep belligerently snubbing their noses at government bodies until they might incur a fine large enough to be worried about their profit margin [5]. Between this and paternalistic, monopolistic, and flagrantly anti-human AI practices [6] the technosphere has only become a more toxic mess. Not to mention the corporate lobbying in support of privacy-invasion, slave-trade and extractivism. Somehow, though, I' m not able to finish here.

If you develop, sell, buy, interact with, or in any way engage with Apple' s platforms, any transaction you conduct through anything but the web browser [7] you are giving 30% of your transaction to Apple. Giving to charity? No worries, Apple will take 30% of that for their bottom line. Doing some online shopping? No worries, Apple will take up to 3% through Apple Pay. These massive marketplaces move billions of dollars a day – and Apple, Google, and Microsoft (amongst others) are there to take most of your pie. The justification is that they "made the tools" thereby entitling them to 30% of your revenue, forever, no questions asked. Just what in the fuck is -free market capitalism- that the corner-store vanguards of capitalism continue espousing, I guess its just code for "shilling for billionaire and trillionaire corpos" . But the plot thickens···

In the last week both Apple and Patreon have been up to some shady business. Patreon, another kind of marketplace for content creators and creatives, were, for some reason or other, initially exempt from Apple' s "30% of your profit goes to us" extortion. Patreon has grown massively over the last few years, with most YouTubers, bloggers, artists, developers and so on having some kind of vague involvement in the platform. Here you can sell your art -publish a piece, and subscribers can pre-sign to say "yep, give them $5 for every creation" . Write a monthly blog? Yep, $7.99 a month. This micro-economy of subscriptions and gate-kept content has proliferated, but really only between Patreon and OnlyFans – the rise of new marketplaces? Well of course, if they' re controlled by a capitalist. Talk about everything being a subscription, ey. Well, Apple, like the mafia, have decided that the rent is due -they want content creators, creatives, programmers, bloggers, and more to yield 30% of their bottom line to Apple [8]. Alongside this, Patreon has decided that it will end per-creation payments, effectively forcing everyone into a subscription model, and ending the 'slow' creation of art --sigh-, capitalist work intensification at its finest.

Apple' s domineering: "we made the tools, you pay the price" argument has gone out the window in this new low. It has been replace with: "you exist on the internet, we' ll extort you" . Patreon already takes between 4-18% from creatives' proceeds. But, at least, Patreon provides billing infrastructure, web hosting, customer support, and profile management services. In this instance, all that Apple is doing is ···making smartphones (which they overcharge consumers for like nobodies business). But, if you want to be in this marketplace, well, you' ll pay -or you' ll leave. I know which I' m doing (and I' m not even on Patreon - ew!).

The corporate greed, entitlement, and fighting over unconscionable quantities of money speaks to the fundamentally unethical nature of capitalism. This anti-human, anti-creative, and distinctively oppressive ideology and political apparatus has truly devolved into a corporate-hegemony of infantile narcissism. Who is leading the charge in the technosphere? The "underdog" Apple. And what a shame, because knowing the struggles of "indy" developers, makers, and creatives, Apple could have chosen a better way –an inclusive way. Instead, like so many others, they hoist the ladder up behind them as they climbed to the very top of the NASDAQ. And now they spend all their time "enshittifying" (as the internet is obsessed with calling it) their platforms and services to extract as much profit as possible. Sick.

I' ve posted before about transitioning to open source software where possible, barring what is needed for employment. Indeed, since that last post, allegedly Linux market share has risen above MacOS on desktop and laptop deployments [9]. Personally, I' m still daily driving Linux, Firefox, LibreOffice, and more – and I' m more than tempted to get a GrapheneOS capable smartphone next time I break something. But this is only the beginning of the reason that I find Linux and open source software compelling. Unlike its corporate counterparts, it is fundamentally based on the idea of transparency, visibility, skilled contributors, and, as much as humanly configurable, meritorious contribution. In fact, it is anti-capitalist by the license agreement. I' ve been GitHub and OpenCollective sponsoring a range of indy projects, contributing to the Linux Foundation, Open Document Foundation, and Mozilla (org, for Thunderbird, Firefox is a subject for another day). In the process of doing this, I' ve found increasingly that software, solutions, creativity and expression in these communities is passion driven and infinitely cooler than any marketing image Apple ever deployed.

Indeed the "cool software" : the tools, tweaks, gadgets, and fun stuff that Apple has slowly sanitised from the App Store, all seems to have moved over to Gnome and KDE. Brilliant. Once Microsoft transitions Office to a PWA (and it' s getting very close) there will be little, beside perhaps the Affinity suite, keeping me dual-booting. And barring an -actual- Linux phone (yes AOSP is Linux powered, but it' s not -Linux-; the same way iOS is BSD-powered lol) my transition to an open source lifestyle will be complete –and I will gladly financially contribute as much, if not more, to these communities than I ever have to Apple, Microsoft and others.

It' s a sad day when you feel ethically as though use of a tool required to do your work –intellectual, creative, fun, freedom, whatever –is fundamentally opposed to your way of life. Either I' m getting more radicalised (lol, jk, of course I am) or Apple and the rest of capitalism has really gone to shit. Probably both. Who cares –get FOSS.

Much love,

Aidan.

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1. https://aidan.cornelius-bell.com/idea/14/
2. https://www.adnews.com.au/news/dissecting-apple-s-crush-ad-controversy this ad truly fulfilled its underlying tone –"crush the creatives, who cares?"–Apple.
3. https://news.ycombinator.com/item?id=27385314 https://www.kotaku.com.au/2024/08/devs-say-working-with-apple-arcade-is-frustrating-like-an-abusive-relationship/
4. https://www.macrumors.com/2024/07/11/apple-vision-pro-under-500000-sales-this-year/
5. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_24_3433

6. https://www.macstories.net/stories/ai-companies-need-to-be-regulated-an-open-letter-to-the-u-s-congress-and-european-parliament/
7. even then, Apple is likely taking a cut on Apple Pay, or another lock-in scheme.
8. https://www.engadget.com/apps/patreon-will-have-to-use-apples-in-app-purchase-system-or-be-removed-from-the-app-store-192631471.html
9. https://itsfoss.com/linux-market-share/