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The Half-Life of Phones

June comes, and a new iPhone is introduced to the world, creating a shock wave of obsolescence. In the aftermath of first-day preordering chaos last week — caused, apparently, by a major computer glitch — it is worth thinking about the cycle of novelty and the very brief half-life of handheld electronics. There is something feverish in the rush to adoption, something almost obsessive in the way our desires are driven by these objects. The question is rarely ever, do I need a new phone? It is almost always, do I want one?

Few objects on the planet are farther removed from nature — less, say, like a rock or an insect — than a glass and stainless steel smartphone. And yet the materials of which it is made have ultimately all been abstracted from nature, resources consumed in the long chain of the manufacturing process, very few of which — apart from the packing materials — have been recycled. Nearly ev-

eryone who buys an iPhone 4 will be replacing an older phone, which means a cascade of discarded phones, some handed down to other users, some recycled, some disposed of in appropriate ways, and some simply junked.

How many cellphones have you owned so far? The answer will depend on your age and technical savvy. But if you have been using cellphones, as many of us have, since the mid-1990s, the answer may well be a dozen or more. And the pace of change — the in-built functionality of smartphones — is only increasing, which is likely to mean an even faster rate of replacement. We are not immune to techno-lust or the seduction of great product design or even the unattainable quest for call clarity. But we look forward to a day when new phones are made from the carcasses of our old phones and the cost of obsolescence is not so high.