Why vinyl records survive in the digital age



reader comments

37 with 25 posters participating

Share this story

Ask a record-collecting audiophile why vinyl is back and you may hear a common refrain: “Of course vinyl’s back! It’s a more accurate reproduction of the original! It just sounds better than digital!”

To this I reply, “Does it really, though? Or is it just EQ’d better? And since when did we start caring so much about the perfect fidelity of our recordings? I grew up—as did many of you—listening to cassette tapes on a boom box. They sounded horrible, and we loved them.”

I think the real reason for vinyl’s return goes much deeper than questions of sound quality. As media analyst Marshall McLuhan famously wrote, “The medium is the message.” In other

words, “the form of a medium embeds itself in any message it would transmit or convey, creating a symbiotic relationship by which the medium influences how the message is perceived.” Nowhere does this hold truer than in the world of recorded sound.

Multi-sensory

The entire experience of vinyl helps to create its appeal. Vinyl appeals to multiple senses—sight, sound, and touch—versus digital/streaming services, which appeal to just one sense (while offering the delight of instant gratification). Records are a tactile and a visual and an auditory experience. You feel a record. You hold it in your hands. It’s not just about the size of the cover art or the inclusion of accompanying booklets (not to mention the unique beauty of picture disks and colored vinyl). A record, by virtue of its size and weight, has gravitas, has heft, and the size communicates that it matters.

Records, in all their fragility and physicality, pay proper respect to the music, proper respect to the past. They must be handled carefully, for the past deserves our preservation. They are easily scratched, and their quality is diminished as a result of those scratches. They are subject to the elements—left in the sun, they warp. Like living things, they are ephemeral.

While the process of launching Spotify and searching for a track (Any track! You have 30 million choices!) is clearly the most efficient means of listening to music, sometimes efficiency isn’t what the experience is about. Record albums are analog, the closest thing we have to the soundwaves. These waves are coaxed out of a flattened, spinning disk of vinyl by a diamond. The diamond is literally taking a ride on the record. The bumps in the grooves push the diamond up and down. Everything about the process has a tactile physicality to it

that differs in feel from digital services.

Steven Beeber, the vinyl aficionado and author of *The Heebie-Jeebies at CBGB's: A Secret History of Jewish Punk,* summed up the appeal of records this way: "As with so many things, the Luddites were right. The old ways were better. Vinyl has a richness and depth that digital media lacks, a warmth, if you will. And hell, even if it didn't, it sure looks cool spinning on the table, and you've got to treat it with kindness to make it play right, so it's more human too. As in our love lives, if you want to feel the warmth, you've got to show you care."

The ritual

Beeber's last point hits at the crux of vinyl. The cumbersome process of putting on a record is akin to a ritual, an experience that mirrors the care that artists took in creating the work. First you have to find the record—a treasure hunt which might take five or 10 minutes depending on the size and organization of your collection. When you find the record, you pull it out. You remove the album from its cover. (Or, if you're a real stickler, you remove the album from the cover, still inside the inner sleeve. Because at some point you rotated the inner sleeve 90 degrees to prevent the album from accidentally slipping out. So you pull out the album in its sleeve.) Then you place the record gently on the turntable spindle: the hole so accurately punched that you need to push the album firmly down to get it to sit right.

The album and the turntable needle are both objects that demand your respect. The record must be freed of dust, so you get out your Discwasher D4+ System. You remove the wood-handled brush from the cardboard box. You remove the small red bottle of Hi-Technology Record Cleaning Fluid, along with the tiny red-handled needle brush, both of which are cleverly nestled inside the wooden handle. You gently sweep the needle with the brush, which produces a satisfying whooshing from the

speakers.

Then you apply 3-6 drops of D4 fluid to the cloth-covered face of the wood-handled brush and rub it in with the base of the bottle. Then you place the wood-handled brush on the record, careful to orient the nap in the right direction. Then you lick a finger of the other hand, place it in the center of the record, and gently rotate the platter beneath the brush. When these tasks are complete, then—and only then—do you set the platter in motion and lower the needle—slowly, ever so slowly—onto the spinning vinyl disk.

And the music begins to play.

The lesson

The record experience suggests a few possible lessons for user-interface designers:

1) Designing for multiple senses can be more powerful than designing for just one. This is why mobile apps that incorporate sound (button clicks, etc.) and tactile sensations (haptic feedback) in addition to visual cues create greater user delight than those that are purely visual.

2) Always design in a manner appropriate for the medium.

3) Always consider the user's state of mind. Consider every aspect of their psychology and how it might relate to the experience at hand. For instance, a person might find one experience preferable to another, because it reminds them of their childhood, or because that's how they've always done it. (Case in point: my mother always preferred grinding her coffee beans with a hand-cranked grinder, because that's how she always did it—not because she thought that the beans tasted better.) There might also be a touch of rebellion in the act of rejecting today's technology for a simpler tool that worked just fine, thank you very much.

Not everything in life is about ease and speed. Believe it or not, sometimes people want to take longer, particularly if an experience evokes a past memory, satisfies a deep-rooted need, or fills a behavioral gap. Make anything too easy and its perceived value declines.

Some people, some of the time want the process of listening to music to demand respect from them, to offer an embodied ritual that removes us for a time from the daily humdrum of our digital existence. Speed has its place, but time spent can signal value and create a pleasant weight of meaning. There’s a reason our religious services aren’t five minutes long, and we shouldn’t lose sight of that as digital technologies continue to dominate our lives.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1467141