

The Gadget Disappears

Steve Mays and 24 Years of Tools Becoming Life

The short version

Steve's *Gadgets & Apps* archive looks like a long parade of phones, cameras, computers, services, and shiny Apple objects. Its deeper subject is friction. Again and again, he asks whether a tool shortens the distance between intention and result: finding, recording, publishing, remembering, communicating, or simply getting on with the day.

The 24-year arc runs from a disposable emergency phone to an AI assistant. At the beginning, technology is an object Steve picks up. By the end, it is an almost invisible layer that listens, interprets, remembers, and sometimes acts.

Prepared for Steve Mays

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What the category contains

This analysis covers every public post returned by the smays.com WordPress archive in the *Gadgets & Apps* category through July 20, 2026: 622 posts spanning December 2002 to July 2026. Short link posts, quoted passages, guest reports, and media-only entries are included.

ERA	POSTS	SHARE	THE CENTER OF GRAVITY
2002–05	48	7.7%	Single-purpose gadgets and early web utilities
2006–10	285	45.8%	Apple conversion, mobile convergence, app explosion
2011–15	86	13.8%	Mobile becomes ordinary infrastructure
2016–20	133	21.4%	Wearables, data, invisible interfaces, platform doubt
2021–26	70	11.3%	Health, memory, AI, and delegated work

The boom is the evidence

Nearly half the category appeared from 2006 through 2010. That is not just when Steve was most excited. It is when separate objects—camera, recorder, music player, browser, map, newsstand, phone, and publishing terminal—collapsed into an ecosystem. After 2011, the posting rate falls because many gadgets stop looking like gadgets. They become ordinary life.

A reading rule that matters

Steve describes the blog as a place to save lines, clips, news, and other people's ideas, and says much of it is not original. Selection is evidence of attention, not automatic proof of agreement. This report attributes a position to Steve only when he states it, tests it, applies it, returns to it, or adds a clear conclusion. Quotations from Scott Adams, Jeff Jarvis, Mark Cuban, reviewers, friends, and later ChatGPT are treated as curated material unless Steve makes the judgment his own.

The strongest evidence is the field report: what Steve bought, tried, abandoned, corrected, folded into a routine, or discovered he could no longer live without.

From separate tools to an ambient layer

2002–05: useful little machines

The first posts are a curiosity cabinet: flash drives, MP3 players, digital recorders, photo phones, satellite radio, Gmail, Google News, and Google Earth. Steve begins as a practical and sometimes reluctant adopter. He wants a mobile phone mainly as an emergency tool. He likes whatever compresses a task—files into a pocket, audio into an email, the planet into a searchable screen.

2006–10: convergence

The iPod leads to a MacBook; the MacBook makes the iPhone feel inevitable. Steve recognizes the iPhone's importance in January 2007 but waits until November 2008 to buy one, when the reason becomes professional and unavoidable: the world is mobile and he needs to be there. By 2009, the breakfast newspaper has become email, Twitter, and Google Reader in his pocket. In 2010 the iPad feels like a genuinely new thing: intimate, instant, and usable without instruction.

2011–15: infrastructure

The gadget spectacle recedes. Mobile computing diffuses into medicine, navigation, aviation, education, payments, cars, drones, photography, and music. Steve is still interested in objects, but increasingly writes about what they enable. The category's sharp drop in 2012 is revealing: the revolution did not stop; it became normal.

2016–22: the interface fades—and the bargain appears

AirPods, Siri, health records, sensors, cameras, smart locks, and cloud services move computing closer to the body and further from the screen. At the same time Steve grows more alert to addiction, politics, monetization, platform shutdowns, and surveillance. Access is no longer the problem. Attention, trust, and control are.

2023–26: from tool to collaborator

Perplexity is an answer engine, ChatGPT interprets fitness data, Apple Intelligence promises understanding across personal apps, and AI becomes Steve's first stop for software help. The object matters less than the interpretive layer over it. The endpoint is not a better gadget. It is a capable assistant that can understand context and remove procedural work.

The central object

The iPhone is the category's load-bearing device, appearing in roughly 130 posts. It absorbs the functions of earlier gadgets, becomes the remote control for later ones, and eventually serves as the sensor-and-data hub for AirPods, Watch, cameras, payments, health, memory, and AI. Steve's contemporary record places his first purchase on November 30, 2008; a 2024 camera retrospective recalls it as 2009.

The tests beneath the enthusiasm

1. Friction removed

His highest praise is often that a thing becomes forgettable. Face ID works so well he forgets it is working. Notational Velocity gets out of the way of writing. Apple TV's limitations are an acceptable "price of simplicity." Ease is not decoration; it determines whether a capability becomes part of life.

2. Agency transferred

He likes tools that let one person do what once required an institution: publish, report, record, edit, distribute, search, diagnose, pay, navigate, or organize. His enthusiasm is strongest when the user no longer needs a printing press, studio, tower, IT department, or gatekeeper.

3. Life made searchable

Backup, scanning, Gmail, Calendar, Photos metadata, and the blog itself reveal a preservation instinct. Steve wants a life that can be recovered: the old receipt, accident record, photo, voice, date, friend, or idea. Yet he is not a blind hoarder. Deleting 15,500 emails after twenty years feels good because retrieval that never happens is merely accumulation.

4. Abundance curated

"Everything" repeatedly becomes too much: too many devices, feeds, apps, songs, choices, notifications, and posts. Steve prunes. The ideal music library contains only songs he loves; the useful social stream is actively tended; the good tool reduces decisions rather than manufacturing more of them.

5. Wonder tested

He is unusually willing to say "amazing," "magic," or "Shazam." He is also willing to change his mind after real use. Specifications earn attention; lived routine earns loyalty. That combination—delight without pretending infallibility—is the category's most trustworthy habit.

Steve's enduring standard: a good tool gives capability back to the person while demanding less ceremony in return.

Phone, camera, interface

The phone: emergency object to center of gravity

In 2002 Steve calls himself a “two-time loser with mobile phones” and wants one mostly for emergencies. Five years later he recognizes the iPhone as much more than a phone. After waiting nearly two years to buy, he discovers the “world in my pocket.” The phone replaces newspapers, maps, wallets, cameras, music players, recorders, and chunks of the computer. Later, the Watch and AirPods become valuable partly because they let him leave the phone alone.

The camera: specialization, convergence, specialization

The camera trail is unusually clean. Webcams, Flip cameras, Casio point-and-shoots, and dedicated recorders flourish; the iPhone then makes most of them unnecessary. Years later, GoPro and DJI equipment return—not because the phone failed, but because stabilization, tracking, remote microphones, mounting, and deliberate handling make creation playful again. A general-purpose device wins until a specialized tool creates a distinctly better experience.

The interface: buttons to background intelligence

The progression runs from keyboards and menus to touch, instant-on screens, cloud sync, voice, AirPods, Watch gestures, and AI. In 2016 Steve imagines the interface becoming invisible. The forecast outruns Siri’s competence, but its direction is excellent. By 2025, he is asking for an AI-first browser and cross-app personal intelligence: computing that understands the intention and handles the steps.

A fourth arc hiding underneath: publishing

Blogger, TypePad, WordPress, Posterous, Twitter, Flickr, Google+, and Mastodon come and go. The durable preference is low-friction expression plus control of the archive. Lightweight platforms are seductive because they shorten the path to publication; the blog survives because it remains Steve’s place. The newest tool—AI—now helps make tools for that place, including the Asides plugin recorded in the category’s most recent post.

The useful contradiction

Steve is both minimalist and collector. He wants fewer tools and keeps buying tools he admits he does not need. This is not concealed hypocrisy; he narrates it with pleasure. Curiosity drives acquisition. Experience drives pruning. The category exists in the productive tension between those two impulses.

What the tools demand in return

Connection versus attention

Early Steve wants to be connected all the time. Later he measures phone pickups, imagines a communication budget, buys a Light Phone designed to be used as little as possible, and abandons Twitter after politics consumes the stream. He learns that access and attention are different problems. Technology can remove friction from communication while adding friction to thought.

Customer versus inventory

His platform skepticism becomes economic. He dislikes being monetized but gladly pays for services he values. “Free is not a business model” is not a complaint about price; it is a preference for being the customer rather than the product. This helps explain his attraction to Flickr’s paid model, Mastodon’s federation, and ad-free communities—and his deep suspicion of Facebook.

Convenience versus privacy

In 2017 he says privacy is not a high priority and is willing to trade a great deal of it for convenience. By 2025, after the platform era’s education, he praises on-device processing as “AI done right” and moves from Google tools toward Apple’s integrated system. He does not abandon convenience. He becomes more selective about the architecture that provides it.

Open web versus integrated system

Steve’s early life is Google-heavy and open-web friendly; his later one moves “all-in” toward Apple. The consistent principle is not openness or enclosure as ideology. It is dependable personal agency with low friction. He follows whichever system best satisfies that test, although his affection for Apple sometimes turns personal success into a broad prediction too quickly.

What platform closures teach

A9, Google Reader, MobileMe, Posterous, Google+, and other once-promising services disappear or mutate. Twitter goes from useful, carefully curated news source to political deluge and then obituary. Over time, Steve’s backup discipline, willingness to pay, and loyalty to his own archive look less like fussiness and more like earned wisdom.

The category begins by asking, “What can this do?” It gradually adds two harder questions: “What will it do to my attention?” and “Who controls what I put into it?”

The record improves when Steve changes his mind

Flip HD

A favorable first impression fails in the field: weak audio, poor low-light performance, and shake. Steve reverses the recommendation and apologizes to anyone who bought on his earlier enthusiasm.

Zelle

A ten-second transfer looks magical until a recipient without a partner bank encounters the rest of the process. The update is blunt: “Too much trouble. Use Apple Pay.”

Twitter

It grows from a modest way to know what friends are doing into Steve's first and last news source of the day—then becomes unusable under political saturation and platform decay.

Apple Journal

Initially dismissed as redundant with the blog, it earns a second trial once Steve finds the real use: private material and automatically gathered context that do not belong in public.

Apple Watch

He watches from the sidelines for nearly a decade because he is not a watch person. Once health, voice, hearing, sleep, and reduced phone dependence become concrete, it turns into a device he cannot imagine doing without.

Gmail

In 2004 he reserves judgment on the promise of saving everything. The search works for twenty years—but in 2024 he realizes he seldom needs the old mail and deletes 15,500 messages. A successful product promise can still outlive its usefulness.

Why this matters

The corrections are not blemishes on the archive. They are its method. Steve makes a provisional claim, lives with the tool, and amends the record. The category is strongest when it preserves that movement from desire to use to judgment.

What aged well—and where desire outran adoption

Especially prescient

- The smartphone would become the world in a pocket and displace everyday print, maps, cameras, audio players, recorders, tickets, and wallets.
- On-demand, personalized “information radio” would weaken scheduled broadcasting and give listeners control over the lineup.
- A phone would become a portable publishing and reporting kit for one capable person.
- The wallet would become data, and identity, payments, and physical objects would become locatable and recoverable.
- Children would experience smartphones as transparent infrastructure rather than visible magic.
- The interface would fade into voice, wearables, sensors, background assistance, and—eventually—AI.
- Free platforms would prove fragile when their incentives depended on advertising, attention, or perpetual growth.

Too early, incomplete, or wrong

- The disposable phone solved a convenience problem but aged badly as an environmental idea.
- The annotated, augmented world arrived mainly through maps, search, and phone screens—not mass adoption of all-day visual overlays.
- The 2016 invisible-interface scenario overestimated Siri’s conversational reliability, memory, and ability to act across services.
- Some technically possible ideas understated consent, bias, surveillance, and clinical reliability.
- Early cloud enthusiasm often treated services as if they were permanent. The closures supplied the missing lesson.
- Apple’s products often justified Steve’s affection, but personal delight did not always prove market inevitability.

The prediction rule

Steve predicts best when he follows a durable human desire: fewer steps, more agency, better retrieval, greater portability, and useful context. He is less reliable when technical possibility is mistaken for inevitable behavior.

A field notebook of everyday computing

Steve is not a neutral technology analyst, and the archive is better for it. He has loyalties, appetites, blind spots, jokes, and a visible weakness for a polished Apple experience. He also has three habits that make the record valuable: he tries things himself, notices how they alter a routine, and is willing to revise the verdict.

His real topic is the texture of agency. A device matters when it lets an ordinary person do something now, without permission, training, delay, or an institution in the middle. A service matters when information can be found again. An interface succeeds when it disappears. A platform fails when it converts the person into inventory, floods attention with noise, or puts memory at the mercy of someone else's business model.

The emotional arc is not a simple slide from optimism to pessimism. Wonder survives. In 2005 it is Google Earth flying him to any spot on the planet. In 2006 it is Skype sounding as if a friend is in the room. In 2010 it is an iPad that does not feel like a computer. In 2024 it is a watch protecting his hearing and an AI helping interpret fitness data. What changes is the price he is willing to ignore.

The category's best one-sentence description

A 24-year inquiry into how much machinery can disappear before help begins to feel like part of the self.

And the load-bearing continuity

Steve is attracted by magic, but loyal to usefulness; drawn to abundance, but repeatedly rescued by curation; willing to trade privacy for convenience, but increasingly insistent that the bargain occur on his terms. The gadget disappears. The judgment does not.

Twenty-five posts across twenty-four years

[2002 — Disposable Mobile Phone](#)

Reluctant mobile user; convenience in its earliest, most disposable form.

[2003 — Photo Story](#)

A small tool collapses editing, narration, music, and sharing.

[2004 — Gmail](#)

The promise: keep everything and trust search.

[2005 — Google Earth](#)

Utility and wonder become nearly indistinguishable.

[2006 — Things I like about the Mac OS](#)

Apple loyalty begins in small acts of interface consideration.

[2007 — Apple iPhone](#)

Immediate recognition that this is more than a phone.

[2008 — My first iPhone](#)

Adoption follows professional necessity: the world is mobile.

[2009 — The world in my pocket](#)

A breakfast news routine—and a media model—changes.

[2010 — Week One impressions of the iPad](#)

The post-PC interface becomes bodily, social, and intuitive.

[2011 — What did we do before computers?](#)

The clearest account of the friction technology removed from work.

[2012 — Write software by talking](#)

An early glimpse of intent replacing procedure.

[2013 — Backup](#)

Automatic, redundant preservation as a personal discipline.

The second half

[2014 — Apple Pay](#)

A prediction tested at the counter, not from a keynote.

[2015 — How many songs is enough?](#)

Abundance loses to a deliberately smaller library.

[2016 — When the interface becomes invisible](#)

The archive's clearest ambient-computing forecast.

[2017 — Mastodon](#)

The rejection of political saturation and being monetized.

[2018 — In praise of Google Calendar](#)

Scheduling becomes searchable autobiographical memory.

[2019 — All my health data on iPhone](#)

The phone becomes a portable medical record.

[2020 — Online grocery shopping](#)

A practical pandemic-era field test of mundane resilience.

[2021 — Google Calendar as diary](#)

The private database of a life becomes explicit.

[2022 — Twitter left a note](#)

A once-essential platform receives its obituary.

[2023 — Cloning yourself](#)

AI moves from distant possibility to an uncanny personal experiment.

[2024 — ChatGPT as fitness trainer](#)

Watch data meets an interpretive assistant.

[2025 — AI does my searching these days](#)

The decisive shift from browsing links to asking for help.

[2026 — Asides](#)

The archive's purpose, and AI as maker of one more useful tool.

Method note

Counts are based on the category corpus returned by the public WordPress API. Product and theme mention counts were used as navigational aids, not as proof of belief; a post can mention several devices and themes. Interpretive claims were checked against titles, dates, links, and the text of representative posts. All links were valid in the source corpus when retrieved in August 2026.