Built to Last.

An app by Filip Hensels

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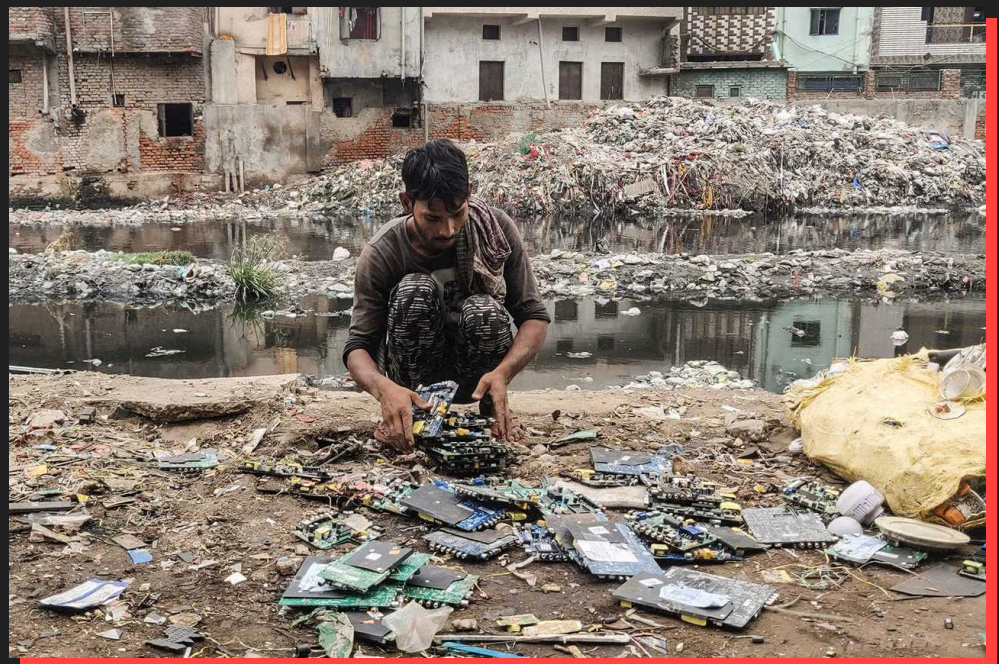
Project statement

The tech industry is thriving more than ever before, but this progress comes at a significant cost to our planet and its people. Products are often designed to fail after just a few years, fueling overconsumption and harming workers, consumers, and the environment.

This has to change. In order to make tech more fair for everyone, I created Built to Last. An app which helps consumers choose the right thing and that provides a platform to ethically manufactured tech products.

Because everyone would benefit if our products were Built to Last.



A worker dismantling e-waste without protective gear in a New Delhi canal, by Shoaib Mir, from Slate

The problem

Planned obsolescence is the practice of designing products to break or become outdated quickly, encouraging consumers to buy replacements. This approach, which dates back to industries such as early lightbulb manufacturing, is still common today—seen in limited software support and hard-to-repair devices—leading to a cycle of overconsumption.

This cycle contributes heavily to environmental and ethical issues. In 2022, around 62 million tonnes of toxic e-waste were produced. The Right to Repair movement aims to reduce this by giving consumers access to parts and repair information. Meanwhile, the demand for electronics drives harmful mining practices for rare-earth materials like cobalt, almost always under extremely poor working conditions.

A child working in a cobalt mine in Congo, from AFP

Real-world examples

A key example of planned obsolescence is Apple's Battery-gate. With their iPhone 6 and 7, Apple limited the performance through a software update a few years after they were released, causing the phones to slow down significantly. Apple claimed this was to reduce battery ageing, though it eventually resulted multiple class-action lawsuits, some of which are still ongoing.

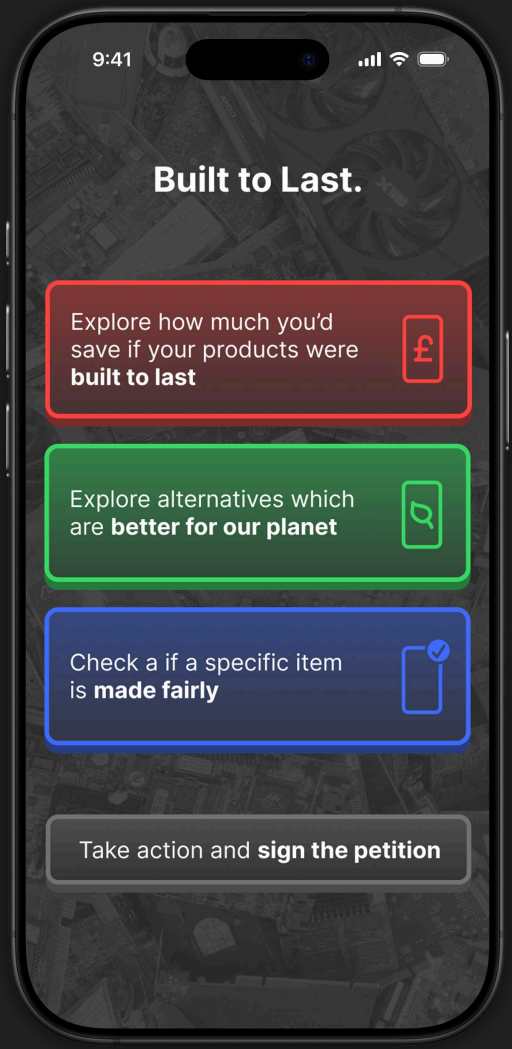
A lot of tech companies make their products extremely hard to repair, by using proprietary parts, glueing components and not providing spare parts, tools or instructions. Because of this, it is almost impossible for a regular consumer to repair their own products. This requires them to pay high repair costs to the manufacturer, or to completely replace it.

From Euroconsumers' 2022 campaign against Apple's Batterygate

The app

To raise awareness on this issue and help consumers do the right thing, I created an app that helps consumers choose the right products that are built with the environment in mind.

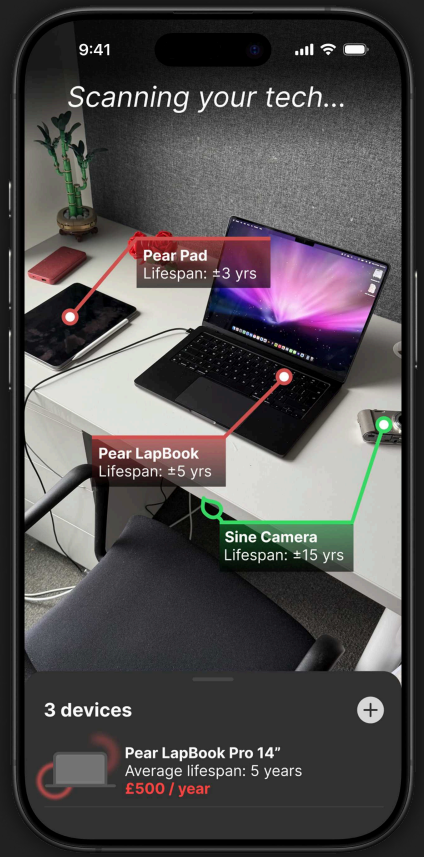
The app itself has three main parts, all focused on awareness and helping the consumer do the right thing.

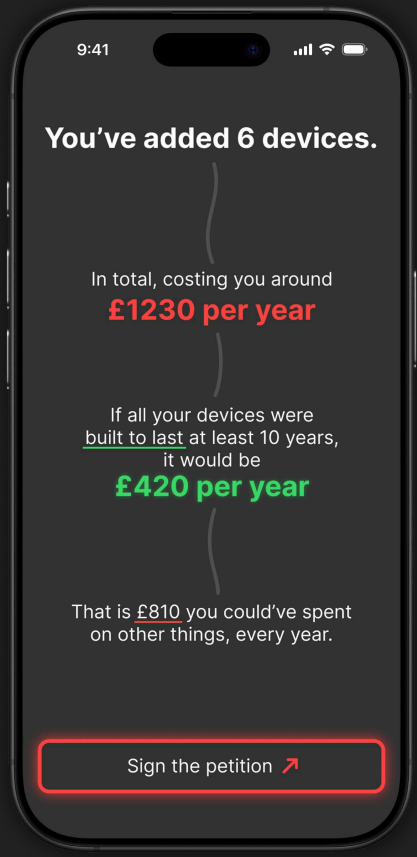


The app - raising awareness

Firstly, it raises awareness by highlighting how much the consumer would save per year if their tech products were built to last way longer, rather than having to replace them every few years. The user first scans all their devices to add them to a list. That list highlights the average lifespan of the device and how much it costs per year (price divided by average lifespan).

Finally, the app highlights how much the consumer spends per year on average on new devices, and then highlights the difference if their devices were built to last at least 10 years. This is followed by a call-to-action to sign the petition for better repairability and lifespans of tech product.

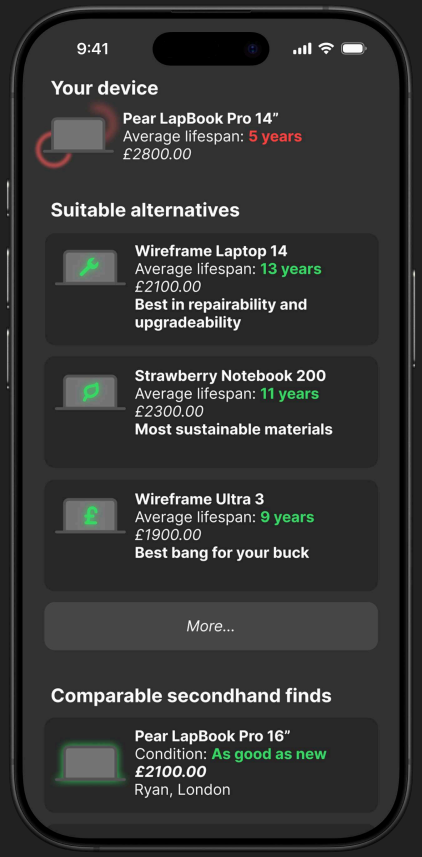


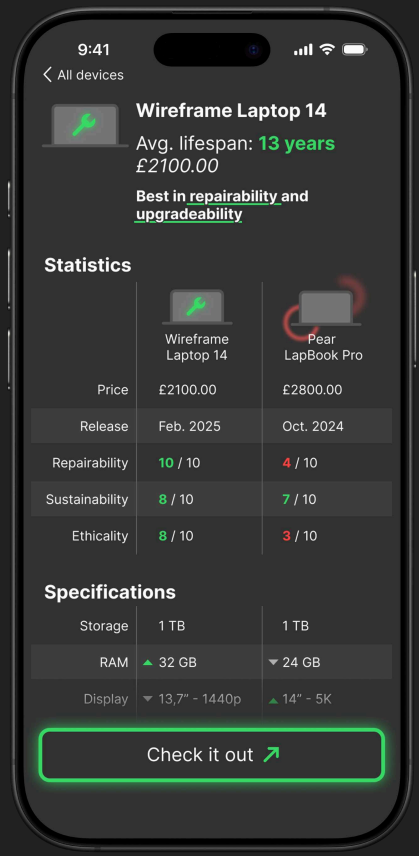


The app - providing alternatives

Secondly, the app helps the consumer choose better products by providing more sustainable alternatives to the product the consumer wants to buy. These alternatives are more focused on repairability, sustainable and recycled materials, upgradeability and overall lifespan.

The app also shows secondhand and refurbished marketplace ads of the same product itself, because buying secondhand is always better for the environment than buying new.

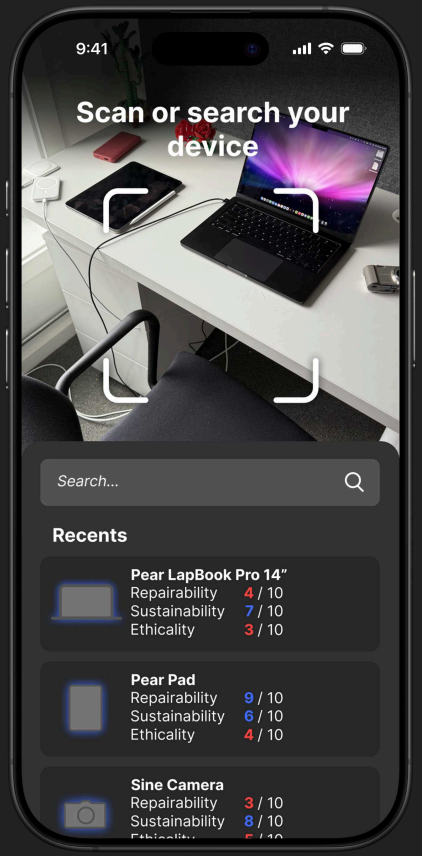


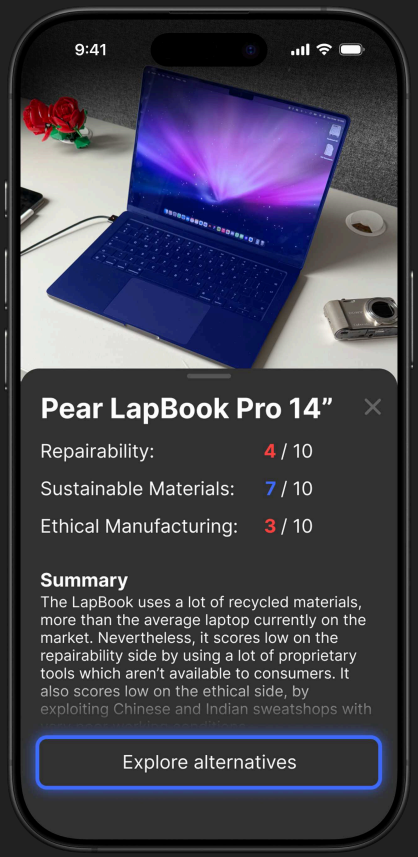


The app - providing information

Finally, the app also provides specific information per product. The user can enter or scan a product they're curious about, and the app will show them information about how sustainable the materials are that were used in production, the repairability/ upgradeability, average lifespan, and other relevant information about that specific product.

This helps the consumer make an informed decision about their next purchase, while simultaneously raising awareness about the various, anti-consumer production practices.





Artist statement

With this project, I wanted to highlight unfair manufacturing methods practiced by tech companies which mostly go unnoticed. Most tech companies intentionally design their products to become obsolete after a few years, and most consumers aren't aware that it doesn't have to be this way.

During my career, I want to leave the world better than I found it and use my creativity for projects that help me achieve that goal.

This project helped me realise how much power UX-designers have and how to use it to make the world a better place. I hope that this project will increase the awareness of the issues in the tech industry and help people realise that it could be better for all of us.

Let’s make tech more fair.