

Self-Improvement, Habits, and iPods

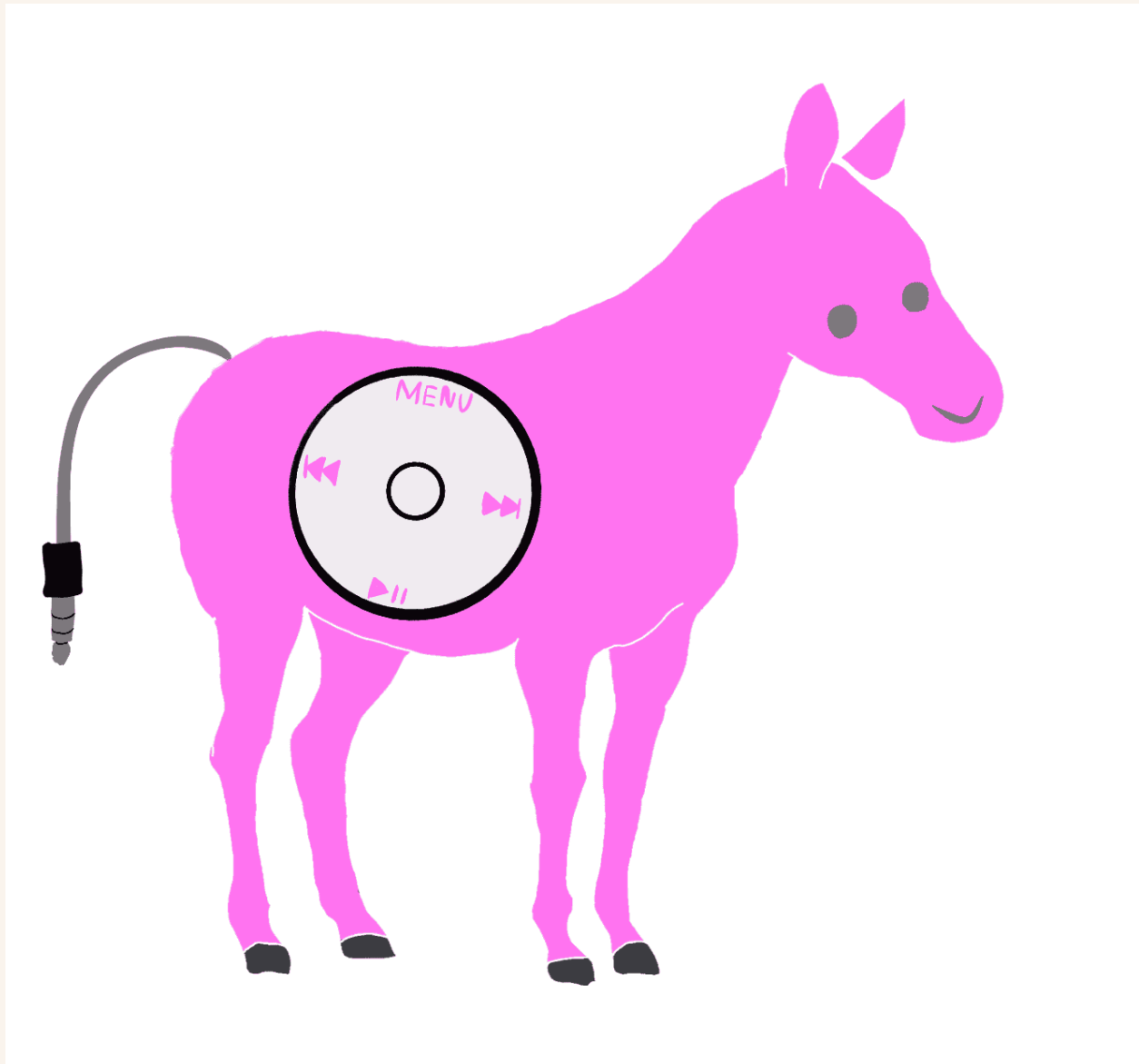
Grace

September 2025

My entry for SIGHORSE 2025

Context

In the Summer of 2025, I participated in SIGHORSE, a pseudo satirical journal taking after the likes of SIGBOVIK. I was one of many who wrote articles. My article has been converted to a blog post here, but if you want to read the others (which you should they are better than mine) you can [right here!](#)



I wouldn't say I'm addicted to my phone, but I also wouldn't say I have a healthy relationship with it. Like most people, I spend more time than I would like on my phone doing a variety of unhealthy behaviors. I spent so much time on my phone that at some point I turned off *Screen Time* tracking because I didn't like seeing how many hours I was spending on it. A typical day for me would typically include 7–10 hours of phone usage and over 100 pickups — that's about once every 10 minutes for all my waking hours.

Using my phone this much just feels gross. I didn't like the feeling that every waking moment of my life I was drawn to this magical computer slab in my pocket the same way a moth is drawn to light. Any moment of downtime would immediately be sucked up with a billion different apps and websites all trying to get me to stay there as long as possible. At the same time, I couldn't just get rid of my phone. My phone is a miracle device that can and does add significant value to my life. This device can

connect me with people from across the world in real time, it knows where I am down to the meter, it can tell me exactly where to go when I get lost, it can capture a moment in time for me to look back at, it can let me into my building when I return home, it teaches me new ideas, and it allows me to learn more about the world I am in. It does all of that while fitting in my hand. I can't just get rid of it, as my life (and modern life in general) is built around it, but I need to be healthier about it.

Now, I am not the first person to express these thoughts. There are many ways to go about reducing unhealthy habits while still keeping the utility of your phone. About a year ago, I met up for lunch with a friend that I hadn't seen for a while. At one point, he pulled out his phone and the way it looked shocked me. I asked him about it, and he showed me how he set his phone to black and white, gotten rid of all the apps on his home screen, and set a 15 minute limit on most trivial and unhealthy apps, all to help him reduce his dependence on his phone while still keeping it. I would consider to be drastic action, and many people are just able to set reasonable limits on their usage. I tried both reasonable limits and this more intense limit, but it wasn't enough for me. If I set it up, I could also bypass it, and having everything still be there is too tempting for me. I had to do something that would be harder for me to get around.

When *SIGHORSE* was announced, I decided to partake in a very ambitious project: fully getting rid of my phone. To do this, I would need to reorganize my life and replace all functionality of my phone with other devices. I think this is objectively one of the worst way to go about breaking habits, but I also knew this would allow me to see things in my life that I would otherwise be blind to.

Spoiler: I was not able to get to the point of leaving my phone at home at any point during this summer. However, I am prepared to do just that when the semester starts, and many of my bad habits have been changed or even fully broken.

So What Am I *Actually* Going to replace

There is a short list of the main useful functions of my phone:

- texting/general communication
- navigation in new places
- starting time tracking timers and managing to-do items
- key card to dorms and other campus buildings
- mobile hotspot
- recreationally watching YouTube
- listening to YouTube in the background while sleeping
- listening to podcasts while going between places
- camera (particularly for *Retro*)

These are all various levels of difficulty to solve for me. I can watch YouTube on my iPad. Texting/communication can all be done on my Mac or iPad, since I am (far too deeply) embedded in the Apple ecosystem. Navigation isn't an issue, since I am on a college campus and generally know where things are without maps. Also, Wi-Fi

blankets campus so I do not need to worry about having a mobile hotspot. Timers, todos, and the keycard are solved with my Apple Watch connected to WiFi. Lastly, I will keep my phone in my dorm room hooked up to a charger most of the time, but will be able to use it at night so I can listen to video to help me fall asleep.

Most of these solutions are better than the alternative. Watching items on a bigger screen and messaging on a device with a real keyboard both benefit from me taking the time to take out a device better suited to the task.

This just leaves podcasts and a camera to be replaced. How hard could that possibly be?

Going Through iPod Hell

I will not talk about everything relating to iPods and podcasts here because the inane technical bullshit these devices put me through is mostly a distraction and irrelevant to the focus of this article. However, let it be known that I am not finished with these little electronic devils, and you can expect a longer piece about the technical side of iPods and other DAPs in the future. For this, all you need to know is I started carrying two iPods:

- a 64 GB flash-modded iPod Mini running Rockbox with podcasts managed by my custom podcatcher called OxiPodder that made it super easy to sync podcasts whenever I plugged it in
- an 8 GB 4th generation iPod Nano loaded up with my YouTube Music playlists.



Figure 17: My commute iPod

When they worked, I absolutely loved using my iPod for podcasts. iPods are actually nice objects and feel great to hold. Using the clickwheel to scroll through menus to select what I want to listen to and skipping forward or backward 15 seconds or pausing by clicking a real physical button is great and satisfying.

I would use it every day on my commute to work, when I would workout, and other moments during the day that I would always listen to a podcast. Having a separate device for podcasts removed the urge for me to change what I was listening to and play something else, or worse, start browsing YouTube. This gave me back the space that urge was taking in my mind and it feels calmer and clearer, even in a small way.

During this summer, I went on two road trips. The first one was with friends driving to Salt Lake City and Moab. I actually didn't use my player much on this trip and only listened to a single podcast. However, that wasn't because I was using my phone. Other than occasional navigation, I didn't use my phone at all. I think this was only possible due to having that urge to grab my phone removed, so at no point during the long ride did I even want to use it for entertainment.

My second road trip was to see family in Missouri. Due to *unforeseen accidents* (dropping an iPod at a gas station and falling off a jet ski with one I forgot to take out of my pocket), I had no iPod with podcasts for the way back, so I grabbed my phone and used that, since I was not about to go without anything for a 12-hour trip. What shocked me was the ripple effect this had on returning to all my old bad habits. The next morning, I found myself watching YouTube Shorts while eating breakfast before going to work. Additionally, that urge to grab my phone and change whatever I was listening to came back. Did they come back because I used my phone like I did before, or because I was a bit tired and it's easier to slip back into habits when you are mentally exhausted? I suspect a mixture of both, but it was a good reminder of what I was working to get rid of.

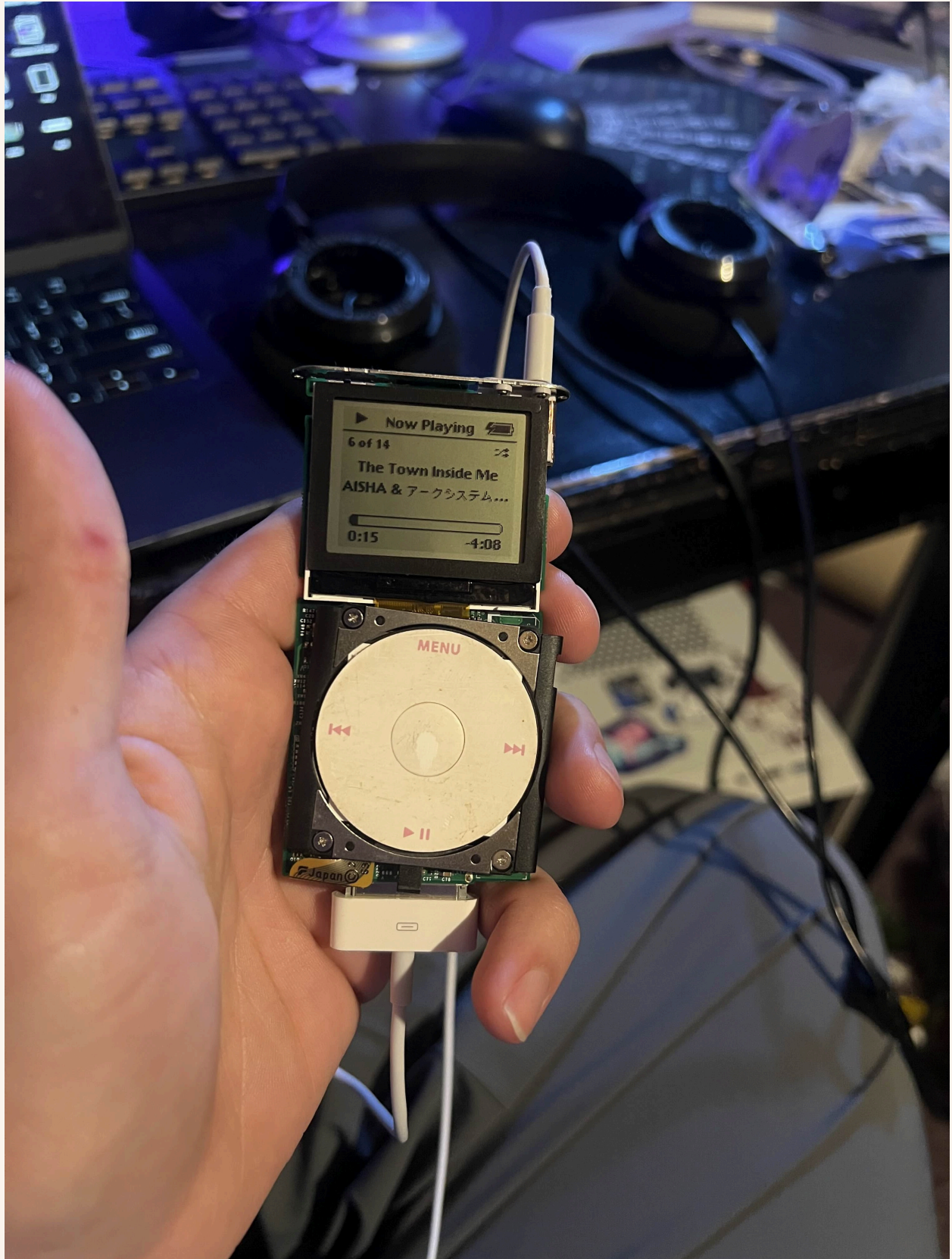


Figure 18: My iPod Mini needed a lot of repairs during its life

As much as I liked the iPods as a solution, they were not perfect. Neither the stock firmware or Rockbox are really designed for podcasts, so there are a lot of paper cuts. Additionally, it was a massive time sink for me to do this. I probably spent a minimum of 30 hours researching, modding, fixing, and debugging iPods and writing my own program to track and sync podcasts. Once I write a longer piece on that, I hope it won't be as difficult for others to do the same, but it won't ever be a fault-free solution. Also, it's expensive. I have probably spent upwards of \$150 on all my iPod and parts. Despite all of this, when it worked, it really worked. I don't see myself without an iPod (or other Digital Audio Player) for a long time.

Replacing My Camera

At the start of this summer, I was roped into using an app called *Retro*. In a gist, *Retro* is a shared photo album only for friends. It does not feel like social media at all and really helped me connect with friends while I wasn't physically close to them. I never really got sucked in a death spiral on *Retro* since you can get to the end of it after 5 minutes. It also made me take at least one photo almost every day, which is great for documenting my life to look back on later.

This made it incredibly important for me to have a camera that timestamps and geotags photos and was small enough for me to carry with me. Turns out, not really a thing in the modern day. Because phones have such good cameras, no one makes a modern point-and-shoot digital camera for about \$100-200, since you can't beat the quality at that price point. There is a narrow range of cameras that have GPS in a small point-and-shoot form factor, but the used camera market is very expensive sadly. I found a few that looked good, but I already spent all my money on iPods so I was unable to justify buying one.

On my first road trip with my friends, I dusted off our family's old Nikon Coolpix point-and-shoot and took it with me. Notably, this was too big and didn't have GPS so didn't meet my requirements for a daily carry, but it was still nice to take photos with. The resolution doesn't look great, but I was able to get better photo composition using the optical zoom of the camera. I enjoyed it much more than phone photography, so I will likely shell out for a used point-and-shoot at some point in the near future.



Figure 19: Photo from Arches National Park



Figure 20: Photo from Canyonlands National Park

My current camera solution is another iPod. This time, it's an old 5th-gen iPod Touch found when cleaning out old tech. This is a shockingly good solution. Even though it is stuck on iOS 12, it is still able to sync all of its photos to iCloud (Apple does a surprisingly great job of supporting old hardware and software) and even includes GPS data. Additionally, it being stuck on iOS 12 is actually an advantage since there are almost no compatible apps (I have found zero) and the browser is so out of date that it can't load most modern single-page JavaScript apps. So far I have only gotten YouTube to work, but the YouTube mobile site sucks so much to use that this isn't an issue. This basically makes it a dedicated camera. The biggest downside is it's battery is shot, and it has about the quality that you would expect from a \$200 device that was discontinued a decade ago. I will eventually get a real camera, but for now, I am happy with this.



Figure 21: iPod Touch 5th Generation

Nothing Quite Beats Pen and Paper

Phones are so good at everything that it is easy to be caught off guard if you don't have one on you. There are little things that you don't normally think about, like paying a friend on Venmo or needing to scan a QR code. While these do come up, they are mostly solved by another item I started to carry on me: a notebook. Rarely is anything that you need to do so urgent that it cannot wait until you finish the day and go back home. Because of this, you can write it down in a notebook and look at it later.

Additionally, I think that writing things out by hand, whether it be notes, logs, or ideas, is really beneficial. Handwriting helps with memory, and being able to mix in sketches, arrows, and everything else pen and paper allows for makes it easy to map out ideas in progress. It also just feels so nice. There is one very notable personal downside; My handwriting is historically bad and I often struggle to read what I've written down. However, this is balanced out by the memory advantages mentioned earlier. Ultimately, adding a notebook to my daily carry has been super nice.

Reflection

In Fall of last year, my first semester at Purdue University started. That person isn't me, or at least not who i am now. Ever since the first day that i have stepped on campus, my life has changed drastically. i have changed so much. i started working on super cool projects, i have met some really amazing people, i actually came out after 5 years. The life i have now is just significantly better than when i started and that doesn't seem to be changing any time soon.

Starting at the end of last semester, a new thought started echoing around in my brain.

oh god, i graduate in 2 years. i am almost a third of the way though my time here. i only get to do this again 2 more times. everything went so fast. if it continues at this rate ... but i cant leave. this place has made my life better. i cant leave the people i met. i cant leave everything ive built here. i love it here. what happens when i get out. i dont want my life stop getting better. it cant be over so soon. it cant finish before im ready...

To this day, i still have this thought and it gets me really worked up and anxious.

...

Everything you have read up until this reflection section was written in August. It is now late September. I have written the conclusion many times and every time I hated it. It always felt like it was disingenuous, like I was trying to give you something that didn't exist.

A lot of the challenges that I faced when writing about this were the external deadlines. Because of the nature of *SIGHORSE*, I was working within a deadline so this project had to be over before it would naturally finish. I wasn't even able to really go out without my phone. Normally, something like this would be okay. If this was a story about technology, I wouldn't have had this issue. But it isn't a story about technology. It's a story that involves technology but is about me.

I tried to give some insight, some revelation, into my life and how I changed during this adventure. I wrote a cute little conclusion about how my life improved throughout this process and urged others to think about their life. It was an ending, but it wasn't great. It wasn't something that made a lot of sense in where I was in my life. My relationships to everything I wrote about was still changing

Then, something magical happened. *SIGHORSE* had review cycles. All of the sudden I was granted extra time and could write an ending that I liked more. I talked to some friends about the ending and wrote another one. This time I left the book open making sure to talk about how I still have a lot to learn about where this fits in my life and keeping it open for me to add to in the future. This just didn't feel satisfying. No matter how much I pretend otherwise, *SIGHORSE* is coming to an end and I need to acknowledge that.

...

During the darkest and brightest times in my life, i have always told myself "this too shall pass." i couldn't tell you where i first heard it, but it stuck with me. i was talking to a friend about my struggles with writing this ending. i told them about my insecurity about when college is over and they talked about how change was scary.

it surprised me when they said that, because thats not what i said. i said that i was scared that my life was going to stop getting better when i left. That i was going to lose everything i gained here. That i was scared of ... oh.

that i was scared of how my life was going to change when i was done.

...

Doing this adventure did make my life better and it would be silly for me to believe that once i submit this draft for *SIGHORSE*, that i would lose the personal progress i made. i will still have better habits and a cool new interest. it's also silly for me to think that everything i wrote about would stay static just because this project is over. i have another 70 years left in my life (optimistically anyway) so of course i will keep changing and of course my life will keep getting better throughout those years. just because one of the best chapters in my life will end, doesn't mean i won't find another one that will make me even better. it's a lot more satisfying to let something truly end and i need to be okay with it. i have a long time until i graduate so ill make the most of it, but when the end comes, ill be there in an open embrace to celebrate it and everything that's next.

this too may still pass, but i shall be out there, searching for what is after

