

Apple just made your app obsolete? You've been 'Sherlocked'

Warm-up question:

Have you ever had an idea that someone else took credit for or replicated?

Listen: Link to audio [[HERE](#)]

Read:

MARY LOUISE KELLY, HOST:

Critics of Apple say many of the new features for its upcoming iPhone were copied from other popular apps. Fair play or an abuse of power? NPR tech correspondent Bobby Allyn reports on why the controversial practice known as sherlocking has **dogged** Apple for years.

BOBBY ALLYN, BYLINE: The headline from Apple's recent developer conference was all about its snappy AI tools. Under the headline was something else - a bunch of small updates, including the ability to record phone calls. Many apps have been offering this service for a while. A popular one is called TapeACall. It's \$8 a month. Apple's version is free.

PHILLIP SHOEMAKER: If I was TapeACall, I'd be saying game over.

ALLYN: That's Phillip Shoemaker, a former Apple executive. TapeACall declined to comment, but it's not just them. Apple announced services similar to writing assistant app Grammarly, password manager 1Password, voice transcription app Otter, AI emoji app Newji and maps app AllTrails. Shoemaker says when he was at Apple, he heard complaints all the time from small app developers angry that Apple copied their service.

SHOEMAKER: Apple has all the data they need. They can look to see what apps are being used most by their customers and then say, hey, that's a great idea. Let's **integrate** that into our operating system. We can do a much better job.

ALLYN: The practice is called being sherlocked. It dates back to the '90s, when Apple introduced a desktop search tool known as Sherlock that replicated another desktop search program called Watson. Since then, the term has stuck. When I reach out to several apps that have been sherlocked, their responses surprised me. They didn't exactly express outrage. Instead, they issued statements basically saying, we welcome competition. We respect Apple.

RICK VANMETER: Many of these developers fear **retaliation** and are very cautious in what they say about Apple. It's something that we unfortunately see every single day.

ALLYN: That's Rick VanMeter. He's the executive director of the group Coalition for App Fairness, which represents more than 80 popular apps.

VANMETER: Apple is not only a competitor, but it also sets the rules of the marketplace.

ALLYN: That marketplace is the App Store. Apple is its **gatekeeper**, so many app developers think it's just too risky to speak out against them. Some companies have fought back and sued Apple, but Shoemaker says the more common strategy is to say nothing at all.

SHOEMAKER: Third party companies do not want **to bite the hand that feeds them** because they are the only method, for the most part, of getting an app onto your device.

ALLYN: And often, the sherlocked app **pivots** to another service or is even put out of business entirely. Apple, of course, became one of the richest companies in the world through its own innovation, but also by taking from other people. Apple co-founder Steve Jobs famously said, quote, "we have always been shameless about stealing great ideas." When I reached out to Apple, they wouldn't comment, but the company has previously said that it welcomes healthy competition and **going toe to toe** improves services for everyone. John Gruber is a tech blogger who has focused on Apple for more than two decades.

JOHN GRUBER: The truth is, Apple, you know, like any successful company, **plays hardball**.

ALLYN: He says it's not just Apple. If you're a small company and you come up with a clever idea, there's a pretty good chance a larger company or a social media platform will try to do it themselves.

GRUBER: It's just the way the software industry works, historically.

ALLYN: Some small app developers have become so worried about it that if Apple reaches out to them, they start to get freaked out. Yes, an Apple collaboration or acquisition would be a big payday to a smaller app company. But if Apple holds meetings, ask questions and then introduces its own version of their services, well, that's been described as Apple's kiss of death. Bobby Allyn, NPR News.

Vocabulary and Phrases:

1. **Dogged:** Persistent in effort; determined.
2. **Integrate:** To combine or incorporate parts into a whole.
3. **Retaliation:** The act of returning an injury or wrong.
4. **Gatekeeper:** A person or thing that controls access to something.
5. **To bite the hand that feeds them:** To act against the person or entity that provides one's necessities or support.
6. **Pivot:** To change direction or focus.
7. **Go toe to toe:** To compete or fight directly.
8. **Play hardball:** To act aggressively and ruthlessly in business or politics.

Comprehension Questions:

1. What controversial practice has been associated with Apple for years, according to the transcript?
2. How does the practice of "sherlocking" affect small app developers?
3. What specific services did Apple announce that have similarities to existing apps?
4. Why are some app developers hesitant to express outrage towards Apple?
5. How does Apple justify its practice of integrating features similar to those of other apps?
6. What is the "kiss of death" for small app developers in relation to Apple?

Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think small app developers are hesitant to criticize Apple publicly? How might this affect their business strategies?
2. Discuss the ethical implications of large companies integrating features from smaller competitors' apps into their own systems. Is this fair competition or an abuse of power?
3. How might small app developers pivot or adapt when faced with competition from a giant company like Apple?
4. What strategies can smaller companies use to protect their innovative ideas from being copied by larger firms?
5. How does the concept of "playing hardball" apply to the tech industry, and what are the potential benefits and drawbacks of such an approach?