

ON THE ORIGIN OF PRODUCTS

THE EVOLUTION OF PRODUCT INNOVATION AND DESIGN

In this new work, Arthur Eger and Huub Ehlhardt present a “Theory of Product Evolution.” They challenge the popular notion that we owe the availability of products solely to genius inventors. Instead, they present arguments that show that a process of variation, selection, and accumulation of “know-how” (to make) and “know-what” (function to realize) provide an explanation for the emergence of new types of products and their subsequent development into families of advanced versions. This theory employs a product evolution diagram as an analytical framework to reconstruct the development history of a product family and picture it as a graphical narrative. The authors describe the relevant literature and case studies to place their theory in context. The “Product Phases Theory” is used to create predictions on the most likely next step in the evolution of a product, offering practical tools for those involved in new product development.

Arthur O. Eger is a Professor of Product Design. He has a broad experience in industrial design engineering, wrote and edited more than fifteen books, and published more than 100 articles and papers. He is a member and Chairman of the Board of the Department of Industrial Design Engineering of KIVI, the Royal Institution of Engineers in the Netherlands.

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Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>page ix</i>
<i>Preface</i>	xv
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xix
1 On the Origin of Products	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 How Revolutionary Is Revolutionary Really?	2
1.3 Innovation	3
1.4 Patterns and Mechanisms of Innovation	3
1.5 Patterns and Mechanisms of Innovation Framed	24
1.6 The Evolution of Products	25
1.7 Definitions	29
2 Technological Innovation as an Evolutionary Process	35
2.1 Introduction	35
2.2 Knowledge Accumulation and Innovation	36
2.3 System Evolution: The Case of the Telephone	38
2.4 When the Time Is Ripe, New Types of Products Emerge from a Fundament of Know-How and Know-What	42
2.5 Subsystem Evolution: The Case of the Electric Bicycle	45
2.6 Evolving Products	48
2.7 Conclusion	49
3 Lineage	51
3.1 Introduction	51
3.2 Theoretical Background and Embedding	51
3.3 Mapping Lineage in Biology	53
3.4 Lineage in Human Culture	56
3.5 Conclusion	58

4	Product Evolution	59
	4.1 Introduction	59
	4.2 The Product Family Tree	60
	4.3 The Ecosystem	63
	4.4 The Timeline	64
	4.5 Use of the Product Evolution Diagram	64
	4.6 Constructing a Product Evolution Diagram	65
	4.7 Extrapolating Developments	66
	4.8 Conclusion	68
5	Evolutionary Product Development: Product Phases	69
	5.1 Introduction	69
	5.2 The Marketing Product Life Cycle (M-PLC)	69
	5.3 The Engineering Product Life Cycle (E-PLC)	71
	5.4 Toward the Product Phases Model	72
	5.5 Product Phases	77
	5.6 Product Phase Characteristics	77
	5.7 Description of the Product Phases	78
	5.8 Conclusion	90
6	Retrospective Case Surveys Based on Product Phases	91
	6.1 Electric Shaver	93
	6.2 Mobile Phone	102
	6.3 Bicycle	113
	6.4 Working-Class Housing	128
	6.5 Traveling (Tourism)	136
7	Retrospective Case Study of General Lighting Solutions and the Compact Fluorescent Lamp	147
	7.1 Introduction	147
	7.2 Electrification and the Rise of Electric Lighting	148
	7.3 Electric Lighting Technology Families	148
	7.4 Phase Out of GLS Incandescent Lamps	160
	7.5 The Emergence and Development of a New Type of Product: The Compact Fluorescent Lamp	161
	7.6 Competition among GLS Lamps	167
	7.7 Conclusion	168
8	Retrospective Case Study of the Child Restraint System	171
	8.1 Introduction	171
	8.2 Availability of Cars and a Niche for the CRS to Emerge	171
	8.3 How the CRS Came About	173
	8.4 Perspectives on the Development of CRSs	189

Contents

vii

8.5 Conclusion	195
8.6 Application of the Case Study in a Design by Noor Reigersman	197
9 Example Showing the Application of the Theory in the Work of Maarten Michel	203
9.1 Introduction	203
9.2 Conclusions of the Research	208
9.3 Design Considerations	211
9.4 Conclusion	216
10 Abstracts of the Most Important Theories Used in This Book	217
10.1 Abernathy and Utterback (1975): “A Dynamic Model of Process and Product Innovation”	217
10.2 Altshuller (1999): TRIZ, the Theory of Inventive Problem Solving	220
10.3 Anderson and Tushman (1990): “Technological Discontinuities and Dominant Designs: A Cyclical Model of Technological Change”	221
10.4 Arthur (2009): <i>The Nature of Technology, What It Is and How It Evolves</i>	225
10.5 Basalla (1988): <i>The Evolution of Technology</i>	226
10.6 Bense (1954): <i>Aesthetica, Metaphysische Beobachtungen am Schönen</i>	227
10.7 Berlyne (1971): <i>Aesthetics and Psychobiology</i>	228
10.8 Bijker (1990): <i>The Social Construction of Technology</i>	230
10.9 Boselie (1982): <i>Over Visuele Schoonheidservaring</i>	231
10.10 Christensen (1997): <i>The Innovator’s Dilemma</i>	232
10.11 Crilly, Moultrie, and Clarkson (2004): “Seeing Things: Consumer Response to the Visual Domain in Product Design”	233
10.12 David (1985): “Clio and the Economics of QWERTY”	236
10.13 Dosi (1982): “Technological Paradigms and Technological Trajectories: A Suggested Interpretation of the Determinants and Directions of Technical Change”	239
10.14 Foot (1996): <i>Boom, Bust, & Echo</i>	240
10.15 Forty (1986): <i>Objects of Desire</i>	243
10.16 Geels (2002): “Technological Transitions as Evolutionary Reconfiguration Processes: A Multi-level Perspective and a Case Study”	244
10.17 Hekkert (1995): <i>Artful Judgements</i>	248

10.18	Jordan (2000): <i>Designing Pleasurable Products, an Introduction to the New Human Factors</i>	249
10.19	Krishnan and Ulrich (2001): “Product Development Decisions: A Review of the Literature”	250
10.20	Maslow (1976): <i>Motivation and Personality</i>	250
10.21	Mitchell (1983): <i>The Nine American Lifestyles: Who We Are and Where We’re Going</i>	252
10.22	Motivaction International (2017): <i>Mentality</i>	252
10.23	Pine and Gilmore (1999): <i>The Experience Economy</i>	255
10.24	Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004): <i>The Future of Competition: Co-creating Value with Customers</i>	256
10.25	Rogers ([1962] 1995): <i>Diffusion of Innovations</i>	257
10.26	Veblen (1899): <i>The Theory of the Leisure Class</i>	259
10.27	Woodring (1987): <i>Retailing New Product or Design</i>	259
11	Conclusion: Evolution in Products	263
11.1	Introduction	263
11.2	Product Phase Model: General Conclusions and Discussion	264
11.3	The Product Evolution Diagram	267
	<i>Appendix: Student, Product, Year, and Number of Times Researched</i>	271
	<i>References</i>	278
	<i>Index</i>	292

Figures

F.1	The six product phases first version (1993)	<i>page xvii</i>
F.2	The six product phases with the last three occurring simultaneously	xviii
1.1	The technology life cycle	12
1.2	Technological discontinuities and dominant designs	13
1.3	Illustration of a four-level nested hierarchy	14
1.4	Technology cycles over time	15
1.5	Nested hierarchy of technology cycles over time	15
1.6	Conceptions that are used in different disciplines but that come close to each other with regard to their meaning. The concepts are vertically organized by time of appearance and horizontally by sequence or gradient	26
1.7	Hierarchic order of some of the conceptions presented in Figure 1.6. The concepts are vertically organized by time scale and measure of detail and horizontally by sequence of appearance	28
1.8	A comparison of the building blocks in the biological- and the “product-world”	29
1.9	An example of the first electric shavers by Philips/Norelco shows how items “variate” (“mutate”) separately	29
2.1	A stone hand axe (left) and a bronze axe (right)	36
2.2	The telephone network system as a nested hierarchy consisting of a system, subsystem, and components. In this perspective, the telephone is a first-order subsystem	38
2.3	Evolution in early telephones	40
2.4	The dual-tone, multi-frequency matrix, and the push-button keypad	41
2.5	Evolution in telephones from pulse toward tone networks	41
2.6	Evolution in telephone network technologies	43
2.7	An early example of an electric bicycle patented in 1895	46
2.8	The electric bicycle for which designs compete for dominance in subsystems motor (A, B, C) and battery (1, 2, 3)	47
3.1	The evolution of Australian aboriginal weapons according to Pitt-Rivers	52

3.2	a) Picture from a book by Linnaeus in which plant leaves are organized by their physical characteristics. b) Finches as Darwin encountered them in the Galapagos. c) Note by Darwin on his idea for the evolutionary tree structure	54
3.3	Two versions of the tree of life. Left: Linnaean classification (1738), right: phylogenetic tree of life by Woese (1977)	55
3.4	Language tree of Indo-European languages	57
3.5	Different lineage relationships	58
4.1	The product evolution diagram	60
4.2	Using the PED to explore the solution space for future products	67
5.1	The (marketing) product life cycle (M-PLC) according to Levitt (1965)	70
5.2	A more recent version of the marketing product life cycle (M-PLC) with the profitability curve of a product	71
5.3	The steps of the engineering product life cycle (E-PLC)	72
5.4	Investing in design-centric companies compared with investing in the S&P 500	73
5.5	A fictional example of the use of the model to determine the solution space for future products based on the product phases and the product phase characteristics	87
5.6	An overview of how the 10 product phase characteristics describe the six product phases	88
6.1	Fragment of the patent for an electric shaver by Jacob Schick	93
6.2	The development of the Philishave between 1939 and 1962	95
6.3	Type 7735, the egg-shaped device made by Philips (1948)	96
6.4	The TH design (telephone head) by Philips/Norelco (1975)	97
6.5	An electric shaver from Braun in which special attention was paid to tactile aspects. The shaver was equipped with rechargeable batteries for wireless shaving (around 1980)	98
6.6	The Beautiphil, the first Philips shaver for women (1951)	99
6.7	“Lipstick” (1959)	99
6.8	Philips Sensotec, available in several colors, with rechargeable batteries for wireless shaving (2003 range)	101
6.9	Motorola DynaTAC 8000X, the first commercially available mobile phone	104
6.10	Growth (worldwide) of the number of mobile phones compared to the number of fixed lines	105
6.11	Nokia 1011 (1992)	106
6.12	The Lady Phone of Samsung (2002)	108
6.13	Nokia 7600 (2003)	110
6.14	Motorola Razr V3 (2004)	111
6.15	The introduction of the iPhone led to a new dominant design for mobile phones (smartphones)	112
6.16	A so-called High Bi or Penny Farthing from 1875	114
6.17	Lawson’s “Bicyclette” (1879)	115
6.18	“Rover Safety Bicycle” (1885)	115
6.19	The quasi-linear development of the bicycle according to Bijker	116

List of Figures

xi

6.20	The evolution of the bicycle between 1800 and 1900 according to Van Nierop and colleagues (1997)	117
6.21	Using a time-mapped PEST analysis to depict drivers of product evolution	119
6.22	A selection of problems and solutions of the bicycle in its early development phases to illustrate its evolutionary character	121
6.23	Docteur Richard's four-wheeler (1669)	122
6.24	Draisienne (1818)	123
6.25	Product family tree of bicycles	126
6.26	Linthoutwijk, Schaarbeek (1870)	130
6.27	Floréal, Watermaal-Bosvoorde	132
6.28	Spherical houses ("Bolwoningen") built in 's-Hertogenbosch in 1985	133
6.29	The number of owner-occupied houses compared to the number of social houses built in Brussels between 1989 and 2004	133
6.30	a) Two (originally identical) housing blocks in Enschede b) and what people did to individualize them	134
6.31	Example of <i>Het Wilde Bouwen</i> in Roombeek, Enschede	135
6.32	Numbers of persons traveling between 1950 and 2008	138
6.33	Revenues of tourism in billion dollars between 1950 and 2008	138
6.34	The first travel guide of OAD	140
6.35	The travel guide of A. Eger & Zoon from 1959	141
6.36	Arke travel guide of 1972	142
6.37	The "winter sun" and "faraway destinations" guide for the season 1981–1982	143
6.38	Facade of the "China shop King Ape" in Amsterdam in 1993; then a small travel agency specializing in China, Vietnam, and Cambodia, nowadays an agency with many "faraway" destinations	144
6.39	Holidays that don't cost the Earth	145
7.1	Electric lighting technology families	149
7.2	Product evolution diagram of most common types of electric lighting technologies	150
7.3	The first incandescent lamp by Joseph Wilson Swan (1879)	151
7.4	The incandescent lamp system diagram	152
7.5	A selection from the range of envelope shapes and sizes offered for incandescent lamps	153
7.6	The Philips SL 18 compared with the incandescent GLS and modern CFL	156
7.7	Development of global CFLi production volumes as share of GLS demand	157
7.8	The light-emitting diode or LED	158
7.9	Left: the first 60 W bulb by Philips awarded the L-Prize in 2009 by the US Department of Energy; right: the Philips Hue introduced in 2012	159
7.10	CFL system diagram	162

7.11	Product evolution diagram combining the CFL product family tree, showing standard and exotic types, as well as price and performance development	162
7.12	The external ballast CFL	163
7.13	A standard CFLi with spiral tube	163
7.14	A CFL including reflector	164
7.15	CFL shop price development over time in the Netherlands as published by Consumentenbond	165
7.16	CFL efficacy development over time in which the last two years include the GLS halogen incandescent lamp and the GLS LED bulb	165
8.1	Development of car ownership in the United States and Western Europe	172
8.2	Child's seat invented by B. Coleman Silver in 1928	173
8.3	The Ames' "children's safety seat"	175
8.4	Prototype of the first rearward-facing CRS tested in 1964	175
8.5	The Tot Guard introduced by the Ford Motor Company in 1968	176
8.6	Storchenmühle CRS type "Niki" introduced in 1963	177
8.7	The Storchenmühle CRS "Jet SM 12," 1967 clamped between the backrest and seat	177
8.8	Rimo belted harness with inflatable support	179
8.9	Baby carrier and car seat patent 4,231,612 filed in September 1978 by Paul K. Meeker. An earlier version was filed in 1977	180
8.10	The Dyn-O-Mite was imported into Europe and sold as the first Maxi-Cosi	181
8.11	Overlapping age and weight groups	183
8.12	The safe fit belt adapter designated unsafe by Consumentenbond	185
8.13	The Maxi-Cosi Pebble above a Maxi-Cosi FamilyFix base with light and sound controls for correct installation and semi-universal Isofix	186
8.14	I-size classification based on length	187
8.15	The system diagram of CRSs	190
8.16	The product evolution diagram of CRSs	191
8.17	The product phases and the product family tree of CRSs	193
8.18	The relation between the product family tree and the ecosystem	195
8.19	The three products that were compared left to right: BeSafe iZi Combi X3, Cybex Sirona, Maxi-Cosi 2wayPearl	197
8.20	Solution space for BeSafe based on the product phases and the product phase characteristics	198
8.21	iZi Go Limited Edition	199
8.22	Design sketches aimed at creating a friendly, reliable, natural, and classy shape and looking for emotional benefits	200
8.23	Study into color combinations	201
8.24	Final design	201
9.1	Basketball shoe: the upper, the midsole, and the outsole	204
9.2	Spalding "Expert" (1904)	204
9.3	Nike "Bruin" (1972)	206
9.4	Nike "Blazer" (1972)	206

List of Figures**xiii**

9.5	Nike iD website	208
9.6	Solution space for Nike based on the product phases and the product phase characteristics	209
9.7	(Simplified) product family tree of the Nike basketball shoes	210
9.8	Characteristics of Anthony Davis	212
9.9	The logo and its inspiration	213
9.10	The logo spells the name Davis	213
9.11	Sketches for the shoe design	213
9.12	The final design of the Anthony Davis Signature Shoe	215
9.13	Nike Signature Shoes including the new design created by Michel	215
10.1	The technology life cycle	219
10.2	Technological discontinuities and dominant designs	221
10.3	Examples of discontinuities and competences	223
10.4	Pleasantness versus complexity	229
10.5	Interestingness versus complexity	229
10.6	An overview of the aspects that involve consumer response to product visual form according to Crilly and colleagues	235
10.7	The multilevel perspective	246
10.8	Motivaction International: The “Mentality” model	253
10.9	The diffusion of innovations and types of adopter associated with different adoption levels according to Rogers (1995)	258
10.10	The number of products sold (horizontal) versus their price (vertical) in three periods (horizontal)	262
11.1	Road map for industrial design engineering	267

Preface

This book addresses the question of how new (types of) products come about and develop through time into a family of more advanced versions. The content of this book is organized around three topics. First, theoretical perspectives from different schools of thought deemed relevant are collected in order to provide an inclusive background. Second, the question of the origin of new types of products is explored based on the observation that products do not appear as a *generatio spontanea*,¹ but build on previously developed versions and/or accumulated learning. Case studies of various kinds are included to provide context. Third, using the perspective of accumulated learning, this book provides a low-risk new product development strategy that builds on recurring patterns in products introduced through time. For editorial reasons, these topics do not appear in a strict numerical order. Finally, using the maxim that products “are both the means and the ends of technology” (Basalla, 1988, p. 30, and Section 10.5 of this volume), a product-centric perspective is presented.

Since the dawn of mankind, we have been making things, tools, products. Today we live in a world that depends on technology and is characterized by abundant products: the consumer society. The twentieth century saw an explosion of ever more advanced products. During the past few decades, the process of developing new products was refined and became an engineering discipline. Until the late 1980s, product development was generally considered a linear process. Successful new (versions of) products were considered the next logical step in the continuous improvement of the product with regard to price and performance. The basic thought behind this idea was the – in practice nonexistent – principle of perfect competition, a term derived from neoclassical economic theory. According to this theory, a product can only survive in a market if it has an improved performance/price ratio, relative to its predecessors.

¹ Aristotle used this term to explain that new generations spontaneously arose as he observed eels and flies coming from cadavers.

In the last quarter of the previous century, this principle received a great deal of critique. Development processes (e.g., product development) seemed to be much less predictable and unambiguous than the linear model suggested. In different fields of interest in which innovation processes are studied, such as economics and technology studies, research was initiated to find new explanatory models that focus on the complicated way that innovation progresses. It is striking that this research, which is based on very different points of view due to the many research backgrounds, ended with the same type of explanations, namely evolutionary models. Nelson and Winter (1982) defined a new nonlinear view on the economy referred to as “evolutionary economy.” Several authors – such as Steadman (1979), Petroski (1992), and Norman (1988, 1992) – engaged in the field of product development and suggested an evolutionary process, although the practical consequences of this point of view remained unnoticed for many years. The linear model remained the generally accepted theory in studies of product development and innovation management, as can be seen, for instance, in the approach followed in almost all introductory texts on design methodology. Despite this, those practical implications are far-reaching. A number of economic phenomena, such as partial path dependence, embeddedness, and technological lock-in, cannot be explained by the linear model and are therefore traditionally considered anomalies. However, they can be explained when technological innovation is regarded as an evolutionary process. This conception has been used to devise a low-risk strategy in new product development based on the observation that products commonly develop through phases.

Evolutionary Product Development is a framework that can be used for developing products that is based on the observation that new products are always based on previous versions and/or accumulated learning. This is an important reason for continuing to investigate the possibilities of an evolutionary vision of product development and innovation.

The theory of Evolutionary Product Development originates from the design practice of Van Dijk/Eger/Associates (nowadays referred to as WeLL Design), a leading Dutch design company founded in 1979. From the very beginning, Arthur Eger – one of the founders of the company – tried to describe the experience of the bureau in terms of a model. The first publication was realized in 1987 in *Dutch Design* (Eger, 1987) on the occasion of a large exhibition that five museums in the Netherlands had organized on the subject of design in the Netherlands. This publication identified five product phases. The sixth product phase, namely awareness, was first described in an article in *NieuwsTribune* (Eger, 1993), and afterward in the book *Succesvolle Productontwikkeling (Successful Product Development)* (Eger, 1996).

In the theory of Evolutionary Product Development, all matters that play a role in the evolution of products are the starting point. The model states that each of six product phases displays a typical pattern of product characteristics.

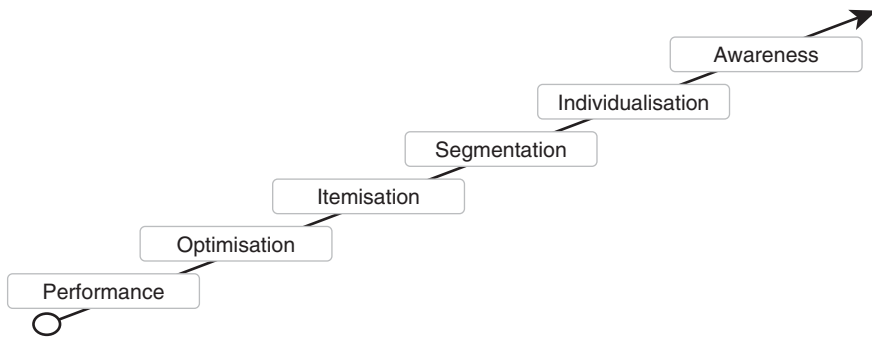


Figure F.1 The six product phases first version (1993) (Source: authors)

Any company making money through the development, production, or marketing of products will have to deal with this phenomenon. Managing it requires skills with respect to management of product development and design methodology, as well as a sound awareness of design history. In practice, products in each phase can be found on the market and specific knowledge is required for every phase.

Generally speaking, the emphasis in the first phase – performance – is on new technologies. New product functions are developed for which the functional performance of the products is the main challenge at this point. In the second phase – optimization – other knowledge is required. The market no longer accepts imperfections and other disciplines become important. Manufacturing technology and quality control become increasingly relevant. Product development is aimed at improving performance, reliability, ergonomics, and safety. In this phase, and in the following one, involving clients in the product development process is beneficial for both the product performance and the financial results of the company (Candi et al., 2010). In the third phase – itemization – high quality and safety no longer suffice. Here, ergonomics and styling are important success factors. Research in the field of man-machine interfaces also starts playing a role. The aim of product development is to develop extra features and accessories, including special editions of the product for different trade channels and target groups (segmentation).

According to the research presented in earlier publications (summarized in Eger, 2013) and in this book, the last three phases coexist (Figure F.2). Product development is either aimed at target groups that become increasingly smaller and differentiated according to specific needs (segmentation), or at mass customization or cocreation by which the customer is able to influence the final result (individualization). The ethical behavior of the company or organization behind the product is also becoming more and more important for customers (awareness).

When applying Evolutionary Product Development it is crucial to understand the history of the product in focus. Designers do not usually investigate

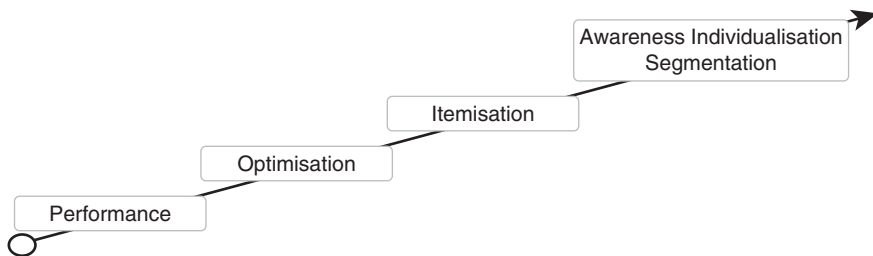


Figure F.2 The six product phases with the last three occurring simultaneously (Source: authors)

the development history of products, as this is a time-consuming activity normally reserved for economic historians or the like. In addition, traditional engineering and design courses lack embedding in the theoretical background of innovation studies required to recognize and interpret mechanisms and phenomena that shape the development history.

Given the aim to provide a method for mapping and extrapolating the development of products, a PhD research project was carried out entitled “Technological Innovation as an Evolutionary Process.” This produced a thesis entitled “Product Evolution” (Ehlhardt, 2016) that presents the Theory of Product Evolution and the Product Evolution Diagram. The Theory of Product Evolution describes how the process of variation, selection, and retention drives the accumulation of “know-how” (to make) and “know-what” (function to realize) to provide an explanation for the emergence of new (types of) products and their subsequent development over time into a family of more advanced versions.

Using analytical concepts from innovation studies, the product evolution diagram (PED) is proposed as a systematic approach for analyzing the development history of products. This method uses two elements. First, a tree diagram similar to the family tree known from biology is used to map a product’s development path. Second, a so-called PEST diagram is used to map the influences from the environment or ecosystem that affected the evolving product. A timeline reference connects the evolving product with the ecosystem. The Product Evolution Diagram is an analytical concept complementary to the product phases theory that is used as a guideline in new product development.

This book is intended for an audience of academics, students, design engineers, and others interested in new product development. It is an attempt to combine practical experiences from the field of new product development with theoretical insights from various academic schools of thought. The aim of this book is to provide a comprehensive answer to the question, “How do new products come about?” Besides this, it provides clues to the design direction of an evolutionary next version of products.

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