

PLUG AND PRAY



The Pitfalls of the D.I.Y. connected home
By Nick Bilton

For the first time in recent memory, I had to call tech support. It wasn't for my computer or my smartphone. It was for my house.

This summer, I had the bright idea to connect my home to the Internet. As anyone who has walked into a Home Depot recently can tell you, the future

has supposedly arrived. And it's called the Internet of Things. The idea is that all the gadgets and devices in our home – including light bulbs, security cameras, door locks, smoke alarms and thermostats – will be connected online and can be controlled wherever there is the Internet, such as on our smartphones. Did the babysitter lock herself out of the house? Did you leave the lights on? Forgot to lower the thermostat? No worries. The solution is a few screen taps away. So to join the future, I picked up dozens of so-called smart products with the mission to install them myself. These products are touted as “plug and play,” meaning they are supposed to just work. But as I soon learned, that could not be further from the truth. It took me the better part of a week to get these devices working. Some of them wouldn't find my wireless network, others wouldn't connect to my phone. Still others would give me indecipherable blinking red and yellow lights. So rather than you having to experience what I went through, let me walk you through some of the good, the bad and the downright abysmal devices I experimented with. The first thing I discovered is that these devices are not as simple to use as advertised. And while some gadgets are hard to set up, others take the simplest tasks and make them more difficult. That was my experience with the August



Smart Lock (\$195), which allows you to unlock your front door with a smartphone. The lock is pretty, but rather than making life easier, it took 10 times longer to unlock than if I had taken the key out my pocket and turned the lock. (August is announcing a new lock this week that is supposed to fix these problems.) My wife threatened to move to a hotel unless I changed it back. I had a similar experience with the Nest Thermostat (\$250). Sure, it's a beautiful piece of hardware, but something as simple as turning my air-conditioning off requires navigating a complex set of menus. So I resorted to turning the thermostat up to turn my A.C. off. But the “intelligent” thermostat interpreted my preferred temperature as 86 degrees, so my A.C. would turn off randomly, even when it was boiling. Some of the gadgets I tried seemed to be solutions looking for a problem. I'm talking about all those “smart” light bulbs, including Misfit Bolt and Philips Hue, that let you change colors from your phone. They are fun and easy to use, but I had a tough time figuring out what to do with those millions of colors, beyond creating an '80s disco party in my living room. That's not to say all these connected home devices are frustrating or useless. There were some I really liked. Lutron Caséta Wireless switches and plugs allow you to control your lights or other devices from your smartphone or the Apple Watch, even when you're not home. It was so simple to set up that I thought I had done

something wrong. When I saw these lights work for the first time, I realized why I had started this painful endeavor in the first place. Telling your phone, “Siri, turn off my lights,” is nothing short of magic. You can even turn your lights off when you're not home. Which leads me to one of my favorite gadgets in my connected home. The Ring (\$200) is a Wi-Fi-connected doorbell. When mine arrived, I installed it by the front door and then honestly forgot about it. A few hours later, when I was out, my phone dinged and I had a video chat with the U.P.S. deliveryman as I ate Thai food in a restaurant. This was one of those “I live in the future” moments. But this story doesn't have a happy ending. When I finally got all these gadgets connected to my wireless network, I sat back with pride, gleaming that I had figured it all out. And then a geek's worst nightmare happened: My wireless router broke. I had to methodically connect every gadget to my new router, again. But there's a lesson here. Maybe all these connected-home gadgets aren't ready for the home. And maybe this is a job that should be left to the professionals, like painting your house or rewiring your outlets. Which is exactly what I tried next. Next week I'll explain what happens when you have an expert connect your home to the Internet.

CALL SECURITY!

Unpacking three webcam options

Not long ago, home security video equipment was expensive, hard to install and even pricier to maintain. Now there are hundreds of security webcams that promise peace of mind for under \$200. While the three I tried out all offered crisp video and motion detection, each had a fatal flaw.

The Canary

What is it? A cylindrical device that records video, sound and has a built-in alarm
How much? \$249
Fatal flaw: The Canary worked perfectly until the night vision kicked in and sent me a security alert anytime a fly came within a few feet, which happened five to ten times a night.

Arlo

What is it? A wireless and weatherproof camera by Netgear
How much? \$149.99 for a two-pack
Fatal flaw: The Arlo cameras themselves worked nicely, but the app is terrible and some users have complained of short battery life in cold weather.

Nest Cam

What is it? Outdoor camera formerly known as DropCam, and now owned by Google
How much? \$205 each
Fatal flaw: Didn't work for me at all, at first. The company sent two replacements before one was able to connect to my WiFi, and the monthly fees will prove steep over the long haul — an additional \$3,000 over ten years.

