## What is feature creep and what are the causes?

A black watch with a black strap

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I bought this watch a couple of years ago. I bought it online and I really like the style, the shape, color, it’s a cool watch in my eyes. In their advertisement, they promoted this watch with its powerful functions, including dual time, timers, real-time temperature, alarm, it can even measure your body temperature. But I never used it, it’s still brand new in my drawer after years. The reason that stopped me from using it is, I don’t know how. I just need one function from this watch, time, but I couldn’t figure out how to adjust the time. In the beginning, I thought I would spend some time reading the manual and figuring out how to use it, but no, after years, it turned out I’d rather not wear it than read the manual to figure it out.

I like wearing watch, for me, it has two functions, one is for time, another is for decoration. Nowadays, people add more and more features to this small device, and I guess they are trying to make their product more competitive, but in reality, it makes their product totally useless to people like me.

This problem, adding more and more features to the product, is called “feature creep”. It’s a common problem often seen in production design and management. After the product has been available for a while, several factors would appear, pushing the company to add additional features to the product. These factors include:

* Existing customers like the product, but express a wish for more features.
* A competing company adds new features to its products, producing competitive pressures to match that offering, and to do even more to get ahead of the competition.
* Customers are satisfied, but sales are declining because the market is saturated. Time to add wonderful enhancements that will cause people to update.

A professor from Harvard named Youngme Moon wrote in her book “Different”: the attempt to match the competition that causes all products to be the same.

Many companies compare features with their competition to determine where they are weak, so they can strengthen those areas. A better strategy is to concentrate on areas where they are stronger and to strengthen them even more. Then, focus all marketing and advertisements to point out the strong points. The lesson is simply: don’t follow blindly; focus on strengths, not weaknesses. If the product has real strengths, it can afford to just be good enough in the other areas.

Good design requires stepping back from competitive pressures and ensuring that the entire product is consistent, coherent, and understandable. The best products come from ignoring these competing voices and instead focusing on the true needs of the people who use the product.

## A case of feature creep [Microsoft]

A computer screen shot of a computer

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 There are way too many options on the tab. Most people don’t know what any of those buttons do or will never use them, so it is completely unnecessary to have them showing as an option on the page. It also looks very complicated so it may turn of users even though Microsoft word is probably one of the easiest softwares out there. It would make the user uncomfortable as they would think that this would be tools that you have to use in order to have your work perfect but that is not the case, you don’t need 98% of these tools.

A screenshot of a computer

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Then the ribbon design makes the interface look nicer and cleaner.

## Inspiration for my own study.

Although the idea of feature creep is often used in product design and development, I feel it also gives me some inspiration for my own study and work.

For example, last year, when I was preparing for my comprehensive exam, I made a mistake. The requirement for each paper was a maximum of 20 pages, but I went way over, I wrote about 25 pages, and for one project, I even made nearly 50 pages. I was lucky; the committee was kind enough to gave me a chance to revise the paper. So I cut it down, I deleted lots of words. I found all the core content was still there. So I realized, I really had written a lot of unnecessary stuff.

Recently, I’m working on my thesis proposal, trying to think of a research plan that consists of three interconnected studies to answer one or two questions. I feel I’m having this feature creep issue all the time. Every time I read a paper and come across an interesting idea, I get a bit excited and I want to add it into my study. But the truth is that a single study can only answer one small question, even a who phd dissertation can only really tackle one or two specific questions. My master’s advisor always told me: if a study answers one question, that’s enough. And for a paper, you only need to make one to three key points clear.

In fact, keeping things simple is harder than making them complex. Simplicity means making choices, letting go of other options, and being very clear about what matters most.