

# Apple CarPlay: The good, the bad, and the what were they thinking?

CarPlay, for what it is, works nicely. It's incredibly limited in some really dumb ways, and it's very expensive. Should you buy it? We'll tell you right now: Probably not.

By [David Gewirtz](#) | May 3, 2018 -- 15:36 GMT (08:36 PDT) :: [Innovation](#) - ZDNet



Let's get this out of the way right at the start. I like having [CarPlay](#) in my car, but I absolutely can't recommend it. Don't buy it.

I had a [CarPlay](#) unit installed in my car about two weeks ago. I had it actually working for about three days. So, please, view this article more as a first-impressions article than as something based on a lot of road miles.

## WHAT IS CARPLAY?

Apple [describes CarPlay](#) as "your ultimate copilot." There is nothing ultimate about CarPlay. CarPlay is an interface to a [head unit](#) or in-dash entertainment system (what we used to call a car stereo).

It presents some of your iPhone's functions on a screen in your dash, plays some of your iPhone's sounds through your car's speakers, and listens to a car-mounted microphone for Siri instruction.

Believe it or not, the stand-out feature of CarPlay is Siri used with [Apple Maps](#). I know. Who would have thought, right?

I paid extra (more on that later) to have my steering wheel radio controls integrated with CarPlay. One such button, located on the back of the right side of my steering wheel, invokes Siri. You can also invoke Siri with "[Hey, Siri](#)," but more on that in the "bad" section of this article.

When you invoke Siri with the Siri button, you get the little multi-colored Siri prompt on the head unit's display. This became a standout to me when I said, "Navigate me to the nearest gas station," without taking my hands off the steering wheel, and Siri found a station, set up navigation, and directed me toward the precious liquid.

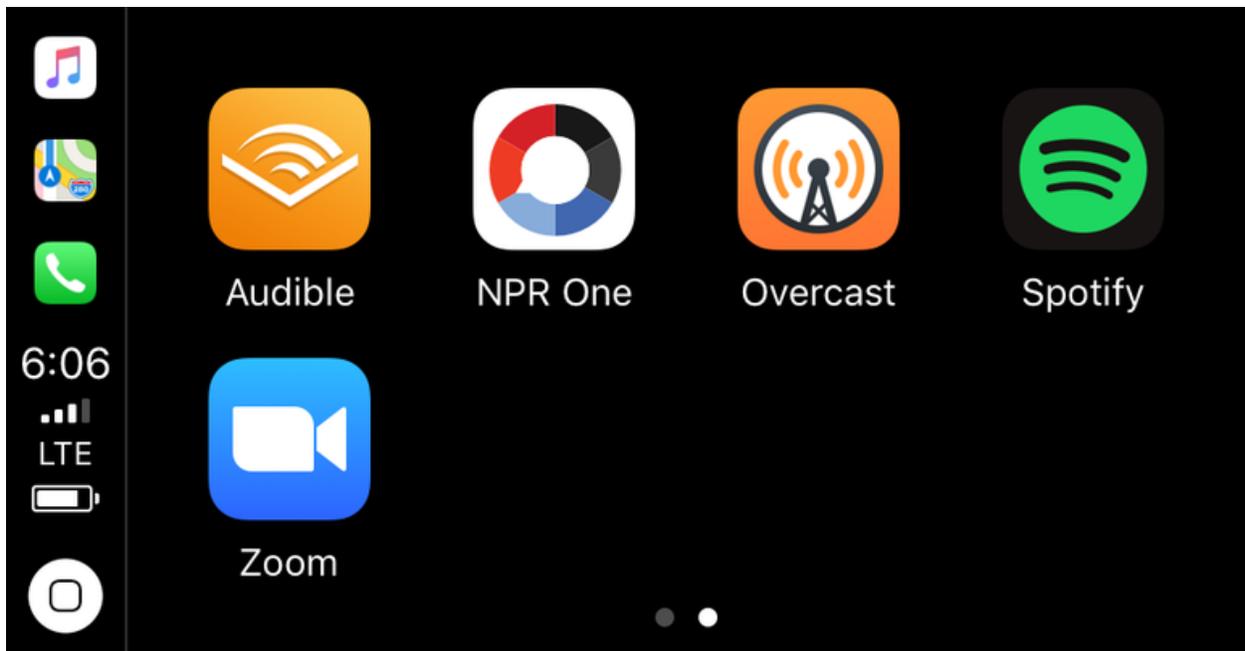
Yes, I know my iPhone could have done this, too. But I did not take my hands off the steering wheel or look away from the road. This, in fact (again with limits, oh, so many limits) is CarPlay's major strength. I've used CarPlay's hands-free navigation everywhere I've gone in the past few days, and it's actually pretty great. Unlike the nav unit

we used to go across the country, you don't have to type and wait. Just ask Siri, and she'll take you there.

Here's another great feature: Over the past few days, I've had several in-depth text message conversations that were actually urgent and needed to be handled while driving. I called up contacts from my Contacts app and had phone conversations. And I listened (again, with limitations) to Spotify.

Overall, I found the hands-free experience pleasant, safe, and surprisingly reliable. I sent quite a few dictated messages, and Siri read back her almost unerringly accurate interpretation of my voice dictation. A quick voice-prompted confirmation later, and I was able to send them through. I was also able to ask Siri to read me the latest message, and she did.

Once again, all this was without taking my hands off the wheel or my eyes off the road. This is important, not only for safety, but because Oregon has a [new hands-free law](#) that makes it illegal to hold or touch your electronic screens while driving.



A few of the very few apps available.

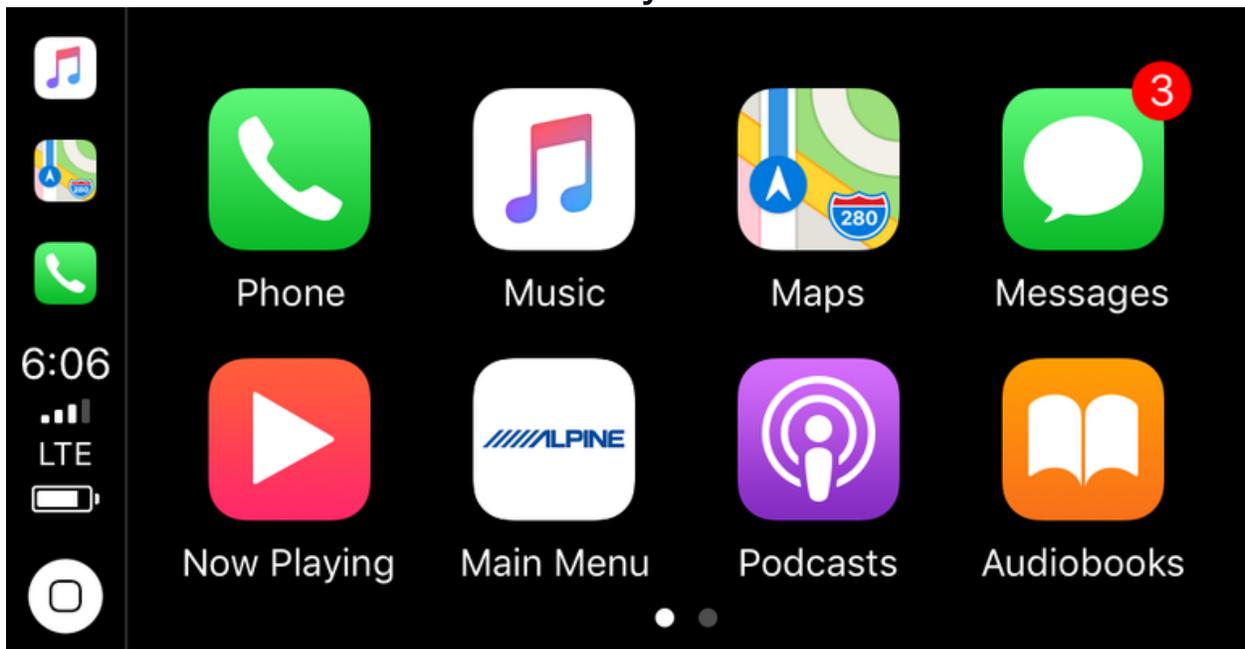
Beyond nav, texting, phone calls, and partial [Spotify support](#), CarPlay does have limited support for a few more applications. I will probably listen to the podcast application or Audible at some point, but I have not tested them yet.

## THE BAD

CarPlay is incredibly limited. It supports a few audio apps (radio station apps, podcast apps, and music player apps), but that's about it.

Even though there's a nice screen, [YouTube](#) (even with the car in park and the emergency break engaged) is simply not available, nor is any other video, including my purchased iTunes videos. If you think you're going to watch a quick tool show while your wife explores

Walgreens, you're out of luck. Just prop up your phone and do it the old fashioned way.



The main CarPlay apps. Note that the Now Playing icon just launches your most-recent music player.

Siri is even more limited. Siri works with Maps, iMessage, Phone, [Apple Music](#), the Apple podcast app, and that's about it. You can use Siri to launch and pause Spotify (my preferred streaming music service), but if you want an artist, album, or playlist, you have to select it by hand. You can do that from the head-unit's screen, but Siri won't help you make selections.

As for messaging apps, only iMessage need apply. While Apple pitches CarPlay as the ultimate copilot, there's no Slack, no Hangouts, or any other messaging app. So, if you're driving along and work wants to reach you with a non-iMessage app, you have to pull over to the side of the

road. None of the wonderful integration available for iMessage is provided for any other app.

I want to address safety versus commerce here. I fully understand how vendors need to carve out their own proprietary territories to try to achieve market dominance. But when it comes to driving, safety should come first. People need to use messaging services other than iMessage. For many of us with corporate affiliations, that's not an individual choice. We use what our organization uses. Period.

In the case of CarPlay, it's particularly odd. I usually understand Apple's all-Apple, only-Apple policy, except CarPlay itself is some sort of mutant Frankenstein's monster grafted on top of an otherwise mediocre head unit. If you're going to be a mutant and work with outside brands, why not make safety a top priority and support other messaging apps?



From a wonderful New Orleans Jazz playlist I found on Spotify.

I could say the same about other streaming music apps, but that's more convenience than necessity. It would be nice to have one music app that works on all our devices (and Spotify comes the closest). But you're not going to lose your job if you can't tell Siri to play [Preservation Hall Jazz Band](#) on Spotify.

Here's another weirdness: While CarPlay/Siri will read your [iMessage](#) messages without any fuss, it won't read your email messages. If you ask Siri via CarPlay to read your last email message, Siri responds that the iPhone needs to be unlocked first.

From a security point of view, that makes sense... except that I wear a security-code protected Apple Watch. If I've unlocked Watch security enough to let me [pay with Apple Pay](#), I should certainly be able to get my email from CarPlay Siri via my iPhone.

One last critique for this section is that "Hey Siri" is far more bug than feature. Pressing the Siri button on the back of the steering wheel or on the head unit (although touching the actual screen is technically illegal here in Oregon) works quite smoothly. But, if you say "Hey Siri," the CarPlay unit screen goes black for about a minute. All navigation just goes away.

Eventually, the Siri interface will pop up and listen for commands, but I had one instance where I had to pull

over, turn off the vehicle, and then start it back up to unfreeze CarPlay from a spoken "Hey Siri." That's not exactly what you want to have happen in a moving vehicle.

We haven't yet talked price, but the bottom line is that CarPlay is exceptionally limited (and still a little buggy). And when you add in the brain-numbing price, it's just not all that great for what it costs.

## **WHAT WERE THEY THINKING?**

CarPlay is a weird, mutant in-dash app released in 2014 that would have [Steve Jobs](#) rolling over in his grave. I know. That's harsh. But CarPlay is a mistake.

The best way to describe CarPlay is as a very limited, virtual iPhone running on someone else's hardware. I happen to be running CarPlay on an [Alpine iLX-107](#), but you can actually get CarPlay on decks from a bunch of aftermarket stereo suppliers, as well as built into the decks provided by many car companies.



CarPlay is just an app.

With my deck, if you want to listen to the radio (the actual car radio), you have to exit the CarPlay interface and control that in the regular Alpine UI. The Alpine UI also has some vehicle information and controls, but all that is outside the CarPlay interface. It's as if you're running Windows, but launch [Linux in a VM](#), and then, for some apps, you have to leave the VM and go back to Windows.

That CarPlay is basically an app on top of a bunch of random craptastic head unit interfaces is gob-smacking. There are two types of head units you can get with CarPlay. Most CarPlay units require you to physically

connect your phone to the CarPlay unit via a Lightning cable in order for the CarPlay functions to come alive.

Other than the reduction in clutter on your dashboard, there's really no good reason for CarPlay to exist. You can accomplish as much with an iPhone, an external mic, and an Aux port to the stereo.

Here's the usage experience for most CarPlay users: Get into the car. Find the iPhone. Plug the lightning cable into the iPhone. Find someplace to stash the iPhone. Start driving.

Think about it. How different is that from the usage experience for folks just using their iPhones without CarPlay? The folks without CarPlay also have to dig out their phone from a pocket or purse, plug it into a power port (if the phone has a low charge), and possibly plug it into the Aux input port of their stereo.

The vast majority of users who have CarPlay have to go through the plug/unplug process for every use. They might as well have just used their phone alone.

At this point, only [BMW cars](#) come with wireless CarPlay. VW [intends to provide it](#), too. The only aftermarket dash unit that supports wireless CarPlay is the Alpine iLX-107, so that's what I bought.

Wireless CarPlay itself is actually quite pleasant. I just get into the car with my phone in my pocket and then get comfortable. Once starting the car, the head unit boots up. After about 45 seconds, CarPlay connects to my phone via Wi-Fi and is available for use.

CarPlay apps show up on your CarPlay dash once you install them on the phone. But unlike the Apple Watch experience, which has its own app and app selection, the closest you get to controlling the CarPlay experience on your iPhone is a single Setup screen that lets you reorder the icons.

Fundamentally, CarPlay is the most convoluted, compromised, and poorly designed product I have seen from Apple in a long time. Given that Apple is the company that put [the charging port for its mouse on the bottom](#), that's saying a lot.

## **ALPINE ILX-107 EXPERIENCE**

This next section is specific to the install of my [Alpine iLX-107](#) unit. Some cars come with CarPlay already installed. If you buy one of those, some of this won't apply to you. Some aspects of this may apply to other vendors' head units, but since I've only installed one (and that's been enough), let's just focus on the Alpine.

Let's start with price. Getting this thing installed into my car, along with a backup camera, was monstrously

expensive. The iLX-107 cost about \$700, and the backup camera, all the wiring harnesses to make the head unit work with my car's electronics and steering wheel buttons, plus the labor, clocked in at \$750. Ouch!

Here's a moment of quick backstory to explain why I didn't just return this thing when I found out how expensive it would be to install.

When my wife and I (along with our little dog Pixel) [evacuated for Hurricane Irma](#) in September, we took our [Ford SUV](#). Given that the forecasts were basically promising Armageddon, we packed as much as we could into the SUV and locked my Dodge Challenger in our garage.

Once we decided we were going to set up a base camp in Oregon and see if we wanted to move here permanently, my wife flew back to Florida to pack up. We originally thought she was going to drive my Dodge from Florida to Oregon, so I ordered the iLX-107 unit from Amazon with the plan that a local installer in Palm Bay would put it in.

I thought it would work best with her phone, and would support the backup camera she wanted (the visibility in the Challenger makes it a challenge to park and back up). Since my car didn't have any kind of screen (it's old school), we needed to install something to get her a backup camera, and CarPlay seemed the way to go.



My head unit was a bit cluttered before I installed the CarPlay unit. As it turned out, the packing and prep in Florida was stressful and exhausting, so we decided it would be better for her to fly back here and ship the car. As a result, the iLX-107 arrived here in the moving pods and didn't get unpacked until recently. I can't tell you how glad I am that she didn't set out across the country with that CarPlay unit.

Altogether, putting CarPlay into my car was a gut-punching \$1,450. I regret this purchase and this expense. Unfortunately, by the time I found it in our boxes and then discovered how much it would cost to install the unit in my car, along with all the special wiring harness fiddles, it was too late to make a return.

Beyond the price, installation was something of a nightmare. I went to a local installer (part of a national chain) who had good [Yelp reviews](#). It sold Kenwood CarPlay units, but it had never seen wireless CarPlay.

After dropping my car off and waiting overnight, I took delivery of the installation the next day. It took quite a few tries to get my phone to bond with the CarPlay unit. If you think about how smooth and [easy EarPods are to sync](#), CarPlay is the opposite. It took about 40 minutes in the parking lot just to get my phone to connect.

Then, of all the steering wheel controls, only the Siri button and volume controls worked. The phone buttons did not. When I went back into the store to ask them to fix it, I was given something of a hard time about how the wiring harness wouldn't work with this model.

I can be... persuasive... so eventually they brought the car back in, and got those buttons to work.

I drove the car home, only to discover that the turn-by-turn voice of Siri didn't work. Instead of hearing Siri, there was silence. If I was playing a song, the song volume would drop at the point you'd expect Siri to say something, but there was no voice.

It wasn't that Siri didn't work -- because Siri spoke up for herself quite nicely for all the other functions, just not for

navigation. I am not the only person who was experiencing this problem. A web search on the topic turned up a ton of folks with [similar problems](#), along with a [bunch of folk remedies](#).

I did definitively find out how to fix the problem. I called Alpine tech support, who told me I had to tell the installer that, and I quote, "If you have a Dodge, the front and rear speaker inputs need to be switched." Did Alpine offer a tech note, knowledge-base article, or any documentation on this fix to show an installer? Heck no. Why make it easy?

My installer rightly thought I was crazy. The inputs are color coded, so switching the inputs seemed like a sure way to simply fry an overpriced piece of electronics. We spent two hours on this issue at my third visit to the store. We went over every setting on my phone. Every setting on the installer's phone. We hooked up the USB connection to bypass the wireless connection. Nothing worked.

Eventually, I convinced the installer to call Alpine, who told my tech to switch the speaker inputs. He did, and it now works. Sometimes you have to stick up for what you want, be persuasive, and be willing to put in the time and multiple trips to get something done.

I just wish it wasn't so often. But that's [another story](#).

## SHOULD YOU BUY THIS THING?

Oh, hell no. If you want to fully integrate it into your car, and you use an installer, the price is so far over what it's worth it's almost nauseating.

If you install it yourself and you don't buy add-on wiring harnesses, there are cheaper wired CarPlay units. Then again, if you have to plug your phone into your car to use CarPlay, you might as well just plug your phone into your car and save the money on CarPlay.

If your car comes with CarPlay, definitely use it. For what it does, I've found it quite pleasant, and my wife is quite comforted by the backup camera. I do enjoy using CarPlay. I enjoy the new sleekness of my dashboard without a phone mount.

Now that I've told you my CarPlay story, I'm going to try not to think about how much it costs, how poorly integrated the CarPlay app is to the rest of the head unit, and how amazing something like this could have been if [Apple](#) hadn't just phoned it in. I'm going to try to use it and enjoy it for what it is, and let myself feel good about giving my favorite muscle car a new toy.

Do you have CarPlay? What's your opinion of it? Let us know in the TalkBacks below.

original article:

<https://www.zdnet.com/article/apple-carplay-the-good-the-bad-and-the-what-were-they-thinking/?ftag=TRE-03-10aaa6b&bhid=23405847687286447375579737817622>