EPISODE #78

Zigbee vs. Matter: Is Your Smart Home Already Obsolete?

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EPISODE SYNOPSIS

In this episode of My Weird Prompts, brothers Herman and Corn Poppleberry dive into the messy world of smart home protocols. Inspired by their housemate Daniel's recent dive into Zigbee and Home Assistant, the duo debates whether local control is worth the technical headache. From the interference issues of the 2.4GHz band to the looming shadow of the new Matter standard, they explore whether Zigbee is a solid foundation or a fading relic. Plus, a skeptical caller from Ohio reminds us all why sometimes a simple light switch is hard to beat.

DANIEL'S PROMPT

Daniel

Let's talk about smart home automation. I recently became a smart home renter and have started using Home Assistant and Zigbee. I prefer the local control of Zigbee over cloud-based systems, which I see as a privacy disaster. However, Zigbee isn't the only standard out there; there's also Z-Wave and Matter. Given that my investment in smart home tech is long-term, I'm wondering if Zigbee will stick around. Is it still a good protocol to base a smart home around, or are we going to see a shift toward these other standards?

TRANSCRIPT

Corn

Welcome to My Weird Prompts! I am Corn, and I am here with my brother, Herman Poppleberry. We are coming to you from our living room here in Jerusalem. It is a bit of a mess today because our housemate, Daniel, has been tinkering with some gadgets. He actually sent us today's prompt based on some of his recent frustrations. He has become a bit of a smart home renter lately, and he is diving deep into the world of Home Assistant and Zigbee.

Herman

It is about time someone in this house took an interest in local control. I am Herman Poppleberry, by the way. And yes, as a donkey who appreciates a well-ordered stable, I find the current state of smart home technology both fascinating and deeply flawed. Daniel is asking a very important question. He has invested in Zigbee because he hates the idea of his light bulbs talking to a cloud server in another country just to turn on, but he is worried he might be backing the wrong horse. He wants to know if Zigbee is a dead end or a solid foundation.

Corn

I have to be honest, Herman. As a sloth, my main goal with a smart home is just to not have to move. If I can tell a speaker to turn off the kitchen light so I do not have to climb down from the couch, I am happy. I do not really care if the signal goes to the moon and back as long as it works. Is the privacy stuff really that big of a deal for the average person?

Herman

Corn, that is exactly the kind of complacency that leads to data leaks. When you use a cloud-based bulb, you are essentially letting a corporation know your daily rhythm. They know when you wake up, when you are home, and when you are sleeping. Zigbee keeps all that data inside these four walls. It is a local mesh network. But to Daniel's point, we have these new players like Matter and Thread entering the scene, and Z-Wave has been the old reliable for years.

Corn

Okay, so let us break this down for people like me. Zigbee is what Daniel is using now. It is a wireless language for gadgets, right? Like Bluetooth but better for long distances because the devices talk to each other?

Herman

Exactly. It is a mesh network. If your hub is in the living room and you have a smart plug in the kitchen, a light bulb in the hallway can act as a repeater, passing the signal along. It is efficient and uses very little power. But here is the catch, and this is where I think Daniel is right to be nervous. Zigbee operates on the two point four gigahertz frequency. Do you know what else lives there, Corn?

Corn

My microwave? The Wi-Fi?

Herman

Precisely. It is a crowded neighborhood. If your Wi-Fi is shouting, your Zigbee light bulbs might have a hard time hearing the hub. Now, compare that to Z-Wave. Z-Wave operates on a much lower frequency, around nine hundred megahertz in the United States. It does not deal with that interference. It is like having a private road instead of trying to ride a bicycle on a highway.

Corn

So why did Daniel pick Zigbee then? If Z-Wave is a private road, why bother with the crowded highway?

Herman

Cost and variety, Corn. Zigbee is an open standard. Anyone can make a Zigbee device without paying massive licensing fees. That is why you can buy those super cheap sensors from overseas that work perfectly with Home Assistant. Z-Wave is a proprietary standard owned by a company called Silicon Labs. They keep a tight grip on it. Every Z-Wave device has to be certified, which makes them more expensive.

Corn

I do not know, Herman. I think you are overstating the interference thing. I have used Zigbee stuff before and it seemed fine. I feel like you are being a bit of a tech snob here. Most people just want the cheap stuff that works. If I can get four Zigbee sensors for the price of one Z-Wave sensor, I am going with Zigbee every time.

Herman

It works until it does not, Corn! That is the problem with your relaxed approach. You wait until the network crashes to care. But let us look at the bigger threat to Zigbee, which is Matter. Have you heard the buzz about Matter?

Corn

I have heard the name. It sounds like something from a physics textbook. Is it a new type of plug?

Herman

No, it is a new language that everyone agreed on. Apple, Google, Amazon, and Samsung all sat down and said, okay, let us stop making this so hard for consumers. Matter is built on top of something called Thread. And here is the kicker for Daniel: Thread is very similar to Zigbee. In fact, they use the same radio hardware.

Corn

So if they use the same hardware, does that mean Zigbee is safe? Or does it mean it is about to be replaced?

Herman

That is the multi-million dollar question. Many people argue that Zigbee is the predecessor to Thread. Thread is basically Zigbee but with internet protocol built in. It makes it easier for devices to talk to the internet and each other without a complicated bridge. I suspect that in five years, we will see fewer new Zigbee devices and more Thread devices.

Corn

Wait, I do not agree with that timeline. You are assuming manufacturers are just going to abandon Zigbee. But look at how many millions of Zigbee devices are out there right now. IKEA uses it. Philips Hue uses it. Amazon Echo devices have Zigbee hubs built into them. You can't just turn that off overnight.

Herman

I am not saying it disappears overnight, but look at the momentum. If you are a company like IKEA, why would you keep developing for Zigbee when Matter and Thread give you instant compatibility with Apple HomeKit and Google Home without any extra effort? It is about the path of least resistance.

Corn

But Daniel is using Home Assistant. That is the whole point of his setup. Home Assistant users love Zigbee because it is mature. Matter is still, frankly, a bit of a mess. I have read the forums, Herman. People are having all sorts of trouble getting Matter devices to stay connected. Zigbee is like a reliable old truck. Matter is like a flashy electric car that is still in beta testing.

Herman

That is a fair point. Matter has had a rocky start. The promise was "it just works," but the reality has been "it works if you have the right version of the right app on the right Tuesday." However, we cannot ignore where the industry is pouring its money. No one is putting billions into new Zigbee development. The money is in Matter.

Corn

Let us take a quick break for our sponsors. Larry: Are you tired of your walls just sitting there, doing nothing? Introducing The Wall Whisperer. It is a revolutionary bio-acoustic adhesive patch that you stick to any vertical surface. Using proprietary vibrations, The Wall Whisperer claims to absorb the ambient stress of your household and convert it into a low-frequency hum that helps your houseplants grow up to three percent faster. Is it science? Is it magic? It is a patch you put on your wall. No batteries required, because it feeds on your home's natural static electricity. Warning: may cause your wallpaper to peel or attract local owls. The Wall Whisperer - give your drywall a soul. BUY NOW!

Corn

Thanks, Larry. I think. I am not sure I want to attract owls to the living room. Anyway, back to smart homes. Herman, you were saying that the money is moving toward Matter, but I still think Zigbee has a long life ahead of it, especially for people like Daniel who are renting.

Herman

Why do you say renting makes a difference?

Corn

Because when you rent, you want things that are easy to set up and take with you. Zigbee sticks like the Sonoff or the ConBee are cheap. You plug them into a Raspberry Pi, and you have a whole ecosystem. If Daniel moves to a new apartment in Jerusalem next year, he just packs his bulbs and his Pi, and he is good to go. Matter often requires these specific Border Routers that can be tied to specific ecosystems. It feels less portable to me.

Herman

I actually disagree on the portability. The whole goal of Matter is that the ecosystem does not matter. You could have an Apple HomePod acting as your Border Router in one house, and a Google Nest in the next, and your Matter-over-Thread bulbs should move over seamlessly. That is the theory, anyway. But let us talk about the privacy aspect Daniel mentioned. He likes Zigbee because it is local. Matter can be local too, but there is a lot of confusion there.

Corn

Right, because Matter can run over Wi-Fi or Thread. If it is running over Wi-Fi, isn't it just as "cloudy" as the old stuff?

Herman

Not necessarily. Matter is designed to work locally on your network. Even if your internet goes out, your Matter devices should still talk to each other. But Daniel's concern about a "privacy disaster" is valid. With Zigbee, there is no physical way for that light bulb to talk to a server in China unless your hub specifically facilitates it. With Wi-Fi devices, they have a direct line to your router.

Corn

See, that is why I think Zigbee wins for the paranoid. It is physically isolated. You need a translator, a bridge, to get that data out. If you trust your bridge, you trust your network.

Herman

But look at the hardware, Corn. If you go to the store today to buy a smart sensor, you are seeing fewer things with the Zigbee logo and more things that say "Works with Matter." For a guy like Daniel who is thinking long-term, is he going to be able to buy a replacement Zigbee motion sensor in ten years? I honestly don't think so. I think Z-Wave has a better chance of surviving as a niche professional standard than Zigbee does as a consumer standard.

Corn

Wait, why Z-Wave? You said it was more expensive.

Herman

Because Z-Wave is the gold standard for security and reliability in professional installations. High-end home theaters and luxury condos use Z-Wave because it just works. It does not fight with the Wi-Fi. It has a longer range. Zigbee is stuck in the middle. It is being squeezed by cheap Wi-Fi chips on the bottom and Matter/Thread on the top.

Corn

I do not know, Herman. You are being very pessimistic about Zigbee. I think it is the Linux of smart home protocols. It might not be the most popular at the big box stores, but the community is so strong that it will be supported forever. Home Assistant's Zigbee integration is incredible.

Herman

It is incredible because we have had fifteen years to perfect it! Matter has had two. You are comparing a mature adult to a toddler. But the toddler is going to grow up and eventually be stronger.

Corn

Alright, we have got a caller on the line. Let us see what the world thinks. Jim, you are on the air. Jim: Yeah, this is Jim from Ohio. I have been listening to you two flap your gums about Zigbee and Zag-bee and whatever else you call it. It is all a bunch of nonsense. You know what I have in my house? I have a light switch. You walk over to the wall, you flip the little plastic lever, and the light turns on. It has a one hundred percent success rate. My neighbor, Greg, he got one of those smart locks. Last week he was standing on his porch in the rain for twenty minutes because his "protocol" decided to update.

Herman

Well, Jim, I think there is a middle ground. Smart home tech isn't just about being lazy, it can be about energy efficiency or security. Jim: Efficiency? I will tell you about efficiency. I turned off the furnace this morning because it hit fifty degrees in Ohio, and that is T-shirt weather. Now my wife is complaining she is cold, but she can just put on a sweater. Anyway, my point is, you guys are worried about whether this stuff will work in ten years. It barely works now! Why would I want a light bulb that needs a software update? It is a light bulb! It should just glow until it dies, then you throw it in the trash and get another one.

Corn

I hear you, Jim. There is definitely a simplicity that we lose when we add all these layers. But don't you think there's any value in, say, having your lights turn on automatically if a smoke detector goes off? Jim: If my smoke detector goes off, I am going to hear it. It is loud. It makes a screeching sound that could wake the dead. I do not need the kitchen light to turn blue to tell me my toast is burning. You people are solving problems that do not exist. Also, the post office lost my magazine subscription again. Third time this year. I am about ready to go down there and give them a piece of my mind.

Herman

We appreciate the perspective, Jim. It is a good reminder that for a lot of people, the "dumb" version of a home is the most reliable one. Jim: You bet it is. Call me when your light bulbs can shovel the driveway. Until then, I am sticking to my switches. Goodbye.

Corn

Thanks for calling, Jim. He is not entirely wrong, Herman. We do spend a lot of time worrying about these protocols for things that used to be very simple.

Herman

He is wrong about the "solving problems that do not exist" part, though. For people with mobility issues, or for people trying to manage complex heating systems in old houses like we have here in Jerusalem, automation is a godsend. But back to Daniel's question. If he is starting today with Zigbee, is he making a mistake?

Corn

I say no. I think he is making the smartest move for right now. Even if Zigbee stops being the "it" thing in five years, his current devices aren't going to stop working. That is the beauty of local control. As long as his Home Assistant server is running, those bulbs will turn on.

Herman

I agree with that part. The longevity of a local system is much higher than a cloud system. If a cloud company goes bankrupt, your devices are paperweights. If the Zigbee Alliance dissolved tomorrow, Daniel's lights would still work. However, I would advise him to make sure his hardware is "Thread-ready."

Corn

What does that mean?

Herman

Many of the new Zigbee chips, like the one in the SkyConnect or the newer Sonoff sticks, are capable of running Thread with a firmware update. So, if Daniel is buying a hub today, he should buy one that can handle both. That way, he is not locked into a dying standard. He can have his Zigbee cake and eat his Thread... well, whatever the metaphor is.

Corn

Eat his Thread pudding? That sounds uncomfortable. But I see your point. Buy hardware that has a foot in both worlds. But I still want to push back on the Zigbee-is-dying narrative. I think we are going to see a "Zigbee Pro" or something similar that keeps it relevant. There are billions of dollars of industrial equipment running on Zigbee. Warehouse sensors, streetlights, hospital equipment. That stuff does not just get replaced because Apple decided to make a new app.

Herman

Industrial is different from consumer, Corn. We are talking about Daniel's apartment. In the consumer space, the "Matter" logo is going to be the only thing people look for at the hardware store. If Zigbee wants to survive, it has to become invisible. It has to be the plumbing that Matter runs on.

Corn

But that is exactly what is happening! Matter can use Zigbee bridges. So Daniel can keep all his Zigbee stuff and just get a bridge that exposes them to Matter. Then he can use all the new fancy Matter gadgets alongside his old reliable Zigbee stuff. It is not an either-or situation.

Herman

It is if you are trying to avoid bridges. The whole point of Daniel's setup was to simplify. Adding a bridge to a bridge to a bridge is how you end up like Greg, standing in the rain while your front door reboots. My advice for Daniel is this: stick with Zigbee for now because the devices are cheap and the software is mature. But do not buy any more "expensive" Zigbee stuff. If you are going to spend more than thirty dollars on a device, make sure it supports Matter over Thread.

Corn

I think that is a bit too cautious, Herman. I would say, buy whatever works with Home Assistant today. The community will always find a way to make it work. If you find a great deal on a Zigbee light strip, buy it. The "future-proofing" game is a trap. You spend all your time waiting for the perfect standard and you never actually get your lights to turn on.

Herman

It is not a trap, it is responsible planning! You are just saying that because you do not want to read the technical documentation.

Corn

I do not want to read it because I have you to read it for me! That is the brotherly synergy we have. You read the manuals, I tell you when you are being too intense.

Herman

Well, I think we have given Daniel a lot to think about. To summarize: Zigbee is fantastic for local control and privacy right now. It is mature, it is affordable, and with Home Assistant, it is incredibly powerful. But, the industry is moving toward Matter and Thread.

Corn

And I will summarize my side: stop worrying about the industry. The industry wants you to buy new stuff every two years. Zigbee is the "old reliable" and it will be around as long as people value privacy and local control. Do not let the "Matter" hype train make you feel like your gear is obsolete.

Herman

It is not a hype train if it is actually being implemented by every major tech company on earth, Corn.

Corn

We will see. Give it another two years and let us see if Jim from Ohio is still flipping his plastic switches or if he is finally using a Matter-certified smart hammer.

Herman

I think we know the answer to that. Jim is never changing.

Corn

Honestly, I respect him for it. There is something to be said for a system that never needs a firmware update. But for the rest of us, especially Daniel, I think his Zigbee journey is a good one. He is learning the ropes of local control, and that knowledge will transfer to whatever comes next.

Herman

That is true. Once you understand how a mesh network functions, whether it is Zigbee, Z-Wave, or Thread, you are ahead of ninety-nine percent of consumers. You are the master of your own digital domain.

Corn

Just make sure your digital domain doesn't attract any owls, according to Larry.

Herman

Yes, please avoid the bio-acoustic wall patches.

Corn

Well, that is our show for today. Thank you to Daniel for the prompt and for not kicking us out of the house while we talk about him. You can find "My Weird Prompts" on Spotify and everywhere else you get your podcasts.

Herman

And if you have a niche technical disagreement you want us to settle, or if you just want to complain about your neighbors like Jim, send us a prompt. We will dive into the weeds so you don't have to.

Corn

I am Corn.

Herman

And I am Herman Poppleberry.

Corn

We will catch you next time. Stay smart, stay local, and keep your switches simple.

Herman

Or complex, if you prefer. Just make sure you have a backup. Goodbye