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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

When the Geeks Get Snide

Computer Slang Scoffs at Wetware (the Humans)

By MICHIKO KAKUTANI

As couch potatoes become "mouse potatoes," as teenagers become "screenagers," the once lowly geek has become a cultural icon, studied by the fashionistas of Seventh Avenue and the Nasdaq watchers of Wall Street alike. And as geek chic takes hold of the technology-obsessed culture, geek-speak seeps into everyday language.

Most people now know that "viruses" aren't just germs spread from person to person but malicious programs that can spread overnight from one computer to millions of others around the world. "Spam" is no longer a ham product but a form of computer junk-mail; "toast" refers not to a breakfast choice but to a state of being dead or burned out; and "cookies" aren't fattening, chocolate-chip-studded snacks but tiny files containing information about our computers that can be used by advertisers to track users' online interests and tastes.

Earlier technological developments left their mark on the language. The railroads gave rise to expressions like "going off the rails" and "getting sidetracked"; the steam engine produced "working up a head of steam" and "full steam ahead"; and the automobile left us with "pedal to the metal," "firing on all cylinders" and "eatin' concrete." Not surprisingly, phrases generated by the computer age tend to be more sardonic and pejorative. "Blamestorming" refers to group discussions devoted to the assignment of blame; the acronym "kiss" means "keep it simple stupid"; and "ego-surfing" alludes to Internet searches for one's own name.

So what does cyberslang say about the digerati and the brave new world? As collections of slang found in books like "Jargon Watch" (assembled by Gareth Branwyn), The New Hacker's Dictionary (compiled by Eric S. Raymond) and "Cyberspeak" (by Andy Ihnatko), as well as a host of online slang sites (most notably The Microsoft Lexicon, Netlingo and The Ultimate Silicon Valley Slang Page) readily attest, geek-speak conjures up a chilly, utilitarian world in which people are equated with machines and social Darwinism rules.

Cyberland has been heavily influenced by pop culture and it boasts its share of counterculture phrases drawn from comic books, children's stories, sci-fi movies and New Age movements. "Deep magic" (meaning "an awesomely arcane technique central to a program or system") comes from C. S. Lewis's "Narnia" books; the online abbreviation TTFN (meaning "ta-ta for now") comes from "Winnie the Pooh"; and "fear and loathing" (meaning the state of mind "inspired by the prospect of dealing with certain real-world systems and standards that are totally brain-damaged but ubiquitous") comes, of course, from Hunter S. Thompson.

A SLANG SAMPLER

domainist: someone who judges people by the domain of their e-mail addresses; esp. someone who dismisses anyone who posts from a public internet provider, like aol.com

the five and dime: refers to American telephone area code 510. It covers the east from San Francisco Bay area, most notably Oakland and Berkeley, and is commonly used by telco and telecom workers.

granular: generally, and rather peculiarly, used in tandem with the verb "to get," as in "We need to get granular on this issue," meaning to examine the fine details.

idea hamsters: people who always seem to have their idea generators running. "That guy's a real idea hamster. Give him a raw concept and he'll turn it over 'til he comes up with something useful."

devolve: (after Dr. Jack Kevorkian) to kill something. "Look, devolve that project and let's go out for a beer," or "I read half the article, got bored and kevorked it."

kubris: an extreme form of arrogance found in multimedia auteurs who think they're Stanley Kubrick.

low-hanging fruit: the simplest, most readily solvable issues or objectives.

PANS: pretty amazing new stuff

Sources: The New Hacker's Dictionary, third edition (M.I.T. Press); the Ultimate Silicon Valley Slang Page (www.sabram.com/site/slang.html); The Microsoft Lexicon (www.udel.edu/elrw-4/language/mslex.html); "Jargon Watch" (Hardwired); "Cyberspeak: An Online Dictionary" (Random House)
E-mail abbreviations like "4-ever" and "2B or not 2B" sound like outtakes from a Prince song, while emoticons (those sideways smiley faces like :-) used to indicate a user's feelings) summon visions of Hello-Kitty lunchboxes.

But for all its playful love of puns and cool disdain for "suits," the high-tech world is, at heart, a cruel, unforgiving place ruled by the merciless dynamics of the marketplace. There are multiple terms for success (including "winnage," "winnitude," having an "Elvis year," being "golden" or "on velvet") and an equally large number of terms for failure ("lossage," "lossity," "Big Lose") and stupidity. As the former Wired writer Paulina Borsook points out in her new book "Cyberselfish," the digital community is increasingly a world that mirrors our "winner-take-all, casino society," a community that projects the attitude "I've got mine (or certainly intend to if the bureaucrats don't get in my way)," so you don't matter.

In the looking glass world of high tech, writers and artists are known as "content providers," and a "showstopper" refers not to a thrilling tour de force but, as The Microsoft Lexicon notes, to "a function, object or issue important enough to jeopardize a ship date or schedule" -- in other words, "a really big bug." "Evil" doesn't have a moral connotation in cyberland but indicates something "sufficiently mal-designed as to be not worth the bother of dealing with." And "elite" suggests something pirated or stolen.

A world with an acronym for `Fear, Uncertainty and Doubt."

Cyberland's politics are libertarian, as Ms. Borsook observes; and its presiding muse is Ayn Rand. This is a world with an acronym for "Fear, Uncertainty and Doubt" (FUD) and another for "Waste of Money, Brains and Time" (Wombat), a Nietzschean world in which leaders are known as "wizards" or "net.gods," and followers are dismissed as "sheeple." Calling someone a "404" (from the World Wide Web error message, "404 Not Found") means he is clueless or has a high "bozon count," while accusing him of being a "BDU" means he's a "Big Dumb User."

What venerated "alpha geeks" and lowly "smurfs" share is a tendency to talk about people as if they were machines. To be "uninstalled" means being fired or dismissed, whereas a "plug-and-play" refers to a new employee who fits in without any additional training. Doing a "bit flip" means undergoing a disturbing personality change; indulging in "nonlinear behavior" (NLB) means acting irrationally; possessing huge "bandwidth" means having lots of talent or brains.

A "bio-break" refers to a trip to the bathroom, and "client/server action" refers to sex. Stress puppies "ramp up" to cope with added work and "batmobile" -- by putting up defensive emotional shields -- when threatened with unwanted intimacy.

Such language tends to ratify the unflattering stereotype of the computer geek, described in The New Hacker's Dictionary as "withdrawn, relationally incompetent, sexually frustrated and desperately unhappy when not submerged in his or her craft." And while that book's editor, Eric Raymond, observes that such stereotypes are "far less common than mainstream folklore" would have it, he adds that "hackers have relatively little ability to identify emotionally with other people," so accustomed are they to spending hours and hours at the computer keyboard.

It is a view echoed by Ms. Borsook, who writes that techies are uncomfortable "with squishy stuff and the intangible and that which can't be reduced to formulae" or programs.

Indeed geek-speak is flush with disparaging or defensive references to the real world and flesh-and-blood human beings. The nonvirtual world, so much messier than the one on line, is derogatorily referred to as a "carbon community" or "meatspace." Individuals who aren't online are shrugged off as PONA's ("persons of no account"); printed magazines and newspapers, as "treeware" or "dead tree editions." "Analog" is an adjective used to refer to things in the "real world" (defined in "Cyberspeak," as "that which cannot be accessed via a keyboard"), but it's also used to describe things that are sloppy or graceless.

For geeks who prefer "text sex" to physical encounters, e-mail to "facemail," e-commerce to "bricks and mortar" shopping, the human body is nothing but "wetware" -- a fragile, inefficient alternative to the shiny hardware of their computers.

This outlook, Mark Dery notes in his book "Escape Velocity," is reflected in those cyberpunk stories in which the human mind is downloaded into computers and thus liberated from "meat-jail," and cyborgs herald a future in which the body is redefined as a "warmblooded machine."

This cybertopian world would eliminate "PEBCAK" (tech support shorthand for "Problem Exists Between Chair And Keyboard"), but then it would also eliminate "meatbots" -- or human beings, as they are still currently known.