Cites & Insights

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Bibs & Blather

Where Do We Go From Here?

On one hand, it's one of the great songs from "Once More, with Feeling," the great all-original musical episode of *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer*. On the other, it's an appropriate question for *Cites & Insights*, where "we" refers to you, the readers, me, the editor/writer/publisher—and unknown sponsors real or imaginary.

All of the issues published this year have been heavy on long essays, light on shorter features. (The January 2011 issue, which has seven relatively short sections, was actually published in December 2010.) In every case, I felt that the long essay was worthwhile, and for most issues, readership in the first two or three months seemed to be solid, indicating that I was reaching an audience. During that time, I was still discussing a possible sponsorship, one that would put *C&I*'s future on a more even keel.

Two things happened in April 2011. One is that the discussions moved in a different direction, one that apparently will *not* yield sponsorship for *Cites & Insights*. The other is that an essay I had high hopes for, and one that was much more timely than is typical for *C&I*, was downloaded less often than is usual—and was entirely ignored by the online community (that is, neither linked from nor mentioned by bloggers and others).

I asked readers to comment on that essay—to let me know what the problem was. I received three or four responses, largely along two lines: This particular issue had been talked to death already (although discussion continues)—and readers didn't look to *C&I* for timeliness.

The more interesting question, then, is what—if anything—should I do about the future of this publication. Does the lack of respons mean that it's run its course? Should I be adopting different strategies?

Here's what I had to say in *Walt at Random*:

> I've been pondering a revamp that would make C&I "web-first" in some ways: That is, essays would be prepared (still using Word) using a template tuned for the web, with HTML versions posted after they're edited—possibly (possibly?) even on a rolling basis before an issue is complete. I might even make essays or the issue as a whole available in ePub format, if future conversions work out better than in the past.

> The canonical C&I would still be the PDF, I think, and it would still be designed to be space-efficient in printed form. I say "canonical" because copyfitting could result in some words and, occasionally, sections of composite essays being changed or removed to achieve the almost-exactly-to-the-end-of-an-even-number-of-pages goal.

> If I do all this, which would involve some deliberate effort, I might also do one other thing to make C&I more web-native: Adopt a new CC license, dropping the "-NC" so that the only requirement is attribution.

Inside This Issue

> If I had new sponsorship–or thought I could successfully adopt a "by the issue" sponsorship/ad model that would yield, say, $5,000/year in revenue–I'd be encouraged to make this package of changes and refresh *C&I*'s overall design in the process. I'm also wondering whether it's worth trying a Kickstarter approach to pay for the next, say, 18 months of *C&I*...

> I've never used public numbers for what I'm actually looking for in *C&I* sponsorship. Here's a possible set, more modest than I'd like, but hey:

To underwrite a single issue without explicit advertising and without a sponsorship line on the home page (but with sponsorship noted on the first and last page of each issue and the closing paragraph of each HTML essay): $400. For a full year of such underwriting: $4,000.

With explicit advertising–up to a full page in the PDF issue, up to a text paragraph in the HTML: $600. For a full year, $6,000.

C&I home page sponsorship–with a credit line and possibly banner, but without actual issue underwriting: $250/month or $2,500/year

Home page and issue underwriting without display ads but with other forms of credit (the ideal): $500 for an issue, $5,000 for the year. For all of this and ads in the issues: $700 for an issue, $7,000 for the year.

All of these are negotiable. If I go the Kickstarter route (and am accepted, and achieve the goal), those who provided high donations would be the sponsors, and there would be no advertising.

Thoughts? Responses? Should I just let *C&I* dwindle off to nothingness…(that is, would I add more value to the field by spending my time with the Friends group bookstore–just as I'd certainly add more value to our household budget by spending that time greeting people at the local Walmart, if I was willing to do that…)

In a followup essay I added another possibility:

I could also do an ePub version of *Cites & Insights*. It looks as though, if I turn off page headers and footers (and, of course, switch to a single column), Calibre does a plausible job of converting Word's "simple HTML" output to ePub–not perfect, but not terrible.

And there are two other possibilities, based on additional feedback:

➢ I could write individual blog posts publicizing each essay separately—and, possibly, blog posts publicizing linked essays from previous issues.
➢ I could convert C&I into a blog—that is, treat each article as a post. I'm not inclined to do this, but could be persuaded if I believed it would yield considerably more readership or some level of financial return.

Next Steps

This issue includes six relatively short sections and no Grand Essays. It is, to a great extent, a catchup issue while I consider future possibilities.

It's also a two-month issue, to give myself breathing space: Time to focus on the first of two book projects and to see what's feasible for the future. If I believe a Kickstarter approach is plausible and my proposal's accepted, that's time to do the appeal, see the results and, if positive, revamp my writing and production process to follow a Web-first model. (One problem with using Kickstarter is the psychological effect of trying it out and not only failing to achieve the required support level but failing *badly*.)

Some group could also come forward to sponsor *Cites & Insights*, which still does seem to have a strong readership, with essays continuing to show growth in readership over time. Through April 15, 2011, every issue published before 2010 had at least 1,000 cumulative PDF downloads (as did one 2011 issue and four 2010 issues) and all but two issues published before 2009 had more than 2,000 cumulative downloads (as did three 2009 issues, one of them well over 3,000). At the article level (and including only articles published in HTML or as separate PDFs), all but ten articles appear to have been viewed more than 1,000 times and 322 of the 395 show more than 3,000 pageviews and downloads.

I believe a Web-first restructuring, with better HTML layout, might be desirable—but it's also a significant amount of work, and not worth doing if interest in *C&I* is waning. For now, I'm taking a little time off. Beyond that? Your comments and advice continue to be welcome.

Just for fun: I've added one modest level of layout sophistication in this issue. Let me know if you recognize what it is—and whether or not you like it.

Trends & Quick Takes

Time for another Random Roundup, part of an ongoing effort to offer quick notes on interesting things. When I did a catch-up edition of T&QT in October 2009, I noted that—with my switch in March 2009 from printing leadsheets for interesting source material to tagging items in Delicious—I was up to 50 items in September 2009 tagged "tqt" (the tag for this section) out of 643 items altogether, *far* more items than I ever had "on hand" prior to Delicious.

If you've been keeping track, you'll be aware that I gave up on Delicious after Yahoo! basically

issued its death warrant and, after asking for advice and doing some exploring, switched to Diigo, taking my Delicious-tagged items with me (evaluating many of them along the way). I'm not thrilled with one specific aspect of Diigo (the alphabetic list of all tags is clumsy to use because it's not a list), but otherwise it's just fine—but boy, do I have a lot of stuff tagged, even *after* wiping out a hundred items in one recent essay.

The count as of April 21, 2011: 1,294 items in all. Take away GBS (Google Book Settlement, which I may scrap entirely) with 230, and you still have more than a thousand, including 106 tagged tqt. So, well, this roundup in an issue full of roundups is another attempt to do a little catching up, five thousand (or so) words at a time.

Idealism, Firefox and HTML5

There's an odd January 25, 2010 item at *Read-WriteWeb*, written by Sarah Peter: "Will Idealism be Firefox's Downfall?" The gist: YouTube was moving to support HTML5 so videos could be viewed without Flash—but the list of browsers supporting the new option excluded Firefox. Why? The new YouTube version uses H.264 as a codec (compression-decompression format—like MP3), which is patented and *not* royalty-free. To support H.264 in Firefox, Mozilla would need to pay $5 million a year to MPEG-LA (a licensing group)—as would anybody trying to introduce a Firefox variant or other open-source browser.

As an update, Microsoft has a Firefox plugin that allows Windows7 users to use the *native* OS-level support for H.264 within Windows7.

There's an interesting John Hermann article from February 3, 2010 at *Gizmodo*: "Giz Explains: Why HTML5 Isn't Going to Save the Internet." It covers some of what makes HTML5 interesting, a few reasons why it's not a miracle cure and more—although as I read it I missed one little item: That is, that HTML5 is *years* away from being a fully adopted standard, much less a fully implemented standard. Still, interesting reading.

The Subscription War

It's something I've commented on before, and it's good to see it noted at *Gizmodo* in this January 18, 2010 item by Brian Barrett: "The Subscription War: You're Bleeding to Death." After applauding the wonders of his smartphone, the "2,454,399 chan-

nels on my HDTV" via broadband and his ability to "access the internet from a freaking airplane!" he gets to something that doesn't seem to concern much of anyone:

> A well-equipped geek will, in our research, have a subscription and service bill total of between 200 and 750 dollars a month.

For many of us $200/month seems high and $750/month is simply out of the question. (For the median U.S. household, that would be close to a fifth of the household income.)

How does he arrive at the total? There's a graphic spelling it out:

➢ $80 to $120 for unlimited voice, text and data on one smartphone.
➢ $20 to $60 for a netbook/smartbook plan with 10MB to 5GB data.
➢ $0-$60 for "slate" (iPad) connectivity.
➢ $25-$145 for broadband, noting that $25's only going to get you 1.5Mbps.
➢ $32-$130+: Cable. (Here, you can do a little better, if you don't mind "limited basic" coverage, that is, just the local broadcast channels and a shopping network or two.)
➢ $0-$50: Landline phone with unlimited domestic calls.
➢ $20-$60: 3G dongle to add mobile internet to your notebook.
➢ $0-$43: WiFi hotspots.
➢ $9-$21: NetFlix with streaming and one to three discs.
➢ Plus another $22-50, prorated, for annual subscriptions to TiVo, Xbox Live Gold, Hulu rentals, Flickr Pro and turn-by-turn GPS navigation.

Before you say "but you don't need a landline and the iPad can connect for free with Wifi," note that $0 is stated as the base price in both cases.

> That's right: if you want to stay even close to fully connected, you're expected to cough up nearly $1,000 a month. Not for hardware. For fees. And that doesn't even include niche services like Vimeo and Zune Pass, or one-off purchases like eBooks or iTunes downloads. Or, god forbid, food and shelter.

Barrett cites fragmentation as the problem—but I'll suggest that megasubscriptions might wind up being even more expensive. Of course, the people who matter presumably make so much money that $750/month is irrelevant. I've tracked our costs—for limited basic cable, three-disc Netflix (with Blu-ray

option), emergency cell phone (Virgin Mobile pre-paid), AT&T combo of 1.5Mbps DSL and unlimited-U.S. landline—and we're at about $125, but anyone who considers themselves Connected would call us Luddites or worse. And, you know, $125/month is still a sizable sum if you have limited income. (Add in our newspaper and magazine subscriptions, and I suspect we're close to the $200 mark.)

There's a similar take in Nicholas Carr's "Information wants to be free my ass" and "...continued," the latter on February 9, 2010, the former taking off directly from the *Gizmodo* piece. In the followup post, Carr quotes Jenna Wortham in the New York *Times* reporting that a Census Bureau reports Americans *averaging* $903/year in 2008 on "services like cable television, Internet connectivity and video games," a figure expected to reach $997 by the end of 2010—and that figure excludes cell phones and data plans. Indeed, the average combined landline/cellular phone bill was itself up to $1,127 in 2008.

Why the internet will fail (from 1995)

Here's a truly odd one, posted at *Three Word Chant!* on February 24, 2010. The writer links to Clifford Stoll's "The Internet? Bah!" from 1995 at *Newsweek*—an essay that was clearly Stoll's commentary, not *Newsweek*'s opinion, and never said the internet would fail, only that it "isn't, and will never be, nirvana." Here are the writer's "two favorite parts" that apparently show how idiotic *Newsweek* was:

> The truth in no online database will replace your daily newspaper, no CD-ROM can take the place of a competent teacher and no computer network will change the way government works.

> Yet Nicholas Negroponte, director of the MIT Media Lab, predicts that we'll soon buy books and newspapers straight over the Intenet. Uh, sure.

The writer notes, "If Newsweek is as good at maintaining the journalism industry as they are at fortune telling, they should be around for a long time."

Well...consider what Stoll actually says in those two segments and the reality in 1995 and beyond. I would argue that Stoll, for all his deliberate contrariness, is right in all cases:

➢ Online databases do *not* really take the place of a well-edited daily newspaper, even though many people use them as a substitute.

➢ It is *absolutely* the case that "no CD-ROM can take the place of a competent teacher," and it's fair to say that massive intrusion of technology into education has not, so far, yielded educational nirvana.

➢ While computer networks may *change* the way government works in many details, I'm not sure there have been fundamental changes—and if there have, they certainly haven't been all to the good.

➢ Negroponte's predictions were ludicrous *for 1995*. He predicted short-term changes that just didn't happen. Indeed, where newspapers are concerned, they're still fairly ludicrous.

Here's an interesting paragraph from Stoll's contrarian essay (he was pushing *Silicon Snake Oil* at the time, and that was a badly flawed book—although probably not as badly flawed as Negroponte's *Being Digital*):

> Then there are those pushing computers into schools. We're told that multimedia will make schoolwork easy and fun. Students will happily learn from animated characters while taught by expertly tailored software. Who needs teachers when you've got computer-aided education? Bah. These expensive toys are difficult to use in classrooms and require extensive teacher training. Sure, kids love videogames—but think of your own experience: can you recall even one educational filmstrip of decades past? I'll bet you remember the two or three great teachers who made a difference in your life.

I'm guessing Stoll feels no need to apologize for that paragraph 16 years later. I suggest he's still partly right about social networks not fully substituting for face-to-face conversations.

Linked Data: my challenge

That's the title of a March 22, 2010 commentary at *electronic museum* by Mike Ellis, an Eduserv employee who was "head of Web for the National Museum of Science and Industry, UK" from 2000 through 2007. Ellis wants to open up data for broader use—he's blogged about it, written papers about it, spoken about it. "I've gone so far as to believe that if it doesn't have an API, it doesn't—or shouldn't—exist." And he finds himself "sitting on the sidelines sniping gently at Linked Data since it apparently replaced the Semantic Web as The Next Big Thing. I remained cynical about the SW all the way through, and as of right now I remain cynical about Linked Data as well."

Why? For some of the same reasons I'm skeptical of Web 3.0 or the Semantic Web or Linked Data as being revolutionary in any real sense, even though it (they?) can and will be useful within some projects.

> Linked Data runs headlong into one of the things I also blog about all the time here, and the thing I believe in probably more than anything else: simplicity.

> If there is one thing I think we should all have learned from RSS, simple API's, YQL, Yahoo Pipes, Google Docs, etc it is this: for a technology to gain traction it has to be not only accessible, but simple and usable, too.

Since Ellis runs his blog with a CC BY-NC-SA license (and I continue to believe BY-NC is close enough to SA to count), I'll quote "how I see Linked Data as of right now" in full:

> 1. It is completely entrenched in a community who are deeply technically focused. They're nice people, but I've had a good bunch of conversations and never once has anyone been able to articulate for me the why or the how of Linked Data, and why it is better than focusing on simple MRD approaches, and in that lack of understanding we have a problem. I'm not the sharpest tool, but I'm not stupid either, and I've been trying to understand for a fair amount of time...

> 2. There are very few (read: almost zero) compelling use-cases for Linked Data. And I don't mean the TBL "hey, imagine if you could do X" scenario, I mean real use-cases. Things that people have actually built. And no, Twine doesn't cut it.

> 3. The entry cost is high – deeply arcane and overly technical, whilst the value remains low. Find me something you can do with Linked Data that you can't do with an API. If the value was way higher, the cost wouldn't matter so much. But right now, what do you get if you publish Linked Data? And what do you get if you consume it?

Ellis is one of those who should be deeply involved with Linked Data, but finds that he isn't. My own take is that expecting ordinary people (including ordinary scientists) to understand triples and turn Word or Excel documents into proper linked data is expecting a *lot*—too much for most of us. Here's what Ellis wants to see:

> 1. **Why** I should publish Linked Data. The "why" means I want to understand the value returned by the investment of time required, and by this I mean compelling, possibly visual and certainly useful examples

> 2. **How** I should do this, and **easily**. If you need to use the word "ontology" or "triple" or make me understand the deepest horrors of RDF, consider your approach a failed approach

> 3. Some compelling **use-cases** which demonstrate that this is better than a simple API/feed based approach

The very first comment (of 28 in all, including Ellis's responses) may show how far we are from Linked Data making sense to, well, people like me:

> I'm still a fan of the original guidelines for Linked data – paraphrased:

> Give each thing a 'permanent' page on the web.

> Put information about that thing on that page.

> Put connections from that page to other pages to make it more easily understood.

> Wikipedia does this excellently, without having to think about RDF/SW.

> For me though, a SPARQL endpoint containing data is not the same as having the data on the web.

> The metaphor that works for me is that SPARQL endpoints are to Linked data, as access to an undocumented SQL server are to CSV files.

To which I say: Huh? Wikipedia is in some sense linked data? Whuh? The last two sentence/paragraphs certainly don't help. Ah, but the final paragraph becomes ever so much clearer as explained by Richard Watson:

> This could be true, but this is the whole point of ontology. As long as someone uses an ontology correctly, or devises their own in a meaningful way, then the SPARQL endpoint is documented, in as much as it can be asked to describe all its own concepts.

I believe Richard Watson thinks he *has* explicated something in a way that people with strong computing, information and technology backgrounds who aren't already part of the linked data community—oh, say Walt Crawford—will find useful. Another modest little 900-word comment attempts to respond to Ellis' challenges and says "it's really rather simple." It's so simple that after reading the 900 words, I began to doubt that I understood the English language, but Ellis thought it was useful.

One commenter assures us that there will be—or, actually, *is*—a service that will allow you to take CSV files, click a button, and have them exported as proper "RDF based Linked Data." Ellis asks, well, given 10 CSV sources from 10 different places all referencing "John Smith," how will I know whether

they're all talking about the same "John Smith"? The response is that "Virtuoso's reasoning will handle the data reconciliation for you via conditional application of rules context for 'co-reference.'" I'm not entirely satisfied with that answer.

We Live in the Future

I'm a little abashed about this one—only because I noted in a comment on the post that I'd eventually be mentioning it in *Cites & Insights*, even though it might take a few months. The post with the title above, by David "Medical Librarian" Rothman at *davidrothman.net*, appeared March 23, 2010—and I suppose June 2011 is "a few months" later, if you interpret "a few" loosely.

It's a neat set of illustrations and comments on how far we've come in the past few decades, with a link to the complete set of slides. Rothman begins with shots of the IBM System/3 equipment his father used to announce his birth—via 96-column punch cards (I don't remember *ever* using 96-column cards) spelling out "BOY" in punched-out holes. He then notes "the cutting-edge of MEDLINE" for most users in 1972: the classic TI Silent-700 terminal with a dial-up modem (the great cups on the back of the terminal) operating at 10 characters per second—although a few people had blindingly fast 30cps access. At the time, about 150 libraries had MEDLINE access for $6/hour.

> Please understand how amazingly fast people thought 30 characters/second was. Please also understand how that compares to today's speeds:

That's followed by a chart showing some download speeds in characters per second. Rothman's "typical cable modem" is a whole lot faster than what I have at home (DSL, effectively about one-quarter as fast), and FIOS and "TWC Wideband" are a whole lot faster yet. I'm pretty happy with 1.5mbps (roughly 200k characters per second) downloading—a mere 20,000 times as fast as most 1972 speeds. Oh, and PUBMED's available *for free* to everybody.

Then there's the discussion that got me involved, as it has elsewhere: Mass storage. He shows a 1979 ad showing really *cheap* hard disks for the time: 80MB for $12,000 or 300MB for $20,000—or about $667 per megabyte, equating to about $1,900/MB in today's dollars.

What will $1,900 buy you today in old-fashioned rotating hard disk technology in 2011? At this writing, you can buy name-brand 3TB external hard drives (including cases and power supplies) for $170, so $1,900 will buy about 33 *terabytes* of storage. That's 33 *million* times as much storage per dollar, over the course of three decades. Rothman makes a comparison to flash drives, where at the time he wrote the post a name-brand 4GB flash drive went for $18, which is spectacularly cheaper per megabyte than in 1979. Still, in 2011, that 4GB flash drive probably costs at least $8, or $2/GB, which means the gap between flash drives and old-fashioned hard disks continues to be enormous, given that the Western Digital external drive noted above comes out to six *cents* per gigabyte.

Rothman also tried to show how much space you'd need to store a laptop's worth of data using 1973's IBM 3340 direct access storage units, one of the most important hard disk developments in computing history. It begins to be ludicrous. I remember that several of us gave up on calculating the space, energy and cost requirements for one terabyte of hard disk storage in 1972 terms; let's just say that companies didn't casually consider data stores that large, especially not ones fully online. (A March 22, 2010 post at *Holy Kaw* consists of a photo of a non-cartridge 200MB hard disk pack from 1970—what looks like a dozen platters, pre-Winchester, probably 12" diameter or larger and probably incredibly vulnerable.)

We do indeed live in the future. It's worth remembering that some times.

Postscript: The Bandwidth of a 747

A little postscript: Peter Murray had a 2006 post that referred to the old internet adage, "Never underestimate the bandwidth of a station wagon full of tapes." I wondered about the effective bandwidth of a 747 full of Blu-Ray discs (yes, they *were* around in 2006). Murray did a well-sourced set of measures, concluding that the effective bandwidth of such a 747, flying from JFK to LAX at maximum rated cruising speed, was 37,034.826 GB/s—that's 37 *terabits* per second. It got to be an interesting conversation (the post's at dltj.org/article/internet2-hopi-network/) and was updated by "Steveo" on June 2, 2010, this time using an Airbus A380-800F in cargo configuration—with an even more impressive rate: 8.88 *petabits* per second, or 9,098 terabits. Oh, and if you used dual-disc slim cases, double that: 17.77 PB/s. Incidentally, all the cases

would be in cartons, so this isn't just 374 million Blu-ray discs rammed loose into a cargo plane... (Unclear: Whether 374 million Blu-ray discs would exceed the weight capacity for an A380. Probably so: The maximum payload is 330,000 pounds, and a Blu-ray disc weighs some appreciable portion of an ounce. If a Blu-ray disc weighs an ounce, then you'd only be able to ram 5.28 million of them into an A380 and still take off; if half an ounce, 10.56 million. So, well, that brings the bandwidth down to somewhere between 131 and 263 TB/S—still impressive, but a little less so. In jewel boxes? Probably down to no more than 50 TB/s...)

A second *DLTJ* post, "Bandwidth of Large Airplanes," on June 8, 2010 (dltj.org/article/bandwidth-of-large-airplanes/), noted an error in Steveo's calculations and did new calculations for the Boing 747-400F, Airbus A380-800F, and Boing 747-8F, the freighter 747. Using slim jewel cases, Murray arrives at 176 Tb/s, 302 Tb/s and 218 Tb/s respectively—which are still three orders of magnitude greater than the fastest data transfer over a network that had been public at that point, a data flow of more than 110 Gb/s. At that point, I got involved again, with a *Walt at Random* post "Bandwidth of Large Airplanes, Take 2," thinking about 2TB internal hard disks, using 100-disc spindles (with locking covers) rather than slim jewel boxes for Blu-Ray discs, and wondering whether weight or bulk limited the capacity. I did real-world measurements of the weight of a 100-disc spindle (this assumes that Blu-Ray discs weigh as much as CD-Rs, which may not be true) and used Western Digital's own specs for the Caviar Black 2TB internal hard disc—and, to simplify calculations, assumed 10packs of the hard discs wrapped in plastic with no real additional weight.

My conclusions? Weight is indeed the limiting factor (by about a 2.3:1 ratio for Blu-ray discs, about an 11:1 factor for hard disks)—and the bandwidth of Blu-ray discs on a 747 is about 232 Tb/s, with 2TB hard disks supporting a mere 163 TB/s.

But ~~weight~~ wait! You can now buy 3TB internal hard disks, and I'd guess they weigh the same as last year's 2TB hard disks (but have greater areal density). That would make the hard disks the bandwidth champion, at an effective 245 TB/s bandwidth.

I believe we've communally established that a 747 configured for freight can provide a bandwidth of *at least* 160 TB/s, considerably more than 1,000 times as fast as the highest known network throughput. As a couple of commenters have noted, however, the latency really sucks. Still, if you need to move really big quantities of data from one place to another—say, 500TB at a time—Blu-Ray discs and big hard disks still look pretty good. As Eric Lease Morgan noted in a comment, when a person from Google came to visit Notre Dame in 2008 asking for some big data sets, he gave Notre Dame some hard disks and asked them to fill up the disks and *mail* them back to Google—it was cheaper that way.

This all seemed theoretical and silly when we were posting about it, given the latency issue. But, as I was doing a followup on Walt at Random on the 3TB hard disks (turns out they're actually a little *lighter* than last year's 2TB drives, so the bandwidth is around 250 TB/s), I thought of a real-world use. Let's say you're the MPAA and you want to send "screeners" of sixty nominated movies to Oscar voters—and of course you want those movies to be viewed in true HD. You can send them a 3TB hard disk for $5.20 Priority Mail Small Box Flat Rate, for a cost of about $105 total ($100 for the disk, $5.20 for the small box—but add a few bucks to make it an *external* hard disk) or, probably, a spindle of 60 Blu-Ray discs for not much more (less for the discs, a little more for postage). Or you can stream the movies...if they can take 55 *days* at 24 hour/day constant 5Mb/s broadband to get them. Which would you choose?

OA publishers: Just use HTML!

That's Dorothea Salo on March 23, 2010 at the *Book of Trogool*, and I'd tagged it for an essay on typography that may or may not ever get written. (Given that I'm writing a book that, among other things, deals with simple but effective layout and typography, chances are increasingly "not ever" for such a C&I article.) It's a post that I would growl about—but only if I read the title and not the essay itself.

Salo's **not** saying all OA publishers should use HTML instead of PDF. What she *is* saying:

> If you're not going to put effort into typesetting, chuck PDF. HTML is where it's at for you. Embrace the Web and its pitifully low standards for typography.

Substitute "intelligent layout, thoughtful typeface choices and general care with typography" for

"typesetting," and I agree. Not that I always follow my own advice, but if you're producing PDFs that are in Times New Roman or Arial with overlong lines and not enough leading—well, you'd be better off dumping the PDF and producing simple HTML. Which isn't that hard to do; Word's "filtered HTML" isn't great, but it can at least be reprocessed using newer styles, where a PDF is pretty much done for.

Salo offers a more cogent discussion:

> It does still take more technical savvy to produce decent HTML than to produce a bad PDF from the most typical manuscript formats. Making a print CSS stylesheet for your journal—which is also a good idea, to avoid grumbling from the print-dependent—is also eggheady. If your subject area is math-heavy, you have an entire new suite of problems.
>
> On the whole, though, it's much easier to produce good HTML than good PDF. Moreover, bad PDFs are essentially irredeemable; there's nearly no way (and definitely no easy way) to reflow, re-typeset, or otherwise reformat them. If you go the HTML route, as your skills improve you will (trust me!) learn to fix your bad HTML, and if your content-management system is any good, you'll be able to go back and fix your old articles in a decently automated fashion.
>
> As you rebrand your journal and its look and feel, which you eventually will unless and until the journal dies, you get a bonus: automatic rebranding of your old articles! They never have to look out-of-date, as old-school PDFs often do.

I'm a great believer in PDF—when it serves a legitimate and positive purpose, as in *preserving a deliberate set of layout and typeface choices*. When that's not happening—when the PDF is clumsy and seems to represent default options—then the advantages of HTML come into play. (Will the HTML for *C&I* get better? Probably only if *C&I* moves to a "Web-first" processing scheme. Stay tuned.)

11 Ideas About Which I May Be Wrong

The title, from an April 7, 2010 post by John Dupuis at *Confessions of a Science Librarian*, is a little misleading; he's really pointing to a post with the same name by Joshua Kim at *Technology and Learning*. He notes that the piece is really about things "you're going to have to convince me that I'm wrong" about. Kim challenges readers, "What are you wrong about?"—that is, what do you think you're right about and would like someone to prove you wrong? Dupuis offers three:

- The biggest transformation in libraries over the next 10 years will be our relationship to stuff. Crumbling media business models and a movement to open access and more broadly to open content will challenge us to find things worth paying for.

- As a corollary to the first point, sometime in the next 10 years I will buy my last print book.

- Perhaps the biggest challenge in our relationship to our host institutions will be justifying the expense of transforming what we now have as collection space into various spaces for students. A lot of other constituencies will want that space and that money.

As you might expect, I think Dupuis is wrong on the first, at least for libraries in general. Ten years is way too soon, especially for *public* libraries but also, I believe, for academic libraries—and the move to OA isn't happening anywhere near fast enough. Can I convince Dupuis that I'm wrong? Perhaps not, any more than I'm likely to convince Dorothea Salo of my rightness in the areas where we disagree sharply. Both Dupuis and Salo are among that class of colleagues I value particularly highly: We disagree about many things, sometimes in extreme form—but never (or rarely) disagreeably, never (or rarely) stating our own stances as gospel or inevitable, and generally in ways that allow us to learn from one another.

The third? Well, yes, if academic libraries flee from physical collections, the ULs are going to have damn difficult times convincing the host institutions not to swallow up most of the library space. And as for the second, if Dupuis makes that choice, it's just that: His choice, having little to do with whether print books are still being published.

[Even] Quicker Takes

Doug Johnson wrote "Augmented reality" on February 6, 2010 at *The Blue Skunk Blog*—a short post asserting that travel guidebooks and the like have been augmenting reality for years. An interesting perspective, but it ignores the chief objection that some of us troglodytes have to real-time augmented reality: It gets in the way of *appreciating* what's in front of you. Any time you're staring at your iWhatever, you're filtering the live, 3D, sound-enhanced

picture going on all around you through that little window that pushes other sorts of stuff at you.

➤ Around February 2010, there was a kerfuffle involving a fair number of nerd sites as to whether Windows7 used memory in a way that would yield thrashing on most computers, as pages were being swapped in and out of disk-based virtual storage because there wasn't enough real memory. I flagged a few items for use, then never got to them; the site claiming that Windows7 was a memory-hog seemed to label anyone who questioned its methodology (including such notoriously useless sites as *Industry Standard, ZDNet* and *ars technica*) as "Windows fanboys," and basically said "we know that what we're measuring is right, and you're all just idiots." And yet, and yet, very few users find that Windows7 has difficulty handling lots of simultaneous applications with high memory requirements—although it *does* try to make use of all available memory for caching and precaching. I know I've never run into disk thrashing, but I rarely have more than six applications running at once (in addition to all the background stuff, of course). As far as I can tell, it was One Dedicated Site (quoting a 14-year-old Windows NT handbook in one case) vs. Everybody Else. It's quite possible that ODS is right, but...well, I have yet to hear numerous (read "any") reports of people running out of usable memory in Windows 7.

➤ John Scalzi, a science fiction writer and preeminent blogger who also makes a point of publicizing other writers and their work (he's also currently president of SFWA), wrote "eARCs: Big Fat Publicity Fail" on April 9, 2010 at *Whatever*. What's an eARC? An electronic Advance Reader Copy—where you get a card and have to scratch off a lottery-like area to get a code, sign in to the publisher's website, then type in the code to download the ARC. "This pretty much assures I won't be reading this particular book." After all, he has all these *other* ARCs that arrived in the mail, where all he has to do is open the cover, not go through this rigmarole—and he's not ready to read full novels on his computer or (nonexistent)

ereader or iPad. There's also the issue of DRM and trust: If the eARC comes with DRM (as previous attempts did), the publisher's saying "we want you to publicize this upcoming novel, but we don't trust you not to make the novel available to everybody else for free." ARCs are, in a way, requests for attention; they need to be as easy as possible. A cynic could contrast Scalzi's attitude here with his well-known attitude on *submissions* for his fiction: He won't submit to any market that requires a printed manuscript (which, until recently, included all three of the "big three" science fiction/fantasy magazines)...even though, you know, printed manuscripts are probably easier for the editors to plow through.

disContent

A Twofer: Two Favorite disContent Columns

Just for fun, I'm throwing in two of my favorite "disContent" columns from *EContent Magazine*—one recent and short, one older and longer.

The Top 10 Reasons You See So Many Lists

July/August 2009

10. Putting things together into a list seems to connect them. Surely you've seen lists where some elements don't quite seem to fit—or where the organizing principle seems forced. Not a problem. It's a list. The title connects individual elements, even if that connection is artificial. You can be philosophical about this: Bogus lists encourage people to think about possible connections. Or you can be realistic: A lazy writer spots 10, 15, 25 or 42 items that can fit under a title, no matter how ill the fit.

9. Lists are quotable, searchable, Tweetable. Honorable bloggers, Tweeters, Facebookers, and FriendFeeders will link back—but they'll probably use one item at a time. Great! Just make sure topic phrases are less than 140 characters long and paragraphs run less than 140 words. You're on your way to big-link love. A good 20-item 1,600-word list probably results in 10 times the links of a

single discursive 1,600-word post or article and probably takes less than half as long to write.

8. Lists are typically made up of short independent paragraphs, great for people with short attention spans. If you believe some gurus, we're all losing our ability to concentrate for long periods of time—and a "long period of time" might be the time required to read a coherent, single-focus article or even an 800-word column. But almost anybody (except possibly those who have become true Twitterphiles) can focus long enough to read an 80-word paragraph—like this one.

7. Lists almost write themselves. Not only can you throw in things that don't belong, you can reuse the same topic phrases (full sentences are so 20th century!) with slightly different slants and wordings. Once you have your topic phrases (or websites, or what have you), writing the paragraphs couldn't be easier. If your list is websites, you describe each one. If there's substance, it's still easier to write a list element than most any other paragraph. That's particularly true because…

6. Lists eliminate the need for smooth transitions. Hey, it's 2009. Writing a coherent sentence is becoming a postgrad skill. Writing a coherent paragraph is hot stuff. Good editors expect that you'll connect those paragraphs to create a narrative flow. Why, I've had editors (hi Michelle!) forbid subheadings in columns to force me to think about the flow of an entire column. But nobody expects one list entry to flow into the next entry; they're supposed to change abruptly.

5. Lists neither require nor reward full attention or close reading. We're all supposed to be multitasking—reading while watching TV while texting on a cell phone. Lists suit multitasking: Half a minute's reading (10 seconds' reading!) gets you through a single paragraph, and if all you really get is the topic phrase, that's OK. For that matter, slowing down and paying full attention to the list won't help much: There's nothing deeper to understand.

4. With luck, you can expand a list into a manifesto, then into a best-selling book. Not only can you build popular blogs from nothing but lists, you can make much more from them. What might have been a plain list can, with lots of near-repetition and other easy creative effort, become a manifesto. Then you need only add a couple more paragraphs after each point and shazam! You're a best-selling author.

3. Numbered lists imply ranking without requiring actual effort. After all, this article isn't just some random number of items. It's 10 items and they're numbered from 10 to 1. That must mean the 10th item is least significant and the first item most, right? The beauty here is that you don't have to demonstrate significance—it derives from the act of numbering. What? You think No. 4 is more important than No. 1? Well, you're entitled to your (obviously wrong) opinion.

2. People love lists. Why not? They're easy to read, they rarely require deep thought (or even shallow thought), they can be quotable. Sometimes you get entire magazine issues consisting of nothing but lists—and you can bet those issues are widely read. Fifteen ways to seduce your neighbor; 10 ways to speed up Vista; the top 25 reasons X will do Y. The possibilities are endless, but the lists are never long enough to pose reading challenges.

1. Lists are easy ways to write articles and columns—much easier than actual writing. This column was inspired by a worldly personal computer magazine that had a "special list issue" where *all* the articles were numbered lists (instead of half or so, which would be typical). I noticed that the issue was remarkably fluffy and must have been unusually easy to put together. So was this column.

Quod erat demonstrandum. No, Michelle, I won't pull this stunt again for at least five more years.

Postscript

Let me list the 25 reasons this is one of my favorite columns. On second thought, I won't bother. Lists still strike me as lazy substitutes for journalism and writing.

Survey Says…Or Does It? [Fun with Statistics]

November 2004

You probably create econtent that quotes the results of surveys and statistical analysis. You probably run stories with headlines and lead paragraphs that overstate results and may be misleading in other ways. I'm not calling on all econtent creators to avoid overstated, misleading, and badly justified projections (though that isn't such a bad idea). I

am suggesting that it wouldn't hurt to be aware of some of the problems with surveys and statistics.

Online Surveys: The Worst of the Worst

What's wrong with online surveys? For the insta-polls on so many web sites, a better question is "What isn't?" The questions are frequently badly worded but that's the least of it. Some online polls register all responses—including those from bored people and axe-grinders who just click, and click, and click again. Others make some attempt to prevent multiple voting either by cookie (easy to defeat!) or by checking IP address. That may be a little better, but not all that much.

High-profile online polls tend to be dominated by special interest groups with instant response lists, true believers with time on their hands, and others intent on showing that their version of the truth is the only one that matters. Even without deliberate attempts to unbalance online polls, they're mostly a toy for people who spend too much time online. Low-profile polls, those that aren't political or are held within a relatively closed community, may be a bit more plausible but it's hard to take most of those seriously.

Small Studies and Faulty Extrapolation

Remember "nine out of ten doctors"? Ever wonder whether that really meant ten specific doctors, one of whom wouldn't take the cigarette company's consultancy fee? You see plenty of statistics and results these days based on little more than a handful of responses. That isn't to say small studies are meaningless—just that their meaning is anecdotal, not statistical. When a hundred people tell you something about any aspect of American society, projection of those results to the society as a whole is worthless.

Sometimes a study's overall size is large enough to give it some likelihood of meaningfulness but the results include all sorts of demographic breakdowns, sometimes involving *much* smaller numbers. If you see comments about the answers provided by male Caucasians ages 40-54 with masters degrees or better, who earn less than $25,000 per year...take a good look at the number of such responses in that big survey. I've seen more than one major study where at least one "important" result was based on fewer than 50 survey responses.

Then there's faulty extrapolation—drawing trend lines based on two data points. That's always iffy and sometimes worse. Say 54% of those surveyed in 1992 did something but only 47% of those surveyed in 2002 did the same thing. Can you reasonably project that the percentage will drop by a flat 7% each ten years, so the activity in question disappears entirely in a little less than 70 years? Or is a drop of 13% (47% is 87% of 54%)—and, if so, what do you project, since you can keep dropping 13% indefinitely? (After 70 years, that would still yield 18%.) These are nonsensical questions. Without a longer series of data points, any extrapolation is unreasonable.

Faulty extrapolation makes for amusing looks back after a decade or so, but that's of little comfort to those who have warned of crises or based business plans on small studies and faulty extrapolation.

Getting the Answers You Want

When you see press releases and news stories based on polls and surveys, do they show the precise questions asked? If not, be on the lookout for slanted questions. You see them most often in online surveys, particularly at sites that favor a certain outcome.

You've certainly seen multiple-choice questions that don't offer a reasonable choice. You've seen satisfaction surveys where a disastrous consumer experience could wind up looking pretty good if all the questions are answered: Customers were overcharged and got terrible information, but the stock was good, bathrooms were clean, service was prompt, and the store was laid out well. That comes out as "67% of responses were favorable."

Any good political pollster knows how to word "Have you stopped beating your wife?"-type questions so they seem objective on first reading. But that assumes you even *see* the actual questions rather than a polished interpretation of the results.

Correlation and Causation

Here's one that may be less common these days: Confusing correlation and causation. Are rainy days caused by people carrying umbrellas? The correlation is certainly strong, and (given decent weather forecasting) the umbrellas typically appear before the rain. If that example seems ludicrous, how do you know that other claimed causative factors aren't equally ludicrous?

Quite apart from inappropriate claims of causation, we see too many silly correlations. With statistical software it's trivially easy to run a full set

of correlations and backing statistics within a set of survey results—even if there's no reason to believe that two factors could be correlated. Unfortunately, there's an all-too-human tendency to accept mild correlations that fit our own prejudices, and to assume that such correlations imply causation.

Choosing Your Numbers

"As many U.S. adults read literature in 2002 as in 1982." If the NEA's *Reading at Risk* survey is correct, that's a true statement—but it's not one the NEA highlights. Here's one that was highlighted: "In 1992, 76.2 million adults in the United States did not read a book. By 2002, that figure had increased to 89.9 million." Here's *exactly* the same information restated: "In 1992, 113.8 million adults in the United States read at least one book. In 2002, that figure increased to 125.2 million." Not quite as desperate a situation? It's the same set of facts.

Did your site feature the "big drop" in book purchases in 2003—when *23 million fewer books* were purchased in the U.S. than in 1992? That was a drop of 1.02% in unit sales (and a small rise in revenue)—but I'm guessing your headline didn't feature that or the 2.222 billion books that *were* sold. "American adults only buy an average of 11.7 books; literacy doomed" just doesn't make it as a headline. But, of course, when sales of a niche technology jump from 1,000 to 3,000, that's "200% rise in sales!" but why mention the actual numbers?

Do **Any** Surveys Work?

Caution: Wild speculation ahead. What about surveys that use a sufficiently large sample, chosen with appropriate care, with carefully-worded questions and cautious statistical analysis? Surely they must be as meaningful as ever.

Maybe not. We could be seeing the flip side of Dewey's presidency. Remember? Polls taken by telephone resulted in a confident projection that Dewey would win—because the people with telephones back then tended to be wealthier and more conservative than most voters. What if substantial portions of America's population just don't respond to telephone surveys any more? What if those portions have things in common that tend to throw off survey results?

In 1982 I would answer telephone surveys. In 1992, I might. Now, I almost never do and we get a *lot* more requests to participate in surveys. If it's a

survey on book reading, my wife and I may both be too busy reading books to spend five or ten minutes answering intrusive questions. So someone else with similar demographics answers instead—maybe because they don't waste time reading books.

We're just one case. Or are we? Do you respond to telephone surveys? Do your friends? (I'd take a survey, but...) What if a quarter of those who are well educated, involved in society and their communities, readers, thinkers, and doers just don't respond to surveys? What if that's the quarter that's most involved, that reads the most, that works enough so they need their home time for all those other activities. What does that mean for survey results?

Maybe this is nonsense. Part of me hopes my wife and I are statistical outliers; that everyone else is only too happy to respond to surveys. But part of me doesn't quite believe that. Even without this wild speculation, there's plenty to watch out for when reporting on surveys and statistics.

Postscript

People continue to misquote surveys—and surveys continue to have all sorts of flaws. Increasingly, you see organizations (especially Pew Internet) quoting a *plurality* result—even one as low as, say, 23% of those responding—as a universal result. (That is: If more people in the survey within a given "generation" answer A to a question than provide any other answer, even if considerably less than a majority give that answer, the press release tells us that "generation X prefers A.")

As for my wild speculation—I'm increasingly inclined to believe it. I would also note that most telephone surveys don't reach cell phones at all. But there are so many problems with how questions are worded and how results are presented that survey bias through unwillingness (or inability) to respond may not be as important a factor.

Interesting & Peculiar Products
Google TV

The first couple of Google TV products emerged in early 2011—Logitech's Revue set-top box and a Sony Blu-ray player with Google TV built in. A fairly long writeup in the February 2011 *Home Theater* is interesting—including an odd little slap at both

devices for requiring wall-wart power supplies, which—for devices that are *always* plugged in—"always screams cheap, off-the-shelf design to me." The main conclusions: Google TV isn't there yet, partly because none of the three main networks will allow streaming of their shows, partly because in the process of passing your other TV signals through the Google box, you lose surround-sound capabilities. We do get a sideswipe from a writer who's clearly an Apple fancier—as made clear in this passage: "If you're one of those staunch opponents of all things Apple, you probably don't know what I'm talking about, and you'll forever be subjected to complex hierarchies and poorly integrated UIs..." Wow. Nobody but Apple is capable of producing good UIs!

For an amusing contrast, there's "Kill Your Cable, If You Dare" by Jeff Bertolucci in the December 2010 *PC World*. Bertolucci was spending $85/month on his cable service, and of course the *only solution* was to get rid of cable entirely. (Since, you know, moving to limited-basic is clearly out of the question.) He concludes that "Google TV...is the best way to find content online." He also discusses lots of other options...and admits that, well, "if you live in an area where the over-the-air broadcast channels are difficult to receive through antenna," maybe you *shouldn't* cut the cable. What I notice consistently throughout the article: There is never any discussion of video quality. **None**. (At the very end, he does mention limited-basic cable.) So on one hand, Google TV is the way to go; on the other, it's not ready for prime time.

Ayre Acoustics DX-5

I'm never sure quite what to make of a product like this, glowingly reviewed by Michael Fremer in the December 2010 *Stereophile.* First there's the question of how to approach a digital-product review by someone as adamantly anti-digital as Fremer claims to be—but set that aside. The other issue is that the Ayre, at $9,950, is an Oppo BDP-83 Blu-ray player with some additional electronics and a new case. The Oppo, highly rated by most reviewers, costs $400. So you're paying $9,550 for a better case, power supply and electronics. Maybe that's reasonable; maybe not.

It's clear that Fremer knows his audience: Proper wealthy audiophiles who wouldn't be caught *dead* watching TV—or at least not sharing their high-and-mighty audio systems with crass TV requirements. Here's the tipoff, word for word:

> The DX-5's backlit remote control belongs to a Blu-ray player, so it has many video functions and buttons you won't use.

Not "I didn't use" but *"you won't use."* Right.

The Really Big Desktop Display

Did you know you can buy a 2560x1600-pixel display for your PC? It's 30" and a mere $1,200 to $2,100. But for *serious* computer users that's not nearly enough. A "Geektech" piece in the December 2010 *PC World* has the answer: You buy four 1080p *projectors*, "each around $1000," and project the images onto a single curved surface much larger than a 30" display.

I haven't heard of any decent-quality $1,000 1080p projectors, but maybe I'm missing something. What this writeup omits: What it would actually cost to have such a monster display (and to have the graphics muscle to drive it). The companies involved in figuring out how to synchronize multiple projects to make single huge pictures work aren't building desktop displays—they're designing theater-scale units, such as a 32x20 foot screen using 20 projectors to create a 55 megapixel image.

This writer thinks that one of these days "you could have a big, curved, quad-HD screen on your desktop for roughly the price of two or three 30-inch monitors." You know, for some *serious* gaming over your 100mb broadband. (I dunno: Would 100mb be enough for quad-HD?)

Touchscreen Differences

I'm interpreting this section's title more broadly, partly to include some old material that I think's worth noting but doesn't necessarily relate to *one* product, partly because otherwise Trends & Quick Takes becomes even more top-heavy.

So, for example, there's this: "Finger Fail: Why Most Touchscreens Miss the Point," by Priya Ganapati at *Wired.com*'s "Gadget Lab" on March 4, 2010. It's about smartphones and other touchscreen (not touchpad) devices (touchpads are another tricky subject), and it's an interesting if perhaps not wholly convincing discussion. Basically, although smartphone touchscreens come from a small set of suppliers, there's enough interplay between hardware, software and overall design so that some touchscreens seem far more

responsive and workable than others...and, yes, iProducts tend to rank high in this area.

> Variables include engineering details such the calibration of the touch sensor so it can separate the signal from the noise, the quality of the firmware and the level of integration of the touch experience into the phone's user interface. There are also more difficult-to-quantify things such as as the level of the company's commitment to making the best touchscreen experience possible.

[Yes, there's a double "as" in the original—worth pointing out since this is a long article, not really a blog post, and given Condé Nast's reputation for attention to detail.] Early touchscreens were mostly resistive, requiring serious pressure or a stylus to make two thin layers connect. Current ones are (mostly) capacitive, responding to the electrical properties of skin. But even capacitive touchscreens vary a lot, for reasons discussed by a couple of sources here, including one from Synaptics (a huge supplier of touchscreens and touchpads—not that they always get the hardware/software combo right for touchpads either). An interesting discussion...

NuVision 55FX10LS HDTV

The writeup in the January 2011 *Sound & Vision* isn't a review, but it's a half-page wowie-zowie writeup for this 55" "3D-ready" HDTV. (Since it comes with two pairs of 3D glasses, I'd assume it's a 3D set, not 3D-ready, but never mind.) What makes it special? Not LED backlighting, apparently, but "you can custom-order the bezel to match any color," it's made of aluminum, and NuVision dealers are supposed to "perform responsible recycling" at the end of the product's "lifecycle"—all assuming that the dealer is still in business, of course.

All that for $6,999, only $5,300 more than most top-rated 54-56" plasma and LCD HDTVs from brands you've actually heard of. Man, that's some expensive aluminum.

Of course, this feature—written by Ken C. Pohlmann—is given to hyperbole, such as the writeup for NextGen Copperhead Xtreme HDMI Cable, which seems to suggest that using any lesser cable will lead to "attenuation, far-end crosstalk or interpair skew" (whatever that might be). As overpriced cables go, they're only mildly overpriced, but to date there's never been any plausible demonstration that, especially for HDTV, bits *aren't* bits—that the cheapest HDMI 1.4-certified cable won't work just as well.

Bryston BDP-1 Digital Music Player

Take, for example, Pohlmann's breathless writeup of this $2,150 device in the December 2010 issue. He thinks it's "pretty cool" because, unlike some other digital music players, it does **not** have a hard drive, streamer, disc player or even digital-to-analog converter. What does it have? Hmm. You can connect it to a storage device and send bitstreams to something else that actually *plays*, you know, digital music. So it's a controller of sorts, I guess. But hey, it's "audiophile" and it's only a little more than $2K, so why am I being picky?

The Trouble with Tablets?

I suspect Jon Stokes knew he was writing a flame-bait piece when he wrote "Why I don't care very much about tablets anymore" in, I guess, March 2011 at *ars technica*. It's not about any particular tablet; it's about why he doesn't find that tablets much interest him.

It's a thoughtful discussion—if you accept one huge premise. We'll get there in a moment. Briefly, he finds that typical desktop setups—with the keyboard and display in separate planes—are similar to those of old scribes and are *sensible*: the separation of productive workspaces just plain works. He also misses tactile feedback. I think most importantly, he doesn't believe a tablet will be the *best* gadget to do any of the things he thinks he'd do with them.

> For watching video, my TV wins. I prefer to read books and papers on either the Kindle or as dead-tree color printouts and books. Surfing the Web is easier on a computer, especially if you leave a lot of tabs open. I've yet to have a tablet gaming experience that really surpasses a good console or PC game. And so on.

> What the tablet is valuable for is for letting me easily cram a downsized version of all of those experiences and functions into a single, lightweight, compact, long-battery-life gadget. So it's great for traveling light. But if I'm at home it's just not the richest or most productive way for me to do anything that I do.

Yes, Stokes owns an iPad. There's more: from what he sees, the "new media" being pushed for iPads feel a lot like CD-ROMs and he prefers to drop

back to pure text. Oh, he's always going to *have* tablets but he's not excited about them.

I suspect he's right on two counts *for some people:* That is, a tablet is typically a second-best platform for a whole bunch of things, and a tablet typically isn't a very good way to create things. (Yes, you can do it, but I have yet to hear very many people claim that it works anywhere near as well as a PC or notebook.) That said, there are millions of people for whom a lightweight convenient compromise is a great idea—and who do very little creation other than email, but lots of consumption.

Didn't check the full range of comments; of those I did check, fewer are flames than I expected, and a fair number agree. Some of them even understand that Stokes is *not* saying tablets are useless.

Windows XP and Big Hard Disks

This one's interesting, but probably getting less and less relevant given the quality of Windows 7: An April 2010 piece by Peter Bright in *ars technica*, "Why new hard disks might not be much fun for XP users." It's a long piece that explores error-correction technology, hard disk sectors and other aspects of this old but still dominant storage technology. What it boils down to: The newest hard disks are likely to *insist* on 4096-byte sectors rather than 512-byte sectors, for very good reasons...and that may be a performance issue for Windows XP, given some very old and apparently hard-wired assumptions.

By now, the answer should probably be clear: Time to move from Windows XP to Windows 7, even if you believed the overwrought bad press for Vista. Or, realistically, since the only time most users will ever get a new internal hard disk is when they get a new computer, it's long past time to stop downgrading new PCs to XP.

Audio-Technica AT-LP120-USB

This appears in the December 2010 *Sound & Vision* "Experts' Guide to Great Gifts 2010." It's a turntable with a built-in phono preamp and USB port (it comes with a CD-ROM containing Audacity in Mac and Windows versions, to save you a free download of this first-rate audio conversion & editing freebie). It includes an Audio-Technica cartridge.

And it sells for around $210. All of which is actually pretty good—except for the years of obloquy

audiophiles have heaped upon direct-drive turntables. After being demeaned as destroying sound quality and various other crimes, now direct-drive is OK, as long as you're playing vinyl (which, of course, any good audiophile must be doing)? Interesting times.

Promises, Promises: The $75 OLPC

Sometimes running behind on items pays off directly—as in this May 27, 2010 item by Charlie Sorrel at *Wired.com*'s Gadget Lab, "Negroponte Promises $75 OLPC Slate by December." Given *Wired*'s general swoony attitude over anything from the magic lips of Negroponte, it's hardly surprising that—even given a little doubt in the article—there's a general air of belief. After all, the final sentence is "The original OLPC had a long and difficult gestation, but Nick Negroponte is stubborn enough to pull it off." Which he did such a brilliant and successful job of with the original OLPC, right, Charlie?

Negroponte's promise is crystal-clear: An XO-3 tablet in prototype form by December 2010 to show at CES in January 2011, with a 9" screen (dual-mode: backlit indoors but not outdoors) and a $75 price. That's for the *developed* world, not just developing nations.

Interesting. One supposed OLPC website (olpc.com) seems moribund, with the most recent story from April 2010. What appears to be the *official* site, laptop.org, offers a "news" page that's formatted such that it's nearly impossible to use (but very colorful). The closest I could get to the promised $75 tablet is the announcement of a $165 "hybrid tablet-computer model" at the 2011 CES and a new promise of a 2012 tablet for $100. Negroponte's promises? Quietly forgotten—and very little on the current XO-3 page appears to be less than a year old.

Arcam FMJ BDP100 Blu-ray Player

I'm not sure whether this one's interesting or peculiar, but I'm inclined toward the latter. As reviewed in the March 2011 *Home Theater*, it's a Blu-ray player that handles the usual range of other formats, much as a $99 Blu-ray player would. Unlike most $150 Blu-ray players these days, it doesn't include any internet streaming options, doesn't handle 3D and, unlike Oppo's $500 players, doesn't support SACD or DVD-Audio. It also won't just

play a disc precisely as recorded, with no upconversion or deinterlacing. It's a lot slower to load complex BD discs than, say, the Oppo. It *might* "look sharper" than some other players, but that may be because of edge enhancement, usually considered a no-no among purists. Oh, and it supposedly sounds better—in part because it puts out a much higher audio level than the standard for digital output. As it happens, it isn't really a great performer—on objective tests, it's not up to, well, players like the $500 Oppo.

One difference: it costs $1,500. So, you know, *it must be three times as good* as the Oppo and 10 times better than a $150 3D-supporting Internet-streaming Blu-ray player.

Back to the Future!

That's my immediate reaction on seeing the C64X as described in a December 20, 2010 *Wired.com* Gadget Lab story by Charlie Sorrel. It's a Commodore 64, or at least it *looks* like that great old computer-in-a-keyboard. Except that this one has a dual-core Atom processor, 2GB RAM, NIVIDIA graphics and a Blu-ray drive. And typical contemporary slots (USB, memory card, HDMI), all within a faithful reproduction of the Commodore 64's body and keyboard (with original Cherry switches, offering an IBM-like keyboard feel). Oh, and if you want, you can actually boot it into C64 emulation mode to play your old Commodore games.

When the article appeared, there were no prices or anticipated date. When I check the www.commodoreusa.net site on April 19, 2011, I see prices, apparently for current delivery—with Ubuntu (Linux) provided ready to install, Commodore 64 emulation to be mailed later. The prices range from $250 to $895, but $250 gets you nothing but chassis and card reader. The cheapest fully-functional version, C64x Standard, costs $695 and includes 2GB RAM, WiFi, Bluetooth, a DVD tray drive and 250GB hard disk—but for $895, you get 4GB RAM, a Blu-Ray drive and a 1TB hard disk, making it probably the best value. (There's a $595 system, but since it lacks both optical drive and wifi, I don't consider it fully functional.)

HDTV Calibration Discs

Some of you might find one of these worthwhile, and they might even be good items for libraries with lots of Blu-ray-using patrons (by now, that's probably around 20% of your patrons). A December 2010 *Sound & Vision* article, "DIY TV Calibration," details what's involved in doing your own picture calibration and notes the three discs, each $25 to $30: *Spears & Munsil High-Definition Benchmark Blu-Ray Edition* (aimed at people who have a fair sense of what they're doing), *Digital Video Essentials: HD Basics* (also aimed at advanced enthusiasts and professional technicians), and the most likely candidate for the average user who wants to improve their picture: Disney's *WOW: World of Wonder*.

Zero Dollar Laptop

It sounds like a great product writeup, if a trifle impossible—but that's not quite what this is. It's a manifesto of sorts, published at *Bricolabs:* www.bricolabs.net/politics/zero-dollar-laptop. It's not dated; I tagged it on June 8, 2010. The article doesn't read like a typical manifesto, but that's what it is.

> The current typical specification of the zero dollar laptop in the UK is around 500mHz, with 256mB RAM, a 10 gigabyte hard disk, a network card, a CD-ROM, a USB port and a screen capable of displaying at least 800×600 pixels in 16-bit colour. Many zero dollar laptops are better specified. (Its close cousin, the zero dollar desktop, typically runs at 1000mHz or faster.)

What is the zero-dollar laptop? Basically installing Linux on the laptop/notebook you've replaced with a newer, more powerful model. That's all there is to it: This is a manifesto urging people to install Linux on old notebooks and reuse them or give them to others. It's written in lots of tiny little paragraphs, I suppose to make it less intimidating but actually making it a little tiresome. It's one of those "you *must* switch to free software for the good of the planet!" approaches. Still, you might find it interesting reading.

The Google Cr-48

There is, to be sure, a zero-dollar notebook, if you're one of thousands of people Google wanted to ~~bribe~~ persuade to give them loads of free publicity for the Chrome OS—that is, the freebie Cr-48 cloud notebooks (that is, *all* your work is necessarily done in the cloud, as there's no local storage and it *must* be internet-connected to work) that Google shipped to those considered worthy. (Lit-

erally *thousands*: 60,000 of these devices were produced and shipped.) One of those was John Scalzi. He offered *very* preliminary impressions in "Early Cr-48 Impressions," posted December 20, 2010 at *Whatever*, after he'd had the Cr-48 for "six whole hours now." It's a charming set of bullets, from the matte-black *look* of it (and accompanying hard-to-read keytops) to the "awesome" replacement of CAPS LOCK with a search button. An interesting quick read, including the note that you can readily simulate the experience of using a Chrome OS laptop: Just do all your computing in the Chrome browser running full screen.

> This is in fact a pretty accurate assessment. Basically, the experiencing of using Chrome OS is like having the browser up all the time. The good news here is that I already use the Chrome browser on a frequent basis, so there's not too much of a learning curve. The bad news is all the annoying things about the Chrome browser are here too.

Scalzi wrote "What I've Learned With the Cr-48" on March 1, 2011. It's a relatively brief and carefully thought out discussion, with four major points. He loves the form factor for a laptop—with a 12" screen, it's halfway between his too-small netbook and large-for-a-lap 15" Toshiba. He likes the keyboard configuration. He likes the nearly-instant-on nature and generally likes Chrome OS. Then there's #4:

> BUT. At the end of the day, I have my doubts that a cloud OS is going to be the way to go. I see two major problems.

Summarizing, the first problem is that "there's not enough there there"—Google Docs really isn't a wholly-baked competitor to Word for long projects and once you get beyond Gmail and Google's online suite, "it gets sketchy fairly quickly." The second: Chrome OS might be better suited to a place like South Korea, with very fast consistent online infrastructure, than the U.S. and Canada, where broadband wireless "is relatively slow and full of all sorts of holes, gaps and dead zones."

> So in the end while I'm enjoying my Cr-48, I don't really think of it as a fully functional computer. I think of it as an appliance to access the Internet, with a nice keyboard thrown in so I can type more easily than I can on the iPad (my other Internet appliance). I'll take it with me when I travel, but only if I know I don't have to do any really serious work outside of e-mail and posting online.

Personally, I'm just not interested in a cloud-based PC, but that's me—and apparently a fair number of other people. As usual, *Whatever*'s commenters are generally more interesting and sane than at many other sites—but I was surprised at the number who apparently felt compelled to tell Scalzi he really should buy a Mac Air, or whatever it's called.

Did Google succeed in getting millions of dollars worth of unpaid advertising? Probably. Jason Griffey devoted a five-part series at *Perpetual beta* to his experience with the freebie (not hard to find the posts), and I'm sure you can find similar streams in other areas.

Our Ads: Great. Other Ads: Terrible

Ken Fisher must love controversy, based on this *ars technica* article from, I guess, June 2010: "Apple's 'evil/genius' plan to punk the Web and gild the iPad." He looks at two different situations, based on Steve Jobs' speech at last year's Apple World Wide Developers Conference. Specifically, when Jobs defended Apple's take-it-or-leave-it approach to approving apps for the App Store—and the convenience of iAds, "a 100 percent Apple-owned, Apple-powered advertising platform" that Apple's called "a pillar of iOS." So Apple's pushing for easy, unskippable ads on the iPad, with Apple taking 40% of ad revenue. Meanwhile, Safari 5 has a great new feature: "Safari Reader removes annoying ads and other visual distractions from online articles."

> So the company that has made an advertising platform a major part of its iOS strategy is also hawking an ad-blocking technology for its Web browser, where it has no stake in ads. App Store: use our unblockable ads, developers! They help you get paid for your hard work! Web: hey, block some ads, readers! They're annoying!

After a little more discussion, we get this:

> So in the end we're left with a) an open platform where Apple is willing to toy with Web publishers, modify their content presentation, and suppress their ads, and b) Apple's curated, closed platform, where everything is done by Apple's rules or it's not done at all.

> On its own, a) is understandable. On its own, b) is understandable. But a) + b) = hypocrisy, unless Apple is going to allow users to suppress iAds, for free, on Apps that use iAds in the app store.

Fisher *knew* what he was getting into: he adds ten bullets of disclaimers and asides, including a clear

definition of hypocrisy and several other issues he knew would show up in comments—including his own environment: He wrote the article using Windows 7 while listening to streaming music from his Mac Pro and his home has two iPads. And he added this update:

> So the pro-Apple camp has brought me this retort: Apple's iAds just won't be as obnoxious as the ads you find online, so there is no need to block them. My response: if the ads are so great that no one in their reasonable mind would block them, then Apple should give us the ability to block them and put this conviction to the test. What's the risk? Apple gives users the ability to make the call on websites. Give users the ability to make the call on Apps.

A better response to that justification: Give me a break.

There are 407 comments as of this writing. I have not gone through all of them. "darconi"'s full comment is worth repeating, with the caveat that *ars technica* comment streams are much more reasonable than most: "Isn't it kinda sad that you need to put so many disclaimers when you publish an article critical of apple? What does that say about the fanboy environment?" Based on just the first hundred or so comments, the chief objections were that Apple's a corporation and therefore profit is the only proper motive, and that, yep, Apple's ads are *good*, so it's not an issue.

Prima Cinema

Jacqui Cheng describes this wonderful new product/service in an *ars technica* piece from, I guess, December 2010: "Want to watch a first-run movie at home? $20,500 please." That's right: This startup, clearly aimed at high-end homeowners and their $250,000 home theaters, will charge a one-time $20,000 fee to set up a digital delivery system in your home. After that, it's $500 per flick (not film: these are digital streams), and you can have as many people over as you like—and movies will be available on the say day they reach theaters.

The service is targeted for late 2011. Universal is on board and apparently so are some other major studios. Movie theater owners aren't wild about this, although one comment from a NATO (National Association of Theater Owners) spokesperson is a little extreme: "Only billionaires can afford $500 per movie." Not really; anyone worth at least,

say, $10-$20 million could afford the $20K startup fee and the $500-per-movie fee.

Cheng makes the story a *lot* more interesting by doing a little checking: How much does it cost to take over a movie theater for a private showing of a first-run flick? She found highly variable rates depending on location, time of day, and day, but for what's probably one of the most expensive cases—Saturday night for a brand-new movie—the prices were typically $400 to $600. (I'm guessing this is a small sample; the article notes that a Chicago chain cited $1,700 as the lowest non-matinee price, and that's for a 140-seat minicinema.) You wouldn't be in the comfort of your own home, but you could have a *lot* of friends over—and you'd avoid that $20K startup fee. Still, assuming Prima has figured out how to get a big enough digital pipe to these households, I'd guess this service would have a few thousand customers, probably enough to make an interesting business: There are a *lot* of multimillionaires out there. (My $250K figure for a home theater is, if anything, on the modest side. We don't have such a theater, to be sure—or any home theater.)

50 Worst Inventions

I can't even attempt to summarize this *Time* Special, but you can browse it at www.time.com/time/specials/packages/completelist/0,29569,1991915,00.html. That link gets you to a list of links, "in no particular order."

I suspect you could get some interesting discussions going about some of these as being "worst" inventions. While the :CueCat was a hugely expensive failure at the time (one that I thoroughly enjoyed dissing, since the notion was silly), it's had an odd little renascence in the library field—certainly not as a success, but as something less than an abject failure. Some inclusions are fascinating (crinoline), some are fairly obvious (hydrogen blimps), some are interesting given current, possibly-faddish, use (Foursquare, Farmville) and some are simply wrong—for example, Betamax, which was a great product that ran into marketing problems (as the actual piece notes). In any case, it's an amusing set of items.

Maylong M-150 TabletPC

Another Jacqui Cheng story on *ars technica,* apparently from December 2010, and this review has

a surprisingly strong title: "Worst gadget ever? Ars reviews a $99 Android tablet"

Worst ever? That's a tall order! Does this device, apparently on sale at Walgreens, live down to that claim? Here's the second paragraph:

> The Maylong M-150 TabletPC is an Android-based device sold by Walgreens for a mere $99 a pop. The obvious purpose for this tablet's existence is to appeal to bargain basement shoppers—grandmas, poor college kids, those on a tight budget—by claiming to offer a full tablet experience for cheap. I mean, it runs Android, right? That's a legit operating system nowadays. Unfortunately, the Maylong M-150 is the very epitome of "race to the bottom," and anyone looking to buy one would get more bang for the buck by setting it on fire for warmth.

The Maylong has a 7" screen with 800x480 resolution, which Cheng calls "limited" but is still pretty decent. It has 256MB RAM and 2GB storage, comes with b/g WifFi and no 3G support, weighs less than a pound…and, hmm, uses a resistive touchscreen (see earlier in this roundup). It's all plastic, and does have a built-in camera. It comes with a stylus (loose in the carton), which you're likely to need for a resistive screen. There's nowhere to store the stylus. As to using it? Cheng says "doing so is basically impossible for any sane person who values their time in any way." She calls the screen atrocious, with terrible sensitivity and inconsistent lag in response to make it hard to figure out what you're actually doing. Cheng could never get the Maylong to stay connected to the internet long enough to download anything.

Then there's battery life: two to three hours *standby* time, with an hour or less of actual usage, even with WiFi "on." But, as Cheng says, "it's so infuriating to use, you probably would never find yourself using it for more than an hour at a time anyway." The overall verdict: "Run screaming in the other direction."

There's a link at the bottom of the review to *BBYOPEN*, which seems to be related to Best Buy, and specifically a post "Maylong Android: more versatile than you think," offering screenshots "showcasing the wide variety of possible uses for the Maylong tablet." It's quite a gallery, showing that the Maylong will make a good coaster, cutting board, mouse pad and *more,* including a "pretend 'smart phone.'"

"Microsoft's raw deal"

I think this is a small but interesting product story: To wit, Microsoft says IE10 (that's right, *10*—even though IE9 is just starting to hit the street) will only run on Windows 7, not on XP or Vista. I might not even bother to note that—it's not going to matter for a while, for one thing—but Peter Bright's April 2010 story at *ars technica* makes it a bigger deal than it should be with the title "Microsoft's raw deal for Vista users: IE10 for Windows 7 only."

IE9 doesn't support XP. That seems sensible to Bright. But he thinks it's unreasonable for Microsoft to take the latter move—and maybe that's because, unlike most sources, Bright didn't seem to think there was much reason to move from Vista to Windows 7. (It's fair to say Bright viewed Vista much more favorably than most.)

Personally, I don't get the big deal. If you're sticking with XP, you can't move to IE9—but IE8's not that bad and there are, ahem, alternatives such as Chrome, Firefox and Opera. Are there tens of millions of people who are delighted with Vista, not willing to spend the money to move to Windows 7, but *absolutely in need of* the newest version of Internet Explorer? Somehow, that combination doesn't make a lot of sense to me. Bright makes it out to be a big deal affecting tens of millions of users. Maybe, maybe not.

RIP Flip

The full title of *Mashable*'s quick early-April piece is "RIP Flip Video Camera," and that's the message. Cisco bought Pure Digital, the company that produced the Flip—and is closing down that part of its consumer business. The *Mashable* take is that Flips were superseded by smartphones with builtin videocams. Maybe, maybe not. There are several other brands in the space. Perhaps Cisco just didn't know how to run a videocam company?

Editors' Choices and Roundups

I was bemused by the December 2010 *PC World* list of "Top 10 Budget Desktop PCs"; if nothing else, they show one reason I abandoned my PC price-point feature years ago. There are indeed ten desktops in the list, ranging in price from a $390 eMachines (bottom of the list) through the top-of-the-list Best Buy $589 Gateway, to an $899 HP,

which stretches the definition of "budget" (the only machines over $600 are that and another HP). What I really noticed, though, is that there are *three companies* on the list: Acer (in the form of two Gateways, one eMachines and three Acers), Dell, and HP (both as HP and as Compaq). **Three**. I find that a little sad. (I should note that the January 2011 roundup of "Top 10 Budget All-in-One PCs"—and who knew there *were* that many all-in-ones?—represents *seven* companies, including Acer via Gateway, HP, MSI, Lenovo, Asus and ViewSonic.)

The February 2011 *PC World* has another roundup of "security packages"—suites that go beyond antivirus software. No surprise in the winner: Norton Internet Security 2011 still comes out on top. One minor surprise in the Top 10: McAfee didn't score well enough to make it into the table at all. (Kaspersky is second, if you're wondering.) One interesting question: How do the malware components of these suites compare to, say, Microsoft Security Essentials, which is free and remarkably unobtrusive.

The CD-ROM Project
Some Work, Many Don't

My wife, the wise person and actual librarian in our household, asked me the other day why I was doing this at all—since libraries surely aren't buying new CD-ROM titles. I gave her a response similar to what I said back in July 2010 (*Cites & Insights* 10:8), and I think that's still valid. Briefly, since libraries don't automatically discard books from the late 1990s, and since many of these title CD-ROMs were "expanded books" in one way or another, I thought it would be worth seeing whether they still run on contemporary computers, whether they still seem worthwhile, what's replaced them and so on—along with some notes from when I first reviewed them.

On the other hand...the first six CD-ROMs I tried out this month wouldn't install at all. Period. In no case was this terribly surprising, but in some cases it was disappointing. After writing up earlier notes on three of them that had been quite interesting (if flawed) "virtual museums," I realized I no longer had the heart to track down possible web alternatives and that, indeed, recounting how

these titles *used to* work was mostly a history of things lost and a trifle depressing. Remembering when title CD-ROMs were touted as the Next Big Thing, possibly even replacing books, I will note this: Any book I purchased in 1995-1999 is still readable—but many title CD-ROMs purchased in that period are now entirely useless. [I was going to qualify "any book" with "except mass-market paperbacks"—but all the mass-market paperbacks I have from the mid-90s are entirely readable, as are ones that date back to 1965, cheap acid paper and all.]

Every CD-ROM I've kept around was fairly interesting. I didn't hold onto the total turkeys. From now on, I'm likely to just note wholly-failed titles and, if it's easy to determine, the minimum number of libraries holding those titles (as reflected in Worldcat.org), *maybe* noting apparent direct replacements. Most space will go to the titles that still work, and I don't think much more space will be devoted to this project at all. For this episode, covering ten CD-ROMs, the batting average is 200: Two titles worked, eight did not.

North American Birds

Full title: *North American Birds with Roger Tory Peterson, version 1.1.* When I reviewed this in the April/May 1997 *DATABASE*, I gave it a 94—a strong Excellent score. I called it a "charmer," based on Roger Tory Peterson's acclaimed field guides to North American birds. "If you're a birdwatcher (birder) in North America and you have Windows, you probably already own this disc. If not, go buy it." That's a strong endorsement for a $50 item.

Why did I like it so much? Because it did things a printed field guide couldn't do as well: Not only include fine drawings for more than 1,000 species (with notes on markings, range, and other categories) and photographs for some 700 of them, but also provide field recordings of bird songs and calls for 700 species. The disc also includes Peterson's video commentary and some spoken commentaries, along with support materials. I wasn't sure the disc would work as a circulating item: it's something you'd want to refer to repeatedly (and even includes a tool to build a lifelist of sighted birds).

Red-tailed Hawk

19–25" (48–63 cm)   *Buteo jamaicensis*

This is the most widespread and familiar large hawk in North America, bulky and broad-winged, designed for effortless soaring. An inhabitant of open country, it is commonly seen perched on roadside poles or sailing over fields and woods. Although adults usually can be recognized by the trademark reddish brown tail, the rest of their plumage can be quite variable, especially west of the Mississippi: western Red-tails can range from blackish to rufous-brown to nearly white.

In the illustration, the Field View brings up a full-screen photo; Range brings up a map of North America with summer, winter (none in this case) and year-round ranges shown along with notes on migration; Voice yields a good-quality field recording; Similar brings up a partial-screen graphic of the broader visual category ("Buteos" in this case), and the other five buttons yield pop-up text boxes on the topics noted. There's a *lot* of information, both visual and textual, and it's well-presented. (I chose this as one of three hawk varieties that frequent the property behind our house.)

Current installation and operation

System requirements that seemed a little ambitious in 1997—16MB of disk space and 16-bit color—are now trivial. The install isn't quite automatic, but if you follow instructions, *it works*—although it may insist on overlaying existing ODBC files (and renaming existing files).

Not only does installation work, so does the disc—with a mildly annoying animated Houghton-Mifflin Interactive logo at startup and, the first time you use it, a video introduction from Peterson. Once or twice, I got an error message "Unable to switch palettes"—but it continued to run without incident, providing excellent color. (Did any PCs have 24-bit color in 1995?) The audio clips worked, the videos worked, the popups worked. Amazing.

One small irritant: While the operating window can be moved, it can't be enlarged—it's stuck at 640x480, which does seem small on a typical contemporary screen. I didn't try online links. Otherwise, this is a product that continues to work as an extended book, doing things a book really can't do. More than 130 libraries have copies of this

CD-ROM; those copies should still be useful and worth using.

Contemporary alternatives

A version that may be somewhat newer (Amazon started selling it in 2002) is currently available, although it's been discontinued by its publisher. The disc is also available in a 4-CD package (for $15 or so), "The Ultimate Birder," along with a National Audubon Society guide, the North American Bird Reference Book, and a disc of eagle screensaver images.

Peterson's books and other guides continue to be available, to be sure.

A variety of websites offer birding information, including whatbird.com, which seems to have good information in a reasonably accessible form and includes both photos and birdcalls. While the drawings didn't strike me as being nearly as good, overall this and other resources probably make reasonable, scalable, free alternatives. If there's an app for use on a mobile device, either free or for a modest price, ideally with the ability to download the full guide (for times you don't have online service—e.g., on most hikes) that would seem to be the best of both worlds, as in the field is precisely where you want this most.

Ancient Origins

I reviewed this in the June/July 1999 *DATABASE* as one of several Codie candidates (actually, *North American Birds* was also received and reviewed as a Codie candidate). I was impressed, giving it a 95 (high Excellent score), saying "They don't come much better than this." Lots of content provided in a variety of thoughtful ways, with a timeline running from 5 million BC to 500 AD, offering a variety of ways to study 44 primary cultures—including more than 2,000 illustrations, 11 interactive excavations, 52 documentaries, 17 ancient instruments (some of which you could play), seven virtual reconstructions in QTVR, and a couple of indexes. It's definitely a disc to explore.

Current installation and operation

Installation went smoothly (after I unchecked the "Install QuickTime" item, checked by default—it reminded me that some form of QuickTime was required). And, well, it started right up. It requires a 640x480 window, appears to use up to 800x600 and, unfortunately, takes over the primary screen

entirely—it's not a movable, scalable Windows-type window.

That said, it seems to work just fine.

I thought it was a bargain for $40 in 1999. It's still an impressive tool for exploring a range of cultures, and appears to be done with as much clarity and honesty as possible. The screenshot shows a European culture, but other regions are treated with depth and without apparent condescension. In the original review I said "Creationists will hate this disc, as will racial supremacists of any stripe." I'll stand by that comment. I thought you'd need 20 to 40 hours to explore the disc fully, and that might be an understatement. Would anybody give it that much time these days?

One other glitch (in addition to taking over the primary screen entirely, although there turns out to be an obscure Minimize button): When I tried to run it a second time, to pick up the screenshot above, the CD-ROM's GO.EXE program said it wasn't installed yet, and the copy of the AAW.EXE program on hard disc didn't do anything—but when I double-clicked the AAW.EXE program *on the CD-ROM*, it started up just fine. The disc also runs on Macs, without installation, although I have no idea whether that includes OS X.

Amazon still lists the CD-ROM, but only from other sellers. At $10, it's an even better bargain, albeit probably outdated since it's missing 12 years of archaeology. Worldcat.org shows at least 17 libraries owning this. It's still useful and, indeed, an excellent way to gain better understanding of the variety of ancient cultures, far beyond the best-known examples.

Some That Don't

Warwick Interactive offered a really interesting series of virtual museums with the running title "A Better Way to Explore Our Planet," originally pro-

duced in Britain by the BBC and various other entities. I reviewed and liked "Lost Animals: Living on the Edge of Extinction" (highlighting 50 species that apparently went extinct in the 20th century), "Worlds of the Reef" (exploring the coral reef in the waters off Belize), and "Sonoran Desert" (explorations from the Gila Field Center in Arizona). Somewhere between six and two dozen libraries seem to have these titles. I wonder whether anybody's attempted to use them lately? In my case, setup failed almost immediately on all three discs, with no apparent way to proceed.

In a fourth case, "Discovering Endangered Wildlife," I'd apparently never reviewed it—and never will, since it didn't install either. As many as two dozen libraries appear to own this one.

I also recall being fond of two Compton's Home Library discs, *The Genius of Edison* and *Battles of the World*. At least 30 libraries own the first CD-ROM and more than 50 own the second. I couldn't get either one to install.

The Dead Sea Scrolls Revealed didn't quite rate an Excellent, but it was still a worthwhile exploration of the topic. It *appeared* to install, but attempting to run it yielded a Director error message suggesting my hard disk might be full (it had 160GB free space at that point) because it couldn't copy a directory to the hard disk. Given that the disk came out in 1994 and was probably designed for Windows 3.1, maybe that's not surprising. There are so many slightly different versions of this title on Worldcat.org that I can only say *some* libraries own it—and a few own a 2006 version, directly from the Israeli institute that licensed this one to Logos. The 2006 version may be Mac-only or might be updated to actually work on contemporary systems.

Cheyenne Dog Soldiers is a virtual museum exhibit related to the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864 and the history of the Cheyenne Dog Soldiers (or Hotamétaneo'o) in general, prepared in cooperation with the Colorado Historical Society. I gave it an Excellent rating in a June/July 1999 *DATABASE* review for its depth, honesty in portraying an American betrayal, and general quality. It didn't require or allow installation, running directly from the CD-ROM, but without an Autoplay file, suggesting that the disc was really developed for the Mac and ported to Windows. Unfortunately, double-clicking on the appropriate .exe file (the only

way to run it) yields...nothing. A shame. It's still available, and more than a dozen libraries own the title. Best guess: It won't run on any Windows from XP on. I could be wrong.

My Back Pages
If I Don't See the Difference…

...then nobody else does, or nobody else should, or nobody should pay extra for the difference. Or any of a number of similar arguments, expressed with comments like "why bother?" or "scientific" claims (such as results of surveys where a few hundred folks can't reliably tell which of two wines, tasted blind, is more expensive).

Sometimes it's a little stronger. Blake Carver, who in many ways I like and admire (otherwise, *C&I* wouldn't be hosted at LISHost), gave this as his reason for posting a link that, at third hand, discussed such a survey—that is, 587 participants were only 50% successful in deciding which of two wines was more expensive—"oenophiles are all full of shit and it's all just subjective and people waste a stupid amount of time and money on spoiled grape juice."

OK, that's hyperbole on Blake's part—or at least I think it is.

Here's what I wrote about this, entirely off the cuff (it couldn't have taken much more than half an hour), in a *Walt at Random* post, "Plonk and circumstance," on April 18, 2011:

> Lifehacker has a story entitled "Why It May Make Sense To Reach for the Cheaper Wine." It references a BBC report based on blind taste tests among 587 people at the Edinburgh Science Festival, tests indicating that people were only about 50% successful in deciding which of two wines was more expensive, based only on the taste.
>
> The BBC report has a misleading title–"Cheap wine 'good as pricier bottles' – blind taste test"–and a highly questionable concluding paragraph:
>
> > Lead researcher psychologist Professor Richard Wiseman said: "These are remarkable results. People were unable to tell expensive from inexpensive wines, and so in these times of financial hardship the message is clear – the inexpensive wines we tested tasted the same as their expensive counterparts."

Without seeing the full study and what wines were involved, it's impossible to provide a full critique, but right off the bat a couple of things should be obvious:

- As stated, the test was not whether people could tell a difference in the taste of two wines. It was whether they could accurately say which one cost more. Those are entirely different things.

- On the other hand, this paragraph is almost certainly correct–but also almost certainly blindingly obvious: "University of Hertfordshire researchers say their findings indicate many people may just be paying for a label." Wow! Some people buy more expensive X because of the label, not the quality (or think that because X_2 costs more than X_1, it must be better). I can think of dozens, probably hundreds of values for X where that's true; that it might be true of wine as well should come as no surprise.

There's another related story at StackExchange, and I link to it not so much for the text as for the comments, which are relatively few and in some cases fairly interesting (even if the first one is flatly wrong–some of France's most expensive and best-known wines are blends, as a fast response points out). Come to think of it, the third and fourth comments on the Lifehacker story–as I write this–are also worthwhile, if somewhat less formal. (Also the fifth and sixth if you expand the comments.)

I labeled the story and study "silly" in a Friendfeed thread. I did so because, at least as reported, the study doesn't really lead anywhere.

Why? Because we should know this, and it's true not only of wines but of many, perhaps most, products that engage subjective evaluation. It boils down to this:

Different people have different tastes and different sensitivity levels–and for many people, subjective response is based on more than a narrow objective reality.

I believe that's exactly as it should be. I'm occasionally offended by reviews where I believe the reviewer is overstating objective differences because of subjective preferences that may have nothing to do with actual performance–thus, my occasional MY BACK PAGES comments on some high-end stereo reviews.

> Which is to say: There's nothing wrong at all with a wealthy person paying $25,000 for an amplifier with badly substandard frequency response and low wattage because they like the way it looks, or they love the warm glow of

tubes, or they like the maker, or they just like having a rare amplifier. I'm mildly offended by reviewers asserting that the $25,000 amplifier is Clearly Superior to a $500 amplifier, and worth every cent, when it appears from the article that they're as much influenced by their friendship with the manufacturer as by the actual sound. Understanding that blind testing of audio products, as with many other products, is inherently flawed, I've always wondered what a "Radio Shack test" would yield–that is, a testing regimen in which the reviewer can take as much time as he or she wants, but the device being tested is encased in a cabinet that makes it indistinguishable from the cheapest device sold by Radio Shack.

The general case: Sensitivity and acuity

On one hand, it should be obvious that most of us aren't terribly sensitive to differences in most areas of daily life, and that's probably as it should be.

Would most beer drinkers–or, even worse, most non-beer drinkers–properly guess which was more expensive (or which was "better") if served Brew 102 (if it still exists) or Fisher and, alongside, the most expensive beer of similar style in the world?

I suspect most people who don't drink high-end Scotch wouldn't be better than random chance at determining whether a $10 Scotch or a $250 Scotch was "better" or "more expensive" or even *different*–I don't think I would be able to make those distinctions, and if I did, I might well prefer the simpler character of the cheap Scotch. (This may not be a fair comparison–it appears that the price differentials in the wine test were as small as 2:1, not 10:1...or in the case of sparkling wine, only 1.7:1. I suspect I couldn't reliably tell you which of two sparkling wines, one costing $29 and one costing $46, the dollar equivalent of the stated £ prices, was the more expensive–that's a price range in which I'd expect the wines to both be excellent with subtle differences. Given that our favorite sparkling wine, Schramsberg Blanc de Blanc, is in the $24-$27 range, I can comfortably state that I wouldn't expect to reliably tell whether a $46 blanc de blanc was better or more expensive.)

It's not just drink. Can you really tell me that most people could tell whether a pair of shoes cost $75 or $150 based on how comfortable or well-constructed they are? (Or, let's say, a good pair of Rockports vs. a pair of designer shoes costing four times as much.) That most people could tell whether a painting is worth $10 or $200 based on nothing more than the image? That most people hearing a stereo costing $2,000 and one costing $1,000 can

tell which is which or which costs more? (Especially if the only difference between the two is in either a digital frontend or the amplification...tell me that the average listener can tell which of a $12,000 CD player or a $200 CD player is more expensive, given only audible clues!)

The specific case: Price in wine is a complex proposition

That's true in many other fields as well. If you think there's a direct ratio between cost and either quality or "driving experience" in automobiles, I'd beg to differ. A VW Golf is a 50% better car than a Honda Fit? A BMW 750LI will give you three times the driving pleasure of an Acura TSX and 4.5 times the pleasure of a Hyundai Sonata? Really?

With wine–as with many other products–the price involves a whole bunch of things, all of which can affect worth for some consumers: Rarity (size of producer, size of production), complexity, time spent in production, deliberate marketing decisions...

There are lots of California red wines priced at $75/bottle and up because the tiny little wineries that make them have based their business plans on such high prices. I'm not likely to try any of them, and not worry about what I'm missing. In many cases, those pricey wines are also very high alcohol because that's what Robert Parker and some other wine critics seem to like; if I was to taste one of these 14.5-15% $75 wines vs. a decently-made $12 wine with 13.5% alcohol, I'd probably prefer the "cheap" wine–and might even assume it was more expensive.

There's a reason Two Buck Chuck is so popular. It's not terrible wine. It's simple wine without lots of pretension. That makes it preferable to more expensive wines for many buyers. I don't buy it these days, but I don't disdain it.

I do buy $4 Chardonnays at Trader Joe's, and $5 Chardonnays and $6 Chardonnays. In general, I find them to be better values and better wines than quite a few $8-$12 name-brand Chardonnays, partly because they're usually 12.5%-13% alcohol, partly because they're well-made with no marketing budget. But we also picked up a $26 Chardonnay at a Livermore winery; it's probably worth the money–but I'd rarely want to drink a bottle that expensive. I've certainly had $12 and $15 wines that simply didn't taste as good as $4 wines–and I've tasted $30 and $40 wines that I wouldn't serve on a bet.

There's no accounting for tastes–and there's very little accounting for taste sensitivity. That makes most studies of these sorts not terribly useful, ex-

cept for those who want to convince themselves that there really aren't any differences between different products. Sometimes, even that's true–but not generally.

You love your high-end Cognac? Good for you. I simply wouldn't appreciate the difference between it and E&J. I might or might not be able to tell the difference but I wouldn't appreciate it. So, **for me**, it's not worth the substantial extra cost. That's partly because cognac and brandy don't interest me (same with most booze, actually). It's also partly because it's not a sensitivity I've chosen to cultivate, and might not have even if I did so. Doesn't mean there are no differences.

Oh, and as to cars? There's a reason I've never owned anything but Honda Civics, and if that changes, it would change toward a Fit, not a Mercedes or Lamborghini...even if I won SuperLotto.

That's the general case, and maybe it's all there is to say. Here's a recent example of what you could also call "leveling"—the assertion that, because some people or most people or, more particularly, the person speaking doesn't hear or see or taste or appreciate a difference, therefore nobody does or should, or at least nobody should cater to that difference.

To wit, "iTunes may upgrade to 24-bit files, but why bother?"—appearing some time in March 2011 on *ars technica*. (I do wish *at* would run actual publication dates, not stuff like "Last updated about a month ago). The story's by Chris Foresman, and here's the lead:

> In the age of highly compressed music files playing on iPods and even lower-quality Pandora streams playing on iPhones, some artists, music producers, and others in the music industry are apparently pushing for iTunes and other digital download services to adopt higher-fidelity 24-bit files. But while a small niche of audiophiles might appreciate the move, it seems unlikely that the necessary sea change in hardware and software will happen in order to support such a move, nor do we see consumers flocking to 24-bit files in order to make it economically viable.

The last sentence there is at least partly nonsense: Hardware and software to handle 24-bit, 96kHz downloads and digital music *already exists*, and there appears to be enough of a market for it to support more devices in the marketplace. "Economically viable" is a tricky term—to some commentators, anything short of a billion-dollar marketplace isn't economically viable, while to lots of small businessfolk, a million dollars a year would be enormous success.

Fortunately, in the real world, there's room for both—which makes me wonder why Foresman seems to feel the higher resolution should be suppressed. The next paragraph is a little silly, in that it mentions the wider dynamic range possible with 24-bit samples but fails to note the much larger problem: Most contemporary music has its dynamic range compressed to nearly nothing. Similarly, while *some* people play music in highly-compressed form, it's pretty clear that millions of people have happily migrated to less-compressed or uncompressed music as player capacities have risen. "In an age of" is one of those "I'm about to make an unsupportable generalization" headers: This is, in fact, an age of 24/96 music, highly-compressed music, the growth of vinyl, and all stations in between. Isn't that kind of diversity and choice what we're *supposed* to get in a "digital age"?

I wonder about this statement: "The difference between an uncompressed 24-bit/96kHz recording master and a 256kbps, 16-bit/44.1kHz iTunes Plus track is great indeed..." If that's true, why shouldn't high-end music-lovers have the choice? For me, *for most music*, the difference between a 320k MP3 track that began as a 16/44 CD track and the CD track itself isn't clearly audible—but that's *for me, for most music*. I wouldn't be in the market for 24/96 recordings. I'm not the potential customer.

The story goes on to describe all the components that would need to downsample 24/96 recordings to play them, which is irrelevant unless someone's trying to get Apple to *stop* selling 256K MP3 downloads. When the story goes on to say "The case could be made that 24-bit audio files would sound better, assuming consumers could (or would) get access to hardware capable of playing it," it's confusing mass-market issues with reality. Consumers *can and do* gain access to hardware capable of playing 24/96 streams. That's like saying that expensive wine and better-than-Coors beer shouldn't exist because 90% of consumers won't pay for them and wouldn't appreciate the difference. Or, for that matter, that no restaurant selling burgers that cost three times as much as Big Macs could possibly survive, since 90% of customers won't care about the difference.

The final paragraph says: "For the vast majority of listeners—many of which are satisfied with

low-bit rate streams from the likes of Pandora—a transition to 24-bit audio would be superfluous." I'm sure that's true. It's also *meaningless*.

As to actual availability...as far as I know, every Mac OS and Windows computer can store big files and can transmit data fast enough to handle 24/96 streams. Some onboard DACs (digital/analog converters) might not support 24/96, but an external DAC connected to a USB 2.0 port will work just fine, and such devices are readily available. So: **Strike 1**: Damn near every music lover with a personal computer has hardware and software that can handle 24/96 music, with at most one relatively inexpensive addition. (And, until that addition is handy, the media software on both platforms automatically downconverts the higher-quality streams.). **Strike 2**: Everybody who owns a Blu-ray Disc player owns a device capable of playing back 24/96 (and 24/192) sound; it's part of the specifications.

The key here: There *is* a market for higher quality, and it's a legitimate market. Denouncing the market only makes sense from a leveling perspective—the idea that if everybody doesn't get it or want it, then it shouldn't exist. And that doesn't help anybody. Personally, I'm 99% certain that my aging ears (which could probably use aids) couldn't tell the difference between what I listen to now and 24/96 streams. So? So I wouldn't buy the higher resolution—but I sure wouldn't tell other people that it's wrong for them to do so. Can the "average consumer" hear the difference? *That doesn't matter*.

We don't have one car model suitable for the average driver. We don't have one hamburger suitable for the average palate. Trader Joe's doesn't *just* sell Two Buck Chuck, even though it may be their most appropriate wine for many drinkers. Life shouldn't be about average.

Asynchrony is Bad?

I haven't yet consigned Nick Carr to the "shooting fish in a barrel" category; he frequently thinks well, even as he makes big bucks from oversimplified and overgeneralized notions. "The eternal conference call," from way back on October 12, 2009 at *Rough Type,* may fall into the latter category.

Carr talks about early email and this: "The great thing about email, everyone said and everyone believed, was that it was an *asynchronous communications medium*." No, I'm not objecting to

the nonsensical "everyone said and everyone believed" (did even 2% of the population *ever* say "the great thing about email is that it's an asynchronous communications medium"? Yeah, right...). I could, but objecting to every nonsensical "everybody" Carr uses really *would* be shooting fish in a barrel—he's a Pundit, so he does this as naturally as breathing. Anyway, it had to do with email's advantage over the telephone and the apparently-negative consequence that email "dramatically reduced the transaction costs of personal communications." Translated from PunditSpeak, you don't have to think as much before sending an email as you would before calling them. Which, if you're a dramatist, leads to "email hell." Ah, but here's the kicker:

> Turns out, we were mistaken about email all along. Asynchrony was never actually a good thing. It was simply an artifact of a paucity of bandwidth.

Where, now, well...he quotes Jessica Vascellaro from the *Wall Street Journal*:

> We all still use email, of course. But email was better suited to the way we used to use the Internet—logging off and on, checking our messages in bursts. Now, we are always connected, whether we are sitting at a desk or on a mobile phone. The always-on connection, in turn, has created a host of new ways to communicate that are much faster than email, and more fun. Why wait for a response to an email when you get a quicker answer over instant messaging? [Email] seems boring compared to services like Google Wave.

There's Oscar Brown Jr. in my head again, "What you mean *we*..." since I'm not always connected and neither are loads of other people sane enough to turn off both their computer and their smartphone at least some of the time.

Is Carr suggesting that this overgeneralization is nonsense? Of course not. Here's his take:

> The flaw of synchronous communication has been repackaged as the boon of realtime communication. Asynchrony, once our friend, is now our enemy. The transaction costs of interpersonal communication have fallen below zero: It costs more to leave the stream than to stay in it. The approaching Wave promises us the best of both worlds: the realtime immediacy of the phone call with the easy broadcasting capacity of email. Which is also, as we'll no doubt come to discover, the worst of both worlds. Welcome to the conference call that never ends. Welcome to Wave hell.

While those last two sentences *could* be reasonable, the post as a whole assumes that "we" all are and should be online and interruptible all the time. Fortunately, as to Wave hell, well, just not going to happen.

In this case, the first comment (by Steven Chabot) nails it, after noting that Carr's hyperbole can be amusing: "While pundits during the supposed time of 'email hell' were praising asynchrony over synchrony, actual people were using whatever medium suited them best... The problem with hyperbole, used by those pundits who see Google Wave as the end of email, is that reality is much more nuanced and multifaceted than that..."

I do love the final comment of John Koetsier, an early Wave invitee who invited other folks and then waited...and waited...: "It's the conference call that never starts!"

Ignorance or Bias?

That's the question that comes to mind when I read "news" coverage as woefully ignorant as *Home Theater*'s March 2011 piece on Redbox and its possible plans to introduce monthly rental plans that combine a few DVD rentals with unlimited streaming. The survey asked Redbox customers "whether they'd like a monthly plan that costs $3.95 for unlimited streaming plus four DVD rentals." Well, sure—why wouldn't they, given that you'd pay $4.00 just for the four DVD rentals? It's the next sentence that earns a mention here: "Compare that with Netflix, which charges $27.99 per month for unlimited streaming with four DVDs, or $7.99 per month for streaming with no discs."

If this was, say, *Car & Driver* or even the *Wall Street Journal*, I'd say it was just a stupid comparison, since Netflix' $27.99 plan includes *mailing and return postage* for as many DVDs as you want, *four at a time*—and I'd expect someone at that level to be going through at least 16 DVDs a month. But this is *Home Theater*'s turf, which makes the comparison seem pretty peculiar: Can Mark Fleischmann, a supposed expert in home entertainment, not *understand* this? Or is he just anti-Netflix?

Deathwatch for the Mouse

Some titles are so self-parodying that I should probably just get out of the way, such as this one from a *Wired Magazine* piece (February 2010): "Steven Levy on the Desktop Mouse and Its Inevi-

table Extinction." I mean... we have Steven Levy. We have him *using his own name* as part of an article title. We have "inevitable" and "extinction"— and all this *Wired*World goodness in just one article title.

He tells us "mouses have all been pretty much the same." (The illustration is of a one-button mouse, and of course all mice are one-button.) And since "more and more of us" use laptops instead of desktops, "the mouse has become an endangered species." You or I might note that *not all of us* have shifted to laptops—and that some of us (I raise my hand) use a notebook computer but continue to use a mouse.

And, of course, you can do things with trackpads that you can't do with mice (or at least that Levy doesn't think you can do), like scrolling through documents (which I do with the scroll-wheel on my mouse) or "tab between open applications." He notes a wonderful new $69 Apple mouse that might "revivify the flagging fortunes of the species" for a while ($69? For a mouse? Really? Ah, but it's Apple, so it's Insanely Great. In fact, most of this article is actually a typical Levy swoon over anything from the Magic Mind of Steve Jobs.)

The Apple "Magic Mouse" is touch sensitive, so it does things Levy "cannot live without"—"the finger slide that scrolls the page up, down, or sideways." Hyperbole, much? "Stat! Levy's unable to do a finger slide, and he'll die any minute now!" But even that isn't the point. Nope, it's this, from the omniscient Levy so it must be true:

> Ultimately, we're going to be doing our pointing without devices—either by touching surfaces directly or gesturing air-guitar style as cameras interpret our movements... Or we'll just bark orders at voice-recognition-enabled machines. Either way, no amount of legerdemain will stop the computer mouse's inevitable scuttle down the long tail of oblivion.

Remember, we're not talking declining market share. Nope, it's *oblivion*. We *all* will point without devices or talk to our computers. "Down. Not that far; up a bit. Now right...no, left a little." How could I have lived with clumsy old, slow, mice?

Internet Fads

When is something a fad and when is it a lasting part of the internet? That's always a tough call. Id' like to say this *Tremendous News* piece, "5 Signs

You're Part Of An Internet Fad," posted February 17, 2010, makes it clearer—but it doesn't really. For one thing, even lasting parts can fade away. (Remember AOL? Remember AltaVista? For that matter, remember MySpace—still being used by millions of people?)

It's a fun read, though, starting with the lead sentence: "Nobody wants to believe that they're part of a fad." And the writer notes that Facebook and Twitter *could* be fads. (Don't believe it? Were you ever on Orkut? How about SecondLife?)

> The Internet is about right now.
>
> Right now we want to read short electrical messages from Ashton Kutcher. Right now we want to view tagged photos of chicks who rejected us but still allowed us to add them to Facebook. Right now we want to play Mafia Wars.
>
> Fine.
>
> Some of us are just assholes.
>
> But whatever we want right now, changes tomorrow. Think about the fallen Internet heroes of yesterday.
>
> The days when Yahoo was the shit.
>
> Ha!
>
> *Yahoo.*

Here are the Five Signs, without the commentary:

1. People are way too into it.
2. People are scared when something else comes out.
3. The spam surprises you with its creativity.
4. It's called a "game-changer."
5. It becomes corporate.

No further comment. Note that this is appearing in MY BACK PAGES, not in TRENDS & QUICK TAKES—although I also had it tagged for possible use in a Perspective on Social Networks and Balance. I think it mostly belongs here in the cheap seats.

Those People are Everywhere!

Here's a fun one, even if it is over a year old, and I'm certainly not criticizing the post in this case. It's by Chris Barton at *Fair Trade Photographer*, posted March 5, 2010, entitled "Microstock: why would a reputable company do this to themselves?"

Barton was looking at a company website, thinking about giving them some business, and saw a picture of five people (three women, two men, standing in a V formation). It made him "cringe involuntarily":

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. Well, this one has a lot to say. It says microstock. It says perfect-people perfect-world lowest-common-denominator cookie-cutter pile-them-high sell-them-cheap image.

Why? Well...next there's 123 Greetings "Corporate Info," with the samfe five people in the same pose. And aixonix, a German consulting firm...with what surely appear to be exactly the same people in the same pose (but cropped top and bottom). And FeTEL, some Asian company. And the Business Gold Club. And more.

Think Barton's "just poking fun at the short-sightedness of companies using cheap microstock images to represent their... well, image"? The next one is BusinessImage, "A Marketing & Design Group, and right over About Us are...the same five people in the same pose. As is true for "About Us" on the FinanceMe! site. There are more—including one from Targetti Poulsen explicitly labeled "OUR PEOPLE" (which leads Barton to wonder "why would I trust anything else that Targetti Poulsen have to say?"

There are more, including the same folks on the website Barton calls "this month's prize for dodgiest domain name," namely Bad-CreditCosmeticSurgeryLoans.co.uk.

Oh c'mon. You've seen it. Not that you'd ever get anything like two or three different library professional books using the same (or nearly the same) cover image composed of book spines and a notebook cover. Nah. That could *never* happen.

Masthead

URL: citesandinsights.info/civ11i6.pdf