Environmental Technology Is Still a Little Green

Column by Matthew H. Hersch

Technology is a strange and wonderful thing. It allows people to stop wasting time on the trivial and spend time on more important things, like sleeping, eating, helping each other, and discovering things.

But the revolutions technology can produce are never quick. Science is an isolated art, and it often takes years, even centuries for scientific advances to adapt themselves into useful products.

This is a good thing. Experimental technologies — automobiles, coffee makers, nuclear power — are often too crude in their initial forms to really provide any net increase in utility for their human users.

Nuclear fission, for example, promises high energy return for the mass of fuel consumed, yet the waste produced by it more than makes up for the gains made in energy production. It will be years before the technology of nuclear power becomes an efficient technology.

This is the natural way of progress. It took decades for people to adopt automobiles as a means of transportation, and that delay had positive results. If people had adapted to the first cars more quickly, we might still be riding around in steam-powered contraptions that have to be turned on half an hour before you want to ride in them. Public revulsion to experimental technologies provides a great impetus for engineers to improve on them.

The real-world constraints of technology, though, have yet to dawn on some environmentalists.

When I went back to my hometown last weekend, many in the community were up in arms about an ordinance requiring them to separate their trash for recycling. Even more ludicrous were reports that in a nearby city, citizens would be required to separate their trash into five different categories for disposal.

The residents of my town are right to be angry, and any idea that the same urban dwellers who dump garbage out their windows will soon separate it into neat plastic containers is patently ludicrous.

It is great that the technology exists to reclaim natural resources from waste. It is wrongful and naive to settle for a recycling program in which people are required to spend more time worrying about their trash than they did before.

This is not how human beings work — they are only motivated to act when they sense the potential for personal gain. Any technological service that wastes time instead of saving it is merely an experiment, unfit for widespread use and inappropriate for public consumption.

This is not to say we should not care about the environment. On the contrary, we should care even more, and avoid settling into an environmental program that is technologically immature. In doing so we are only inviting failure, and worse, a suspension of recycling activities if people become fed up with the system.

Clearly, the technology exists to separate trash chemically. It is the job of science to discover a way to do it, to improve our society in a way that is economical, time-saving, and easy. In a world stripped of academic pretensions, this is what science is for.

As today's veteran programmers are watching their jobs being outsourced to the far corners of the earth, you can't help but ask yourself, "is there a secure future in programming?"

In Decline and Fall of the American Programmer, Ed Yourdon demonstrates how U.S. software organizations can become world class shops if they exploit the key software technologies of the 1990's. Companies and programmers that master these new technologies can be sure of superior productivity and quality — and those that don't won't be here when the 21st century starts.


1992, 320 pp., cloth, 6 x 9", 0-13-203670-3 $24.95

How secure is your future in computing?

Decline & Fall of the American Programmer

Edward Yourdon

"View this book as a Tom Peters-style search for excellence in the software world. Be prepared to be angered. Be prepared to be confronted. Be prepared to change."

Prentice Hall

BYTE Magazine, July 1992

Available at your college bookstore