

Subject: PC410 News, February 2017: When is Technology Too New?

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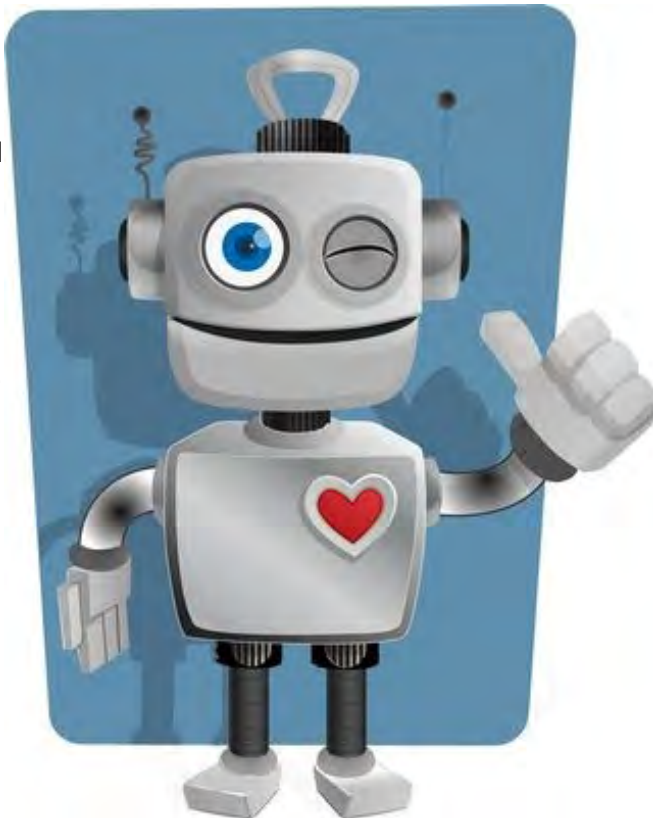
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When is Technology Too New?

Don't be somebody else's guinea pig. There's a reason that the latest and greatest widget is called the leading edge, or sometimes the bleeding edge of technology. If it still has rough corners, somebody's gonna bleed. New technology isn't particularly polished, compatible, or cheap. So configuration costs are high, and there can be a longer-than-normal list of "While we're doing this, we really should upgrade that." items.

The Amazon Echo and Google Home devices live in your home and can do things for you, like playing music, or ordering, well, dollhouses. A San Diego TV station said these magic words on television in a news report: "Alexa order me a dollhouse", and multiple Amazon Echo boxes heard that broadcast and obeyed, by ordering a dollhouse. More on that here:

http://www.theregister.co.uk/2017/01/07/tv_anchor_says_alex_a_buy_me_a_dollhouse_and_she_does/



And then there was the Google advertisement for Google Home during the Superbowl. Early adopters of the new Google gadget found that when the television said the "OK Google" trigger phrase, their Google Home device woke up. Fortunately, it was not dollhouse-enabled: <http://www.cnbc.com/2017/02/06/googles-home-tv-ad-makes-google-home-systems-go-crazy.html>

Any science-fiction reader knows that voice-controlled whole-house computers are on the way, that they will use voice recognition to only allow commands from a specific

individual, and have a special command to say 'Make it so'. In Robert Heinlein's books, commands had to end with "I tell you three times." Clearly, we haven't reached the competence level of science fiction from 1980.

The Internet of (Stupid) Things

There are a lot of cheap security cameras and so-called 'smart' light bulbs available now. These devices 'connect to your cell phone' and let you control them. Warning flag there—they connect to the internet in order to trade information with a central server, and accept outside instructions to control them, relayed from your cell phone, and possibly any other system that knows the sometimes-obvious default password, which is generally '1234'.

In the past year, there have been incidents like these:

The largest web site attacks ever seen were accomplished by taking over security camera video recorders (network DVRs), telling millions of them to attack a single site and take it down. As over 80 brands of security DVRs are made by just one company in China, and they share the same settings, and passwords like "123456", they're trivial to find online and then turn into attack 'bots.

Some purchasers of video baby monitors were surprised to find that their baby monitors showed someone else's nursery. There were some basic security flaws that didn't account for two monitors on one account, or monitors returned as unwanted needing to be reset to factory defaults.

For many of these products, there is no way to contact the purchasers with a fix, and no way for purchasers to contact the manufacturer; a no-name product means no updates, no notices of security issues, and no fixes.

Incrementalitis: The Un-Upgrade

Sometimes a new edition of a product works well for all the features of the previous version, but for the newly-added 'reasons to upgrade', well, they're just not ready. Windows has had a long set of new features that didn't work, but were heavily promoted. Windows 7 has clumsy support for touch screens, but that feature works well in Windows 10.

Windows 95 had no Internet support until you also bought the Win 95 Plus! add-on, and that gave you Internet Explorer version 1.0, based on the old NCSA Mosaic software from the National Center for Supercomputing Applications at the University of Illinois. Now, the internet in Windows generally works without any setup whatsoever.

And going all the way back to 1993, in Windows for Workgroups 3.11, we had "network support", which worked if you fiddled with the settings long enough for the other computers to declare Bingo! and accept the connection. Networking has become better in subsequent Windows, and now, it works if you don't mix product ages too dramatically.

While yet-another faster version of what we're using is generally a safe purchase, it pays to check reviews on new technology. And new tech should come from old names. If the latest, greatest technology is from a good company with a history of good products, I know they'll get it right at some point. But if it's a no-name security camera from an Amazon Marketplace vendor shipping directly from the Hong Kong post office, it's trouble. Such vendors may be OK for a cheap cell phone case, but not for anything that's complex or new.

Contact

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