

Chance (Winter 1997)

Lost in Cyberspace

Sometimes, when I'm on the information superhighway, I feel like road kill. Everyone whizzes by me with greater RAM, higher cache, more megahertz, faster CD-ROM's, ISDN lines, and modems that can go from zero to 60 in 9.6 seconds. My colleagues are doing multi-tasking, handling a 150 variable regression in one window while downloading the 1990 census in another. Meanwhile, I can't get by the first level of Donkey Kong.

I realize that personal computers are the greatest contribution to human productivity since the Salad Shooter. But progress can work against you. For example, before word processing, I could type 35 words per minute. After word processing, I could type 36 words per minute, but I could *erase* 16,000 words per minute.

There is also an aesthetic loss. At the University of Chicago, for example, fundamental courses, once based on the Great Books, are now based on the Great CD's.

Here at the National Academy of Sciences, you can't go anywhere without hearing people talk about computers. Even in the cafeteria. (The Academy doesn't call it a cafeteria. That would be too crass. It's called a *refectory*. As if patrons are expected to don academic robes and be waited on by monks, all while engaging in philosophical discourse on the comparative merits of hash vs. creamed chipped beef on toast.)

It's just like the Amoco commercial, where drivers at a truck stop trade stories about their octane or how many mpg's they get. I'm standing in line for a bowl of soup, and everyone around me is talking about the RAM they have or the megahertz per gigabyte they get. When I get to the front of the line, the gal behind the counter tells me, "Just a minute, honey, we're talkin' premature execution here."

By far the most useful innovation has been the Internet and its collection of sites on the World Wide Web. You can reach anyone through their URL, which stands for *Unknown Reference Locator*. To find our web site here at the National Academy of Sciences, for example, you just load up your Internet browser and type in the easily remembered address:

<http://www2367.science.academic/3.1416/newton.ivorytower.nas.edu>

Unfortunately, most URL's are not that intuitive. That's why Internet browsers have powerful search engines. (I use them often to find my misplaced library books.) Merely enter "science academy" in the appropriate box and click on "Search." This will narrow your search to between 20 to 30 thousand web sites. It's amazing what else you'll find. I never knew, for example, that there's an American Academy of Motion Sickness Arts and Sciences.

The World Wide Web is a powerful instructional device. You can create a web site for an individual course and post your homework assignments and reading lists on it. (For example, take a look at www.multiple.regression/nobayes.iowa.edu.) Students can create their own web

site to help them study for your course. (For example, see www.stat101.exam.cheatsheet.edu.) And students can use the internet to guide their choices of curricula, with web sites on which are posted student reviews of courses. (For example, for my lecture series on nonparametric statistics, see www.nonparam.thiscoursesucks.statdept.edu.)

Students can even set up Internet chat rooms to study together. Usually, around 11 o'clock on a Sunday night, after wasting away the entire weekend, students start to get serious. They sit down at their terminals, load up their Internet software, enter a statistics course chat room, and proceed to exchange dirty pictures.

You can find anything on the Internet. Even the American Statistical Association (URL: www.am.stat.ass). Actually, the ASA web site is fascinating. On it, you can order directly, the association's latest CD's, including the ones with the hit songs, "I can't get no certification" and "The least significant blues." You can also send an e-mail message to anyone in the ASA. You don't have to remember their name--just their membership number. *Warning:* Don't stay on the ASA web site too long, however, or you may pick up a virus. The last one I caught from there made my PC freeze up every 30 minutes while it e-mailed back a message from me in support of certification.

Surfing the Net does have its problems, however. A single keystroke can lead you far astray. Once, while trying to find the web site for the Population Association of America (PAA), I accidentally entered PPA. After one hour and 45 minutes, I had downloaded the complete web site for the Pitted Prune Association. (Once there, you can't go back; to exit, you have to click on either fresh or dried.)

Another time surfing the Net, my entire screen filled up with unintelligible gibberish, with greek letters and crazy symbols all scattered about. At first, I thought my modem had a parity error, but then I realized that I had retrieved the on line version of *The Annals of Statistics*.

It's time, however, for me to be part of this wave of the future, to enter the virtual unreality of high tech computers. I'll upgrade my PC, get more RAM, install Windows '95, and, with fortitude, courage, and perseverance, I might be able to advance to a higher level of Donkey Kong.

Editor's note: The web sites you have read are true. Only the URL's have been changed to protect the innocent.