

Planned Retrogression

Nobody asked but ...

I have been teaching computer literacy since the last millennium (since 1997 in layman's terms), and I am amazed at the volume of innovation that we have seen in those 2+ decades. I am amazed in two ways: 1) at the progress, and 2) at the lack of progress. I will not belabor you with a discussion of the progress, since it is all around you. But I will try to explain my contention that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

I had to do some electrical repairs at the house this weekend. There are many weekends in which I have to make electrical repairs, although not due to the age of our infrastructure. Our house was finished, and wired, in 2008. The failure of components is more due to sloppy manufacturing, overstretched distribution, and ignorance of consumer needs (which are, after all, human needs). In plainer words, the big box stores relied excessively on third-world production to meet price points. As a wit said, "I can get you goods or services, cheap, fast, good — choose any 2." By that filter, as Theodore Sturgeon said, "Ninety percent of everything is crud." Cheap and fast are chosen thousands of times more than cheap and good or fast and good. As our attention spans shorten, the problem compounds.

Why do we still have the QWERTY keyboard, or any type of keyboard? Why do we still have the mouse (51 years and counting)?

To me, the most telling example is my tractor, a Kubota. The definition of good seems to dwell on the specifics of mechanized farming at the beginning of the industrial revolution. If a male (not a female) can muster the strength to hook up an implement, such as a bush hog, then that is "good enough." Subliminally, men in the supply chain do not want to see any change.

Another example comes from the electrical system referred to above. I am a septuagenarian who has seen no change in basic electrical hardware in 60 years, and I am fairly positive that there was no preceding fundamental change in the century since Edison, Westinghouse, and Tesla were quarreling about the architecture.

Institutions (industrial complexes) have ways of embedding themselves so that expensive, slow, and no good become the choices.

— Kilgore Forelle