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Geek-speak's a peek into a cruel world

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By MICHIKO KAKUTANI
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As couch potatoes become "mouse potatoes," as teenagers become "screen-agers," the once lowly geek has become a cultural icon, with geek-speak seeping into everyday language.

Most people now know that "viruses" aren't just germs spread from person to person but malicious programs that can spread overnight from one computer to millions of others around the world.

"Spam" is no longer a ham product but a form of computer junk-mail; "toast" refers not to a breakfast choice but to a state of being dead or burned out; and "cookies" aren't fattening, chocolate-chip-studded snacks but tiny files containing information about our computers that can be used by advertisers to track users' online interests and tastes.

Earlier technological developments left their mark on the language. The railroads gave rise to expressions like "going off the rails" and "getting sidetracked"; the steam engine produced "working up a head of steam" and "full steam ahead"; and the automobile left us with "pedal to the metal," "firing on all cylinders" and "eatin' concrete."

Not surprisingly, phrases generated by the computer age tend to be more sardonic and pejorative. "Blamestorming" refers to group discussions devoted to the assignment of blame; the acronym "KISS" means "keep it simple stupid"; and "ego-surfing" alludes to Internet searches for one's own name.

So what does cyberslang say about the digerati and the brave new world?

As collections of slang found in books like "Jargon Watch" (assembled by Gareth Branwyn), The New Hacker's Dictionary (compiled by Eric S. Raymond) and "Cyberspeak" (by Andy Ihnatko), as well as a host of online slang sites (most notably The Microsoft Lexicon, Netlingo and The Ultimate Silicon Valley Slang Page) readily attest, geek-speak conjures up a chilly, utilitarian world in which people are equated with machines and social Darwinism rules.

Cyberland has been heavily influenced by pop culture and it boasts its share of counterculture phrases drawn from comic books, children's stories, sci-fi movies and New Age movements.

"Deep magic" (meaning "an awesomely arcane technique central to a program or system") comes from C.S. Lewis' "Narnia" books; the online abbreviation TTFN (meaning "ta-ta for now") comes from "Winnie the Pooh." Emoticons (those

sideways smiley faces like :-) used to indicate a user's feelings) summon visions of Hello-Kitty lunchboxes.

But for all its playful love of puns, the high-tech world is, at heart, a cruel, unforgiving place ruled by the merciless dynamics of the marketplace. There are multiple terms for success (including "winnage," "winnitude," having an "Elvis year," being "golden" or "on velvet") and an equally large number of terms for failure ("lossage," "lossity," "Big Lose") and stupidity.

Cyberland's politics are libertarian, as former Wired writer Paulina Borsook observes in her new book "Cyberselfish"; and its presiding muse is Ayn Rand. This is a world with an acronym for "Fear, Uncertainty and Doubt" (FUD) and another for "Waste of Money, Brains and Time" (Wombat), a Nietzschean world in which leaders are known as "wizards" or "net.gods," and followers are dismissed as "sheeple."

What venerated "alpha geeks" and lowly "smurfs" share is a tendency to talk about people as if they were machines. To be "uninstalled" means being fired or dismissed, whereas a "plug-and-play" refers to a new employee who fits in without any additional training. Indulging in "non-linear behavior" (NLB) means acting irrationally; possessing huge "bandwidth" means having lots of talent or brains.

A "bio-break" refers to a trip to the bathroom, and "client/server action" refers to sex. Stress puppies "ramp up" to cope with added work and "batmobile" -- by putting up defensive emotional shields -- when threatened with unwanted intimacy.

Such language tends to ratify the unflattering stereotype of the computer geek, described in The New Hacker's Dictionary as "withdrawn, relationally incompetent, sexually frustrated and desperately unhappy when not submerged in his or her craft." While that book's editor, Eric Raymond, observes that such stereotypes are "far less common than mainstream folkore" would have it, he adds that "hackers have relatively little ability to identify emotionally with other people," so accustomed are they to spending hours and hours at the computer keyboard.

Geek-speak is flush with disparaging or defensive references to the real world and flesh-and-blood human beings. The non-virtual world, so much messier than the one online, is derogatorily referred to as a "carbon community" or "meatspace."

Individuals who aren't online are shrugged off as PONAs ("persons of no account"); printed magazines and newspapers, as "treeware" or "dead tree editions." "Analog" is an adjective used to refer to things in the "real world," but it's also used to describe things that are sloppy or graceless.

For geeks who prefer "text sex" to physical encounters, e-mail to "facemail," e-commerce to "bricks and mortar" shopping, the human body is nothing but "wetware" -- a fragile, inefficient alternative to the shiny hardware of their computers.

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101 Elliott Ave. W.
Seattle, WA 98119
(206) 448-8000

Home Delivery: (206) 464-2121 or (800) 542-0820

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