Life at Hyper-Speed

By David Shenk

The computer chip manufacturer Intel surprised and delighted the computer industry this week with the announcement that its engineers had invented a way to speed up the design cycle of their chips. From now on, the amount of memory each chip can hold will double every nine months, instead of every 18 months. That means computer processing speeds will increase at an even faster rate than before.

Bully for them. In Seattle and Silicon Valley, the morning lattes are brimming with an extra dash of nutmeg. Watch for yet another technology stock surge, and another run on the Bay Area's Ferrari dealerships. Since the bulk of industry profits depend on loyal customers frequently upgrading their hardware and software, a faster product cycle means that technology will become obsolete quicker, forcing the Smiths to buy more often if they want to keep up with the Joneses.

For Steve Jobs and Bill Gates, the news is pure gold. But for the rest of us, the consequences are more mixed. It's true that machines will get even smarter, cheaper and lighter and will make our lives more convenient. But the faster pace has its ugly side. Not only do technological improvements increase the stress of living in a hyper-speedy, information-saturated world, but they also affect our relationship with time. As machines get quicker and quicker, the world appears to move slower and slower.

Conveniences like the fax machine, E-mail, Fed Ex and beepers seem to compress time to such an extent that we're now painfully aware of every second that we wait for anything. Have you ever been in an elevator with someone who impatiently smacks one of the floor buttons over and over, as if pushing it would speed the ride? We're all becoming that person, a culture of restless button-smackers.

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Not long ago I passed a McDonald's that had just introduced a guarantee that all lunch orders would be served within 90 seconds. But don't you think people will still tap their fingers on the counter, roll their eyes, even look at their watches? If you're in that button-smacking frame of mind, 90 seconds can seem like an eternity.

So it goes with technology. As we speed it up, we also speed up our expectations. Remember how 9600-baud modems and 386 Windows machines once seemed swift? Now, a few years later, we consider them virtually unusable. When the pace of change is so blistering, people who stand still feel as if they are falling behind. A faster product cycle is going to further undermine the confidence of consumers, who already feel that the machines they are buying today are almost immediately obsolete.

In our compulsion to improve efficiency, we easily forget that intelligent work by humans is not just a matter of processing speed. Notice the constant stream of spelling mistakes and missing words in the E-mail you receive. Good work takes time and patience; humans are not designed for multi-tasking.

Someday, there will be no discern-

Intel's chip could run us ragged.

ible wait at all for transferring files or for Web pages to appear on-screen. But when the Web becomes as instantaneous as television, will we then be content with the speed of information? My guess is that we won't. It's no coincidence that some psychologists have noticed a new "culturally induced" form of attention deficit disorder. Wired magazine nominated A.D.D. as "the official brain syndrome of the information age."

As we enjoy the spectacular benefits of the information revolution, we must try to remember that the machines are there to keep up with us, not the other way around. I admire Intel for what it has accomplished, but my life doesn't need its velocity doubled just yet, thanks very much.□

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