

BIOCAPITALISM

What price the
genetic revolution?

By David Shenk

About a year ago, my wife phoned to say that something might be wrong with our unborn child. A blood test suggested the possibility of Down syndrome, and the doctor was recommending amniocentesis and genetic counseling. As it happened, I was almost finished writing a book about the paradoxical nature of information technology—the strange realization that more, faster, even *better* information can sometimes do more harm than good. When my wife's obstetrician reported the alarming news, it seemed as though the God of Technology was already looking to settle the score. The doctor, after all, was merely reading from a computer printout. Test results poured over us in a gush of formulas and statistics. My wife's blood contained such-and-such a ratio of three fetal hormones, which translated statistically into a such-and-such increased chance of our child having an extra chromosome, a forty-seventh, which can cause severely limited intellectual capacity, deformed organs and limbs, and heart dysfunction. The amniocentesis would settle the matter for certain, allowing a lab technician to count the fetus's actual chromosomes. But there was a dark statistical specter here, too, a chance that the procedure itself would lead to a spontaneous miscarriage whether the fetus was genetically abnormal or not. Testing a healthy fetus to death: many times, in the days ahead, I wondered if I could come to terms with that ultratemporary brand of senselessness. The computer thought it a risk worth taking: the chance of miscarriage was slightly lower than the chance of discovering Down syndrome. My wife and I put our faith in the computer.

David Shenk is the author of Data Smog: Surviving the Information Glut, published in April by HarperCollins. His last piece for Harper's Magazine, "The Pedagogy of Pasta Sauce," appeared in the September 1995 issue.