

/dev/random

Dark Rhetoric

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If I understand it (you probably don't want to put any money on that), "dark silicon" is what happens when you have more processing doohickeys on a chip than you can afford to keep powered up continuously, because of the excess heat that generates—something like the effect of a close-in shot of all the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders gyrating simultaneously. To minimize this (chip heat, not gyrating heat), manufacturers have taken to leaving parts of the chip that are unnecessary for the current processing tasks powered off, or "dark." That got me to thinking (keep your haz-mat suit handy): perhaps this approach would work equally well in other areas of technology.

Pray, let us take, by way of example, the nation's urban highway systems. The vast majority of these are lit by sodium vapor or halogen street lights. (Or, if they aren't, just pretend I'm right; my wife does it every day.) These things are bound to take a lot of power to keep shining, power that is wasted if no one is on the street. I'm talking about expressways and such with no routine pedestrian traffic or driveways along them, of course—not the road in front of your house where the corner streetlamp is burned out half the year, anyway.

Shoving aside (rudely) the considerable latency in firing up some of these lamps—because it more or less ruins the argument I'm about to make and therefore in true pundit style shall be tidily ignored—I propose that we install motion detectors calibrated for whatever the minimum legal vehicle size is for that roadway, so that the lights only come on when someone could actually need them. We could call this "dark highways." The motion detectors would be arranged in such a fashion that the highways in question were divided into zones. Only a currently occupied zone would be illuminated.

This would probably present a problem if you ran out of gas and tried to hoof it to the nearest gas station because: (1) a single person walking along the highway would not trip the motion detectors, so as soon as you left your zone you'd be in the dark; (2) since your car would no longer be in motion, even that zone would be dark by the time you got back. Maybe if you flapped your arms while you walked...

While this really isn't a particularly viable proposal for municipal energy-savings, people trudging up and down the bypass flapping their arms like goony birds trying to take off would provide a lot of entertainment value when viewed from the cameras that would almost certainly get posted every couple hundred feet or so along the roadways. Not to mention traffic helicopter views. Oh, and International Space Station videos of large cities blinking on and off in segments like mega-scale

billboards would be sweet, too. I can envision flash mobs being formed to spell out political or environmental messages as viewed from space. They might call themselves “flaptivists.” (That’s not what I would call them, mind you.)

We could further degrade this once useful principle by applying it badly to all sorts of inappropriate systems, but I want to take things in a slightly different direction now. The term “dark silicon” has put me in mind of the fate of other nouns that have had “dark” placed in front of them. Setting aside fictitious concoctions like “the dark side” and “dark lords,” we shall begin with “dark matter.”

This is a seriously messed-up concept. It’s still matter, so it has mass, but it doesn’t seem to reflect any light or glow when it gets irradiated or experience, in fact, any of the illumination-producing actions to which normal matter is subject. Zero albedo, as it were: interesting attribute. If we ever manage to corral some of it I can see a lot of covert operations applications, as well as just about any other activity that benefits from an absence of light (mushroom-farming and politics spring to mind). They might even have to add a new color to the crayon box rainbow: “Dark Black.” Since it reflects no light at all, however, it won’t be very popular for use in coloring books. I’m not sure whether it would look transparent, or simply create a gap in the optical field, as though that part of the page were missing and so was everything behind it. Thinking about that makes my head hurt.

This segues inexorably if not neatly into the nebulous “dark energy.” I don’t know what to say about this one except, “*Excuse me?*” This smacks of slapping a scientific-sounding term on something that may not really even be there. You can’t just go around putting “dark” in front of anything you don’t understand. If that ever catches on we’ll have “dark algebra,” “dark probate,” and especially “dark romance.” I’m not so sure that last one doesn’t already exist.

...

“Sir, did you realize that you were going the wrong way on the street and speeding back there?”

“I’m sorry, officer. Traffic signs are dark for me.”

...

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to disallow this \$4,500 deduction for therapeutic ice cream sandwiches and the \$875 one for marijuana-scented hair gel unless you provide some rationale beyond ‘coz my old lady brings me down.’”

“I’m bummed about that, man. I guess this tax stuff is, like, dark.”

...

At any rate, I think a much more descriptive term for it would be “missing energy” or its more dramatic cousin “fugitive energy.” My own theory concerning dark matter, incidentally, is that the fundamental fabric of space itself has mass, and that explains all the mathematical anomalies. Whoever heard of massless fabric, after all? Problem solved. You can ship the Nobel Prize to my PO Box. Make sure to wrap it in an old towel or something so it doesn’t get broken.

Last night I heard an odd noise in my backyard and went out to investigate. I realized that the dark itself was a mystery to me, which this terminology scheme would of course render as “dark dark.” Unfortunately for the further exposition of this

thesis, the term “dark dark” reminded me of “Jar-Jar,” which made me nauseous and I had to lie down.

It may well turn out that the culprit in my annoying middle-aged weight gain over the past few years has not been excessive chocolate and beer coupled with lack of exercise, after all, but “dark calories.” Or perhaps I haven’t really gained *any* weight; I’m just a victim of “dark gravity.”

Here will I leave you all to your dark thoughts.

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