

## /dev/random Techno-illogical

ROBERT G. FERRELL



Robert G. Ferrell, author of *The Tol Chronicles*, spends most of his time writing humor, fantasy, and science fiction. [rgferrell@gmail.com](mailto:rgferrell@gmail.com)

I recently stumbled over an online debate attempting to assign blame for the failure of technology to live up to society's expectations (although who, precisely, established those expectative benchmarks wasn't clear, possibly because, as is my custom, I only skimmed the first few paragraphs: tl;dr is my motto these days). Was it the fault of technology itself or of the companies that make it? In other words, is the reason we don't have flying cars because the technology is still out of reach or simply because no company has bothered to make full use of what we already have available?

If you're going to remind me at this juncture that we do in fact have flying cars, let me stop you right there. We both know that the flying cars we were promised were something the Jetsons would recognize as such, not these giant drone abominations that you could fly inverted and mow the lawn. Nor are the "hoverboards" currently available anything like the models we were expecting. In fact, no component of them does any actual hovering. They're more akin to self-propelled skateboards with their wheels mounted sideways, as though they were designed and assembled under the influence of peyote.

There was a time, I'm led to understand, when technology was still a shining beacon of hope on the horizon, promising solutions to problems we hadn't yet even created for ourselves. That was an era of optimism and blind, cheerful trust in the implicit genius of the technologists who were going to make life so much easier and more pleasant for us all. The utopian society of the future would be populated by buttons, gadgets, and machines that go "ping," all working in seamless unison to enable the humans of the household to go about their day in a state of blissful freedom, unencumbered by the necessity for manual labor or thinking of any sort.

That's what we were promised. What we got, at least up to the present day, falls a bit short of that ideal. The buttons summon products we don't really need or could easily obtain by more conventional avenues that don't require relinquishing our last vestige of privacy; the gadgets spy on us unceasingly and bombard us with a barrage of ads for yet more gizmos we don't need; the machines trap us in a closed loop of surrendering basic control of our domestic landscape for the sake of perceived convenience. Hooray for progress.

If future projections aren't quite being met on the home front, they're even more divergent when seen through a wider lens. We've already covered the disappointments that are the flying car and hoverboard, but these only scratch the surface of our poor record at projecting technological achievements. Perhaps, however (as I intimated in the first paragraph), it isn't our predictive acumen that's to blame but some aspect of technology itself.

We tend to ascribe virtually no limits to the wonders technology can summon. In point of fact, the very word "technology" is more or less useless as a substantive noun. It doesn't mean much, other than the *application of knowledge for practical ends*. So, can the application of knowledge be indicted for not applying itself? Blaming technology for failing to live up to our nebulous and in many cases wholly unrealistic fantasies is hardly rational. If indeed there is

a culprit in all this, it must therefore be the company that develops said technology.

Now that we've established culpability for our disappointment, let's move on to creating some sane expectations. Technology isn't a broad-spectrum magic bullet, and it can't pull solutions out of thin air. Pretty much every technological advance generates as many new questions as it provides old answers, in the grand tradition of progress. Moreover, technology has proven time and again that it is not easily predictable in any granular sense.

I read a study just today that claims a substantial proportion of millennials interviewed considered cracked smartphone glass and a failure to receive "likes" on their social media posts as major stressors in their lives. Leaving aside the questionable priorities thus illuminated, what this statistic reveals to me is that technological advances my generation considers relatively minor—a smartphone is just the latest iteration of the telephone, after all, and that's been around since the 19th century—have assumed a central position in an entire generation's lives. They rely on their phones for, well, *everything*.

I dropped my iPhone in a pond several years ago and went 133 days without it. It was frustrating at times, yes, but really not much more than an annoyance. I could still send email, and

I never really used the phone part of my smartphone much, anyway; it served mostly as just a terminus for spam calls. To someone of the current generation, however, I'm told that same situation might prove utterly devastating, on par with sudden amputation of a limb or loss of family members in some horrific accident. Technology here has clearly moved from servant to master.

Perhaps that's the crux of this entire discussion: is technology meant to be something that enriches our lives or exerts control over them? Will we even be able to make that distinction before long? The technology we want is occulted by the technology we realize, which then eventually replaces our expectations with itself. The substituted technology often bears little resemblance to what we visualized, but sooner or later that disparity loses any relevance.

It's probably best for our collective blood pressure if we accept that technology moves in its own direction at its own pace, whether or not we find that movement agreeable. Don't establish inflexible expectations and you won't be disappointed when they fail to come to fruition. If you can't have the flying car you love, honey, love the flying car you get.

## USENIX Supporters

### USENIX Patrons

Bloomberg • Facebook • Google • Microsoft • NetApp

### USENIX Benefactors

Amazon • Oracle • Two Sigma • VMware

### USENIX Partners

Cisco Meraki • ProPrivacy • Teradactyl • TheBestVPN.com

### Open Access Publishing Partner

PeerJ

