



Why Things Bite Back: Technology and the Revenge of Unintended Consequences (Vintage)

By Edward Tenner

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In this perceptive and provocative look at everything from computer software that requires faster processors and more support staff to antibiotics that breed resistant strains of bacteria, Edward Tenner offers a virtual encyclopedia of what he calls "revenge effects"--the unintended consequences of the mechanical, chemical, biological, and medical forms of ingenuity that have been hallmarks of the progressive, improvement-obsessed modern age. Tenner shows why our confidence in technological solutions may be misplaced, and explores ways in which we can better survive in a world where despite technology's advances--and often because of them--"reality is always gaining on us." For anyone hoping to understand the ways in which society and technology interact, **Why Things Bite Back** is indispensable reading. "A bracing critique of technological determinism in both its utopian and dystopian forms...No one who wants to think clearly about our high-tech future can afford to ignore this book."--Jackson Lears, *Wilson Quarterly*

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

If it can go wrong, it will--thus Murphy's Law. Science journalist Edward Tenner looks more closely at this eternal verity, named after a U.S. Air Force captain who, during a test of rocket-sled deceleration, noticed that critical gauges had been improperly set and concluded, "If there's more than one way to do a job and one of those ways will end in disaster, then somebody will do it that way." Tenner concurs, and he gives us myriad case studies of how technological fixes often create bigger problems than the ones they were meant to solve in the first place. The indiscriminate use of antibiotics, by way of example, has yielded hardier strains of bacteria and viruses that do not respond to pharmaceutical treatment; the wide-scale use of air conditioning in cities has raised the outdoor temperature in some places by as much as 10 degrees, adding stress to already-taxed cooling systems; the modern reliance on medical intervention to deal with simple illnesses, to say nothing of the rapidly growing number of elective surgeries, means that even a low percentage of error (one patient in twenty-five, by a recent estimate) can affect increasingly large numbers of people. Tenner examines what he deems the "unintended consequences" of technological innovation, drawing examples from everyday objects and situations. Although he recounts disaster after painful disaster, his book makes for curiously entertaining, if sometimes scary, reading. --*Gregory McNamee*

From Publishers Weekly

Even when used to better the world, technology fosters unforeseen, often unpleasant consequences that Tenner calls "revenge effects." For example, air-conditioned subways raise platform temperatures by as much as 10 degrees F; some computer users get painful, wrist-numbing carpal tunnel syndrome; flood control systems encourage settlement of flood-prone areas, inviting disaster; 6% of all hospital patients become infected with microbes they encounter during their stay. In a thought-provoking study, Tenner, a historian of science and visiting researcher at Princeton, looks at revenge effects that pop up in medicine, sports, the computerized office and the environment. Oil spills, erosion of beaches, back injuries, athletes' illegal use of steroids and mass extermination of bird species on the world's islands by ship-hopping rats mark this saga of bewildering, often frustrating change. Tenner's cautionary conclusion: revenge effects demand ingenuity and brainpower as technology continues to replace life-threatening problems with slower-acting, more persistent ones.

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From Library Journal

Believers in Murphy's Law--"if something can go wrong, it will"--might think this book proves it. Historian of science Tenner, who holds a visiting research appointment at Princeton University's Department of Geological and Geophysical Sciences, describes the "revenge effect," an adverse consequence occurring when "new structures, devices, and organisms react with real people in real situations in ways we could not foresee." There are innumerable examples, e.g., sophisticated medical procedures save lives but are expensive and leave patients vulnerable to other unpleasant complications, technologies to improve agricultural yield inadvertently lead to erosion, and office computerization has fostered a new epidemic of carpal tunnel syndrome. Tenner chronicles dozens of such cases, which are seen as almost inevitable owing to the complexity of many systems. With hindsight, some of his examples seem obvious--for example, traffic jams resulted from the mass production of automobiles--and Tenner's point is clear by the third chapter. Still, his conclusion that we must recognize revenge effects and act earlier to avert them is worth heeding. For general science collections.

Gregg Sapp, Univ. of Miami Lib.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Vikki Maynard:

As people who live in the actual modest era should be upgrade about what going on or information even knowledge to make these people keep up with the era which can be always change and move forward. Some of you maybe can update themselves by looking at books. It is a good choice for yourself but the problems coming to a person is you don't know what one you should start with. This Why Things Bite Back: Technology and the Revenge of Unintended Consequences (Vintage) is our recommendation so you keep up with the world. Why, since this book serves what you want and wish in this era.

Denita Lumley:

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