

Technology

Nerd words go mainstream

Technology has inspired vocabulary that's now in use every day

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The current estimate of the number of words in the English language is just under 1 million. Many of these words owe their existence to the hyperactive progress of technology. Not only have new words been coined to describe the heretofore indescribable, but old words are taking on new meanings in a process known as linguistic drift.

Take the word "wiki," for example. Originally, it meant quick in Hawaiian. Now it refers to websites that can be edited collaboratively. The word was first used in 1995 in an early open-source database called WikiWikiWeb and was later co-opted by its famous cousin, Wikipedia.

The term is now the hottest buzzword in the corporate game, as outlined in the popular book *Wikinomics*. In response to this obsession with all things wiki, or, in the original meaning, all things quick, a slow movement has sprung up. The Hawaiian word for slow, "lohi," is hardly as catchy, but maybe a lohipedia isn't far behind.

Or how about the word "google"? It's really an alternate spelling for "googol," the word used in math to describe 10 to the power of 100. The name of this behemoth search engine has become a verb describing the process of researching anything on the Web.

Conjugated like any regular verb, it has even spawned a whole sub-library of derived names: "googlehacking" refers to the practice of finding pairs of words that will only give you one result when googled (e.g., insolvent pachyderms). The best moment in this word's lexical history came when Bush talked about "using the Google" to look longingly at his ranch with GoogleEarth.

"Wizards" are the little bits of software that help you set up new programs by suggesting settings and telling you where to click. The name suggests that you'll only be able to set up your computer properly by putting your trust in the murky magic arts.

The name is actually appropriate, because when most programs are installed, they create dozens of settings and batch files that are invisible to the user and often clash with other files, leaving you with a computer that crashes.

Toronto is well known as the city with the most Facebook users per capita, and the social networking site has spawned some newly co-opted words. The practice of "poking someone," for example, is something you'd never do as an adult to get someone's attention, but it's the perfect way to dredge up your boorish friends from grade school.

"Darknets" are private file-sharing networks that only allow in a trusted few and are completely self-sufficient. Although they can receive data from the Internet, they can't be found on standard website lists or receive requests from other servers for information. The name is perfect, because it suggests a network that flies under the radar of the usual frenetic power of the Internet, a platform that has all the best features of the Web but none of the annoying advertising or quackery. Unfortunately, the elite invited into darknets usually belong to either the military or some sort of sketchy corporate venture.

With blogs and YouTube hitting the big time, the Web has emerged as the most solipsistic medium ever. New words have been coined to describe this focus on the importance of personal life and opinions. "Egocasting" and "lifecasting" are terms applied to people who document their lives 24/7 and broadcast them online. Both words suggest a widely accepted perception of the self as actor in a role, performing a part for millions of potential viewers.

How formidable does "firewall" sound? Surely, nothing can get past it, even a powerful "zombie," "virus" or "Trojan horse," words that create powerful images evoking David Cronenberg films and Greek myths.

My favourite new tech word is "avatar," describing the character you create when playing a game like *Second Life* or *The Sims*. The root of this word is the Sanskrit "avatara," an earthly incarnation of a divine being, and its appropriation reinforces the idea that the player has godlike control over the world in the computer.

It certainly puts a new perspective on the traditional narrative of Christianity if we start viewing Jesus as God's avatar in an omnipresent video game.

