THE LAST WORD



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Fixing Email

his past January, I had dinner with my friend Alex, who was visiting my hometown of Washington, DC, for a meeting at the National Science Foundation. While we dined on stout and freshly shucked oysters, Alex admitted that his email inbox had ballooned to 1,000 messages. They weren't all unread—just unprocessed.

Neither of us could devise a solution to the deluge of messages that beset people whose jobs, like ours, entail evaluating and creating information. Filters and rules merely shift messages to different places. They don't truly deal with email. Our conversation moved on.

But on the walk home from the restaurant, I dimly recalled reading about a tool that did just what Alex wanted. A week later (sometimes it takes me that long to retrieve a memory from deep storage), I remembered the book: Greg Egan's *Permutation City: A Novel*.

Set in 2045 and 2050, Egan's science fiction tale tackles themes of artificial life, synthetic consciousness, and virtual reality. Despite its futuristic concerns, Egan's plot is somewhat attached to reality. Computers and disk drives are neither implausibly powerful nor implausibly energy-efficient.

In chapter one, we meet one of the book's main characters, Maria Deluca, as she returns to her apartment in Sydney. After she stows her bicycle, Maria checks her filtering software, Camel's Eye. Egan doesn't describe how Camel's Eye works, but he does say what it does: read Maria's email and recommend action. Camel's Eye is so powerful that it can even cope with an "interactive," which in the novel's fictional world is an executable program—machine code with heavily encrypted data, intentionally designed to be easier for a human to talk to than for screening software to examine and summarize. Camel's Eye had run all three interactives (on a doubly quarantined virtual machine) and tried to fool them into thinking that they were making their pitch to the real Maria Deluca.

I'm optimistic that software like Camel's Eye can be developed before 2045. Already since 2013, Google's Gmail service automatically categorizes incoming messages under one of five tabs: Primary, Social, Promotions, Updates, and Forums. As a Gmail user, I've encountered few, if any, miscategorizations.

But we don't have to resort to software wizardry to improve the email experience. My wife, Jan, contends that the biggest problem with email is its cheapness. Just as accountants typically omit the environmental cost of corporate activity, senders are typically oblivious to the true cost in time and effort that dealing with their messages imposes. With just a few keystrokes, an email miscreant can send the one-word, one-emoticon email "Thanks! :)" to everyone on a distribution list, each of whom will have to read and delete the message.

Jan has two solutions to email overload. The gentler one entails each of us being more judicious and sparing in our own use of the service. Pause before hitting "reply all," before adding recipients, and before deciding whether an email is even necessary.

er harsher solution would be implemented on an organization's email server. Every employee would have a fixed and modest monthly ration of messages. "Over-mailers would be silenced!" she says with a gleeful grin.

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