Life & times

What would Captain Kirk do?

Craig Gamble
FAST LIVING

It's funny how everything sometimes connects. A few weeks back, I mentioned the technology visible in old episodes of *Star Trek*, while earlier I wrote about the creation myths of Hewlett Packard and alternative ways of powering mobile gadgets through less toxic types of battery power – part of the growing problem of e-waste. Now these three things – e-waste, HP and Captain Kirk – have come together.

Employees at HP's global headquarters in California got a surprise when they turned up for work the other day. Almost the entire staff found a voicemail message from none other than William Shatner, which began, ''This is William Shatner speaking. You, HP, promised me a toxic-free computer by 2009. Now my friends at Greenpeace tell me that I'll have to wait till 2011. What's up with that?''

Shatner went on to suggest that the employees should convince their leaders that this was not good enough, and that if other companies had already accomplished what HP had promised, then why couldn't the biggest player in the world electronics market do it? The message was backed up by a protest from Greenpeace members, who climbed onto the roof of the headquarters and painted in huge letters the words ''Hazardous Products''. Shatner politely ended his message by wishing everyone ''an enjoyable day''. The entire message is available at the Greenpeace site, greenpeace.org.

It was, as they say, a fair cop. HP had promised to phase out by the end of 2009 toxic chemicals such as PVC and brominated flame retardants (potentially toxic chemicals that do what they say, stop computer parts bursting into flame), but have since backtracked.

Greenpeace has been on the case of HP before. In April, the company published a report that accused three big PC manufacturers, HP, Dell and Lenvo, of not doing enough to champion environmentally sound practice in the production and disposal of their products. The other manufacturers, too, had promised to rid themselves of toxic chemicals and components, then rescinded the promise.

The problem with toxic substances in electronics has been around for some years, but has recently become critical, largely because of what happens to the waste. It's then that the toxins included in the product's manufacture can really cause trouble. The brominated flame retardants mentioned above can become poisonous to animals and humans once they enter the waste stream, and a large amount of e-waste is simply dumped in a landfill, with its cargo of potentially poisonous components untreated.

Australia is not above all this. *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported recently that over 37 million old computers, 17 million TVs and 56 million mobile phones had been buried in landfills around Australia, where we currently recycle only about 4 per cent of our e-waste. As Shatner would say, what's up with that?

Even worse, though, is the fate of an increasing amount of e-waste that doesn't end up in landfills. There is a growing and deadly worldwide trade, sometimes illegal, in e-waste. Huge piles of the stuff are sent to China, India and Africa, where they are ''recycled'' – but it's not what it seems. The parts are broken down with crude corrosives, dismantled, burned and otherwise broken up to get at the tiny amount of valuable chemicals that can be sold on. The process itself is polluting, but what's worse is that many of these recyclers employ child labour. Fred Pearce, who writes a regular column for *The Guardian* called ''Greenwash'' has visited such a plant in New Delhi, where he watched children as young as eight dipping circuit boards in vats of acid to reclaim the tiny amounts of copper they contained. Shipments of this kind of e-waste have been sent from Australia, where at least the practice is illegal. Some shipments have been seized by Australian Customs, but even they admit they have probably only scratched the surface.

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Toxic labour: Chinese workers picking their way through a mountain of e-waste. Photo: REUTERS

This growing problem spurred Dell Computers in May this year to impose a ban on exports of used equipment bearing its brand name, unless the computer is still in working order and intended to be used for its given purpose. People at Dell admit they can't do a lot to stop the export of e-waste, but at least they're making the attempt. Greenpeace has estimated that between 50 per cent and 80 per cent of e-waste in the US sent for recycling is in fact shipped overseas, so every little bit helps. Other companies are developing schemes where they take back old computers and dispose of them safely, but Greenpeace doesn't believe the manufacturers are yet doing enough to make such schemes the norm. I have a simpler idea, but one not likely to appeal to the manufacturers of electronics. I get a lot of questions from friends and relatives asking advice about what computer or TV or MP3 player to buy. I always encourage them to buy something that's a little better than they might need. My small hope is that the product, if it's well made, with performance and features better than others in its class, will last a few years longer before it needs to be upgraded or replaced. It's a slim difference, I know, but you have to start somewhere. So next time you upgrade your computer, TV or even mobile phone, think about the future, think about the end of the road for your new gizmo – and think about what Captain Kirk would do.

A love of fire burns ever brightly within the human spirit

SLOW LIVING

There's not much a fireside can't do for the human spirit. Apart from the basics – warmth, safety and utility – there are effects on the senses that can charm the philosopher out of a simpleton and a romantic out of a hard-nosed bastard. We gaze into fires, mesmerised by dancing flames, their constant movement and glowing colours drawing us in to a hypnotic state. Of outdoor firesides, it's hard to imagine that stories could not be told when the dark of night settles, like an overcoat, on the shoulders of folk who gather around. In winter, children might be wide-eyed and rosy-cheeked, they may be tired and grubby, but a fireside never admits boredom. Children are as absorbed as anyone into ''the magic of fireside'': one cannot look into a fire and be bored.

The fireside is a place for tales, chit-chat, music, food, contemplation and ''alone-togetherness''. We commune around firesides, yet it is only one's own gaze into the flames that pulls us in. It is hard to look at the heart of a fire and draw one's eyes away.

Historically, the indoor fireside – the hearth – is linked to cooking and boiling and heating. Activity surrounds it but can be slow; it is far more enjoyable to eat crumpets that are pulled off a toasting fork than to eat the mechanically regulated, evenly browned deliverables from an electric toaster.

But specialised slow food can be cooked in, on, or underneath the fire: foil-wrapped food parcels will bubble and steam their moist and tender contents, and we savour the moment of unveiling them. Banana leaves might cocoon prepared offerings for burial in a fire pit. Hours later, like pirate treasures, they are unearthed for shared feasting.

It is no coincidence that slow food and firesides go together: the convivium (an esoteric word for a slow-foodies cell) is a shared ''coming together space'' that can equally be a family kitchen, a common room or a

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fireside. In August then, that final winter month in Australia, and uniquely in the nation's capital, the Fireside Festival takes pride of place on the calendar. The convivial firesiders will celebrate local produce and the fireside arts. Let's hope, when the braziers are lit in broad daylight on expansive winery estates, that crackle and flame lose nothing of their mysterious charms and that the love of preserving our ever-at-risk environment can be balanced with our love for burning wood.

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