technica q&a

Lawrence Weinstein

Describe your latest project.
We wrote Guesstimation: Solving the World's Problems on the Back of a Cocktail Napkin to show people how to estimate the size of almost anything, from the silly (the total length of all pickles consumed in the US in a year) to the serious (the amount of space needed to landfill all of our trash for the next century). When you can estimate for yourself, you can understand the difference between millions, billions and trillions and you can decide lots of questions without depending on the opinions of experts. We also wrote it because it's fun to write about off-the-wall topics such as the relative fuel costs of automobiles and bicycle rickshaws or the kinetic energy of the dinosaur-killing meteorite or whether Spider-Man could really have stopped that runaway subway train.

Guesstimation: Solving the World's Problems on the Back of a Cocktail Napkin
by Lawrence Weinstein and John A. Adam

"This book will benefit teachers and students in science and engineering, from grade school to college. The problems are well chosen to illustrate increasingly complex themes, culminating in energy conservation, risk assessment, and environmental problems. The solutions are careful, complete, and illuminating. General readers with a taste for mathematical puzzles will enjoy it." *Hans Christian von Baeyer, author of The Fermi Solution*

"This is definitely my kind

Have you ever taken the Geek Test? How did you rate?
I was moderately geeky (I forget the exact score). I was very disappointed that the test did not ask about using base negative-two to count on your fingers (that lets you count from -10 to 21).

What's your favorite Blog right now?
Instapundit, but I spend way too much time auditioning others. My favorite science blog is tierneylabs, for its mix of information, skepticism and wonder, and for its willingness to address controversial topics.

Douglas Adams or Scott Adams?
Both, but I actually prefer my singular co-author John (Adam, that is).

What was your favorite book as a kid?
How can I choose just one? Isaac Asimov's Foundation was great for exploring the vast sweep of history and the relative impact of societal forces and "great men." I really wanted to learn enough to become a psychohistorian. Alas, there were no job openings when I graduated so I settled for being a physicist.

What new technology do you think may actually have the potential for making people's lives better?
Is this a trick question? Almost all of them, of course. New agricultural technologies make food cheaper and better (think about corn that is still sweet, even after waiting around in the supermarket for days), new medical technologies help us live healthier and longer, new computer technologies help us waste more time on video games, new manufacturing technologies make stuff so amazingly cheap that even most of the poor have TVs, cars and central air conditioning. A harder question would be, "What new technology does *not* have the potential to make people's lives better?"

What was your best subject in high school? Your worst?
My best HS subject was physics (of course). My worst was Phys Ed. I almost flunked senior year because I missed too

of book. The authors show, using numerous examples, how readers can make numerical estimates of quantities — some absurd and some fascinating — in a wide variety of areas. This is a very useful talent — be it in everyday life, in one's career, or in job interviews." *Robert Ehrlich, author of Eight Preposterous Propositions*

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many PE classes. I had to make up a bunch of PE classes in the last month so that they would let me graduate.

Describe the best museum of science and/or industry you've ever visited and what made it great.
Wow, tough choice. I always visit the local science museum when I travel. Air and Space is, of course, unique. The Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago had great hands-on exhibits when I was last there. But my favorite is the American Museum of Natural History in NYC, both for sentimental reasons (I grew up going there) and because their paleontology halls are amazing. They have enough gee-whiz stuff to make first-time visitors happy and enough depth of information to keep science nerds like me coming back again and again.

By the end of your life, where do you think humankind will be in terms of new science and technological advancement?
You're just trying to make me look bad. Five-year predictions are usually over-optimistic and twenty-year predictions are almost always hopelessly wrong. Since medical advances will let me live to 120, I can expect that any prediction I make will be, at best, humorous in 2080. (Imagine predicting in 1908 what life would be like in 1980. Hah!)

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