'Cyber' realities continue to flow

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The term *cyber charter school* evokes a wonderful world in which jet packs propel children to education pods where information is seamlessly uploaded to their cerebral cortexes, unimpeded by the discontents of the brick-and-mortar world. And yet Pennsylvania officials rejected all six of the latest applications to launch cyber charters. How could they?

As it turns out, cyber charters are just Internet-assisted adjuncts of our benighted public education system whose results are often as evanescent as the name suggests. Worse, they have nothing to do with jet packs.

At least part of this misunderstanding has to be blamed on language. *Cyber* is such a promising prefix, imbuing everything it touches with a futuristic sheen. But the fate of the most recently proposed cyber charters marks the linguistic point at which the limitless future became the limited present.

One of the earliest and most productive partners of *cyber* was *space*. Coined by science fiction writers in the early 1980s, *cyberspace* became a grandiose synonym for the Internet. This was back when the Internet was a thing of the future to the extent that it could be envisioned as more than a repository of dirty videos and long-lost high school classmates.

Today, though, one hardly hears of cyberspace, a term that sounds overexcited in an age of Internet saturation. But the word nevertheless had a lasting impact, releasing *cyber* from the esoteric study of cybernetics and making it a free-floating word particle, ready for dissemination deep into the 21st century.

Cyber arrived in our time much worse for the journey. Consider "Cyber Monday," a recently invented holiday whose chief recommendation is that if we ever forget its true meaning, we can count ourselves lucky. A day designated for online Christmas shopping, it's an attempt to extend the dark impulses of Black Friday while stripping them of that celebration's thrilling potential for hysteria and violence.

It's a long way, indeed, from the infinite reaches of cyberspace. *Cyber* used to define a universe; now it's just a Monday.

If computer-assisted shopping isn't dreary enough, take some of our other modern cyber-preoccupations. There's cyberbullying, which as far as I can tell is regular bullying conducted sometime after 1998. Cybersecurity sounds cozy enough - something to do with electric

blankets, perhaps? - but it turns out to exist for the sole purpose of countering such cyber-malevolence as cyberattacks, cyberwarfare, cyberterrorism, and cybercrime. (See also: WillUsingThePrefixCyberMakeMeLookLikeAnIdiot.com.)

Long before *cyber* became a bully, it was a nerd. In 1948, the MIT math professor Norbert Wiener - a man just begging to be cyberbullied - founded what he called cybernetics, the study of communication and control in biological versus mechanical systems. While the word comes from the Greek for "steersman" or "governor," Wiener's comparison of humans to machines - conjuring advanced robotics and artificial intelligence - infused the word, or at least half of it, with enduring futuristic connotations.

Cybernetics' maiden hybridization was, fittingly, *cyborg*, short for "cybernetic organism." From the 1960s onward, science fiction writers have used *cyborg* to refer to such half-man, half-machine heroes as Steve Austin and the Terminator, cyber-dudes so thoroughly awesome that the word survived its use as the title of a 1989 Jean-Claude Van Damme movie. Twenty years later, science fiction also gave us *cyberpunk*, a dystopian subgenre cool enough to weather its use as the title of a 1993 Billy Idol album.

But it was another sci-fi cyber-coinage of the '80s, *cyberspace*, that gave rise to the prefix's dot-com boom in the following decade, yielding *cyberculture*, *cybercafés*, and, inevitably, *cybersex*. That last innovation captured enough imaginations (and baser faculties) that, as Annalee Newitz wrote for io9, *cyber* itself was for a brief moment slang for virtual intercourse. Noting the word's modern migration toward combat - cyberterrorism, etc. - Newitz observed, "Today, cyber means war. But back in the 1990s, it meant sex."

Cyber certainly has devolved from usages that could be boundless (space), bewitching (sex), or at least benign (cafés) toward the merely belligerent. But cyberwarfare hasn't infiltrated our speech just because of a novel threat. The prefix's modern connotations can also be blamed on what the Cato Institute's Jim Harper has called "the ugly poetry of budget-building in Washington." Attaching *cyber* to *security*, he wrote, gives politicians a whole new universe of excuses to wield power and spend money - often on government contractors employing ex-politicians who just finished officially hyping the cyberthreat.

So *cyber* hasn't just gone to war; it's gone into business. Hence Cyber Monday, a holiday cleansed of everything but commerce; and cyber charters, which soak up government money at the same rate as traditional schools while yielding none of their tangible facilities or, in many cases, results. In rejecting the most recent cyber charter applications, state officials worried that some were simply fronts for moneymaking enterprises - ventures no doubt counting on the futuristic sound of *cyber* to keep everyone distracted.

The philosopher Eric Hoffer famously wrote of America: "What starts out here as a mass movement ends up as a racket, a cult, or a corporation." His prophecy is fulfilled by *cyber*'s journey, through space, from theory to profit. We may yet be promised jet packs, but we'll never have to wait for the latest scam.