



EDITORIAL

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Science Fiction Sneaks Up

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Make your own spatula or SpongeBob key ring. That is the promise of the 3-D printers that may soon be gracing your kitchen or family room.

They are a lot like normal printers, but instead of using ink, they layer, in one case, nylon powder. With layers of the powder melted into place by a halogen bulb, they build three-dimensional objects. It's so logical you almost miss that it's inching up on a "Star Trek" replicator.

Yet the floor is hardly littered with dropped jaws. Incrementalism is a subtle but powerful force. It robs the greatest advances of much of their glitter and awe, reining every leap into a baby step forward from whatever came before it.

For one thing, those most likely to get excited are long since over it, accustomed to \$15,000 versions already in industrial design shops, dental labs and architecture offices. The experts are already dreaming of "printing" robots. But as Saul Hansell reported this week in The Times, several companies are trying to bring the price down to the \$1,000 to \$2,000 range in the next five years, paving the way to move the machines into homes.

Once the all-in-one scanner, fax, copier and printer became a standard home appliance, desktop publishing became ho-hum too. Now the day that a parent will be able to conceive, design and print out a toy without leaving home is an impending certainty rather than a far-fetched possibility. As it advances, the technology could lead to an explosion of invention and innovation, when anyone can turn ideas into objects.

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