

Positive Feedback Loops in Early Human Development

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Positive Feedback Loops in Early Human Development

There is no doubt that technology facilitated human development throughout history. However, what has been left largely untouched among the authors of the texts for this course is why technology has had such a tremendous effect on the evolution of the human species and its relationship with its environment. This essay will attempt to show that the effects of technology were subject to a multiplier effect inherent in positive [feedback](#) loops. In other words, every historical technological innovation gave way to a change in human behavior and physical [capabilities](#), which, in turn, allowed for further technological innovation. Because this loop has been so incredibly successful, humans have overwhelmed the environment by continually growing towards, and sometimes beyond, its natural carrying capacity. The only reason why humans have not surpassed the upper limit of environmental tolerance is our own technological innovation which exists as part of the positive feedback loop; hence the origin of the term "tech fix" (the idea that human ingenuity will overcome all environmental limitations).

The positive feedback loop that is responsible for the dominance of the human species is very much like a game of elementary school dodge-ball. Initially, there is no skill involved;

a [mess](#) of children with the sole intention of remaining alive in the game. Only, it is not entirely random because there are the few children who are particularly well-suited for the game. Be it because they are more agile or perhaps they understand the movement a little better than the rest. Whatever the reason, they are able to continue playing the game longer than a child who runs around as if his eyes were closed. The more able children will then gain more experience and be able to stay in even longer and dominate in the next game, and so the positive feedback loop proceeds to take shape. Early humans were similar in that what set them apart from the rest of the animals is that, for some reason, they had a natural inclination towards tool-making and technology. With these tools they were able to dominate the evolutionary "game", so to speak. The multiplier effect comes from the fact that the loop, once it has begun, will be self-propagating, such that one invention will inevitably allow for another. Conversely, a negative feedback loop is "self-limiting rather than self-reinforcing", as put by Tom Tietenberg in his text Environmental and Natural Resource Economics.

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