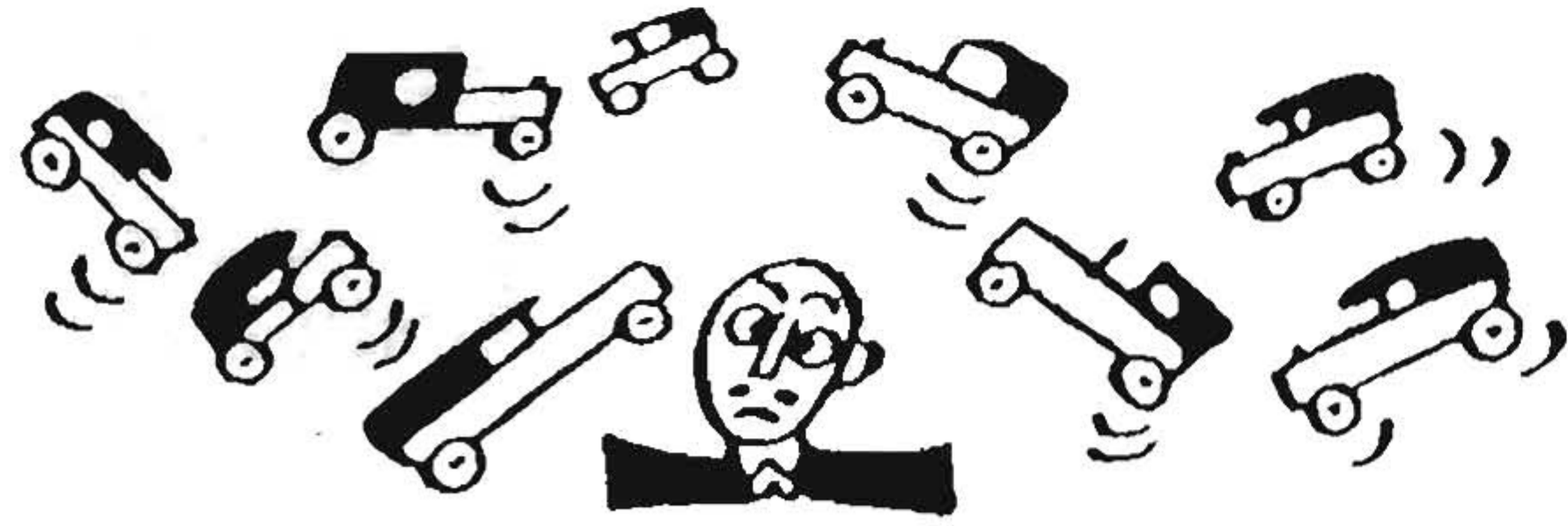




THE TALK OF THE TOWN

FOOL'S GOLD BY THE NUMBERS



The design for the new license plates unveiled last week in Albany has been given a name, Empire Gold, that seems especially fitting in light of the record budget deficit projected for the state, and the record highs in the price of gold—a magic recessionary solution. The sale of the plates, at twenty-five dollars apiece, was intended to alleviate the budget shortfall, under the guise of improving safety: as old license plates lose their reflective sheen, police are said to have a harder time reading the digits. Graphic designers at the D.M.V. have done away with the frills—the skyline, the Adirondacks, and Niagara Falls—and proposed replacing the current white background with a solid bar of gold that could pass for Mets or Islanders orange.

Your new plate, which is not meant to be optional, would come stamped with a new, randomly assigned sequence of seven letters and numbers—unless you've become so attached to your existing sequence, and the handy mnemonic device you use to remember it, that you're willing to pay an additional twenty bucks to roll it over onto Empire Gold. In this age of tea parties and Sean Hannity, however, citizens have become adept at spotting surreptitious forms of taxation, and, in Republican districts upstate, clerks like Frank Merola, of Rensselaer County, are staging a revolt, collecting thousands of signatures in opposition to the move, and starting Web sites like [Nonewplates.com](#) and [Stopnewplates.com](#).

"I'm in Troy, and I often give out special county-clerk plates that start with 'TR' or 'TY,' which have local significance and are very easy to remember, instead of 'XYZ1257,'"

Merola said the other day. "There's nothing wrong with the old plates. Most cars are in far worse shape than their plates." Part of the clerks' concerns is the anticipation of fielding angry calls from drivers who can no longer find their gray Volvos at the mall (A19—is that the row we parked in or the license plate?), or whose parking permits no longer square with their vehicle registrations. "It's almost insulting that they think it's O.K. as long as they dress it up in new colors," Merola said.

Could it be a coincidence that the Empire Gold color scheme calls to mind license plates introduced in New York during the seventies, another time when budgets were off course and precious metals were in demand? Gold, of course, is the nostalgist's perennial hedge against the proliferation of meaningless numbers and abstractions. With each passing year, more people require more area codes and Zip Codes and account numbers, and more gizmos for storing those numbers. The storage gadgets, in turn, ask for ever-more-complicated passwords and PINs, and the system expands outward until it threatens, on occasion, to break down—a memory brain freeze.

Memory, unlike gold, starts to deteriorate with time, and from lack of use. You may remember your childhood phone number, but, without the aid of speed dial, can you recall your child's? "We take for granted this highly repeated memory storage that allows us to function so well," Dr. Gary Small, the director of U.C.L.A.'s Memory and Aging Research Center, and the author of "iBrain: Surviving the Technological Alteration of the Modern Mind," said last week, after first asking if he could switch to another line and repeating his caller's number aloud, to exercise his frontal lobe. Small's license plate begins with the letters "YSL." "I think of Yves St. Laurent, so that helps," he said, and added, "Older people are better at seeing the big picture, but their memorization is slow."

The big picture: Albany still needs money. As of late last week, Governor Paterson appeared to be waffling over the license-plate scheme, appealing for new measures to increase revenues. Perhaps a free-market vanity-plate system (instead of fifty dollars for, say,

LUVGOV) would work better? Last year, in Abu Dhabi, a man spent fourteen million dollars at a public auction for a license plate that had only one digit: "1." "I bought it because it's the best number," he said.

—Ben McGrath