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High-tech gifts elevate post-holiday stress

Setup: Trying to make things work tips love-hate toward hate.

BY ABIGAIL TUCKER
SUN STAFF

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On Christmas night, Kevin Colohan found himself suddenly dusted in white.

The sprinkling, alas, was not a holiday snowfall but rather the powdery insides of an exploded stress doll. Colohan squeezed it to death while attempting to set up his Christmas present, an 80-gigabyte external hard drive that resisted installation.

Seated in front of the computer monitor, the 18-year-old Towson resident spent "two hours straight, squeezing as hard as I could," he said. "It was the only thing I could do to keep from punching my keyboard."

Of course, the keyboard was imperiled anyway when the doll -- emitting a pathetic "puff" sound -- expired, engulfing man and machine in a chalky cloud.

Such are the consequences of techno rage, a form of anger that is particularly prevalent this week after one of the most high-tech Christmases ever.





The satellite radios and LCD TVs have all been unwrapped, and America is strangling in a post-Christmas snarl of Mp3 player wires, modem lines and extension cords that won't quite reach the outlet.

"People are opening up all this technology," said Kent Norman, a University of Maryland, College Park psychology professor who studies computer rage. "When people sink three grand into a new plasma TV and something goes wrong, sometimes a killer instinct takes over."

Christmas presents are notoriously annoying to assemble, with mummifying plastic wrap and slots and tabs galore.

But Norman, who researches human-computer interactions, said a digital Christmas taps into something much deeper -- our reverence for, and visceral fear of, machines.

Partially because many people now feel defenseless without laptops and BlackBerries, the computer has become "almost this hallowed object," he said. "So

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 **Impaled computer mouse**
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precious. So expensive. People say, 'Be careful, be careful, don't get crumbs on the keyboard.'"

Handling automated objects with excessive care suppresses gradual frustrations that might ultimately bubble into rage, he said.

This furor arises during all seasons, not just the holidays.

Eighty percent of respondents to a continuing international survey that Norman designed acknowledged cursing out a machine at least once in their lives, and 20 percent confessed to intentionally dropping a computer on the floor.

The urge to throw

Local repair shops have seen Nintendo systems that have been tossed out apartment doors and computers pushed out of windows.

Mike Menefee, vice president of A-Plus Computers in Baltimore, remembers one aggravated customer who pitched his virus-ridden PC down a flight of stairs.

"I was like, 'Hey, we'll give you a discount for that,'" Menefee said.

Techno toys can reduce quality of life, according to Jonathan Lazar, a computer science professor at **Towson University** who tracked computer frustration among Baltimore office workers as part of a study, and found that people's moods often darken after using the computer.

"A lot of digital cameras, hand-held devices, are designed to make you mad," Lazar said. "These things can actually raise your blood pressure."

Despite this, well-wishers stocked up on high-tech items for their loved ones. About a third of items bought online during the holiday season were computers or electronics, according to comScore Networks, a consultant group that tracks consumer behavior. All of the top 10 most-searched-for items were gizmos of some kind, such as Playstation 2s and Bose sound systems, a comScore spokesman said.

To be sure, many people are on edge during the holiday season, with extravagant meals to cook and unwelcome relatives underfoot. Part of the problem might be that consumers have even less patience than usual for alien technologies that looked so cute in the box.


Also, there seems to be a cultural phobia -- perhaps digitally conditioned -- of printed instruction manuals.

"They give you a book in Spanish," said a bewildered Jim Hossback of Lutherville, who has relinquished all hope of transferring the Christmas pictures from his brand-new digital camera to his computer screen. "They give you a book in English, and a book in Chinese."


To make matters worse, new technology in a household can reveal the limits of older, formerly reliable equipment. Only after oohing and ahing over her new iPod did Stacey Schaeck of Sparks realize that it wasn't compatible with her family's computer.

The gift of an iPod cost her mother about \$300, but "now I have to spend \$2,000 on a new computer," she said. "I was really mad."

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
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So was Ben DeRose, a 17-year-old from Street who struggled to install software for his deluxe model iPod on Christmas morning. He spent more than an hour in front of the computer monitor, which flashed mocking messages.

"Do not disconnect, do not disconnect," DeRose mimicked, his voice rising.

Do not disconnect, indeed. To his family's horror, DeRose hurled the intractable iPod against the wall, shattering the screen.

"I wanted to finish it off," he said.

Next year, DeRose might do well to ask Santa for Computer Rage I & II, short films that Kent Norman and his psychology graduate students have shot over the past few years. Part parody, part earnest protest, they provide an outlet for vicarious techno venting without physically harming expensive new toys.

The films star Norman and sundry disobedient machines -- a printer that refuses to print, a video camera that he swears only takes pictures of feet -- which he insults, then systematically dismembers for a grainy home video effect that Carmelo Anthony might admire.

In one clip, Norman blackens a computer mouse on his backyard grill. In another, he squishes one camcorder in a vise while eyeing a second, which is filming from a safe distance.

Available for purchase, the films can also be viewed for free at a university Web site (http://lap.umd.edu/computer_rage). Next on Norman's agenda is a holiday episode. The scenario: A shining Christmas morning, as Dad opens a new computer.

Gang up on the gizmo

Making the videos helped Norman conquer his own gadget grudges, but the real secret, he said, is joining forces against technology. In the weeks after Christmas, he recommends that families work as a unit to decipher new electronics by parceling out tasks. One person should study the manual, for instance, while another untangles the cords.

Maybe future Christmases will get easier, as new high-tech toys gradually become the norm. Paul Moscatt, manager of Little Shop of Hardware in **Hampden**, recalled the "Christmas modem rush" of four or five seasons ago, when the store was besieged by customers who couldn't get their new modems to connect to the Internet.

That almost never happens now, he said -- although a modem barely ranks as a respectable stocking stuffer these days.

Some lucky recipients are unruffled by high-tech gifts.

Twenty minutes beneath the Christmas tree was all 15-year-old Sarah Renderrez of Cockeysville needed to unleash the mysteries of her new iPod mini. Nothing could have been simpler, she said.

Although actually, she reflected, "they put tape and stuff on the box," she said. That "was kind of frustrating."

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