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## Rage Against the Machines

By Michelle Delio December 24, 2004

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Kent Norman kills computers.

His lab looks like a silicon slaughterhouse. Over here is a heap of mangled monitors, over there a sad little collection of flame-broiled mice. Brutally kicked keyboards, drowned hard drives, pounded PDAs and other tortured technology are piled under desks and stashed in corners.

Norman, who is a cognitive psychologist and director of the Laboratory for Automation Psychology and Decision Processes at the University of Maryland, doesn't destroy technology solely for the thrill of it. His lab was packed full of surplus and obsolete equipment from more than two decades worth research on human/computer interaction.

"So I thought why not dispose of all this stuff in a creative, vent-filled manner," says Norman. "And I discovered it is fun, interesting, and rewarding to barbeque a mouse, crack open a hard disk, and bend a keyboard."

A computer mouse was the first bit of technology to experience his wrath. He's hated them for twenty years because the idea of a device that moves on a horizontal plane to point at a pixel on a vertical projection strikes him as truly stupid.



[Click here for more images of computer killing](#)

But it's not just about the destruction. He also makes computer snuff films which he shares online, hoping that they will act as a sort of early intervention to keep computer owner's frustrations from getting out of hand.

But if all films aren't enough to soothe the silent rage, Norman figures the videos can serve as a self-help guide for safe and effective machine murdering methodologies.

Norman's videos resemble Bad Day. An online cult favorite in 1999, the short depicts a frustrated worker deep into a full-fledged, computer-killing frenzy -- pounding the keyboard with his fists, flinging the monitor and keyboard to the ground and kicking them as they lie helplessly at his feet, while his cube neighbor pops up in "Whack-A-Mole" fashion, curious to see what's going on.

When Bad Day debuted, it was thought to be a candid mini-psychodrama showing the stress endured by the modern worker. It turned out to be an advertising clip for an office surveillance company.

Norman's offerings are authentic -- real computers are hurt in his videos.

Norman knows frustration; he knows the things that people do to their computers during their darkest hours. For the past three years, he has conducted an informal online survey about how people torture technology. The bulk of his respondents, maybe quite unexpectedly, appear to be fairly technically savvy.

"Geeks have real problems with technology designed by other geeks," says Norman. "Everyone thinks that things should work the way they think things should work. But everyone thinks differently."

The reports of computer abuse that have been confessed on Norman's rage survey include:

"Struck mid-size tower with car going 25mph, propelling it 15-20 feet forward. This causes damage to car but troublesome DVD drive finally ejected jammed disc upon contact with pavement. Still worked but HDD reported errors, and case wasn't attractive. Sold on eBay (with new case and HDD). Beware of this computer if you find it on eBay."

"Slammed keyboard with fists hard enough to pop most of the keys off. Lost the 'A' key and the top row of characters stopped working. Threw keyboard into the swimming pool. Kinda nice watching it sink."

"Smashing boards and plastic bits with a hammer is satisfying. Stomping on things that make a nice "CRUNCH" noise is even more satisfying."

"I once shot a computer with a .50 cal BMG sniper rifle."

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### NOTEBOOK

**Norman's Tips to Build a Better Technology:**

1. Remember, you are NOT designing this for yourself but for someone you don't know, performing a task that you probably had not thought they would try to do.
2. [Read](#) and apply the basic principles for Human-Computer Interaction and best practices. Don't complain about users not reading the manuals when you yourself have not read them.
3. Involve a broad range of users early in the design process.
4. Keep systems for the general user population simple. Many older users long for the old days when they could start up MacWrite or PixelPaint and immediately do the simple tasks that they needed to do. Today we are subjected professional programs like MS-Word and PhotoShop that require extensive training just to type and print a simple letter of complaint
5. Always do extensive user testing. It is not just an issue of seeing whether the software works, there is also an issue of user satisfaction versus user irritation and frustration and ultimately computer rage. See Norman's [Questionnaire for User Interaction Satisfaction \(QUIS\)](#) for this purpose.

### Norman's Family Tech Support:

1. Do set up the systems for your friends and relatives.
2. Go through the processes of using the product step by step with your relatives and friends.
3. Write out all instructions and put the crucial ones on post-it notes, prominently displayed.
4. Demand food and drink, and no free tech support after 90 days.

### The Ultimate Computer Destruction:

Much of Norman's own displaced anger isn't on emerging technologies. Instead, smashing dreams are of precedence and history. He wants to punish the original computer mouse prototype. And he longs to smash the original Altair 8800, the first personal computer, introduced in 1975 and sold to hobbyists in a \$439 kit.

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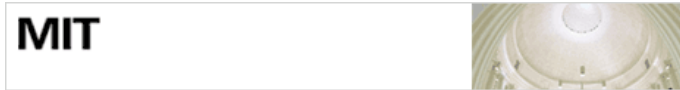
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"But no one knows where it is," says Norman.

The Altair graced the cover of the January 1975 issue of Popular Electronics, but the machine that was shown was actually an empty shell. The only working Altair in existence at the time had been previously shipped to the magazine's offices, but was lost in transit and has never been found.

#### On the Net:

- The original [Bad Day video](#)  
Kent Norman [videos](#)  
Computer rage [survey](#)  
OnTrack's 2004 [list](#) of  
computer incidents

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Norman's survey indicates that most people confine themselves to shrieking curses at their computers, but there are always a few that move onto physical abuse.

"I was on deadline, it was 3 in the morning, the job was due to my client at 9AM and I was freaking out about how I'd ever get it finished in time," says Manhattan graphic designer Jim Heedles "Of course my laptop picked that moment to start acting up. I just snapped.

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"I started slapping it around, and the next thing I knew it was on the floor and I was yelling and kicking and stomping on it. I cracked the case, but the innards survived, thankfully. I felt a lot better afterwards, and I even made my deadline."

Judging by past survey statistics, Norman figures that roughly 10 percent of all new computers and tech gear given as gifts over the holidays will be seriously injured over the next few weeks in frustrated fits of rage.

Ontrack Data Recovery agrees that the holidays are an especially dangerous time for computers, but notes that technology is never really safe from the wrath or reckless whims of their owners.

Last year the company was asked to restore data from a laptop whose owner had placed the machine in the toilet and then flushed several times, a computer that had been used as a punching bag to relieve the owner's frustration with its sluggish performance, and boxes that had been fried by power surges, squished by falling steel beams, and run over by airplanes.

"Data can disappear as a result of natural disaster, system fault or computer virus but human error, including 'computer rage,' seems to be a growing problem, says Jim Reinert, senior director of Software and Services for Ontrack Data Recovery.

Norman expects that most of those owners who flip out and beat on their new gifts won't be technically-inclined folks. But he predicts a few geeks will snap over the winter holidays, and the results are likely to be very ugly.

"Geeks have as many or more frustrations than the rest of the population because we attempt to push the technology harder and have higher expectations than most," says Norman. "And while most techies have a high tolerance for frustration when they go over the edge they can be excessive.

"I have one report of a frustrated geek who took his PC into the middle of a parking lot and dosed it with two gallons of gasoline. That's a bit much. Two cups would have been more than sufficient."

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