When Automation Gets Ugly

by Frank Pennetti

I went into a public library the other day, and as soon as I entered the bathroom stall, there was this new intelli-toilet that spontaneously flushed itself, seemingly repulsed by my presence.

Undeterred by this snobby new fixture, I sat down, went about my business and then got up. Nothing happened. There was no lever to press, no small black panel, with an infrared device in it, integrated in the toilet directly above the seat. I waved my hand before the little square, pressed it, massaged it, pleaded for a flush, and still nothing. I wagged my butt before it, thinking that perhaps this was some sort of ultra-advanced space-age butt sensor that could identify my exact rump from all the times I had used this stall. No luck. Because the library assumed that pushing a lever takes too much energy or would give everyone germs or something, I had to leave this high-tech Big Brother toilet looking like a port-a-potty after a marathon chili cook-off. Some things just should not be automated.

See, we used to work on ways to eliminate hard work, inventions that would automatically wash and dry our clothes, cook our food and so on. But now it seems like we're just thinking up complex ways to make easy things simpler. Personally, I just don't need a home network that turns my lights off. Make something that iron and folds my clothes. I couldn't care less about being able to turn my stereo or air conditioner on remotely before I enter my apartment. Make me a bathroom tub and tiles that clean themselves.

Computers do all sorts of tedious mental tasks so we don't have to. Software constantly tries to outguess what we want to do, and keeps attempting to further automate what was already a purely electronic endeavor. Microsoft Publisher offers to make a wine/dessert menu or a paper airplane model for me. Word wants to change "Calista Flockhart" (of "Ally McBeal" fame) to "Ballasta Flowchart." Outlook always wants to archive my stuff, but never actually tells me where it's putting it all. The instant messaging program ICQ thinks I want to hear actual typewriter rat-a-tat-tat sounds as I'm typing a message. Some program always wants me to register it. And those cartoon help assistants: Instead of making our work easier, it's now getting to the point where the programs make us take more time to figure out how to disable all their annoying features of "convenience."

There's a ton of software out there that does nothing but try to control how Windows software should run. At Dave Central (www.davecentral.com/sysauto.html), you'll find 15 pages of links to programs like WinWizard Pro, AutoTask 2000 and MouseMover (yes, it actually moves the mouse cursor around the screen for you). Of course, a lot of this little shareware probably won't install properly, so you should grab special disk-cleaning software to get rid of the software that was supposed to help your operating system software. But soon, according to Jini.org (www.jini.org), we'll have a "device community," where all our appliances will talk to each other to sustain my ideal living environment. What do I install when this thing crashes?

Then there's the cool technology stuff we have and would like to use, but never do. My Voodoo 3500 graphics card has this big ol' blue garden-hose-like cord that I'm supposed to connect to my TV set to use it as a monitor. Instead, it just pointlessly winds around my floor, wrapped around some of my lesser computer cables like the ultimate box constrictor of wires. Apparently no one else really felt like trying to tame this beast either, so now the newest Voodoo cards, including the 5500, don't even have TV-out support.

Innovation overkill seems to be backfire in many ways. We have dishwashers. We still wash the dishes before we put them in. We have car washes. We still wash our cars with hoses. We have automatic transmissions. We still don't want them in sports cars. We can automate your breathing when you're near death. So we sign living wills to make the machines stop.

But boy, do we need a device community to run our homes.

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When not using the actions featured in Photoshop to automate his utter mastery of the Spatter and Zigzag filters, Frank Pennetti can be found at www.franklyspeaking.com.