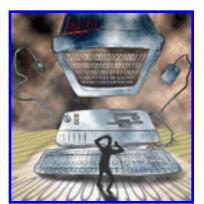# Why Are People Afraid of Computers?

by *Scott Ramsay MacDonald*

There's someone sitting alone in an apartment, typing away at a paper due very soon. Typing franticly she mutters, "I have to get it done before my computer crashes!" The person pauses only to backup onto floppy, not giving the slightest bit of trust to the hard drive. She will type the paper all at once, not trusting the file to return after the computer is turned off. I get a call from my mother, who is in a panic. Her ruler disappeared off her screen in Microsoft Word and she thinks her whole system is going down. My brother was playing a computer game and it crashed. He came to me apologizing for destroying my system, and was *very* relieved when I rebooted with no problem. These are normal people, and there are many more like them. They are creative, loving, and generally nice. They are also afraid. Very afraid.

In a world where the Internet is constantly in the news, where America On-Line advertises on your television, and where people everyday are gaining the coveted email address, it is hard to imagine that there are people who **don't like** computers. Computers are our friends, aren't they? Life is simpler with them, isn't it? God knows what I'd do without a spell checker. It's difficult for me to understand why people wouldn't like to be able to play X-Wing or Doom whenever they wanted. But some people fear these little pieces of technology. These people range from those who have tried to get on the so called ``Information Superhighway'' and broke down, to those who are so afraid of computers they won't touch a word processor on a Macintosh.

Knowing many people who fear computers, I had to ask why. My first stop for answers was on the Net itself. The first response was ``stupidity or ignorance.'' This was most likely a jest but it made me think. I recalled a quote from the Cosby show. In response to his father asking why he wasn't studying, Theo said, ``I'm not studying, because I'm afraid I might fail.''

Do computers make us think this way? Are we afraid that we might try and fail, and people might think we are morons? This is in fact what some people believe -- and we computer literate people aren't helping very much, and neither is the media. I try to imagine myself as a very patient and understanding person, but how many times when someone asks me a question about computers are the first words off my lips, ``Oh, that's so easy....''? Of course it's easy, I've already asked the question before, so I've seen the answers. But this person hasn't, and knowing I think it's easy isn't helping their ego much. The media is painting a marvelous picture of the Internet. It can do everything for you! It will change the world! It's so easy! If you don't get on, kiss your future good-bye!

But it can't, we are still working on it, it's not, and don't be so hasty.

If you want more to that weird answer I just gave, I suggest you pick up a copy of *Silicon Snake Oil* by [Clifford Stoll](#) (the guy who caught the computer spy). It is a second look at the Internet and cyberspace. I was going to review it, but it's probably better for you to form your own opinions. While I don't totally agree on every point, he has brought up some ideas that should be seriously discussed, and he helps see reasons behind the fear. I'll quote not from the book, but from his talk at [Washington University](#) while on his book tour.

> We have two groups of people, those who follow instructions, are great at following a reasoned line of thought. And we have those who aren't that good at following instructions, who are more right brained, who are more creative. The person who is great at following instructions has an easier time with computers, it follows a straight line of reason. The person who is more right brained has a problem, it doesn't come easy to him, he becomes frustrated, he gives up. The people who are good at following instructions are considered `Smart,' `Gurus,' the people who are right brained are `Stupid.' And it shows in what's in the market place, DOS for dummies, etc....

I mostly agree that by trying to sell the Internet as an ``easy to use'' tool, we are driving people away. They learn it isn't easy for them, and decide that they themselves are the morons. It's a shame because I believe computers have a lot of potential for creative people. I differ with Stoll because I believe there are groups in the middle. I think I'm somewhere in there. But the group I'm going to look at now are the people who are just plain and utterly frustrated.

Ever felt like slamming your head into that monitor in front of you? Everyone I know has, but so far I'm the only person I know who's actually done it. Here's a hint: don't. It hurts, a *lot*. But we've all felt that frustration, be it from compiler errors, programs crashing, network connections failing, etc. It's temporary, and we grow used to it. And that's part of the problem -- people who are used to problems don't complain much, and nothing gets fixed. And the people who aren't used to the problems are driven away.

When was the last time you picked up a computer game that didn't need a patch? The Internet and BBSs in general are partially at fault for this. Using them as a medium, distributing patches is easy, and soon patches become standard procedure. Microsoft is even planning to **charge** you for the fixes for Windows 95. ``Get the product to the shelf, that's where the money is!'' I fear is the growing mentality of software producers. I feel sorry for the designers and programmers who have to watch their product get shipped, when they know it's flawed. I know its going to happen to me, and I am not yet sure how I'm going to deal with it. And yet from reading the news groups on the Net it seems bugs are expected from every product. Sometimes a product delayed to fix bugs gets more criticism than a bug-filled product released on time.

When was the last time you could read a manual once and understand it completely? When was the last time you looked for a feature in software that you *knew* was there, but found it in the most insane place (or the feature didn't do what you thought it would)? These questions deal with a certain mentality. People who use computers everyday have developed a jargon. After a while, this jargon becomes integrated in your language and mind. You are surprised when someone doesn't understand a term that is second nature to you. It happens to me, it happens to us all. But we all have to become aware of this when we sit down and write instructions on how to use a piece of software. It's very easy to fill it with terms, jargon, and jokes any Computer Science person would understand without a blink (well, most of them, I know I'm not one of them). And when designing software, it's easy to be closed minded to others' views, placing features where only someone on your mind set will find them, or calling the features a weird name that only you and your five closest friends understand.

But what about someone who has just bought a computer with all sorts of new features he wants to learn? He'll fiddle with it, then attempt to read the instructions. He might have to read them several times, and still not understand it all. He'll fiddle some more, and he'll make mistakes because he didn't completely understand the nuances in the manual. He'll read the manual yet again, then most likely he'll throw the manual in the fire. He then has two options, call someone he knows is proficient with computers or pull out a shotgun and blow it away.

How many vote for option two?

We have to realize this mentality we have isn't shared by everyone. And we have to strive to make computing easier and more dependable for those who are new to it. We must learn how to communicate all over again.

I cite all of the above for you to think about, to reflect on, and, I hope, to augment. Feel free to respond to me via email. Tell me why you think some people grow afraid of this machine that runs on 1's and 0's. And the next time a ``newbie'' asks you a question, crinkle your face, look like you are racking your brain and say...

``Hmmmm, that's a toughie, but I think I can help you....'' Let **them** be the ones to say, ``But it is so easy!''