



Home
News ▶
Technology ▶
Markets ▶
Your Money ▶
Opinion ▶
At Leisure ▶
In Today's Paper
Columnists
Portfolio
Setup Center
E-Mail Setup
Site Map
Discussions
Help
Contact Us
Log In



Today In:



@ Your Service
Lind Simulated
Trading-30 Days FREE!
Order Free Annual Reports
Order Free Fund Prospectuses
FREE report >>
Forbes columnist's stock market analysis
Give the perfect gift: The Online Journal
More Insights. Better Decisions. Visit The Business Insight Center.
Visit the WSJ.com insurance archive sponsored by Liberty Mutual
Get there with IBM e-business on demand.

PORTALS

By LEE GOMES



Appliances Have Become Like PCs: Too Complex for Their Own Good

Almost from the day personal computers were invented, people have complained about how complex and hard to use they are. Why, people ask, can't they be more like home appliances?

Be careful what you wish for. That transformation is occurring, though not in the direction people were hoping. PCs aren't getting easier to use, but appliances -- TVs, telephones, cameras, washing machines, microwave ovens -- are getting harder.

The average house is now crammed with machines too smart for their owners' own good. These are the devices on which we are utterly dependent, but over which we have no mastery. Sometimes we can barely even use them.

It's a bit like Orwell's famous comment about the future being a jackboot forever stomping on a human face. But instead of a boot, substitute a digital camera, one you can never figure out how to download from properly.

A few months back, I bought a new home-theater system, with separate components for picture and sound, plus a DVD player and video recorder. Each component had its own inputs and outputs and controls -- and the combinations and permutations quickly became exponential. I spent an evening trying to set it up and failed. I had to resort to hiring someone to come by and show me how to get it going.

After that, I began noticing how many other machines containing some sort of digital technology I had around my house that I didn't really know how to use. I found them everywhere, even in my car. We've been in daylight-saving time for weeks now,

[→ ADD TO PERSONALIZED HOME PAGE](#)**RECENT COLUMNS**

May 5

- [Technology Too Easily Hides Behind Legal Protective Bubble](#)

April 28

- [This Cyberbouncer Battles To Keep Match.com Clean](#)

April 21

- [Once-Dashing Chip Turns Out To Be Just a Face in the Crowd](#)

[MORE](#)**NOTE TO READERS**

Lee Gomes's column is now called Portals. His Boomtown columns are available [here](#).

ABOUT LEE GOMES

Lee Gomes, who writes the Portals column on Monday and the Portals Exchange on Friday, has been covering various topics, technical and otherwise, for The Wall Street Journal since 1996. He is a graduate of the University of Hawaii and the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, and lives in San Francisco.

SEARCH PAST COLUMNS

Search for these words:

[Display all columns](#)

advertisement

IBM Express Middleware.

Powerful IBM software designed (and priced) for the mid-market.

Get free case studies, white papers and more. ↘

Middleware is Everywhere. Can you see it?

Stay organized,
connected and in touch
with the P800.

and the clock on my car radio is still an hour behind. Changing the time is done completely differently from how it was on my old radio, which was stolen and replaced. Who knows where the manual is.

People who write about technology are often asked why computers are so complicated. Truth is, there are lots of reasons.

For one, computers started out as office machines and have been evolving slowly since, with no real chance to make a fresh start to take into account the more average-consumer role they now play.

In the case of Wintel machines -- those using Windows and Intel -- it's because no one "owns" and controls the whole system, a fact that makes them inexpensive, too.

Of course, PCs are also complicated because they do lots of things. Today's PC is typewriter, post office, photo album, stereo, bookshelf, game console and much more.

During the PC industry's early years, software was often judged on how many features it had, leading to bloated products. That sad chapter is being repeated now in home appliances. We have feature-bloat in machines that never used to have features at all. Look at the row of phones at a big electronics store, each jumping up and down screaming, "Pick me! I have Caller IQ!" "No, pick me! I have Sound Select!"

"Profound simplicity" would be the best feature, but manufacturers seem to think that sales tag wouldn't move a lot of product.

All this is happening because the chips that make your PC smart are now so cheap you can put them everywhere. And that is where they are ending up, whether they are needed or not. The result is a new epidemic of man-machine alienation.

At least with PCs, most people develop a growing sense of competence because the machines tend to work the same way from year to year. Not so with appliances. Each one is a design island unto itself, with a whole new set of rules, sometimes even from one model to its successor.

So many things about the gadgets in my house remain a mystery to me. Usually, I can solve the mystery by taking the time to read the instructions, but I am troubled by the idea that on account of "smart" electronics, I now must read a manual to make toast.

The answer to all this is good design, but judging by the lack of it, one presumes good design is a hard thing to come by. The solution isn't always just to make things simple. In doing so, you often deprive them of some of their usefulness. Sometimes, good designers will have the courage of their convictions to force people to spend time teaching themselves how to use something worthwhile.





Most people don't mind learning a new tool if they sense that in doing so they are encountering some overall logic and design, where new skills build on old ones in steady steps toward mastery. But many give up when they realize the various drills they are memorizing are totally arbitrary. Shoelaces, for instance, are hard to master. But once you do, the world is at your feet.

Good design involves seeing things with fresh eyes. My favorite example of this sort of thinking outside the box involves hardware, though not the PC sort.

Everyone with a tool chest knows there are two basic kinds of screwdrivers: Phillips head and straight blade. Someone much smarter than I am, looking at the two side by side for the first time, asked why they weren't simply called "plus" and "minus."

- Send your comments to lee.gomes@wsj.com, and check back on Friday for some selected letters at WSJ.com/Portals.

Updated May 12, 2003

 [EMAIL THIS](#)  [FORMAT FOR PRINTING](#)  [SAVE THIS](#)  [ORDER REPRINTS](#)

Sponsored by



[Return To Top](#)

[Corrections](#) [Contact Us](#) [Help](#) [About Dow Jones](#) [Mobile Devices](#) [E-mail Setup](#)

[Account Information](#) [Privacy Policy](#) [Subscriber Agreement](#)

Copyright © 2003 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

[Copyright and reprint information.](#)



