



DATA-DRIVEN WORLD

Be good, for goodness' sake

My Computer, My Self

Of all the ridiculous ideas that come down the information highway, seat belt off, drinking heavily, veering into the sparse traffic moving in the opposite direction, there's none I find more ridiculous than this one: "The computer is our friend."

The computer is not our friend.

True, the computer is a lot of things. It's a tool, for one. But so is a hammer. Is a hammer our friend? No. It's a hammer. We use it to pound nails, and then put it away, or leave it to rust on the patio, depending on our personal skills as handypersons. We don't have personal, deep feelings about our hammers, unless we hit our thumbs.

The computer is also, of course, the gateway to the future. That doesn't necessarily make it our friend. How many friends do you have that you can truly call "gateways to the future?" I'm betting zero, unless you've had a couple drinks, and your friend has expressed some bizarre insight into the nature of time that you'll both have forgotten by morning.

Even if you did know somebody whom you felt was a genuine gateway to the future, he or she would not be your friend. They would be your cult leader. Is the computer our cult leader? Sometimes I wonder.

The *San Francisco Chronicle* (a personal friend, by the way) informed me this summer that an "elite group" had gathered in San Jose for the seventh annual "New Paradigms for Using Computers Workshop." (I know it's a foolish dream, but wouldn't it be nice if we mastered a few of the old paradigms we have lying around, before tackling new ones?) They had gathered, it seems, to find ways to "give computers a human face." Ted Selker, an IBM fellow, said, "Computers will know us better than we know ourselves and will make the best decisions for us. It's already starting to happen."

Is the computer my mom? I read on.

Selker, according to the *Chronicle*, "...envision[s] a personal computer that knows when you're happy or sad."

Is the computer my therapist? I read on.

Rosalind Pierce, conference presenter and professor at MIT's Media Lab, said a computer should "act like a dog." When you come home, it should wag its tail (virtually) and drop bones of data at your feet. Pierce calls this the "illusion of empathy and sympathy," which a computer will eventually give.

So the computer could be our love slave? Wow.

Scientists at IBM are working on an intelligent system called Simple User Interest Tracker (or Sutor) that tracks where a user has been on the Internet, and (using a webcam) studies the user's eye movements to determine his or her interests, needs, and impossible desires. The system is called BlueEyes.

So the computer is a sociopathic, needy lover who needs our approval to survive?

The relationship is already dysfunctional, and we don't even have the bandwidth to stream movies yet!

I think we're going about this the wrong way. Maybe we should be getting emotional input from our computers. We need to learn a little bit more about *their* needs and wants. I'm not talking about peripherals and add-ons, but about the soul of the machine. Who's looking to that?

And if it turns out that computers are in fact doglike in their essence, that could work to our benefit. When the screen freezes in the middle of a project, we can shake our finger at the webcam, and say in a gentle but firm tone: "Bad computer! Bad! Give me back my document or no more upgrades for three months!"

Of course, we'd have to discipline ourselves as well. No upgrades for three months? Paradigms lost! But that's the price we have to pay. We must show them who's boss. **IE**

Ian Shoales has an ambiguous relationship with his PC.

He and his computer live in an uneasy yet fruitful alliance in San Francisco.