

Introduction



We have at least ten different remotes. I got a universal remote and programmed it for most of our gadgets, but nobody really liked its touch screen, I think, because it is so hard to read and so easy to press the wrong “button.” But I was able to program a real button to turn on the TV and the stereo, which sounds really cool, especially when watching action movies!

One time I was away and my cell phone rang. There had been a blackout and my wife wanted to turn on the TV. The thing is, that you had to set up the DVD player, the cable box, the stereo and the TV just so they could talk to each other well enough to show you a rerun of *The Flintstones*.

She had to use the dreaded universal remote, but I talked her through it step by step, trying to picture each button in my head and say what to press in small English words.

After a short while I could hear TV voices and she said I was a genius. The Home and Garden Channel has me to thank for the spike in their ratings that day!

But it goes to show that the world has become too complicated, because the people who make the gadgets don't make them usable by mere mortals. If that universal remote were designed by someone who actually uses universal remotes I'll bet it would look better and be a lot easier to use. And you'd be able to see what to press on that miserable touch screen!

Then there is the problem with repairs. We had a pricey DVD recorder attached to our TV. When these things first came out they cost over \$600. I got a discount on mine, but it wasn't cheap. It worked for two years and then it died.

I went to Target and found a \$99 DVD recorder on sale for \$89. That was way less than the company wanted to fix my expensive one. So another gadget became trash, and I actually like the cheapo DVD recorder more, because it was evidently designed by a human being. I kind of understand it. Murphy has his law, I have mine:

“The more you own,
the more you own that can break.”

It's frustrating when you have a computer, cell phone or some other gadget. Heck, our washer just died, and the new one is so computerized that it takes a bit of an MIT graduate to do a load of underwear. You know that your gadget is supposed to be great, but you just can't figure out how to make it work so it *will* be great. Or even good... All you want to do is get Aunt Mable's phone number to dial when you press "5" or make a slice of toast...

I believe that technology doesn't have to be inscrutable. A computer is just a tool, after all, like a hammer or a drill. The trick is to know enough about how to make it work that you don't want to use a hammer or a drill on your computer! You want to spend your time doing your work with your tools, not working *on* your tools.

The problem with technical things is that technical people create them. Those folks already know how to use their technical things, and find it difficult to explain them to other people in simple terms. Most people don't read the directions, but even if you do they are often impossible to decipher.

That's where Dr. Digit comes in. These articles were published in the Lansing Star Online (www.lansingstar.com), Lansing NY's On-line Newspaper. Some of them also appear on Tucows, the download Web site. They are meant for the average person to understand, to try to untangle the tangle of tech-speak frustration and make sense of our digital world.

My hope is that these seventeen articles will make your world slightly brighter, and even if you can't set the clock on your VCR after reading it (there isn't an article about VCR clocks, after all) that you will feel a little less intimidated by our modern techie world.

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