

# SHODDY NATION

Our columnist, Gersh Kuntzman, bemoans the current state of state-of-the-art gadgetry

I was having a bad couple of weeks: a perfectly good personal computer that was barely two years old died on me. The computer that I bought to replace it broke down less than a week after it arrived in the mail. It was perfect ... except for one thing: I kept getting error messages that said I must 'upgrade' to a newer version of 'Windows Messenger', which is apparently an instant-messaging program. I tried to uninstall Windows Messenger, but the devil kept coming back. Finally, I decided to download the newer version, thinking I'd just uninstall it later. Well, seconds after the download was complete my brand-new computer started acting like a punch-drunk fighter. Whenever I tried to put the computer into standby, I'd get this amazing error message: 'The device driver for the "Standard 101/102-ye or Microsoft Natural PS/2 Keyboard" device is preventing the machine from entering standby'.

An Apple computer that I've been borrowing suddenly decided that it wouldn't let me burn files onto a CD-ROM because, and I'm quoting here, 'the startup disk is full'. Yet when I tried to delete files to

make room, the computer gave me warning messages like, 'This system file can not be deleted'.

My cellular phone broke down after less than six months of fairly mild use. The so-called 'smart phone' isn't broken, but the earpiece sometimes shorts out in the middle of a call. It's kind of annoying. So I brought it back to my Sprint PCS store and told them about it. 'It's still under warranty,' the clerk said. 'We'll just get you a new one.' A new one? This is a \$400 device! It probably needs a \$10 repair, yet Sprint is going to just throw it away.

Given all I've been through, I feel qualified to ask: What the heck is going on in this country? We've all heard of planned obsolescence, which was corporate America's way of getting us to buy stuff sooner by having it break just *after* the point at which it would make financial sense to repair it. But what I am going through – along with probably millions of other Americans – is *unplanned* obsolescence, an entirely new phenomenon in our consumer culture.

And just as I was sitting in my office, wanting to throw all my brand-new computer equipment out the window, I

discovered that my neighbours had beaten me to it. Last week, a group called 'Recycle This NYC' had set up a tent for people to 'recycle' their used, broken or no longer state-of-the-art electronic equipment. And it wasn't just old junk that was being thrown on our society's scrap heap. Most of what was being dropped off was fully functioning computer equipment. There was one computer with a flat-screen monitor. There were new-looking printers and cell phones.

Seeing the detritus of modern American life made me reflect about mortality. Not my own, but the mortality of the stuff we buy. In my living room, I have a Sony Trinitron television set that my parents bought in 1981 that still works brilliantly. In my dining room, I am still using the Sanyo amplifier and radio tuner that I bought in 1980.

I guess I'm a bad American. I don't throw out perfectly useful stuff. 'When you organize these recycling drives, it seems that our entire economy is propped up by companies tricking us into thinking that we need new stuff just because it's new,' said Rachel Cernanski, a volunteer. To me that's what deserves an error message.

1 Summarize the nature of each of the four problems noted by the writer. You should write a sentence to briefly describe each problem; each sentence should be no shorter than five words but no longer than ten.

2 Answer these questions:

- What do you think Kuntzman means by 'unplanned obsolescence'?
- What is surprising about the 'recycling programme' in his neighbourhood?
- What is surprising (or not) about some of the older technological items he has in his own house?
- What is shocking about the culture Kuntzman is part of?

3 How would you describe the author's attitude and his style? How does he feel about this situation?

4 Do you think the situation is similar in your country? Do you think the situation is likely to get better or worse globally?