/dev/random

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Fall is in the air, not to mention all over the ground and floating in my new pool. With autumn comes cooler weather, which may seem like a blessing in this year of record-breaking heat, even for some of you who ordinarily dread the encroachment of Jack Frost and his minions. Good thing all those climate scientists who've been predicting global warming are wrong, eh? Otherwise, this might be a worrying trend. In my neck of the scrub brush—San Antonio, Texas—any lessening of the thermal oppression is welcomed by all and sundry.

One of the topics I saw proposed for this month's issue of the magazine you are currently holding concerned self-destructing DC power supplies. The topic got me thinking about all of the computers I've owned and administered in my life—a number that requires scientific notation to express—and their propensity for autolysis. Computers, at least the ones that have dominated my existence for the past 35 years, tend to experience three fundamental failure modes: insidious, inopportune, and incendiary. I3 == bad juju. (Notice that I use two equals signs rather than one, which brands me as an authentic coding geek. Pay attention next time.)

Insidious failures are those that happen when you're not looking, often when the computer isn't even powered up. Main board and memory failures generally fall into this category. Many's the otherwise fair morning, vibrant with the promise of a productive day, that has been ruined utterly by a POST failure; serenade of clinical, cynical beep codes; or just flat refusal to power up. Those weird, unpredictable errors that spring from thermal cycling, transient memory boo-boos, and the infamous *gremlins in the system* are all examples of this genre of frustration-inducing activity.

The inopportune fail mode is for the most part blatant and occurs, as the name suggests, in such a manner as to maximize the deleterious consequences. A classic example was the *Blue Screen of Death* (BSOD) fail during Bill Gates' 1998 COMDEX introduction to Windows 98. For the next four or five years, I giggled every time I thought of that. In fact, I'm still giggling. Another member of this genus is the computer that locks up just as you are reaching to save an hour's worth of complex word processing or spreadsheet data. This failure is also known as a TYHO (Tear Your Hair Out) error.

My favorite failures have to be the various BSOD incidents in simulators for military aircraft and surface ships. *If they happen in real missions, that's classified and I can't talk about it.*

> "You have a bogey at nine o'clock, Major. Engage him with your missiles!"
> "Um, I tried that, but first the console said something about a memory read error, then the little hourglass came up. Now it doesn't respond at all."

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"You're hit! Bail out! Repeat: bail out!

"No can do. It says *'Action failed. Please see your system administrator.'*"

"Climb out of the cockpit manually, then."

"Can't. Canopy interlocks are computer-controlled. Wait…the screen is coming back on. Just in time, too. Hold it…never mind."

"Why? What does it say?

"'It is now safe to turn off your computer.'"

"Bummer. Any last words, Major?"

"Linux rocks!"

The third—and perhaps least-predictable—failure mode is what I have termed *incendiary* for two reasons: this failure tends to make the failure recipient very hot-headed, and it literally can trigger open flames. Although I didn't actually read the DC power supply failure article/proposed article/outline—whatever form and degree of completion in which it manifested—I imagine that such an event could easily fall within this category of failure. The foremost example that springs to mind for me is a PCI graphics card I once owned that decided to fail with a pronounced flourish. First the housing for the fan that cooled the GPU exploded noisily, followed fairly rapidly by a little jet of flame that might have burned down my entire house had I not been nearby when it chose to erupt. Using keyboard cleaner compressed air, a move that incurs extra geek points, I snuffed out the flame and yanked the wreckage out of my mainboard. The scene looked like an appropriately scaled aircraft had crashed into the GPU with the loss of all souls; in aircraft accident investigation parlance, this would be a CFIS, or *Controlled Flight into Semiconductor.* Since that incident, I have avoided this particular manufacturer because I prefer my domicile in the pre-combustion state.

Of course, incendiary doesn't necessarily have to equate to high temperature. Incendiary can also refer to occurrences that by their nature engender anger. Not that I wasn't angry when my video card started spitting fire, but that anger was secondary to sheer panic. Other incendiary failures do not result in panic or ignition of household furnishings, such as the infamous autocorrect *feature* that has torpedoed nearly every Internet user at one time or another, usually at a most unpropitious moment.

Let us, for the sake of exemplification, take a hypothetical situation in which a charming young man of good breeding wishes to express gratitude to his mother-in-law for the thoughtful gift of a pair of booties knitted by her very hand for the newborn child of the young man and his wife, the gift-giver's daughter. As said wife is driving the booties home from Mom's house, the young man composes a short—but heartfelt—expression of these thanks on his smartphone. "Dear Mom," he types, "Thank you so very much for the booties. Sherry and I love them, and so will little Radisson." Tragically, the smartphone really isn't, and its dictionary has not come pre-loaded with the word *booties.* The phone decides to auto-correct with a word that means *seabirds related to the gannet.* Mom's response is outside the scope of this treatise and can be found in a companion volume called, "Why Wars Start."

What about hardware or software failures that don't fall easily into one of the above categories? I happen to have come up with a suitable answer to this question, the deeply ingrained wisdom of which, upon sober reflection, should be apparent to even the most simple-minded of my readers: Stop engaging in useless hair-splitting and get—for the love of all that is good and wholesome and promotes sound UNIX-related IT policy—a freaking life.