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Surviving crashes: A cautionary tale

By Christine Boese
 CNN Headline News
 Thursday, July 29, 2004 Posted: 10:12 AM EDT (1412 GMT)

(CNN) -- Most of the time we think it will never happen. Then it does - the dreaded computer crash.

I've been interacting with my computer on a daily basis since 1989. I've suffered major crashes before, replacing some parts, cobbling components together and upgrading the entire machine, usually only when a breakdown forced me into it.

You know how it feels when your car goes in the shop and you're faced with how dependent you are on it? You toss and turn at night, worrying about the transmission, worrying about the bill.

But a car is duking it out in the world, battling rush-hour traffic on your behalf. We expect our cars to take some wear and tear. I'm hard on stuff I take out of the house, which may be why I avoid laptop computers. They're too big an investment to expose by tripping on some stairs or spilling a soda.

No, my computer stays safely at home. It had no right to crash.

Unlike with my car, I feel obligated to fix the computer myself. It's part of my fantasy of being some kind of insufferable electronics know-it-all.

Which is why I felt so stupid when my first attempts to fix the problem failed. It dawned on me that it could be a major problem, could even be permanent. Then I realized it had been more than six months since my last massive CD-ROM backup.

I wanted to cry. I'd done a nominal backup before upgrading the system. To make space on the internal hard drive, I moved all my family photos to an external SCSI hard drive, not suspecting the upgrade itself would kill the drive and lock out my backups. (I still haven't given up on it.)

It is a truism, a maxim, a mantra: always back up your work -- always, always, always. I've taught classes and preached it to my students. I was mean when they came with excuses of why their homework wasn't done: The printer died, the network

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swallowed it, the laptop keyboard shorted out, the Ethernet connector broke off.

There were a million excuses in the naked city, but I had no sympathy. I pointed a long baleful finger at the paragraph in my syllabus that said, "Failure to back up your work is not an excuse for missing a project deadline. Assume anything could go wrong with the computers at any time and prepare accordingly."

Most teachers have such policies these days. After all, there's no need for the dog to eat your homework when the computer does a much better job.

I guess my chickens came home to roost.

The moral of this story should be the importance of setting up automatically scheduled global backups or investing in a tape backup drive. Solving this problem does take more than religiously repeating a mantra, and machine discipline is better than human discipline.

But my mom e-mails family pictures from Alaska because I don't get home very often. I didn't notice how important such small things are. They accumulate. We don't pay for them the way we pay for hardware or software. Yet they were my only copies of those photos, and for all I've invested in my computer habit over the years, those are what it hurts the most to lose.

So I'm re-thinking my social relationship with the machine, with a sense that I must take bolder steps to preserve regularly those seemingly insignificant personal data files. The slow accumulation of what Philip K. Dick called "kipple" may turn out to be the most valuable part of the machine.

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