

The Devil's Computer

by Michael Finley

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I didn't really have time to hear another of young Wormwood's passionate presentations. Our soul quota for the millennium was still unmet, and it was already 1999. But since he's my nephew, I humored him.

This time, his mania was all about individual computing machines. The boy is only two million years old, and as green as copper flame.

I sat him down in the visitor's chair and listened to his spiel.

"Uncle Screwtape," he said, clearing his throat, "the computing machines, and the Internet they speak to, enable every person to communicate with every other person, but behind a gauze of their own making.

"You can say anything you want, be anything you want," Wormwood said. "Everyone pretends to be respectable, and have wonderful credentials. It is a liar's paradise. No one has a clue what the truth is any more."

"Really?" I said. "I had no idea the computing machines had this potential. I thought we created them as a way to mess up people's phone bills and paychecks."

"Much has happened since then, uncle. The machines can go anywhere and do anything now."

"Give me examples," I said.

"Very well. It is possible to use the Internet to locate someone else's work, download it, and then present it to others as your own. Children around the world are getting other people to do their homework. Copyrights are being ignored. Theft has become the global pastime."

"I like," I said. "Tell me more."

"Very well. Because users don't actually see one another, they are emboldened to become very angry, and they shout at one another using their machines. If someone says something you disagree with, you can be as rude as you want. You'll adore the phrase they give this, uncle: *flamewars*.

"People are swindling one another routinely in a wide variety of online scams -- chain letters, get rich quick schemes and phony stock reports. Greed is epidemic. No one wants to do honest work any more! Obsession and isolation reign.

"There are even people who spend their entire lives thinking of ways to annoy others using these machines. They call their business *spam*, after a compote of swine gelatin. I think you would like them.

"Who would have thought that these machines created for work would become the primary movers of pornography. People who ordinarily would work hard are

instead downloading pictures of other undressed humans and examining them on company time.

"Husbands are cheating their wives, and single people who should be dating are frittering away courting years, addicted to naughty pictures, forgetting what they really need in a mate -- friendship, loyalty, and support.

"Some people flip out entirely, and stalk one another online. It's deliciously twisted!

"Then there's the children. With all the pornography sloshing around, kids are inevitably exposed to the most degraded images and enticements. Let me tell you, once they see this stuff, we've got our hooks in them for a lifetime. And beyond!

"The best part is, the machines don't work all that well. Every now and then, we flip a switch down below, and cause someone's computing machine to fail -- for no good reason. Oh, if you could hear the wonderful cursing and blasphemy that ensues!

"Before I forget, uncle, there's a company there called Microsoft that makes software for these machines that is doing such great work, we really ought to consider some sort of merger."

"Noted," I said.

"In conclusion," the boy said, "the computing machine is a godsend for our retrieval operation. People are wadding up their souls and tossing them away without the bother of yesterday's legalistic mumbo-jumbo, contracts in blood, and the rest.

"And they never know what hit them. They never actually *choose*. Things that once mattered simply stopped mattering. All sense of connection, one soul to another, is lost. All sense of underlying purpose is erased.

"The pitchfork," he declared, "is obsolete."

I rose from my studded chair and stood a moment in silent recognition of his feat.

"My boy," I said, "you bring tears to these red old eyes."

"Oh, and I left out the best part," Wormwood said, with a wicked grin. "Prices keep falling."