

Grumpy old woman discovers DIY solutions on the net

Contributed by Debbie Smit

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This week I turned 41. I'm aware that this fact belies the portrait of me as a buxom blonde and also partially reveals my identity as a child of the sixties – do not take this to mean that I was a flower child: it merely means that I did not witness TV until I was ten and consequently was allowed to give reign to my imagination.

We made our own TV then. My siblings and I had an entire underwater world that we conjured in the large puddle that would form at our driveway gate everytime it rained (that is until my parents decided to pave the driveway). We also pretended to be circus performers, using the frame of the large swing that my dad constructed for us: climbing monkey-like up the diagonal struts and performing somersaults off the Portapool ladder – even when there was no pool to dive into. My brother, five years my junior, learnt to spin on his head long before breakdancing even existed. In those days the public pool was very popular and climbing trees was still an engaging pastime. Brands were reserved for washing powder and cars. Designer jeans only surfaced in 1978 when I was 13.

I'm allowed to go on like a grumpy old woman now that I'm 41 and the fanfare of turning 40 has passed. I don't mind presenting myself as a Luddite, longing for the good old days when you could invent something or make something out of nothing without feeling guilty about wasting time or stealing somebody else's idea.

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An invention that in my estimation rates among the more useful things one can do with a computer is VOIP. With VOIP, which stands for Voice Over Internet Protocol, the data that is transmitted is in the form of sound. VOIP users can make free calls to one another anywhere in the world, hence the Skype catchline "Now the whole world can talk for free".

One of the things that is a little irritating about this newish technology, is that you are chained your computer while you are speaking to your Skype (an account system for VOIP users) buddies, because you need to plug headphones or a microphone or a VOIP phone into your computer to allow you to listen to the voice – a hard thing to do since we've been mobile for more than ten years. In South Africa you can buy an Olympia cordless VOIP phone for around R1 200.00 – rather expensive for a gadget that doesn't get used all that often (and incidentally only works with Windows).

So, I did a spot of surfing and found, on the Skype site (in the Skype blogs to be precise), instructions for making a cordless VOIP phone out of a traditional cordless phone. I haven't yet attempted making one, but the writer assures us that it is very efficient, and just as good as the real thing.

Why is it that finding solutions on the internet is perceived as a vaguely criminal activity? I mean, it's not the same as searching for a recipe for a pipe bomb. All I want is a cheaper alternative to purchasing some shiny gadget just because it's the only one that is mass-produced. I'm not stealing music from some poor starving artist or downloading movies before they go on circuit. Is inventiveness being branded as piracy? Does one need a creativity licence? Surely, as Einstein said: "The important thing is not to stop questioning."

The internet is crammed with ways to bypass the trappings of a consumer culture. You can make your own PVR without spending too much time or money. There are also websites where you can learn how to make an mp3 player. Admittedly this might actually turn out to be more expensive than buying an iPod, but think of the satisfaction making it yourself and the opportunity of customising it – from functionality to appearance.

So, next time your child whines about not having the latest gadget, suggest an exploration of the world wide web.

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