



## Humbug to the gadgets that ruin Christmas

**P**ICTURE the festive scene. Presents open, wrapping paper strewn across the living-room floor, dad pulling his hair out struggling to re-programme his new mobile phone, the kids moaning as it takes three hours to set up their state-of-the-art games console.

Season's greetings and welcome to another high-tech nightmare.

We already know 2006 was a digital Christmas. That means Britons will have received more gadgets than ever before – be they flat screen TVs, iPods or sat-navs. Verdict Research reckons once the till rolls have been totted up, we will have spent £7.8bn on them.

But for those of us not blessed with an Oxbridge astro-physics degree, programming even the simplest electronic device can confound and frustrate.

Take the digital watch I received. It came with a tide predictor (why I don't know), a diary, a stopwatch, an alarm and 100-pages of instructions printed in miniature. The typeface on this Lilliputian epic was so small I needed a micro-

scope to read it. Suffice to say I didn't.

So far I've set the time and date. But despite my best efforts, the alarm still goes off at one minute past midnight daily. As for tidal predictions – forget it.

While I'll admit I'm a Luddite, research from the accountancy firm Deloitte shows I am not alone in finding these overspecified gizmos utterly bewildering.

Its study shows that of the millions of presents returned to retailers supposedly broken this Christmas, 20pc have simply confused their owners so much they have boxed them off in hope of receiving a refund.

The tolerance-levels of most people who struggle to make a new device work is limited to 20 minutes of effort only. After this they tend to give up, conclude the product is faulty and return it to the store.

'An unusable product may have as little value as a broken one, regardless of its underlying technical brilliance,' warns Christy Kulasingam, technology director at Deloitte. The falling cost of processors –

the tiny memory chips used in electronic devices – may be a key culprit, encouraging manufacturers to include increasing functionality in their products.

The logic is that if the cost of an extra feature is minimal or even zero, then it should be included, regardless of whether it is desirable or practical for consumers.

Even the humble mouse mat is now available as a version that incorporates a radio, headset connection, alarm clock and calculator – and of course supplied with a user manual.

Deloitte says the gadgetry may be simplified with introduction of voice controls and motion sensors, which negate the need for programming.

But the root of the problem appears to lie not with the user, but the designers who come up with the latest digital accessories.

The geeky engineers who create these difficult-to-operate cameras, MP3 players and handheld computers need to think less about the processing power of the machine and more about the needs of Joe and Josephine Public.

**K**ULASINGAM reckons if we give the designers less time to develop the next wave of technology, it will render the devices more user friendly.

My suggestion is more straightforward. Ask people what they want and don't include dizzying extras they don't want and for which they have no earthly need.

Retailers are starting to cotton on to the fact that even the most basic household item is apt to bewilder.

DSG – the former Dixons chain – set up an advice firm called the Tech Guys to help you unravel the mysteries of your new laptop, or latest piece of software – for a fee of course. Analyst reckon other retailers will follow suit.

The message for the manufacturers is simple – the easier the next whizz-bang gizmo is to operate, the better it will sell.

After my recent run-ins with technology, a pair of new socks, a tie or some aftershave will suffice next Christmas.

