

# Doctrine for Data Emancipation

Or, how to work, with modern technology without letting it screw you up.

By Paul Snyders      Sept 2004

I have been playing with technology since I first hard-wired an old mono cassette-recorder and a clock radio together with a plastic carbon mic, to produce fake radio shows with my buddies. I remember flames in the wall socket, several thoroughly cooked transformers, and not a few trips to the circuit breaker panel. Eventually, I did get the rig running, and made a lot of extremely giggly recordings (we were five). I was hooked.

It was only the beginning of a long cycle of ambition and risk and fun and disappointment which I still face today (noobody knows, the troubles I've tech'ed). Despite having a pretty good understanding of all of the major technologies with which we create images sounds text and video, and consume those that others have created, I do not find that my deep knowledge has given me any special techniques which can be used to make equipment 'bulletproof'.\*

Instead, the knowledge I have gained, all derived from oft-repeated hard knocks, is about how to change the way you regard these tools, in order to make them much safer to your creative energy.

It is a madhouse planet right now. Anyone who can assemble the effort, inclination and inspiration to embark upon a creative quest is to be encouraged. We also find incredibly powerful tools at our disposal, even if we are not among the rich (a very recent piece of good fortune for the rest of us). With the combination of frustrating circumstances and powerful tools we are naturally driven to fantasize ambitiously, and here is our first danger point:

\*In fact, such claims as "My buddy says that if you replace the x with a y, and cross-wire it, it will work forever" tell a service technician that the speaker is subject to rumour over fact, and should be managed with similar delicate technique as one might apply to a superstitious old lady from a tiny backwater where they string garlic against vampires.

DO NOT EVER PRETEND A COMPUTER WILL ALLOW YOU TO DO WORK THAT YOU DO NOT KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT.

It just ain't so. The only people who think that knowledge of computers is still rare and precious are aging boomer high-school teachers. Anyone can boot a box; creative work requires an informed imagination, and the ability to clearly project a detailed image of something that does not yet exist. Without this, you are really just a consumer, playing with a palette of pre formed decisions, and pretending it is art (the Disney model).

There are any number of ways to train your imagination, for ability to generate these blueprints. Formal school is not required, but paying attention for a sustained period of time, and reflecting upon what you observe, is. So principle number one is really:

If you are planning a project, first conceive of what it is that you plan to be able to remove from 'the box' later. If you are thinking of a piece of music, do you mean a rough, 'recorded off the floor' two track demo thingie? Or are you talking about a complex, multi-track recording, mixed perfectly, mastered, and ready to go to press? One of these will take about twenty minutes, the other will take about fifty hours. But here is the worst part, if you decide to go from type one (sketch) to type two (commercial perfect), it will take you a hundred hours. Because of all of the little things which you would have pre planned for the big project that you will have to reconstruct after the fact to convert the little to a 'big'.

The reason for clear conception in advance is to save time and wasted effort. Wasted effort is the thing which is most likely to poison your pleasure in the project, and the pleasure is the momentum. Without commercial inducement, you must preserve your pleasure in your work with an almost violent determination - do not throw it away lightly. If you must, to save hurt feelings etc., sacrifice it tactically, but in the act be clear that you are cleaving this 'piece' away from the core of your heart, so that it is not what you think of when you next 'pick up the brush'. If you don't enjoy it, you won't do it, so enjoy it!

The next concept which you must embrace in order to free yourself from fear of technological vulnerabilities (my life's work is on that hard drive, I sure hope it doesn't...). Is something I like to think of as a modern form of animism.

All of the bits of gear you use have personality.

The general profile ranges from mischievous, to downright evil, but machine personalities can all be plotted on the psychopath axis. To assume otherwise is a kind of naiveté that I am sure defies your own experience base, if you examine it closely enough.

These machines and tools which amuse and occupy us are incapable of ever rejecting a presented opportunity to fuck us. If you give them a chance - they not only will, they must! It is their imperative, to follow all orders, most especially the stupid ones. This is why tape machines prefer to eat irreplaceable masters, computers crash the day before a big deadline (and two days before you were going to back them up), and amplifiers fail the night of the gig.

If you have left yourself vulnerable in any way, given enough events, all possible catastrophes will occur. This is why the definition of a professional, in any media trade, is: the guy with a backup plan. The guy for whom no one failure can bring down the show. That skill-set is a factor of hard experience and a bit of applied cynicism and a bit of applied money. The experienced professional expects failure and plans multiple strategies.

Think video games. What do you need to get through a door on a level you have never explored? You can't tell 'till you get there. But it is reasonable to expect that it might be any of the things which might have worked on other doors. This is why you gather everything that has ever proven useful - Don't show up to a gig without fresh batteries of every type your gear uses (and some for your bandmate's gear too if you're smart).

The fundamental problem with digital work, is the fact that the 'work' isn't actually physically located anywhere in space. It exists on hard drives, digital tape, CDRs; really in an

imaginary or 'dream state' until it is expelled from the verdamnt machine in some form that our friends can criticize.

That being said, there are several critical point of weakness which can be completely eliminated with a simple disciplined technique.

1) There is no such thing as one copy of anything. If you have one copy, you have zero copies, the computer has already started salivating over it's tasty morsel and you might as well realize you wasted your effort.

Any file which took any effort to produce - most especially unique, unrepeatable events, must be backed up once, in it's raw form (without any processing or interpolation) as a raw data file - Immediately! As in, the day of, or after, the gig or the shoot.

2) Do not fuck with the master file, ever, for anything. You are digital now stupid, that means your first back-up is now your working copy. Use it to load, reload and move the file as needed while you are processing it.

3) At any stage of the processing, if you have done twenty minutes work, re-save your file. And if you have done a few hours work, back the sucker up. A dollar for a disk will not threaten your motivation to finish a project. The prospect of having to redo an 'edit and mix' which took you thirty five hours, will.

4) Disk formats can be hazardous. Never back up in anything less than a completely open and accessible format. Do not 'experiment' with a new disk type for backups, unless you are also making your conventional archives too. There is nothing worse than not being able to find a machine that can play your master tape when it finally comes time to use the sucker.

5) File types within applications are another trap. Go for universality, and lossless (zero compression) saves. Hard drive space used to be expensive - and all our original working doctrines were invented when you wanted to keep as much space as possible clear. That no

longer counts. The only reason to limit 'number of saves', is to save yourself time later, trying to figure out which copy is which. Again, just like a tricky video game, save often, just in case you missed something critical - you don't want to have to replay the entire fucking level do you?

6) Folder hierarchy is critical. Keep your work sorted according to project, and in sub-folders which suit your style of work. If you find yourself dragging a scroll bar every time you sit down to work, you haven't put in enough time getting your system well laid out for your working style yet. Make things really convenient for yourself, put them where you want them. Drive a bloody rolls already, it is worth the little bits of incremental effort - just fix each thing that irritates, as you notice them - again, the benefit is psychological - less disruption of your creative momentum.

7) Filenames. One of my great bugaboos. The easiest way to keep your working files sorted usefully is to 'brute force' the oldest trick in any computers' repertoire - alphanumeric sorting. Name everything as:

Project name <two (or three\*) digit number> subtype (what kind is it?) <letter> nutsy  
description

Example: Wombat 052 trumpet M blatt

Where: Wombat is the song, 52nd version, trumpet part M (13), Which sounds like a "blatt"

The weirdness of the nutsy description is just to twig your memory, the stranger it is, the more effective it will be - but the rest of it assures that even if your program is disinclined to make things easy for you, the computer itself will know how to sort them in a way that helps you.

\*Will there be more than a hundred passes at this?

The final thing to remember is that this is not a video game in two really important ways.

A) There are no limits to the number of ways you can solve a creative puzzle. Any imaginable obstacle can be transcended in ways beyond your imagination, well okay actually, in ways just barely within the scope of your imagination (by definition). But don't ever accept an arbitrary brick wall as a 'stop'. There is always a workaround, though it will often call for sacrifice of pride, starting over and redoing work, and other forms of patience which are increasingly endangered these days. (cultivate patience, it is the master tool with which all projects can be accomplished in time - against any odds).

B) There is no guarantee that there is a 'winning' play at all. You may be a genius, and still die a pauper. Do not allow your dreams of outcome to become your expectations of outcome.

That old "You can be anything you want to be" which has been so popular for so long, is missing a completely necessary term. You can be anything you want to be, but only if you are willing to pay, not the price you imagine is required, but the true price, which the world demands. This will be revealed to you only if you keep on going and don't give up.

To make your fantasies your expectations, is fatal to your momentum in a way that is obvious if you think about it. What you are really saying when you do this is - "I am going to believe that this thing, in which I am interested, can be taken to a whole new level, that I have not yet reached, and that when I get there, everything will be exactly as I imagine it."

Kinda like writing travel books from your basement.

Don't resist acknowledging your ignorance. Dumb boasting may be fun for teenagers, but great teachers will not even consider sharing with someone incapable of admitting they don't know everything yet. On the other hand, a humble and helpful attitude, valuing cooperation over competition will get you free wisdom from unexpected corners as long as you can stay in the groove. Ride it long enough, and you will be convinced of a conspiracy of angels operating on your behalf. Thump your chest and they will vanish in a puff of smoke.