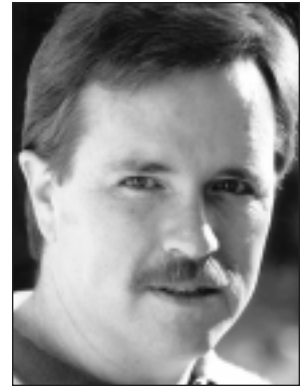


Timothy Perrin



- **Recovering Stolen Laptops**
- **All About Rosie**
- **Where's the Smart Home?**

In May of 2002, a Dell Latitude laptop computer worth \$4500 was swiped from the front seat of a surgeon's pickup truck outside the Orthopedics Northwest clinic in Yakima, Washington.

Chuck Stillwagon, Information Systems Manager for the clinic, immediately placed a call to a Vancouver company called Absolute Software. The laptop was equipped with Absolute's ComputracePlus software, a program that operates somewhat like the LoJack system does for cars. When a thief steals a car equipped with LoJack, the car actually calls in via cell phone and reports its position from a Global Positioning Satellite (GPS) receiver. Similarly, the first time a computer with ComputracePlus is plugged into a phone line or any kind of Internet connection, it contacts the Absolute Monitoring Center in Vancouver. Using a variation on the everyday call display technology, but one that can't be blocked and that works even for unlisted numbers, Absolute can get the address from which the computer is calling.

In the Yakima case, their information enabled Sergeant Joe Salinas of the Yakima Police Department to obtain a search warrant. When he executed the warrant at a private residence, sure enough he found the stolen computer.

Absolute's ComputracePlus software has a 95 percent success rate in recovering stolen computer systems.

I've never had a computer stolen but \$56 a year is just a little more than \$1 a week.

While the risk of having your computer stolen is only 3 to 5 percent, the risk of losing a laptop is appreciably higher. The vast majority of computer thefts are inside jobs.

But losing your hardware is only part of the problem. Your laptop undoubtedly contains sensitive client information, information you are legally bound to protect. It's really not good enough to say, "But they stole it from me." ComputracePlus can help there, too. On your instructions, Absolute can also make your stolen computer delete sensitive files. For that matter, they can make it delete any files, including the operating system, rendering the stolen computer nonfunctional.

The software can usually survive a reformatting of the computer's hard drive, even a repartitioning. It operates at

a very low level and is virtually impossible to find and disable.

If a thief does reformat your drive, Absolute's technicians can even help you recover your data.

Pricing is by the year, with a three-year licence running \$169.95 on a single computer. Discounts are available for multiple computer licenses.

I've never had a computer stolen but \$56 a year is just a little more than \$1 a week. That's pretty cheap insurance for a device on which I'd gladly pay \$100 to \$150 a month in lease payments. It really seems stupid not to install this product.

You can find Absolute Software at Suite 800, 111 Dunsmuir Street, Vancouver, BC V6B 6A3. 1-800 220 0733 or 604 730 9851, Fax 604 730 2621 email: info@absolute.com http://www.computrace.com

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My wife Terre loves to torture me before Christmas. "I got you something really neat this year," she kept telling me all of December. "I saw it and said, 'This is pure Tim!'"

It seems she couldn't sleep one night and was watching TV in a spare bedroom when she got caught up in an infomercial. Now, I don't know about

you, but I find there's something strangely seductive about infomercials. Everyone is always so enthusiastic, the food is always delicious, the exercise equipment produces perfect bodies, and everyone gets rich on the Internet. But I have never actually dialled one of those 1-800 numbers.

But Terre did and so, on Christmas morning, I was introduced to Rosie, our computerized robot vacuum cleaner.

Yep. I said robot vacuum cleaner.

Rosie, named after the Jetson's robot maid, is a Roomba vacuum, a self-controlled disk about 15 inches in diameter and maybe 3 inches high. You put her down in the middle of the room, hit a button to tell her how big the room is, walk out, and close the door. When you come back in an hour or so, the floor is clean.

Of course, we still don't really go out of the room and close the door. We're still at the standing-around-and-

watching-fascinated stage. When friends come over, out she comes into the middle of the living room for a demo, and we all sit around, lifting our legs as she scoots by.

She starts in the middle of the room, going in a widening spiral for half a dozen or so rotations. Then she'll head off toward the wall. When she hits it, she turns and starts to track along the wall, detouring around stereo stands, pianos, couches, or anything else in the way. She'll eventually take off across the room again, turning when she bumps into something, heading off in another direction, perhaps tracking along another wall, perhaps starting a new spiral. The computer algorithm that guides her ensures that the entire room gets cleaned. Rosie goes under chairs and tables, along walls, even under beds. She handles uncarpeted floors as well as medium and short-pile carpets. (Sorry, if your family room still has late-'70s purple shag carpeting, you're out of luck.)

The other day, my wife and I took the dog for a walk. The dishwasher was washing the dishes—no big deal—and the washing machine was cleaning the clothes, again old hat. But, for the first time, we had an automatic vacuum cleaner doing the floors.

It really is a brave new world.

The Roomba vacuum is made by iRobot Corporation, an interesting outfit that is working on a variety of civilian and military robot applications, including a robot army medic to treat wounded soldiers when it is too dangerous for a live medic to attend. <http://www.roombavac.com>.

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Thinking about the Roomba vacuum reminded me of an article I wrote in 1985 about "smart" houses, homes that could control themselves. They'd turn on the lights when you entered the room, automatically set the alarm system if you forgot, and water your lawn when it

needed watering, not just when the timer said to do so. In other words, these were going to be truly *smart* homes.

Where are they? Have you seen one? I sure haven't.

The technology is certainly around. You and I could walk into RadioShack right now and buy a controller unit for \$20 to handle eight outlets in your home. The special outlets are \$23 each. Special wall switches are \$20. If you're looking for something more sophisticated, check out the Website of an Australian company called Clipsal Integrated Systems. Their sophisticated HomeMinder system will do just about everything but butter your toast.

But smart homes have failed to capture the public's imagination and, more important, their pocketbooks. Since 1985 when I wrote that column, I have bought probably 10 computers, at least seven televisions, three VCRs, two DVD players, several dozen DVDs, three CD players, more than 500 CDs, and three cars. I have purchased five computer monitors, six modems, eight printers, two dishwashers, two lawn mowers, two hot tubs, and a snow blower. I've poured I-can't-begin-to-imagine-how-many thousands of dollars down that black hole we call the Internet but, in the same period, I've spent exactly \$40 on home automation: \$20 for a timer to control the Christmas lights and \$20 on a timer to control one of the inside lights.

It's interesting that we seem to perceive a value in a lot of new technologies but not in others. ▲

Timothy Perrin, a former lawyer, is a technology writer for a variety of magazines. He teaches writing in the Professional Writing program at Okanagan University College in Kelowna; online for the Community College of Southern Nevada; and through his own school, WritingSchool.com. www.TimothyPerrin.com