

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever noticed how complicated all the instrument panels looked in those futuristic movies and TV shows from years past? The fact that Captain Kirk could operate the myriad buttons, lights, and widgets on the Starship Enterprise was a feat in itself. Sure, the producers of *Star Trek* probably weren't thinking a great deal about how usable the instruments should appear on-screen. Instead, they created a depiction of what this monster we call technology must look like in the future: a mess of complicated processes understandable only to a select, brilliant few. See Figure 1 for another example.



Figure 1. The classic 1980s TV series *Knight Rider* featured a talking car named Kitt that could think on its own. But how would you operate a car with a dashboard as confusing as Kitt's?

Unfortunately, it's not just at the movies or from prime-time TV where we get the impression that technology is difficult to use. From radio clocks, to stovetops (see Figure 2), to computers, to the Internet, you'll find plenty of examples of poorly designed interfaces masking otherwise great engineering. Take a multi-disc DVD player, hook it up to a TV with multiple video ports, and try to navigate through to the favorite scene of your movie with an all-in-one TV/DVD/VCR remote. If you can get through it all without a few mental stumbles along the way, and without the aid of the instruction booklet, maybe you can help the rest of us!