

“Why the bleep aren’t you working?”
Agency and Subjectification at a Computer Help Desk

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Introduction

After entering the Computing Resources Center (CRC) through glass and metal double doors flanked by large glass windows (unless it is after-hours, in which case you have to swipe your student ID first), through a small alcove, and then past another pair of double doors, keep walking straight. There will be stairs up to the second and third (restricted access!) floors on your left, and usually a handful of students studying and/or napping on couches and chairs in front of a fireplace to the right. Continue and you will come to the Help Desk on your left, immediately across the hall from a row of printers and three computer labs with fishbowl-like windows. Greet the T-Watchers, student Help Desk employees, with whom I spent eight hours at the Help Desk, sitting and recording our conversations with my open laptop to explore their relations to technology.

Hanging from the ceiling in front of the desk is a dynamic sculpture of interlinking chains of paperclips, and suspended from that are various small doodads (a CD, an anti-phishing postcard, CRC.). The desk and the counter behind (both with light wooden trim) are littered with similar baubles: a wind-up walking sashimi toy, a plush gorilla stuffed between two pieces of styrofoam (from the packaging of the iMacs that look like flowers?), an outdated printout on the location of the Kerberos application. The windows and doors of the room behind the desk are covered with posters, signs, and stickers; each Full-Timers’, full-time CRC employees, office is decorated, including one character from Homestar Runner (an online cartoon, <http://homestarrunner.com/>) on each of their doors. Immediately behind the desk are a variable number of dark, drab, but functional office chairs, usually from three to five, some with arms, some without. They

all have wheels. A wobbly wooden three-legged stool moves around the edge of the desk. A white iMac that looks like a flower sits directly in the middle of the desk, a black office telephone to the right of it. Usually laptops of T-Watchers and Full-Timers are open on the desk as well, occasionally accompanied by one from a user in distress. A power strip is nestled on the far left end of the desk. Robostapler and the Whale (also a stapler) sit with Ponies the tape dispenser and a hole-punch on top of the tall part of the desk for standing customers, while the Billy (a stapler for 20-120 sheets only) commands the right part of the low, employee side of the desk.

It might seem intuitive that ethnography about people working at the CRC Help Desk, who are primarily concerned with fixing technological problems, would have a strong emphasis on technological objects like computers and robotic staplers. In a way it does, as discourses surrounding the desk are tethered to the technical practices engaged in at and around the desk. Such an object-focused ethnography would also make sense from a common-sense perspective that sees IT workers and their kin as introverted nerds who shun human contact for metallic, plastic, and digital companionship. Perhaps surprisingly from this perspective, T-Watchers and Full-Timers organize their experience of their work in terms of interactions with other subjects—both human and technological. In a strong sense, this mini-ethnography is primarily about intersubjectivity. This unexpected focus challenges common-sense notions of technological activity as somehow “anti-social.” When asked about why they enjoy their work, T-Watchers invariably mention other people and the ability to help others. When Help Desk employees feel their agency is subjugated by stubborn computers, they resort to “hacks”—not-quite-official problem-solving techniques—to tame technologies that are strategically given unruly personalities,

i.e. “subjectified.” As such, this ethnography—and I would propose, all ethnographies of technologies—cannot analyze merely interactions between human subjects and technological objects: phenomenologically, Help Desk workers interact primarily with other agentive subjects, human or otherwise.

Methodology

I conducted eight hours of fieldwork at the Help Desk of a small liberal arts college in the Pacific Northwest over six days, spread out over a month in the fall. Most of these hours were logged during the afternoon on weekdays, between 1 pm and 5 pm, although one extended recording was made on a weekday evening. I was already friends with one of the T-Watchers, acquaintances with several others, and all were current undergraduate students like myself, so gaining access and initiating rapport was relatively easy. In fact, I would have felt comfortable as a T-Watcher myself, having knowledge of many of the same things I saw demonstrated by T-Watchers at the desk, and sharing a common history of experience with nerdy internet humor and computer gaming. After verbally requesting permission, I used my laptop to make recordings as I sat behind the desk, taking notes, observing, asking questions, talking about computer games, sitting in silence. My laptop was particularly unobtrusive here, because laptops were frequently open and used or worked on at the desk. While performing informal interviews, instead of asking leading questions, I tried to follow up on things they had already said, aiming for queries more like “How did you feel about..?” than “Did you like..?”

My first analytical step after transcribing recordings was to begin an informal grounded text analysis (see e.g. Bernard and Ryan 1998), marking up the margins of my transcriptions with general themes, compiling a list of these themes, and revising these

analytical categories as I progressed. This was more of an informal practice, and was intended not for quantitative analysis but to organize the data I had in terms of interesting trends and themes.

Working with, Talking about Other People

When asked what they enjoy about their work, T-Watchers tend to mention other people, whether co-workers or users (synonymous with “customers,” even though nobody ever buys anything at the Help Desk). This comes up frequently in informal interview-type dialogues. The questions I ask in the following exchange are typical, asking how long they have worked at the Help Desk, how they got hired, and then asking for their feelings about their job.¹

- 1 Joe: How long have you been working (.) at the Help Desk?
- 2 Josh²: Um, let’s see, I was hired last, uh, last spring. So, uh, wait, no, spring of my freshman year, two years ago. Sorry. Time flies here.
- 3 Joe: Yeah, it does. I understand.
- 4 Josh: Yeah, so, this is my second year. Well, I guess, yes, second and a half year working here.
- 5 Joe: How did you get hired?
- 6 Josh: Um, I saw the application, um, the application on IRIS, you know with the job search on IRIS and I said that would be a fun place to work so I downloaded the application and sent it in.
- 7 Joe: Why did you think this would be a fun place to work?
- 8 Josh: Well I’ve done computer work before and (I actually made use of) the Help Desk before when I first moved in as a freshman. xxxx like those guys, I’d like to be one of them, you know. And you know good job, good people, and on campus, which is nice.
- 9 Joe: Yeah, it’s good.
- 10 Josh: So it was uh- it was just a nice option all around. And I’m uh interested in computers, they’re fun, and I help people with their computers so it was a good choice.
- 11 Joe: Has it lived up to your expectations, then?

¹ See Appendix A for the transcription conventions used throughout this paper.

² All names other than my own have been changed to protect identities. There are many T-Watchers whom I have never met, so if a name appears that is shared by a T-Watcher, this is entirely unintentional.

- 12 Josh: Oh, yes, very much so. I mean, it's a lot of fun, it's a lot of work, but I enjoy it.
- 13 Joe: That's good. Um, what's your favorite part?
- 14 Josh: I would s- uh, s-, uh the coworkers and the people you're working with. I mean, that's true about the whole thing about [college] in general, the best part about it is all the people.

Josh mentions that he gets to "help people with their computers" in line 10, and that "coworkers and the people you're working with" are his favorite part of work.

Jessica makes helping people an even more central part of why she likes her job in line 20.

- 15 Joe: Why did you want to work here?
- 16 Jessica: I just thought it would be a cool job.
- 17 Joe: Why did you think it would be cool?
- 18 Jessica: {laughs} My god, what is this.
- 19 Joe: I'm interested.
- 20 Jessica: I know, I know. Um, because you work with computers and you sit here and you help people. Yeah. I think mostly the helping people part.

But this tendency to focus on helping people seems to be in tension with another common theme, fantasies of harming them. Harming users gets talked about humorously, epitomized by the User Appreciation Bat, a yellow whiffle bat with a key attached to it with "acceptable for use especially on people who whistle tunelessly" written on it in black Sharpie. It sometimes gets referred to as the "Customer Appreciation Bat," because it was inspired by a Penny Arcade comic (<http://www.penny-arcade.com/comic/2000/9/20/>) that includes the phrase. I first learned about the bat when I asked Josh whether he knew the story behind any of the many objects around the desk.

- 21 Josh: Yeah, uh, it's- people bring in little [toys] and they just stick around. I mean, we have our bat that we use as our keyring. That kind of actually has a little story behind it, over here. {Josh stands up and goes to the door to the CUS lounge behind the desk; I stand and follow him inside. Inside, on the right wall, somewhat obscured by the door when it's open, there is a Penny Arcade comic that has been modified; instead of being about CompUSA and the 'Customer Appreciation Bat' as in the original comic, the text has been changed to 'CUS' and 'User Appreciation

Bat'. The actual User Appreciation Bat it is lying on the ledge to the left of the door.}

- 22 Joe: So this is for-
- 23 Josh: This is the User Appreciation Bat.
- 24 Joe: Oh. Do you ever-
- 25 Josh: use it?
- 26 Joe: Yeah. {both laugh} Ever use it, do you ever talk about using it?
- 27 Josh: Um, not to my knowledge. Uh, sometimes you feel like you want to, but that's unprofessional. We try to maintain that air of professionalism. Professionalism.
- 28 Joe: Have you ever wished you could use the User Appreciation Bat?
- 29 Josh: Sometimes. Depends on we have a particularly either- um, we get calls from people who are like I was an alum there you know ten years ago and I'm right now in Bangkok trying to set my internet, can you help me? <voicing an alum over the phone starting with 'I was...', but few voice quality changes> And like I don't know um. Suuuure.

In line 29, Josh reveals the frustration experienced when dealing with a particularly *bad* customer, in this case one that seems far beyond the mandate of the T-Watcher. This customer is not only currently unaffiliated with the college, but is on another continent. The ideal customer, on the other hand, comes to the desk flustered and leaves grateful, as in the Sara' and Jessica's portrayals of users in 30-33.

- 30 Sara: (A significant amount of the things we get are professors.) <voicing a professor: deeper voice> {she mildly flails her arms while speaking} 'Nothing works, everything is broken.'
- 31 Jessica: {she comes up from the entrance of the CRC with her yellow bicycle} <voicing a student: high-pitched, but smoother than her regular voice; obviously feigned> (Help, help, I need help.) {she leaves}
- 32 Joe: 'That was going to be my next question, how do you feel about the job?'
- 33 Sara: "They walk up, and they're really frustrated." (They go away and they're like,) <voicing a customer: deeper voice> "Oh, thank you so much."

Lines 30 and 31 show T-Watchers voicing users who need help. Sara flails her arms in imitation of somebody who has no control over their situation, while Jessica repeats "help" to suggest urgency. In line 33, Sara voices the transition from frustration prior to getting help, to gratitude once their problem is solved. Generally, customers do express gratitude for the help they receive at the Help Desk, though I never experienced

one as helpless or as frustrated as those voiced by the T-Watchers. In fact, the Help Desk employees seemed more likely to become frustrated with mysteriously uncooperative computers, at which point they would resort to “hacks.”

Hacks

When Full-Timers and T-Watchers do not know what is wrong, or how exactly to fix something, they often resort to hacks. “Hacks” can be defined as workaround solutions that might not address the cause of a problem, but ultimately produce a desired outcome. Mike uses the term when describing the solution to a problem I sought his expertise on:

- 34 Mike: Go to edit citation. And you’re typing it in the pages field. Which is logical, and should really make it work. How do you want it to look. Do you need it to say like, colon page number?
35 Joe: Uh, yeah, that’s how I want it.
36 Mike: So in suffix (.) type colon twelve. Or colon space twelve.
37 Joe: Okay.
38 Mike: And then say okay. Now this isn’t really the right way to do it,
39 Joe: Yeah, that’s what I thought.
40 Mike: but it works. It’s a hack.

Mike acknowledges that his solution is not “the right way to do it” in line 38, and calls it a “hack” in 40. Other practices that fall into this category of “hack”—not quite the right way to do it but it works—include restarting the computer, refreshing a webpage, or force quitting an application when other potential solutions have either already failed or do not present themselves.

- 41 Jessica: It’s not typing. ||she is trying to type an email address into webmail, but it’s not working||
42 Joe: Maybe you have number lock on. It’s not typing?
43 Jessica: Mmhmm.
44 Joe: But didn’t it just type, before when you entered the-
45 Jessica: Oh yeah yeah. It did, but then it disappeared.
46 Joe: Why do you think (.) it might not work... but now it’s working?
47 Jessica: Yeah.

- 48 Joe: Why do you think it's working?
49 Jessica: Because I clicked refresh.
50 Joe: You refreshed it?
51 Jessica: Mmhmm.
52 Joe: How would that fix it?
53 Jessica: It just- I don't, resets everything. I don't know why things work, I just know that they work.

This kind of hack—restarting, refreshing, or force quitting—is meant to “reset everything”, as Jessica describes in line 53, in the hope that whatever was causing the problem will be resolved (or at least temporarily repressed). This tactic only seems odd in light of the way computers get talked about as unruly, uncooperative, willful, and ultimately impenetrable subjects because it dramatically recalls the object-ness of technologies that are often treated as subjects. These hacks, then, are a tactic for taming the unruly subjectivity of technologies.

Computers Are People, Too

One of the most basic ways computers and other technological objects get subjectified is through naming and essentialization. Every stapler at the Help Desk has a name, and each has essential characteristics that can be appealed to for an explanation of their behavior. At the end of a prolonged discussion of the names of the staplers, Jessica and Robert start talking about the staplers' characteristics:

- 54 Joe: Which is your favorite stapler?
55 Jessica: Robostapler.
56 Joe: Robostapler, why Robostapler?
57 Jessica: Because (sometime- I'm in a hurry,) and I just reach out my hand and keep walking. And it staples it, and I [run on]. {laughs}
58 Robert: Most of the [other] staplers have issues, too. Like the Billy is always jammed and the Whale never works.
59 Jessica: Yeah.
60 Joe: What about Robostapler?
61 Robert: Robostapler always works. Robostapler is reliable.
62 Jessica: xxxx for when it runs out of staples and then you have to fix it.

63 Robert: I have a friend who's obsessed with 'Robostapler'. Like whenever she comes here she'll always staple something with it.

The essential qualities of these staplers are discussed in lines 58 through 61: whereas "the Billy is always jammed and the Whale never works," "Robostapler is reliable." When technologies do not function as desired, a battle of wills between humans and computers ensues. These can be frustrating for T-Watchers and Full-Timers, because the source of the problem is not always immediately clear, and communication from the computer is sparse and cryptic.

64 Joe: George ||one of the hard drives involved in transferring some files|| is in use and could not be ejected. ||here I am reading from the screen of the laptop Frank has been working on||

65 Frank: Curse you George.

66 Mike: {reading from the screen} The disk George (.) is in use.

67 Frank: I'll show you who's not ejecting.

68 Mike: This is Xxxxx's ||the owner's name||.

69 Frank: I'll show you. Ah, yes.

70 Mike: Quit your, uh, quit your-

71 Frank: What'd you do.

72 Mike: uh, Adobe Reader.

73 Frank: {Frank clicks eject twice, then tries dragging the drive's icon into the trash twice.} Don't give me that, dude. Come on dude, eject. {he quits Adobe Reader} (..) This- [[this is a big thing I- I dislike about-

74 Mike: [[(Is it) a Time Machine thing that's-? Shut down.

75 Frank: I know, I'm like shut down. <mumbling>

76 Mike: Or just (.) yank it out. Suffer the annoying error message.

77 Frank: No. <whiny and prolonged>

78 Mike: You know what it's probably doing, it's indexing it. Spotlight is busy making a metadata index.

79 Frank: No, it doesn't say it is. {he checks by clicking on Spotlight to see if it says it's indexing}

80 Mike: Well... {Frank restarts the laptop, and pulls out the drive while it's restarting}

81 Frank: {he makes growling noises} You get out- you get out, Cory, get out. ||Cory is the name of the other drive||

The two drives are already personified by their owner, having been given the names George and Cory. While Mike gives Frank advice, Frank talks to George to convince him to eject, first cursing him in line 65, vaguely threatening him in 67 and 69,

and trying to colloquially coax him in 73. Part of their problem is that there is no indication of *what* is using the drive for the computer to display the message in line 64 that the disk is “in use”. In line 78, Mike guesses that it is in use because Spotlight is indexing it, but Frank disproves this hypothesis in 79. Eventually, Frank resorts to a “hack,” restarting the computer altogether—when treating the computer like a subject by threatening or persuading it fails to resolve the issue, Frank strategically re-objectifies the computer by restarting it.

This kind of resetting tactic to deal with an uncooperative computer seems to occur at the edges of T-Watchers’ and Full-Timers’ knowledge (or, sometimes perhaps, their patience), and is especially interesting in light of Michael Jackson’s (Jackson 2002) phenomenological claim that the greater one’s understanding and control of a machine, the more one feels “symbiotically merged” with it; the less understanding, the more one feels radical alterity. Furthermore, he claims that when control over machines is lost, humans become objectified and machines subjectified as machines seem to have independent agency and wills that leave people feeling subjugated. Symbiotic mergedness seems more appropriate when discussing organ transplants and prosthetic limbs, but the relationship between people and computers could appropriately be described, along similar lines, as either cooperative or conflictual. Treating technological objects maximally like a person tends to occur when they are being most conflictual, as when Tiffany curses out a power strip:

- 82 Tiffany: Why the fuck aren’t you working? <unvoiced, loud whisper> {pulls Intel iBook charger out of the power strip on the left side of the desk, plugs it back in}
83 Sara: Do you need me to unplug?
84 Tiffany: No, I actually have plenty of battery power xxxxx I just realized that maybe the outlet wasn’t working [[xxxx]]
85 ?: [[Okay]]

86 Tiffany: But in fact everything is just xxx
87 Sara: Wow, yeah.
88 ?: xxxx
89 Sara: I'm gonna guard this ||a Windows Vista CD|| with my life.
90 Tiffany: Now you're working. Oh, I see how it is.

Just as programmers inscribing Sylvie, an early virtual-human, with a female gender provides an easy excuse (i.e. ditziness) for her lack of durability, her inability to maintain a conversation, and her proneness to responses that would be remarkably stupid coming from a real human (Zdenek 2002), so does attributing subjectivity, agency, and willfulness to computers provide a convenient justification for their mysterious and seemingly willful uncooperativeness. As such, personifying and subjectifying computers is an effective coping device in the face of agency-robbing technologies, displacing the problem from one's lack of agency and lack of understanding of a computer to the computer's seemingly intentional stubbornness. Restarting, refreshing, force quitting, and other near-magical cures for technological personality disorders dramatically re-assert computers' object-ness, and as such are techniques for taming out-of-control machines.

Conclusion

Although a fair amount of time at the CRC Help Desk is spent using, fixing, and talking about computers, it is nevertheless appropriate to treat the ethnography of this site as one of interacting human and technological subjects, as T-Watchers and Full-Timers not only frame their work largely in terms of their interactions with other people, but perceive and conceptualize computers as subjects. Besides subjectifying computers to cope with their uncooperativeness and inscrutability, T-Watchers and Full-Timers employ "hacks" as workarounds that manage the subjectivity of unruly technologies. Instead of being anti-social computer-bound nerds, employees at the Help Desk are as

focused on interaction with subjects as others. If people whose work centers so much on technology are so focused on intersubjectivity, it suggests that any serious study of technology cannot be divorced from the ways in which human agents engage in technical activity both with other humans and with subjectified technologies.

Appendix A: Transcription Conventions

“ ”	very certain of specific forms
‘ ’	reasonably certain of specific forms
()	somewhat uncertain of specific forms
[]	very uncertain of specific forms
[[]]	overlapping speech
(.)	pause, (.) (..) and (...) indicating length of pause
—	focus placement
.	level or falling sentence-final intonation
?	rising sentence-final question intonation
...	trailing off
-	broken intonational phrase
xxx	unintelligible speech
< >	comment on speech quality
{ }	paralinguistic action
	other comments

I have tried to be consistent with these conventions, though my use of (.), (..), and (...) for pauses is impressionistic and not directly related to actual temporal duration. My use of { } and || || is sometimes overlapping. I tend to only use markers of the certainty of my transcription when it fluctuates. If it is unmarked, it should be assumed that it is very certain, or “ ”.

Works Cited

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