

Platform Address
Northern virginia Ethical Society
PO Box 984 • Vienna, Virginia 22183
information: (703) 437-3161
Www.noves.org

What I have Learned about Life From working with computers

Jone Johnson



February, 1998

Platform Address

Sometime about 10 years ago — after I had begun as a volunteer to give occasional talks such as this one to groups such as this one — sometime about 10 years ago, I decided that I would attempt to put into a talk such as this some of the learnings I've gleaned from working with computers — what I've learned about humanity, about people, from working with computers.

But during those 10 years, my work with computers has changed — the whole way most people work with computers has changed drastically. I kept putting off this talk, because someday, I hoped, I would know what I really needed to say. Now, I accept that the world of technology and computers will continue to change, will continue to tell me different things, give me different lessons. But it's a good time to sum up some of what I've learned.

What got me thinking about this was reading an ancient Greek writer, Herodotus. No, he didn't know about computers or write about them. He did, however, write about human beings.

For Herodotus — who lived about 2500 years ago — people were somewhere between the animals and the gods. His stories of peoples' lives were often illustrations of how people failed to live out what we would call their potential, and instead strove to be god-like, or fell into behaviors tht were animal-like. To Herodotus,

to the ancient Greeks, either was disastrous. What they knew about human beings, and human nature, was primarily this: we are above the animals, and below the gods. We share some things in common with both animals and the gods, but we are not either, and should not live as if we are.

That differentiation got me to thinking. Much of classical philosophy about human nature is concerned with differentiating human beings from animals and from gods. We are somewhere in between. Judaism matured during this period, and Judaism reflects this concern. Christianity arose during this period, and also reflects this concern. What is important in this kind of thinking, what is central for ethics, is that human beings are a little higher than the animals, a little lower than the gods. Human worth and dignity rest in our ability to be better than the animals, and refusing to have the hubris, the over-reaching pride, to act like we are gods.

Then I thought: what was it like before the classic period, in what scholars will now call "primal" societies? Was there a contrast there, that helped people define our place in the universe? And yes, I think there was. In the primal world, the nature of humanity centers mainly around life — we are alive, rocks are (perhaps) dead. To the primal mind, the continuity in nature is life. What is important, what is central, is life. Early Judaism said that their God gave them two choices: choose life or choose death. Choosing life is the human option — fulfillment is to choose life. Worth and dignity in large part arise, in the primal world, from being alive.

Well, then, what of the modern period? That came easily. In moving from classical to modern philosophy, the contrast was not between the living and non-living, not exactly — nor between animals and gods with humans in between — though both concerns continue as well. No, the new concern was more this: human beings are not machines. Human beings, to the philosophers developing modern thought, had souls, had minds. They were not machines. WE could think. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are full of contrasts, by philosophers, by religious thinkers, of human beings as assertively NOT cogs in the wheel. Worth and dignity rest in our rational selves, the ability to think, to reason, to make choices.

And what, then, in the Information Age, the age of the computer? More and more, human beings are defined in contrast to the computer, in contrast not to the sterile, mechanical machine, but to the sterile, thinking, reasoning machine — the robot or the computer. Yes, machines can now think — and where does that leave human worth and dignity if those can now rest in machines?

There is, of course, ongoing debate about whether what computers or robots might do is actually "thinking." But the ability to take a variety of facts, and to put them together in such a way that rational choices are made, is clearly within the realm of the sophisticated computer. Sometimes, because of their speed, computers can do some kinds of thinking better than any human being or group of human beings alone can do. But where does that leave humanity?

I find, more and more, that humanity is defined in the age of computers as a being with feelings and emotions and compassion. Computers can't factor in such human qualities, most agree, except in a calculating, rational way. Rationality has thereby lost some of its centrality when we think about what is special and unique about humanity. If computers can think, what's the big deal?

So one of the things I think that humanity has learned from our collective work with computers, is that human beings are more than our rational decision-making side. We have an irrational side — holding over from the classical and modern thinking, we reject that as primary, whether we see the irrational side as instinctive or mechanical. But we also have what some would call a transrational side — neither rational nor irrational — a side informed by values and love, not just thinking and rules.

The danger of this kind of thinking, if we forget to keep it in perspective, is that we forget that the rational, the living, the higher-than-the-animals and lower-than-perfection sides are also important parts. All of these are models, and the models are based on culture and experience. We were still human beings in those other phases. In a next historical and philosophical phase, in another century or more, will teach humanity even more about who we are.

If I had written my talk about the lessons computers teach humanity, I would have spent the entire talk fleshing out that theme. I still think it is critical: the gift of computers to our lives is not only that they free us from some of the "thinking" tasks and do them better than we could — but they help us to remember our compassionate side

I first saw a computer when I was in 6th grade, and our class visited one of the big insurance companies in town. I can remember how huge it was, and how cold the room was that it was stored in. It was very impressive. And, with the number of staff people running around that room, it really looked like IT was running the show, and the people were its servants.

I learned quickly about computers, and one of the most important things I learned is that they really are quite docile. They will basically do what you tell them to do. And one thing I learned about humanity from that is that the ability to err, to be creative, to have intuitive insights, is an important and valuable part of our nature.

I learned very quickly that computers are just tools, and that the human beings behind them can make uses of them that exaggerate both our strengths and our weaknesses. As computers have broadened in use, become tiny in contrast to those room-size monsters, have become unbelievably less expensive, and have, at the same time, become far more powerful — we find, more and more, that computers enhance human capabilities — both our good ones and our bad ones.

The explosion in the last few years of the internet has made such tendencies even more exaggerated. People use their computing power differently, but in all cases, as ways to broaden our human capabilities. I am interested in these ways in which computers strengthen us — I am even more interested in ways in which use of these tools can transform how we work and play and how we build relationships and community.

As a beginning computer programmer, in the early 1970s, I remember the excitement when we moved from decks of punched cards with our programs, to having a computer terminal on the desk. As a quick typist, I quickly learned to dispense with the card decks, and work directly with the computer. As an extrovert, I pictured that terminal, and the phone lines to which it connected, as a window to the wider world. I also saw how others, more introverted, pictured the terminal and the wires as an extension of their own minds. Either way, this new ability to control the computer more quickly and directly suddenly exploded the possibilities.

Yet we were still connected the computer to ourselves. Occasionally people figured out how to put multi-player games into these large computer networks — and then people began interacting with other people, with the computer not at the other end, but in between. The computer disappeared, the task became less "how to do something with the computer" and became more "how do I communicate what I want to another person."

And so, as computers have become linked, and a much larger percentage of the public has direct access to computers, the computer has moved, in our lives, to a more and more important role in interpersonal communication.

And so much of what I have learned in the last five years about computers has more to do with the communication side of human relationships than anything else.

Email came onto the scene — I was, at that time, managing a training department in Chicago, and our company purchased another company near Philadelphia. I was to manage the training function there, as well, with two of the staff people working for me out of the Philadelphia office. It was the assistant manager there who taught me the advantages of email. We could be in communication daily, and we were BOTH in control of the timing. No phone tag, though we did talk on the phone regularly and I traveled to Philadelphia about once a month for face to face contact. But the kinds of day-to-day operational details could be handled effectively and easily with this interesting new invention called email.

I never really thought of the idea that email could go beyond the boundaries of a single computer system. I did, as soon as I could afford my very own personal computer, feel almost compelled to buy myself a modem, and sign up for Compuserve. I found there several bulletin boards — places where people left messages for each other. One was a bulletin board about the word processing program that I was using, and I grew to really appreciate the ability to ask a question of a community of people, there voluntarily to help each other and ask for help. My learning curve was very steep, because I had almost instant assistance. And I contributed as much as I could back to others, when I could.

Another community there was a group of people with religious ideas very similar to my own. There were philosophical discussions and debates. I even remember a long involved discussion between a group of Mormons and a group of humanists, on what the groups had in common and where we differed. It was a profoundly respectful conversation — we all learned a lot about and from people we probably would never have associated with. We learned a lot about them — we also learned a lot about ourselves. For me, the people connection was made. The computer had made a new kind of relationship, a new kind of tentative and temporary community, possible.

Almost five years ago, a different event loomed very large in my professional and philosophical life: the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions. I will talk more about that Parliament in two weeks, in a very different context — so what I will say today is that it was an amazing week, with more than 3000 individuals from around the world, talking together, discussing important ethical and philosophical and religious and scientific questions. At the end of the week, some people presented a proposal for a computer network to keep us connected. I bought into the solution — which failed utterly. It was not well-thought-out, it didn't work as promised, but... it was an important taste.

Several of the AEU leaders had attended that Parliament, and had tasted the possibilities of using technology for this new interconnection. When the first solution failed, we went searching.

I knew that, experienced and comfortable as I was with computers, solutions like the then-current state of Compuserve would not work. And so we tried out another service, America Online, which had learned some lessons from other networking services, and had worked to make a service that was easy-to-use for newcomers, and that was mainly designed not as a research tool to find data, but as a tool to connect people.

I am not doing, here, a commercial for America Online — but I think that it was an important part of the development of our culture around computers and interconnection. A service which put the connections between people first, and strove to make it simple enough for most people to use and understand, was exactly what the culture needed then. And it promoted that kind of culture.

One of the first things that happened to me with this new dimension of computers and networking was unexpected: I made some friends. The first few of these people actually found me. I didn't even know you could make friends that way — they, fortunately for me, did know this, and reached out.

We would like to think, in our lives, that we relate to people as themselves, and not their appearance, not their weight or height or the color of their skin or whether they are male or female, whether they are handsome or pretty or plain or disfigured. But I now know, more than I ever could have, two things: first, that it is VERY difficult to meet someone face to face and not have that affect how you judge another. And second, that it IS possible to have friends where these factors do not come into play in any major way.

I always prided myself on my ability to relate, I thought, beyond those categories. But since meeting people online, and making friends there, I recognize the contrast to face to face relationships.

Yes, there are downsides to friendships with only computers and telephone or cable lines connecting the people. I'll talk about some of those in a minute. But the revolution, I think, is that it is possible to diminish the effects of those, frankly, unimportant parts of us. Important parts in that they are part of our identity — unimportant in that they are not all of it.

The first friend I made on line was a person who simply refused to disclose whether she was a woman or he was a man. I didn't know for months of getting to know this person, as a friend, what gender he or she had — and it was tough.

A lot is made of incidents on line where people have posed as someone they are not, and the dangers of this. My friend without gender was different — he/she didn't pose as either, and made it clear that she/he was not going to have, in online relationships, either a female or male identity. Fascinating. It is difficult, most people relating to my friend found, to even conceive of relating to a person, rather than to a man or a woman! And yet, by this friend's actions, many people online had to attempt to do this.

But this privacy can work other ways, too. I also found, as I got involved in some philosophical discussions online, that there were many who decided, as one of them said, "You think so well, of course I assumed you were a man." Some of our prejudices may unknowingly be self-reinforcing, because we don't have the evidence to contradict the false assumptions we make.

I've been an activist on racial issues for a long time. I'd like to think that someone's race does not affect my attitude towards them. But after working on a project for about 6 months, online, with someone I'd never seen, I suddenly picked up from something he said, that he was not white — and just as suddenly realized that I'd simply assumed he was white. I'd like to think I'm not the kind of person who would do that — but it reinforced for me that we all, unconsciously, have "defaults" as the programmers would say. A smart person online MUST be a man, until we know differently. A person is white until proven otherwise. I try harder now, from being on both sides of these assumptions, not to make them, but I know that I fail.

And there are infamous cases of people posing as other than they are. Early in the development of interconnections through computers, there was a group in California which developed an intentional community spirit, called the WELL. A pioneer group in what has become common now, they encouraged ways of communicating that brought people as people together online. And one man, just to see what would happen, posed as a woman. When he finally disclosed that he was a man, there were many who felt betrayed and hurt. The situation has repeated itself many times — though I suspect that the number of times people have benefitted from the privacy has been far more than the times people have been truly hurt. Like most of life, caution is a necessary part of human relating.

Communicating in groups online exaggerates the same tendencies people have in any other setting — whether they are using the computer for chatting, where people are communicating with each other at the same time, often sentence by sentence — or whether through email, where people compose longer responses and need not communicate at the same time.

Metaphorically, the computer now can help break down boundaries — and that has good and bad sides.

Some people find that the anonymity frees them to be nasty, curt, to verbally hit-and-run. They don't have as much likelihood of being caught, so they do whatever they can get away with. Others find that the lack of nuance and nonverbal cues in communication mean that they are often mistaken as more curt and short and even nasty than they might be in real life.

I lost a friend, too, in online communication. Actually, I realized when the whole mess was over that he was not the friend I'd thought he was, and that was a revelation that I really wish I hadn't had to learn. We'd known each other just a little for over 15 years in Chicago. Our lives touched occasionally — we were sociable, friendly, and I think each found the other an interesting part of our lives, though not in any way central.

Something happened when this man discovered email. His boundaries seem to disappear, and he decided to share personal stories with large groups of people who not only didn't care about the stories, but were offended to be included in the revelations. He lost me as a friend when he started publicly claiming our friendship as more than it was. He began public postings, in large groups, that stated what he just KNEW I thought about various issues. I asked him repeatedly to let me speak for myself — that I knew my own mind and heart well enough to speak them — and he went on telling people what I believed and thought. The fact that he was wrong about what I believed and thought made it all the more difficult. I — and others who had been close to him — realized that once this man had his hands on a computer connected to the internet, NOTHING in his life was private. He lost many friends — and still, occasionally, he will send email to all his supposed friends, asking if anyone knows why all his friends seem to disappear.

Yet for others this loosening of boundaries is helpful. Often, people who communicate online will find themselves talking with each other more deeply than they would have after the same amount of time in a face-to-face relationship. The new phenomenon of online romances is one place this plays out.

I've been around online communities long enough now to know a number of people who begin intimate relationships online, and take those relationships into "real life." My observation here is the same as it is with friendships: the online aspect, aided by the computer, only exaggerates normal human behavior, it does not create it. The computer and the networks connecting computers do open up chances to meet people — for friendships, or intimate relationships - much more widely. But every time I read in the paper, or meet someone online who can tell, a horror story about their friendship or relationship, I can immediately recall similar stories of people who met in bars — or in churches — or at school.

I have learned, by experience, that there are far too many evangelical Christians (and evangelicals of other sects as well) who think the internet was invented specifically so they could invade my mailbox and chatroom to convert me to Christ, or the Book of Urantia, or some particular version of what they consider the one and only truth. I have also learned, by experience, that there are far more people out there who, when they run into our low-key presentation of ethical culture ideas on the internet, will quickly ask "Where is the nearest Ethical Society?" The internet and online communication have caused me to have less faith that understanding with some styles of religious belief are possible — and more faith in the possibilities for a thriving national ethical culture.

What have I learned about people from working with computers? That the emotional and compassionate side of us is an important part of what makes us human — that the computer can exaggerate our best and our worst qualities in relationships — and that the vast network of computers can open up many more options than most could possibly have available any other way. I have learned that the computer and the internet that the computer makes possible can help us to relate more directly to the real person underneath our externalities — that we really are capable of being human beings first and relating to the human being in another, beyond physical appearance, age, sex, and color. And yet how easy it is for us to fall into assumptions about those features, assumptions that reinforce unequal relationships. We are pulled in both directions, and conscious choice and the decision to make ourselves better is more and more important.

Just as the person who lives in suburban Virginia and does not have an automobile is at a serious disadvantage in the life of their community — so, more and more, the citizen of the world who does not have a computer and an internet connection is at a serious disadvantage. Television was, in my earliest childhood, still a rare item — today the child who does not have television to connect with the world is rare. But as cars and televisions moved from luxury items to practically universal, so computers are moving, and I believe will continue to move, towards that stage. With technological changes, freenets, free web page hosting services, library access to the internet, this will only increase.

And unlike televisions, computers open up far more possibilities to be active agents in our own lives. I have more and more faith, even with the negatives that we must also concern ourselves with, in humanity's ability to use the technology of the computer to bring communities together and bring out the best in the people who use them. The irony in culture is often this one: those tools which have the greatest potential for bringing out the best, often also have the potential for bringing out the worst. And so it is important to be active and involved, even in online communities, in bringing out the best.