



The Sandbox Theory of Computer Literacy

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Many people — particularly those who have graduated to the "comfortable" range of jeans sizes — begin to feel that their computers are an impossible kind of ongoing intelligence test. They are partly right, only they are wrong about who is being tested. It is the software and hardware vendors that are being tested and they have palpably failed. Accept that fact and you will at once become more productive with your computer. You may even get up and have a cup of coffee, go read a book, or find time to start another family.

Getting along with the one-eyed monstrosity on your desk is not age related. It is personality and habit related. You can improve your relationship with your computer by changing your attitudes and modifying your habits.

Here are my diagnoses and recommendations for the computer illiterate:

First, don't be impressed by anyone more knowledgeable than you; their geeky edge won't last. Instead, be amused by the dull evanescence of the so-called experts' knowledge. Any and all computer literacy has a half-life briefer than a sneeze.

When feelings of personal intimidation arise around a computer "expert," picture that the person to whom you are listening is the Wizard of Oz and respond accordingly. (If you've forgotten what the Wizard of Oz is like, that may be part of your problem. You probably don't have any red shoes, either.)

Second, bear in mind that all created things closely resemble in some way the people who create them. Software is no different.

When a software company states that its products can be manipulated "intuitively," they mean intuitive to the programmer(s) who authored them. The only real clue these programmers have about the customer is that he can be parted from his money. For this they've created another intuitive interface called "serial investment" or the software license. You buy the software and pay for "upgrades" every three to six months so the software will continue to work despite the fact you haven't yet got the hang of how to use it.

The "serial port" is a hardware adapter on your computer intended to provide enhanced management of your serial investment online; hence, that ubiquitous financial tool: Cyber-Plastic.

I suggest two images to put atop your monitor, to reflect upon as you use your software, that modern marvel that so resembles its makers: Frankenstein, the model from which all programmers are made, and Bill Gates, who only ever invented one thing — serial investment for software.

If you live out in the country, as I do, you can try this experiment when your software is driving you nuts. I look out the window, see the rolling hills covered with oak, hickory, walnut and cherry. The squirrels and birds are dancing under a brilliantly blue sky where a lazy cloud undulates high in the air. Involuntarily I murmur, "God!"

A moment later I look back into my office at my desktop computer humming and blinking and involuntarily mimic that sound. "Hmm..." That's the sound of an inarticulate Frankenstein attempting to utter the word "human."

Third, and most important: adults feel stupid in front of computers because they have learned NOT to do something that all children do naturally. That is to play and explore in an unstructured manner. This latter behavior is the *only* way to become proficient with a computer. Yet adults will not engage in it, believing that they must always appear to be working toward an immediate goal and cannot for a moment swerve from the path. If you do not spend at least ten to fifteen minutes of every hour at the computer exploring, you will never become proficient. In an entire lifetime of contact with



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Little Painting

computers, there is no point at which this ratio will change. All technical knowledge has a half-life (see above).

I can't count high enough to estimate the number of people I've come across who are living the following scenario: Tom is engaged in Task A and naturally has a deadline. After struggling away for a couple hours at some minor detail of some subtask of Task A, such as paragraph alignment, indenting sub-articles, or organizing a Table of Contents, Tom finally asks for help. Now two people are working on Task A.

"Tom, you're not learning to use the software. If you spent only fifteen minutes of every hour acquainting yourself with its menus and features you wouldn't have these problems."

Tom always replies, "Why I can't possibly take the time to do that! I've got to complete Task A!"

Through sheer brute force, headbanging, and drudgery, Tom completes Task A two days late having completely mastered only the delete and backspace keys. A week later the software he has been using is upgraded and now behaves differently. Task B rears its ugly head. Tom is in a panic. *What to do?*

My recommendation to the Toms of this world is: develop a different attitude. I call it: PLAY OR DIE (POD)TM. I don't mean games. Use the software you want to learn, explore its menus unsystematically and fool around with the features to discover how they work. Explore the help files. Don't be a drudge — look for something that appears to be cool or fun and figure out how it works. It is fair to create playtime-pools. That is, work four hours and then do one full hour of unstructured exploration of the software.

The history of computer science has led us to this: the binary basis of all computers stems from the age-old technology of banging two rocks together. It has been used for everything from messaging to manufacture, from timekeeping to negotiation. Bigger and bigger rocks have been used to effect bigger processes, and eventually, through a straight-line succession of advances, resulted in the IBM and Cray mainframes. Through the miracle of miniaturization, these really big rocks can now be handheld.

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