



## The Large-Scale Clinical Trial

There's an old definition of insanity—usually attributed to Einstein, although apparently without the cooperation of Einstein—that says insanity is doing the same thing over and over while expecting a different result. If that's true, the modern computer user is not merely insane. We are merely part of a large-scale clinical trial.

Consider the ordinary login screen. You enter the password you have used successfully since the Obama administration. The software rejects it. You enter it again, this time more slowly, allowing each keystroke to understand the seriousness of the occasion. Rejected.

You double check your password manager. It's there. You entered it correctly. And this is the thanks you get for using passwords other than Password1234. Nevertheless, you delete the password asterisks and type it a third time, because perhaps the computer will respect persistence. It does not.

Suddenly you notice the tiny light glowing above the keyboard. Caps Lock has been on the entire time. Yeah, you get it. Somewhere inside the computer, the cooling fan begins to whirl with what sounds suspiciously like laughter.

## **Obsessive Clicking Disorder**

This is the digital form of obsessive-compulsive behavior: clicking the same broken link repeatedly, refreshing the page, closing the window, reopening the window, and then tampering with the URL as though you were defusing a bomb. Maybe if I remove everything after the question mark? Maybe “https” has become too formal? Maybe the slash is angry?

Soon, you are no longer trying to visit a website. You are negotiating with punctuation.

## **The Banking-App Conspiracy**

Paranoia, another wellknown mental disorder, arrives when the banking app suddenly refuses to recognize you. Yesterday, it greeted you warmly with your account balance. Today, it regards you as an international jewel thief attempting to infiltrate First Community Savings from a hostile foreign power.

“Your identity could not be verified.” Oh, really? By whom?

You begin to suspect the bank knows something you don’t. Was your account emptied overnight? Has your Social Security number been sold on the dark web? Did the cashier at the garden center notice your PIN when you bought mulch in April?

The app allows two more login attempts. Then one. A warning appears: “Your account will be locked.” Now you must decide whether to risk your final guess will send you to Hamlet's Undiscovered Country. Or

should you call customer support, where you may eventually reach a live person working from home while a toddler throws pots and pans down a staircase?

You call and get a real person, who is obviously stressed out watching an unruly toddler and trying to remain insincerely polite:

“Can you confirm your mother’s maiden name?”

CLANG.

“And the street where you grew up?”

CRASH.

“Sir, please don’t yell.”

“I’m not yelling. I’m speaking over your child’s cookware.”

The person fixes the problem, but you're not done yet. You have to run one more gauntlet involving two-factored authentication, hoping sincerely that your don't mess that one up.

## **The Ecstasy and Agony of the Printer**

Then there is bipolar computing, the soaring emotional cycle produced by solving an impossible technical problem only to have it return five minutes later. At first, you are in despair. Your printer is “offline,” despite being three feet away, fully powered, illuminated like a casino, and physically attached to the computer by a cable thick enough to tow a Buick.

You investigate. You crawl under the desk. You restart the printer, the laptop, the router, and possibly the refrigerator. After forty minutes, the printer suddenly whirs to life and produces seventeen copies of the

document before running out of paper and flashing mysteriously. It's missing a driver that possibly took a bathroom break.

You reload the paper tray, reboot the printer and the computer--your go-to trouble-shooting solution to every problem. Then there's the faith-based belief if you let the computer processor cool down, the tantrum will be over and all will be well.

The computer returns to normal. Euphoria! You are a genius. A systems engineer. A digital shaman. You have reached into the invisible realm of drivers and protocols and restored order. Five minutes later, the printer is offline again. It ran out of ink. The descent is immediate.

## **Will the Real User Please Stand Up?**

Split personality emerges whenever you own more than one device. Your laptop knows you as Curtis. Your phone knows you as Curt. Your tablet believes you are "Guest." Your streaming service thinks you live in Ohio, while your credit-card company is deeply concerned that someone in Colorado has purchased gasoline.

Each version of you has a different password, security question, subscription status, and preferred method of receiving a six-digit code. One identity gets codes by text. Another gets emails. A third sends verification messages to an address you abandoned when Netflix was still mailing DVDs. Soon you are holding three devices, trying to prove to each one that you are the same person.

## **Features We Hid Because They Were Useful**

Delusional behavior occurs when we believe software labels. A button marked "Help" rarely helps. "Remember me" seldom remembers. "Keep me signed in" is more of a philosophical aspiration than a feature.

The most dangerous delusion is the belief that an arcane setting must be somewhere nearby. It isn't. It is in the basement of the software, behind four menus, under "Privacy," then "Advanced," then "Other," then "Features We Hid Because They Were Useful." On the iPhone, the setting you need is accessible only by tapping your portrait, selecting a cloud, turning off something unrelated, and performing a gesture known exclusively to one teenager in Cupertino.

By this stage, computer-induced illusions of grandeur may set in. You find the obscure setting, change it, and immediately offer technical support to your entire family. "I understand these systems," you announce. This is the most serious symptom of all.

## **Diagnosis and Treatment Plan**

Diagnosis: Acute Digital Frustration Syndrome, complicated by Password Fatigue, SettingsMenu Vertigo, and an unhealthy conviction that restarting the device should not be necessary.

Treatment plan: Step away from the screen. Do not click the broken link again. Do not attempt one final password. Put down the phone and go outside. Breathe fresh air. Look at a tree, which requires no login, has never demanded two-factor authentication, and performs automatic updates every spring.

If symptoms persist, take a walk. If you still feel compelled to troubleshoot, turn around and walk farther. The software will still be broken when you return—but with luck, you'll be sane enough to ask some genius at the Apple store to help and humiliate you.

## **A Final Word from the Machine**

But computers were never designed to improve our self-image. They emerged from a world of brilliant, intensely focused people who could

spend an entire weekend coaxing a machine to display a blinking cursor—and consider that a social triumph.

Bill Gates did not literally invent the personal computer in his parents' garage; that bit of technological mythology belongs more closely to other pioneers. Still, he became the enduring symbol of the era: a famously cerebral young programmer building software while the rest of us were outside acquiring tans and interpersonal skills.

Then MS-DOS arrived and took over everything. Its black screen and blinking prompt did not welcome us, encourage us, or ask how we were feeling. It simply displayed C:\> and waited for us to admit that we had no idea what to do next.

In retrospect, that may have been the computer's most honest user interface.