

# “I am calling you from BT’s technical department...”

Seeking distraction, I play ‘cat-n-psychopath’ with a cold-calling computer scammer.

Paul Mobbs, *The ‘Meta-Blog’*, issue no.3, 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2019



**Amidst the media babble over computer security, Huawei, and the Chinese state, most of the technical commentariat miss the major on-line hazard that plagues Western society. It’s not just that while the UK or US governments criticise Chinese gadgets an equally large number of [Western-manufactured gadgets](#) are equally insecure; or that the [use of Wifi](#) makes most office and home networks fundamentally vulnerable to attack; more than that, the greatest flaw might be right in front of their eyes.**

I have been working hard in front of the one-eyed monster for a few days. This morning my eyes really hurt and I decide to take it easy.

I need a distraction.

I look at my workbench and think it needs a tidy, especially as I have to work on a computer idea soon.

## Saved by the bell

The phone rings...

“Hello, this is the BT Technical Department”.

Yes! Saved from the bench tidy!

If I were busy I might put the phone down; or say something like, “did you know there’s a special place in Hell reserved for phone scammers”; or if I were really annoyed I might say something truly unkind, such as, “is this what you wanted to do when you grew up?”

This morning though... *distraction!*

It takes thirty seconds for them to read the introductory stuff from the menu in front of them.

There’s a worry about AI-based robots taking over these jobs soon. What I really worry about is whether people doing call centre jobs, reading from their pre-prepared menus, would pass the [Turing Test](#) to see if *they* qualified as ‘intelligent life’.

In total it takes two minutes to pass the pleasantries and get down to business. Then it takes another minute or so to tell them that I’m sat in front of my computer, etc. etc.

I used to say something like, ‘hang on, it’s installing updates’, and then just sit and wait – but they got wise to that and would just hang-up.

“Can you see the ‘CTRL’ key in the corner of your keyboard”, I’m asked.

‘Yes’, I say.

“To the right of that what key do you have?”

‘The ‘Linux Key’’, I say

There’s a pause. She repeats the question again. I pause; and repeat my answer once more.

“What does it look like?”, she asks, with great uncertainty in her voice.

‘It’s a little square black button [with a penguin on it](#)’, I say.

There’s a very long pause. I can hear a lot of tapping. Obviously ‘penguin keys’ are not in the [menu of options](#) that the call centre presents to the operative – which is weird because any mention of the words ‘Linux’ or ‘penguin’ should already be ringing her alarm bells.

There’s another pause. “Is that a tablet or a mobile phone?”, she asks.

‘It’s a computer; a big box with a big whirring fan, lights, and a screen, and a keyboard with a penguin on it’, I say (trying to keep my replies overly long).

Four minutes.

“What type of computer are you using? It is Windows or a Mac?”, she then asks.

‘Linux’, I say.

“Wait a minute Sir, I will need to check with my supervisor.”

In the babble of background noise I can hear her attracting someone’s attention. Given speaking to my friend in rural Wales always sounds so crackly, I have to say this line to India is crystal clear!

Five minutes has now passed.

Today is shaping up to be a good one, though I presume many people don't get the deeper point. Amongst geeks there is a competitive game that we play – to string scammers along and burn as much of their time as possible. *It's a public service.*

While this person is talking to me, for my (possibly sociopathic?) distracting pleasure, they're not hassling or defrauding someone else.

I'm really just a novice at this though: partly because I don't have the time to devote to this time-consuming competitive sport; but mostly because I refuse to use *Windoze*, and so can't engage with their call centre display menus in more (for them) annoying detail.

I have a friend who works in IT support in London who has every *Windoze* menu memorised. He can play this game laid on the sofa at home, and still answer every question as if he were sat at the computer. His record call lasted over forty minutes.

The operator's soft Indian tones return on the phone to replace the annoying background babble.

"Hello Sir, can I ask, what version of *Windoze* are you using."

Six minutes.

"It's not *Windoze*, it's *Linux*", I say.

At this point I usually get asked something along the lines of, '*what picture do you see when the computer starts up*'. Today though I can hear a voice behind the operator which immediately, and agitatedly says, "*Hang up!*"

## Resistance is productive!

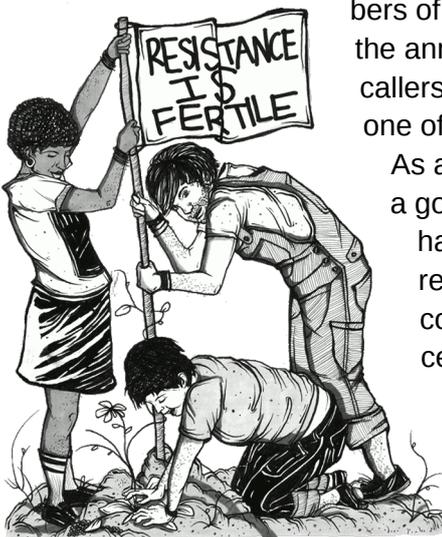
OK, I just wasted six-and-a-quarter minutes of my life – even though it was in the good cause of de-

fending a few other members of the public from the annoyance of cold-callers while I tied up one of their operators.

As another example, a good friend of mine hates those voice-recognition-based computerised receptionists that you get when you

phone-up a big company.

What he does



instead is 'babble' at them: "*Vistumbli bobbly steromsa gobbi halble ofvwel*", or some such phrase.

If he responds in this way a few times the machine puts him through to a human operator. He gets the service *that he* wants, rather than what the corporation providing the level of service it is willing to give to him.

In short, *he 'hacked' the system*, even though he's not deeply into computer geekery. He just used playfulness and common sense – and was willing to *depart from the script* that had been given to him.

The operator I talked to today is almost certainly drilled to always 'read from the script'; and that flaw creates a massive security weakness in the system for those prepared to 'hack' it – to understand what the script *should be*, and depart from that in 'disruptively creative' ways.

That's the fundamental point here:

*Within any system requiring a machine to interact with a human (even if that's a human being forced to act like a machine) it requires that the human 'degrade' their level of interaction with the machine to compensate for its 'inhumanity'.*

What if you chose *not* to do that?

What happens then?

I choose not to use self-service checkouts because I want to have people to have jobs. If I have to spend a few pence more for each item, so be it. Likewise, I will not do on-line shopping.

Of course that sometimes means I don't buy things; but I've never believed that to be a problem – certainly, not so much as a problem as the *'structural unemployment'* being ushered in by the *automation economy*.

As part of your daily interaction with automated, on-line systems, '*The System*' (Capitalised, as in, the economic ideology behind it, not the particular machine you are interacting with) is betting on the fact that you won't depart from the script; or, desperate, you play along and suck-up the alienation and annoyance to get what you want.

Therein lies both the *technology trap* of *'consumer demand'*, and the way in which we can stem the tide of automation. Problem is, such a "just say no" approach is unrealistic because, just like this operator didn't know there's a thing called *Linux*, most people don't know there are alternatives to most 'mainstream' products and services.

## The reality of computing today

My record of fourteen minutes playing with cold-calling scammers still stands.

If I really want to extend it, I'll have to reacquaint myself with the inner-workings of *Windoze* so I can play-along with 'the script' of the operator in more detail. That's something I'm not prepared to do.

*It doesn't mean that much to me!*

It was twenty years ago this month that I went to a hacker event in London and spent an afternoon playing with [Linux](#). A few days later I purchased a book with a CD containing [Red Hat Linux 5.2](#) on the back, and began playing at home.

I started running a home network server in 2000. I ditched *Windoze* for desktop use in 2001 (my last version was the appropriately named, '[ME](#)').

There's a deeper reality to this though. It's the one I just alluded to. Using Linux initially meant I had to learn and change the way I worked on computers – *it was difficult*. The benefit of that was that my computers were more secure and more reliable, certainly than when I was using *Windoze*.

Most 'consumer' operating systems such as *Windoze*, *MacOS*, and *Android*, are created in such a way to make them easy for the 'user' to operate; more importantly, they are also designed to make it easy for corporate entities to exploit the user – by installing all sorts of things on the computer that monitor, control, or otherwise chain the user into working in certain ways, while trading their privacy and security for the privilege of using the system.

*Why can scammers mess up people's computers so easily? That's how they're designed.*

It has to be said, though, some of the new 'friendly' versions of Linux (including 'Unix-like' systems such as *MacOS* and *Android*) have some of their best built-in features weakened. This was done to broaden the appeal of Linux, and expand the number of users.

**To 'resist' the rise of a machine-dominated world, that begins not in politics or economics, but in the way you manage your interaction with all technology: From which operating system you use; through to how you respond to cold callers; through to the browser add-on you install to block all those exploitative extra downloads. And yes, "*it's difficult*". Truly though, that fact it is difficult is what 'they' are relying upon in order to defraud or manipulate you.**

In fact the default security of the best Linux distros *is* their best feature – creating both a versatile and secure platform compared to the alternatives ('*compared to*', because *NO* computer system connected to a network is ever fully secure).

Security isn't just an issue of looking at a web page, and having some corporation's JavaScript function [mug my browser](#) for all the private data it can divulge. When you look at a web page – something like [The Independent](#) is one of the worse UK offenders here – what you are 'seeing' is actually only a small fraction of the data you download.

Most of the data that comes with the page isn't for you to 'see', it's to: track you; to sift your browser for all the information it can give; and, to install little unique, identifying '[cookies](#)' so that when you visit other sites they can report your presence.

All of this is a means for hard-up web services to generate revenue, not from the advertising, but from the compilation of data on personal habits by marketing and P.R. agencies.

There's another price to be paid for this, over and above the cost of downloading all that extra data designed to exploit you for money – *just like the telephone scammer who called today*. This is a far more significant cost to society as a whole.

The NSA or GCHQ wouldn't have such [powerful domestic surveillance](#) capabilities without all this data being generated. Likewise, companies like Cambridge Analytica couldn't have '[fixed](#)' the [Brexit referendum](#) without the ability to use data like a "state intelligence agency" and attack poor unsuspecting people on *Facebroke*.

We do not use the technologies we are 'given'; in practice the technologies we 'choose' use us.

