

Technological Maven, Technological Hanger-on, or Both?

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Terry McGuinness is a 26-year-old Caucasian man and a lifelong resident of metro Detroit with a high level of comfort using several modes of technology. He exhibits great interest in and adeptness at this technology, as well as a strong trust in its value. An AutoCAD operator at work, Terry estimates that he spends nearly seven of his eight working hours per day on the computer. A self-professed "pop-culture maven" in his spare time, he spends approximately five additional hours each day using some form of technology, most often with a computer or a television as a base. In short, the vast majority of his time, both at work and at play, is spent using technology. Terry believes he must keep up with technological changes to avoid being a "hanger-on." He sees the generational differences in play, particularly at this moment in time, when American education and the workplace balance between the old ways and the new, as do the people within the systems of society itself.

Educated as an architectural illustrator and an interior designer at Lawrence Technological University, Terry works at a small, independently owned architecture firm. He spends most of his occupational time using his office computer, and most of that computer time using AutoCAD, which "is pretty much a standard program throughout the architectural world." Terry employs the program to draw, change drawings, and manipulate drawings for the purposes of planning construction. Beyond this program, Terry's office uses a multitude of technology daily, including e-mail to transmit AutoCAD drawings and a scanner to import information into the drawings. The computers of all office workers are networked to share drawings and files.

Though his company and the industry as a whole are much more technologically advanced than many other fields, Terry comments on his coworkers' frequent ineptness in the realm of computers, the Internet, and other technology. "They're constantly asking me 'why does this work?' and 'why doesn't this work?'" He admits, however, that his own knowledge can be dangerous: some of his associates do not appreciate his assistance, and "they can be real jerks about it" when Terry has the answers they do not have.

Terry recognizes the generation gap between him and his colleagues, many of whom reject technology. His coworkers, all at least nine years older, often are not interested in the Internet or computers themselves; "they feel that they could do things the old way, by hand-drafting, better than what they could do" on the computer. Terry, however, "embrace[s] the technology." "Even that 10 years of difference in our ages makes quite a bit of difference" in, for instance, "the way they operate the Internet, the way I operate the Internet." Terry is more efficient in "the little shortcuts" of the Internet.

When asked if he would have chosen this field 30 or more years ago, in the absence of such technological helpmates as AutoCAD, scanners, and e-mail, Terry quickly answers, "Definitely." For as long as he can remember, he was interested in building: "the idea of being able to put something together that people could actually walk into and experience." For Terry, the method is nearly arbitrary: the job means creating architectural and interior designs. When he first began drafting, computers were not yet a major part of the process. Terry and his coworkers could work by hand, though perhaps not as quickly as with computers, because "we were draftsman people before," educated and trained in hand drafting. Indeed, Terry's education consisted of "learning technical [but] not always technological" methods. He did not depend upon the use of computers in high school, from which he graduated in 1992, except for a "very, very, very basic version, very early version" of AutoCAD that is now obsolete. The program has "become a lot easier to use" in its latest incarnation. Terry does not recall if Windows existed when he was in high school because he never used it, but he did use DOS. He works with someone now who used computer punch cards, a method that Terry calls "prehistoric" by today's standards.

Regardless of the "leaps and bounds daily" in technology, Terry believes that "everyone should learn how to draw by hand" in the field of architecture. "I think [hand-drawing] gives a little better idea of how things work, and there's an art feel to it." At his first job in the field, Terry's work was "solely hand-drafting. I never used a computer at all in my first job. I was CAD-knowledgeable, but I wasn't CAD-efficient." As time passed in his education and work

experience, he became much more CAD-efficient, and "probably my hand skills have meandered and are not up to their strong potential, as what they were, but I still can draft. I'd be a little rusty, I'm sure."

Certainly, Terry knows that his education and experience and his colleagues' education and experience are very different; he also sees that his learning and today's learning are very different as well. He only half-jokingly states that children now learn Windows and Macintosh in kindergarten: "they're smarter than we were at that age," but, alas, "they might not know any other way." If children receive training so early in computers, Terry muses, a time may come when "going to a book might be weird to them, as opposed to the other way around." Though Terry recognizes a "certain romantic charm" in books, not available and not possible on a computer screen, and that "you can't curl up with a computer the way you do a book," he asserts that "I personally would like to see them [book and screen] go hand in hand."

How has Terry's strong focus upon technology affected his life away from school and work? "It's made me more of a couch potato [and] I spend a lot more time indoors." He uses technology for his primary leisure and informational pursuits. "It's always nice to read up on things and be knowledgeable," and his personal computer assists him daily. All in all, Terry claims, "I use it for certain things that got me more than what I [had before]." Terry finds an inherent worth in his technological skills, particularly as connected with his well-equipped computer.

Though he claims that "everything I have is pretty much standard equipment," Terry has an array of additional features hooked to his computer, such as a cable modem for Internet access, a scanner, a DVD player, a CD burner, programs for manipulating audio files and photographs and for creating fonts from one's own handwriting. Terry also uses the computer "to do some artwork, not as much as I'd like to, but I do artwork on the computer ñ manipulating images, music files. I play around with that quite a bit. MP3s. Watching movies over the Internet. Yeah, that's about it." Interestingly, Terry doesn't believe he uses technology "that much," despite spending approximately seven hours of work and five hours of free time in an average day.

Terry confesses that he uses the Internet hourly, but he doesn't believe a computer will ever truly replace print material such as newspapers. When queried about his familiarity with newspapers online, such as <http://www.detnews.com>, Terry responded that, "it's got, you know, information, but there's a lot more clicking involved---and it's a little bit harder to find things. It's not, you know, 1-2-3." Terry doesn't subscribe to any newspapers, and purchases *The Detroit News* only on Sundays, so if he needs "information that's going on in the world right that minute, and I'm willing to find out what's going on, I would definitely turn to the computer to see if I could find that information." After all, "if there's a real big event you have to wait for the next [newspaper], whereas they can make a special update on the computer. Some web sites, like Internet news sites, are updated hourly, if not even sooner. Still, when it comes to information about any kind of new technology, magazines are dead to me because they don't, they can't, keep up with the Internet. The Internet is instant, I mean, it's done, it's there. You can access it in a minute, whereas print material, such as magazines [cannot be accessed quickly]. By the time they print that, the information is already available on the Internet. I know magazines that I do buy, some of the information is nice to see, because you get the high-gloss pictures, the images might be somewhat better than you can see on your little seventeen-inch screen or nineteen-inch screen or whatever you have. I bought a magazine the other day, and half the stuff that was in there I'd already read about on the Internet."

Nowadays, Terry's major desire for print materials is aesthetic: glossy photographs and appealing images. His thirst for the visual echoes his graphic sensibilities and interests. Terry's computer covers most of his entertainment as well as informational needs. When he isn't surfing the Net or using e-mail, he relies upon the machine's audio (MP3s) and visual (DVDs, videos) abilities. He uses his television mainly for playing Nintendo 64. His computer has pushed his TV into early obsolescence, as he can watch any of his cable stations on the PC monitor. He uses his portable stereo only occasionally, such as when he leaves for long periods and does not want his cats to be lonely. He usually uses his large stereo (however rarely) when he rents a video for his television (rather than a DVD for his computer) and wants surround sound.

Terry's computer-aided pursuits attest to his strong attention to the entertainment industry (remember, he's a pop-culture maven). "One of the interests I have is video games, and I like to look up video games and keep up on what's going on in the video-gaming industry." Of television, which he watches quite a bit, Terry comments that a lot goes

on to produce a daily or weekly show to create the finished product, and he's interested in the production itself; Terry has a profound interest in casting, plot lines, even air days and times. His adopted homepage (on one of his three Internet connections) is <http://www.cinescape.com>, a site dedicated to movies, television, and gossip about them.

One strong influence on Terry's understanding and use of technology has evolved from a competitive relationship with his friend Kevin (a pseudonym). Kevin knows the Internet and computers much better than Terry "ever will," but Terry concedes that his friend's job as a computer administrator absolutely requires knowing the latest technology. Kevin, rarely the modest type, freely shares the story, in mythic proportions, of telling the executives at one of the Big Three automakers that the company's computer system was just plain wrong for its needs. Terry and Kevin were roommates for two years, and they shared an obvious competitive spirit. Terry bought a CD burner; Kevin bought a CD burner soon afterwards. Terry bought a DVD player; Kevin bought a DVD player soon afterwards. Terry added capacity to his hard drive; Kevin added much more capacity to his own hard drive soon afterwards, as well as purchased a second monitor so that he could have two, both turned on, side by side, manipulated with the same mouse and sharing halves of a split screen. Terry did not attempt to top that one.

Despite his loss in the one-upmanship game with a computer guru, Terry prides himself on his functional knowledge of the machines. He scoffs that he would never buy "a computer that's already built," much as many people scoff that they would never buy new cars. Though he does not consider himself completely self-sufficient, he thinks that he could "easily" purchase the elements of a custom computer and build "a working machine" without too much help, relying upon his "pretty good working knowledge" of putting together, taking apart, and replacing elements of computers. Terry has no formal instruction in repairing and building computers, and most of his knowledge seems to emanate from watching others and trial and error. Indeed, last year, Terry pieced together a new tower from existing parts, adding a few extras here and there; he only needed a new keyboard and mouse. Of course, he now admits he "had help" from Kevin.

Terry admits to having had "tons of problems" with his computer, such as when he adds new programs to an already overloaded system or manipulates files in nonstandard ways. Yet, he has never failed to get his computer up and running again. Though he rarely has used a Macintosh, he is "relatively sure I could, within a few minutes, figure things out." If faced with the challenge of using an unfamiliar system, he is certain about his ability to "work my way around a computer," even with text-based systems such as DOS, his archaic companion from high school.

Despite all of his technological skills, Terry sometimes feels "a little left-behind" because he "grew up in this age." He thinks that it would have been nice if "I could have been a part of it [the computer revolution], as opposed to a hanger-on."

When Terry began working with computers in 1992, "things were so simple," but he thinks that if he had pushed himself, he would be creating computer technology, rather than merely using it. Terry honestly believes that he has "squandered my talents." Though he loves architectural designing, he hates its limitations, and would like to learn "everything and anything" about computers and programming if he had the time and money. He wants to invent video games, to program, to "create my own software that can do what I want it to do," and, basically, "do my own thing." Terry knows that he could create this life if he really wanted to, but also knows that "life goes by too fast, and you can only spend so much time sitting in front of a computer."