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Dariusz Jemielniak

'When you look into the abyss, the abyss looks back into you.'
(Nietzsche, 1966, p. 89)

There are only 10 types of people in the world: those who understand binary and those who don't. This pun has made a career as a status message in IMs, emails, forum signature notes, and on a T-Shirt in a ThinkGeek.com online store. It has been indexed by Google half a million times. Still, it is only one of millions of similar jokes that deprecate those who are not adept at technology and mathematics.

Users ('users-losers', as they are sometimes called by IT specialists) are depicted in these anecdotes as imbeciles, stupid beyond imagination. Certainly, support specialists often have to deal with problems that appear trivial to them, and they get over the frustration by sharing these archetypical stories. Some stories are obviously made up, some are urban legends, and some are pranks that geeks play upon each other. After all, computer work can be very demanding, since software companies often foster an atmosphere of distrust (Latusek, 2007) and of high time pressure (Jemielniak, 2005). However, such stereotypes shared by the group are also reenactments of their professional roles and help define their workplace (Berger and Luckman, 1966; Boje, 1991; Feldman and Skölberg, 2002; Weick, 1969/1979). In this sense, they do not describe the truth in a historical, factual sense. Rather, they are much more significant, because they reveal the symbolism that constitutes the actor's script, the underlying assumptions of what is and what is not important (Czarniawska and Calás, 1998).

The production of the roles in the relationship between the software engineer and the PC user is also conducted also through storytelling,

including 'real' and mythical tales. Just as in the construction of organizational reality (Czarniawska, 1997a), the occupational community and professional identity are created through narration (Czarniawska, 1997b). The heroes appearing in the narratives, the archetypes recurring in the stories, and the returning symbolic characters all play a crucial role in perceptions and expectations of organizational actors (Gabriel, 2004a). They are important devices used to make sense of the organizational reality (Gabriel, 2000; Kostera, 2005).

Therefore, the analysis of occupational myths, even though certainly under the influence of group stereotypes and biases (Gill, 2003), is nevertheless useful for enhancing our knowledge of how social institutions are being +constructed (Czarniawska, 1997a). Such narratives, coming from a natural environment, are among the most common ways of communication and of creating social reality (Barthes, 1978; Czarniawska, 2004b; Fisher, 1987; MacIntyre, 1981). They are not always chronological. Indeed, in some instances only a single event is described. Yet, even in those instances, they are sometimes considered narrations (Corvellec, 2006), stories from the field that hugely impact role enactment.

Therefore, researching heroes of software engineer jokes and anecdotal stories may shed new light on IT projects and on the 'configuration' of the model user of a computer by software engineers (Grint and Woolgar, 1997). In preparing this chapter, I analyzed 1,177 statements, mostly anecdotal, from a portal entitled slashdot.org, a popular site for engineers and 'geeks', posted in a discussion entitled *Favorite Support Story* (ScuttleMonkey, 2005), and 360 posts from a portal entitled b3ta.com, a popular message board, under the heading of *Clients are Stupid* (Rob, 2003). Due to obvious spatial limitations, only a careful selection of the stories can be presented. Those cited were selected as particularly representative or particularly impinging.

The method of interpreting fiction in order to reach deeper archetypes is similar to methods used by other organization theorists (Czarniawska and de Monthoux, 1994; Kostera, 2005), with the exception that these particular stories were collected by Internet portals. As a result, the authors were quite probably unaware that anybody would bother to analyze their works and consequently may have been more open and candid in addressing their peers within the confines of the Internet medium.

The research process follows Czarniawska's (2004b) advice to collect, interpret and analyze the stories, and then deconstruct their selection with the author's own view, resulting in yet another story.

ID10T

Surprisingly, reading the dozens of posts about *Favorite Support Story* revealed numerous comments about the lack of competence among less experienced users:

People (like my wife) who grew up using typewriters, and so insist on hitting the Enter key *at the end of every line* when typing a document.

Oh, and the Enter key is good for spacing down to the start of the next page, too.

The same view was shared by many others:

People who use the spacebar instead of the tab key (or, even better, 'style' tagging) in MSWord, WordPerfect, or other good word-processors, shouldn't be given remedial training: they should be taken out back and shot, to the benefit of all humanity.

The support specialists were apparently so engrossed in the reality of electronic word-processing that they did not consider that paragraph alignment and adjustment with the support of a computer is not really the 'natural' way of typing. One even made a facetious suggestion that people who have traditional typewriter habits should be executed. The ignorance of an arbitrary convention was quite often pointed to as an example of stupidity:

My old roommate, Dan, went to get a programming certificate at the local college. All students (whether in computers or not) have to take an 'Intro to Desktop Systems', AKA, intro to Windows.

In the first class, the instructor asked everyone to double-click on some icon to load up the tutorial program.

The girl beside Dan clicked BOTH mouse buttons once, simultaneously. That's a 'double-click', right?

Again, being unaware of a particular term was perceived as ridiculous and funny. Polite and rather understandable questions from beginners were perceived or characterized as absurd, as in another post about mouse clicking: 'I could not believe the questions I had. "How do I do a right button click?"' The reaction of another support specialist in a similar situation was even more extreme:

Many moons ago, I worked as a lab instructor at NCSU for, amongst other things, 'Introduction to the Computing Environment'. At the

time, it was a network of DEC workstations running Ultrix, but it was a lab about how to use the keyboard, mouse, word processor, etc. So it's early in the semester and I'm telling this one freshman how to do something (I don't remember what now), and I tell her to point at a particular button. So, she removes her hand from the mouse and physically points to the button on the monitor. So I say 'No. I mean with the mouse.' To which she responds 'Oh!', picks up the mouse and presses it against the glass. I was forced to simply turn around and leave.

The teacher, who should show patience and understanding for somebody else's inexperience, was so perplexed by the girl's ignorance that, instead of explaining what he meant, he left the classroom. This story, apart from involving an interesting gender note, is a clear admission of pedagogical failure presented openly and anecdotally about a lame user.

What was quite striking was the fact that women were heroines of many of the stories. Usually they were depicted as totally incompetent, carriers of the 'stupid blonde' stereotype. If there was any potential sexual innuendo or bawdy misunderstanding, the specialists perceived the story automatically as even funnier:

But a relative of a friend of mine ran a computer company in the DOS and Windows 3.1 days. One afternoon a customer who had bought a computer, phoned in. The conversation went as follows:

Techy: How can I help?

Woman: My computer won't work!

Techy: Can you be more specific please?

Woman: I don't know what's wrong, it's being weird and it won't do what I want!

Techy: Are there any messages on the screen saying what the problem might be?

Woman: Well, it says my himen has been broken or something.

The phone was subsequently slammed down, and the techy burst into fits of laughter, he barely managed to relay the story to his co-workers, at which point they all burst out laughing too. Moments later the phone rang, they manage to gain composure and answer. The same woman was on the phone 'Hello? I think we got disconnected, can you help me with my broken himen please?'

She was helped in the end, but I could never look at himem errors in the same light again.

The whole group of co-workers had a good laugh at the user's mispronunciation and her sounding as if calling for help with 'her broken hymen'. Many other misunderstandings and calls involving porn were cherished:

Some wife called tech support complaining that her web browser was getting pornographic: the 'location' drop-down menu was full of porn-site addresses. The tech guy explained that those only appear if the user has typed them in before. Having a clue, she figured it out and very politely hung up...

Apart from women, another archetypically group of incompetent users were parents and particularly mums:

A half a year ago, I went home for the holidays and fixed my parent's Windows machine for them.

Not more than two weeks later my mom called me up saying it had a blue screen of death whenever it tried to boot up. I asked her what the error said and she started reading to me the hex from the screen.

She said my *older* sister had been using the computer last so I told her to put her on the line and asked her what had happened. She told me her friend in college had sent her an attachment in an email named 'ms...blast...worm...32.exe or something' but when she clicked on it, the machine started acting funny.

The user reporting the error was a mom, but, as we learn from the description, the family member who had really been at fault was another women: the older sister. In some sophisticated myths, the topoi of sex and parents intertwined, possibly in an ultimate fool-user pattern:

I helped my mother learn how to use a computer... I went back a week later for Sunday dinner and asked if everything was ok with the computer. 'Fine', my dad replied. My mum just gave me a sheepish look. Later that afternoon I logged on to their computer to check my emails and was flabbergasted to see that their Internet history was full of gay porn sites.

'Er, why are all these sites in your history?' I asked – visions of my dad, a gimp and a family tragedy filling my head.

'That's your fault!', piped up my mum indignantly. 'You said if I typed "Hot male" into the search engine it would take me to the email login'. 'That would be m-a-i-l, mum.'

'Oh.'

Thing is there were loads of sites. She'd obviously tried dozens of links.

Another recurring theme involved clients who were obviously a bit slow on the uptake, especially in understanding how machines work. Some showed that they are a bit technically challenged and made history in Internet myths: 'One customer I heard of years ago was having a problem with diskettes becoming unreadable every night. Turns out the swing shift was leaving them for the night shift stuck to the side of a file cabinet with a refrigerator magnet.'

Dozens of other stories described users who inserted unintended objects into their CD-ROM disc drives, such as credit cards, coffee cups, etc. Some stories sounded really amazing, as if their heroes had skipped the electric era, too: 'How about finding a 5¼" disc in a 3½" drive? The client said he didn't have the bigger drive, so he figured if he folded the disc over and shoved it in. Oh, and then I had to explain that the extremely important data on this disc he just folded was likely no longer in existence.' Some users seemingly treated their computers as they would other kitchen appliances: 'I had a client trim their 5¼" discs with scissors so they'd fit in their new 3½" drive, then complained the drive was faulty.' A couple of other heroes used angle grinders to adjust unfitting ink-printer cartridges, recover CDs from 5¼" floppy drives, etc. One heroine managed something even more difficult: 'We talk for a while and I figure I'd just go over there since she's such a retard. I get over there and sure enough, it's plugged in the ethernet port on her laptop instead of the usb port. Don't ask me how it fit...' Again, it was 'she' who proved to be very incompetent, even referred to by the engineer as 'a retard,' although she put a plug into an incorrect, though quite seemingly unfitting, as we have to admit, port.

In some cases, the need for help was possibly more for reassurance in dealing with the unknown, rather than for anything else:

I have defined what tech support does. The job of tech support is to read to the user any error messages that they see on their screen:

User: I have a message on my screen

Tech: Ok – what does it say?

User: It says my password is wrong.

Tech: Ahh right – that means your password is wrong.

User: Ahhh great – thanks!

In a number of stories, the figure was referring not to reluctance to immerse into computer reality, but quite the opposite: an excessive identification of 'virtuality' with the physical world:

Built him a brand new computer and as it was Christmas, installed Microsoft Flight Sim 2000 on there. He was made up. Until the point he phoned me up in a blind panic.

Him: Chris you know on that Microsoft?

Me: What, Windows?

Him: No, the game . . .

Me: Ah, OK. Yeah?

Him: I've just crashed it

Me: The game crashed?

Him: I crashed the plane into a mountain . . .

Me: Yeeees?

Him: Look, that won't have damaged the screen will it?

Some users were 'funny' just because they understood pictograms differently than the support specialist:

Me: type in dir *.dat

Meat: eh?

Me: type in d i r star dot d a t

Meat: star?

Me: asterisk

Meat: eh?

Me: hold down the shift key and press 8

Meat: oh right! you mean cabbage

Me: eh?

In the cited story, the inept client was referred to by a derogatory term, 'meat'.

Perhaps the most unusual were the anecdotes where the user was literally following the instructions of the 'tech person':

Tech: Insert the first floppy disk.

User: Okay. done.

Tech: When the computer tells you, insert the second floppy disk.

User: Okay. Er . . . Damn! Done.

Tech: When the computer tells you, insert the third floppy disk.

User: NO WAY will a third disk ever fit into that slot! I can't get the first two out, either.

In the story, the support technician did not advise removing one disk before inserting the next. Yet, he nevertheless found the situation bizarre and considered the user dull.

Probably the most irritating were the users who considered themselves competent, although, in the view of the support team, they obviously were not:

1. Talking to a customer who is unable to get her DSL connection to work because she had inserted the network cable in the CD-ROM drive.
2. Talking to another customer having the same problem as the one above, but this one has not been able to locate anyplace on his computer where a network cable might fit. When I asked him if he had a network card installed I got the answer (in a very annoyed tone of voice) 'Of course I have a network card, do you think I'm an idiot?! The card is right here in the box from the store.'
3. Realizing that this will be a long and very painful day.

A client who denies being an idiot, while quite clearly behaving like one, is definitely a reason for a headache.

Only a few stories were partially non-depreciative. As one of the engineers put it:

Customers ARE everything you've heard about them. Every outlandish, unbelievable story you've ever heard is true, and odds are good I can provide at least one example of whatever incredible behavior you've ever doubted when you read it.

On the other hand, some customers, the ones that will act this way, actually DO know they are babbling and don't know what they're talking about, and it's a very rewarding thing to have them admit to being a pain and thanking you for being very patient with them. It doesn't happen all that often, but it's nice, and I try to keep it in mind the next time one of our 'high maintenance' customers strolls in the door (and then I usually consider finding somewhere to hide anyway).

As the specialist put it, although customers are often incompetent and cause 'horrors', occasionally they realize it and are at least thankful for assistance. The only positive feature of a client, as pointed out by the specialist, is that the client sometimes knows he or she is not really apt

and 'babbles'. Still, this could be a serious merit when contrasted with the legendary customers who angrily deny their ignorance.

Interpretation and conclusions

The computer users are described anecdotally, but quite univocally, as idiots. One of the specialists, whenever encountering an inexperienced user, would report it to his colleagues by spelling out an 'ID10T' problem. The figure of the user was depicted mostly by referring to incompetence. 'Favorite support stories' were virtually filled only by images of lame creatures, requesting help in mostly trivial and obvious situations.

The hero that immediately comes to mind after reading all the stories is The Fool from Tarot. The Fool is one of the Major Arcana in the Tarot deck. (See Figure 7.1.)

The Fool in one of the most popular Tarot card sets is shown as walking toward the brink of a precipice with a rose in one hand and his head pointed to the sky. A small dog seems to accompany him, perhaps trying to warn him, as he seems to be just about to step over the edge.

This hero strikingly resembles the typical user as perceived by computer specialists. The traditional character exemplifies recklessness, light-heartedness and mental darkness. Fools do not realize their stupidity. This is what makes them difficult to deal with. Fools do not hear the warnings, but nevertheless expect help. After all as Ronell (2002, pp. 17–18) says:

[t]he stupid are unable to make breaks or breakaways; they are hampered even on the rhetorical level, for they cannot run with grammatical leaps or metonymical discontinuities. They are incapable of referring allegorically or embracing deferral . . . The stupid cannot see themselves.

In the game of Tarot, The Fool has another unique role. Playing The Fool temporarily exempts the player from having to follow the rules. Following this analogy, perhaps the PC user may be understood a liminal role then (Turner, 1967) in the sense that it deprives the person of all labels, apart from ignorance. When being helped, the users leave all of their identities behind and rely fully upon the IT expert supporter. The users cannot outsmart the high-tech specialist by accepting his or her rules. The users can, however, as the stories show, outfox the expert by literally following all advice. In this sense, computer user perception may be a replication of yet another icon of Western culture, namely Till Eulenspiegel (also known as Eugenspiegel). (See Figure 7.2.)



Figure 7.1 The Fool in the Rider-Waite Tarot Deck
Source: Smith (1909)

Till Eulenspiegel¹ is a hero of Northern German folklore, described in a story anonymously published in 1510 under the title *Ein kurtzweilig Lesen von Dyl Ulenspiegel, geboren uß dem Land zu Brunßwick, wie er sein leben volbracht hat . . .*² Some ascribe the authorship of this story to Hermann Bote. Till Eulenspiegel was later portrayed in a tone poem by Richard Strauss. According to the tale, while traveling in the fourteenth century across the Holy Roman Empire, Till Eulenspiegel played practical jokes on the people he met. In 95 tales, he played pranks on the noble, beguiling all, including doctors, monks, dentists and others in



Figure 7.2 Till Eulenspiegel
Source: Deutsche Literaturgeschichte (1905)

respected professions. In his farcical and often scatological jests, he kept playing a fool. As a result, he was able in the end to outfox everyone by relying upon the underlying assumptions of society (condescension, pretentiousness, piousness, etc.). His most common ploy was what we now would probably refer to as a deconstruction or misreading of what he heard by taking a literal understanding of all figurative statements. This method is still popular today as evidenced by the success of the movie *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*.³

The PC users in the stories about specialists were in some cases described in the same manner as Till Eulenspiegel. They personified the common wisdom and, by following the expert's advice verbatim, they played the fool. The situation with the three disks in a drive is an

example. Another example involves a specialist consulted on the phone on how to remove coffee stains from the boss's keyboard. The specialist suggested washing the keyboard with tap water and drying it. Unaware that the 'keyboard' belonged to a laptop, the consultant had to deal with a furious boss. In these instances, the experts were not emphasizing the skillfulness of the users in tricking them by playing incompetent. Nevertheless, they replicated a formula resembling Till Eulenspiegel's trick: the specialists admitted being fooled by seemingly doltish clients.

Both archetypes (of The Fool and of Till Eulenspiegel) are built on one motif though: the stupidity of the user in one real case and in one fabricated case. Nearly all of the approximately two thousand stories read involved idiots, freaks, or clowns. These taken for granted, easily recognizable icons may be very powerful. For example, Elizabeth B. Silva (2000) showed how the user-figures in instructions for cookers and ovens over the past century helped to reinstate the gender and power roles ascribed to women. Kociatkiewicz (1997) used mythical metaphors to shed new light on the interaction between computers and their users. Similarly, the speciously indifferent language shift in describing people as 'alcoholics' rather than as 'drunkards' had a huge impact on the social reception of drinking and resulted in, among other effects, an authority shift from priests to doctors as the problem was transferred from a moral to a medical dictionary (Brown, 1998).

Therefore, such a common description of a client should not be underestimated, even if given in a frivolous Internet forum discussion. The fact that help desk consultants perceive their clients as idiots may have major consequences with regard to their relationships. Use of such recurring archetypes can have a deeply stigmatizing effect (Goffman, 1986). The reinstatement of the perception of the user also defines the role that is offered to computer users by specialists. We become what we think we are: if the users are repeatedly, and not always verbally, put in the position of a fool or Till Eulenspiegel, eventually they will become one (Rothenbuhler, 1998). As has been shown, however, some do not need much encouragement.

Notes

1. Literally in High German, the phrase means 'owls mirror', but the original in Low German is believed to be *ul'n Spegel*, which means 'wipe the arse' or 'kiss my ass' (Oppenheimer, 1995).
2. The title is sometimes translated into English as *An Entertaining Book about Till Eulenspiegel from the Land of Brunswick*.
3. I would like to thank Joanna Jemielniak for this trope.