

Technology and Theology: Psychological Issues at the Human/Computer Interface

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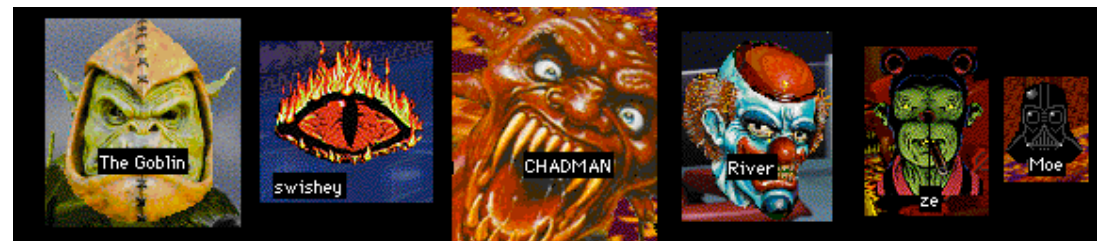
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Introduction

While the truths of our faith are eternal and absolute, our understanding of the faith is contextualized by the world in which we live.

Our environment provides the language, the metaphors, and the images by which we think about and contemplate our relationship to God, to others, and to His creation.



Technology

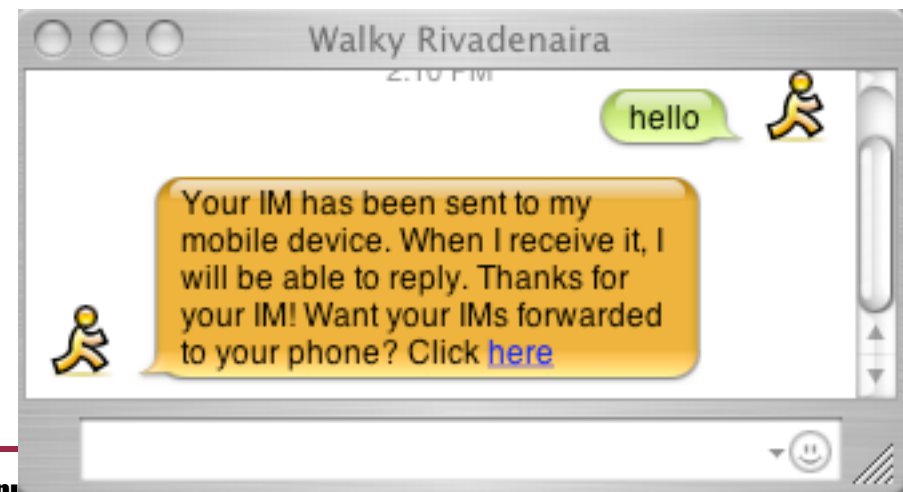
Today, we are immersed in a world of technology and computers.

We communicate via email, the Internet, and digital mobile networks. Our commerce, industry, and media are electronic. We work on computer desktops.



Technology Immersion/Submersion

- Over 60% of American adults are online.
- The average amount of time people spend on-line per week is 21 hours at work and 9.5 hours at home.
- All of this creates new ways in which we interact with others, new constraints on how we do things, and new concerns about security, identity and reality.

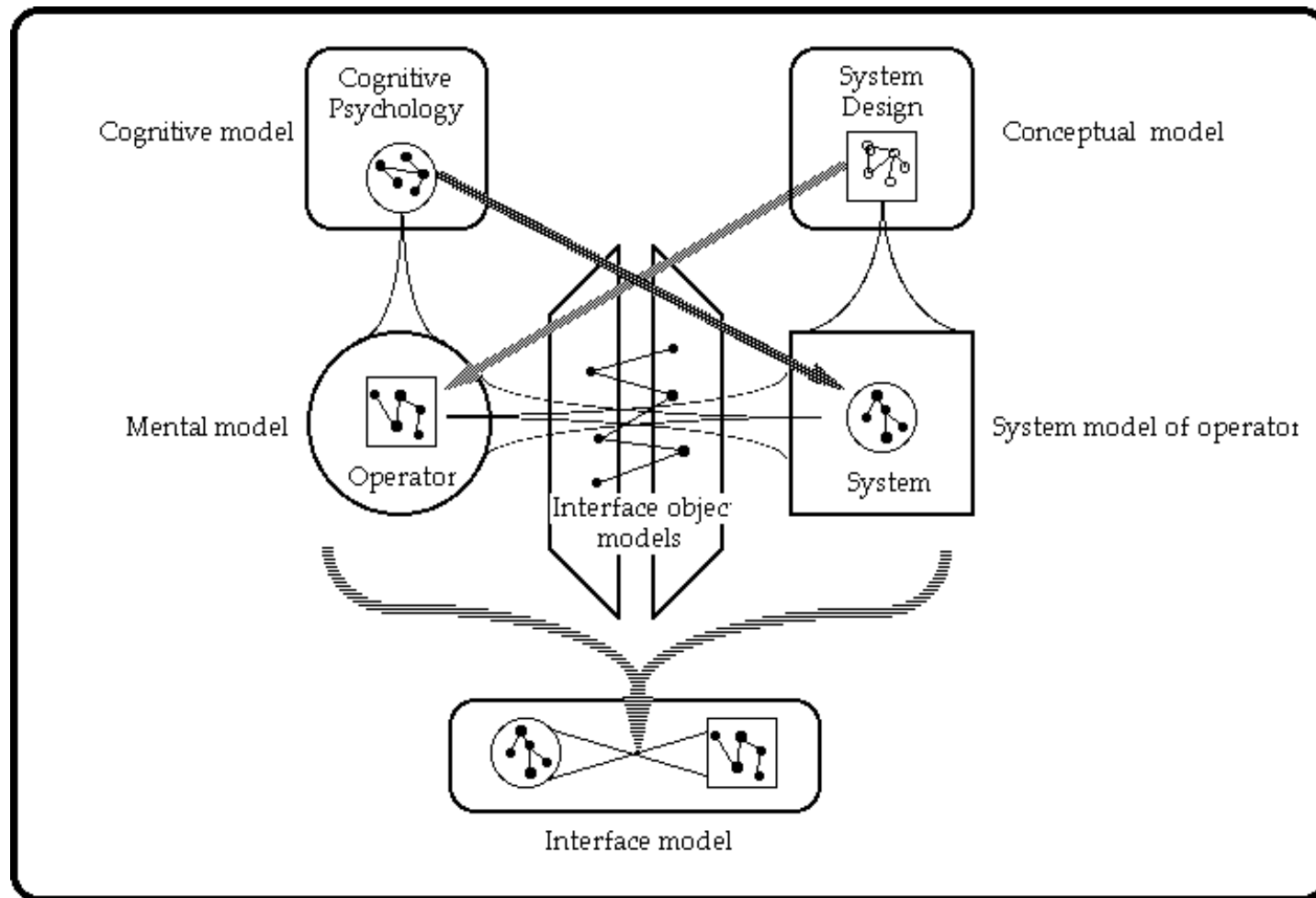


The Human/Computer Interface

The psychology of human/computer interaction deals with the relationship between human thought and behavior and the design of computer systems.

Much has been learned in last two decades about how humans learn to cope with computers and how technology has changed our patterns of thought and how we think about others and ourselves (Norman, 2000).

Models of the Human/Computer Interface



Research Issues and Questions

- Many analogies exist between the human/computer interface and the interface between God and man.
- As believers struggle to understand the mysteries of God's nature and His plan of salvation, metaphors from technology may come to mind.
- Could the Internet be a technological metaphor of the Holy Spirit? The network Server could be analogous to the Father and the network Client the Son.
- What are the psychological and theological implications of such metaphors?

Study Methods

Christian web sites for sermons and illustrations were searched for:

- frequency of computer technology terms
- changes in views of human versus machines and ways in which technology has changed our language
- new metaphors and illustrations from technology
- new topics and issues from technology

Methods: Sites

- Sermon and illustration sites
 - www.sermons.org
 - www.sermoncentral.com
 - www.bible-sermons.org.uk
 - www.preachingplus.com
- Christian literature sites
 - www.crosscurrents.com

Results: Frequencies

	sermons.org (211)	sermon- central.com (60,000)	bible- sermons.org (880)	preaching- plus.com (400)
Internet (email, WWW)	4	11	2	61
Hardware (memory, keyboard)	1	5	0	31
Software (word proc, program)	2	8	2	19

Some sites are on the leading edge and others are not.

Results: Human/Machine Equivalence

Anthromorphizing: ascribing human and even godlike characteristics to the computer.

“My computer hates me.”

“If you want to find anything out, go to the Internet.”

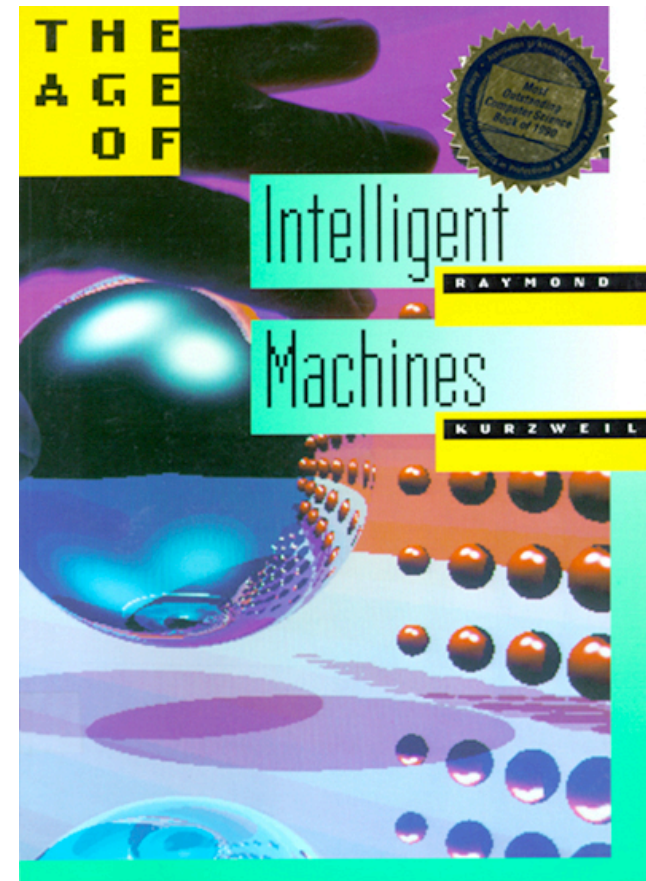
Mechnomorphizing: viewing humans as nothing but machines.

“The brain is the computer.” “You need to erase your memory banks.”

“In short, we've taken a cue from Windows 2000. We've learned to multitask.”



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The question is only whether we become machines or they become us. (Kurzweil, 2000).

Results: “Saved” Example

1 Corinthian's 15:2 Paul reminds his listeners that they are in the process of "being saved" because of their faith in the gospel. If there were ever a term that has benefited from our new technology, the concept of being "saved" must surely be it.

What happens on a computer disk when you hit the "save" option on your keyboard? It does not mean that everything remains as it was previously. No, what "saving" a screen means is that whatever was in there before has now been wiped away completely in order to be replaced by the information that is currently up on the screen.

Maybe you just fixed a typo. Maybe you re-wrote an entire paragraph. Maybe you didn't mean to hit "save" and you just erased six months of research numbers.

No matter. Whatever is up there when you hit save . . . that is what you now have in your document.

"Save" doesn't mean it is protecting what is in the past. Save means you get rid of the old work and you start with your updated work.

This is what the Bible means when it talks about being "saved." The digital understanding of "save" is remarkably congruent with the biblical notion of "being saved." When the believer who "goes under" the water in baptism, they are a "saved" person when they re-emerge seconds later.

Results: Internet Example

Charles Henderson explores the Internet as a metaphor for God from Sherry Turkle's book *Life on the Screen*. "People see the Net as a new metaphor for God." The reason for this, she explains, is that they experience electronic networks, like life itself, evolving by a force they can neither understand, nor control. "The Internet is one of the most dramatic examples of something that is self-organized. That's the point. God *is* the distributed, decentralized system."

Henderson concludes that the Internet is a good metaphor for God.

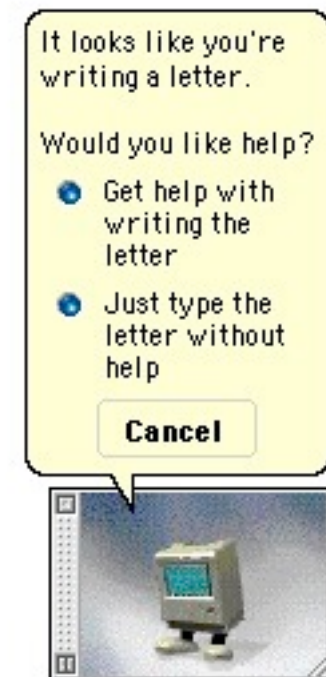
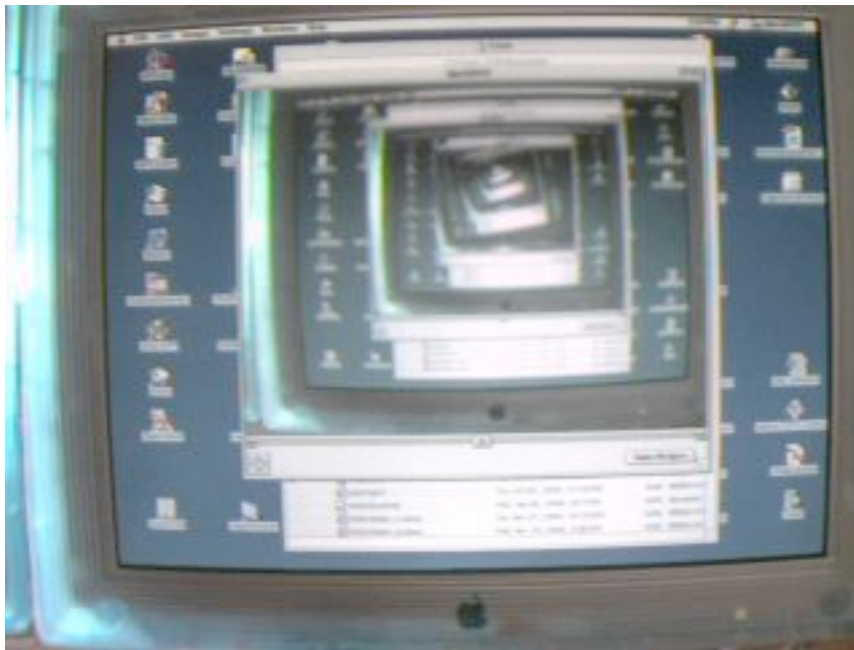
Results: New Topics

On the plus side, technology has offered solutions to many human problems (e.g., world wide communication, relief from repetitive tasks):

Over 15,000 web-based prayer circles, the virtual counterpart of physical prayer circles have popped up on line over the past few years. Even mainline denominations are taking prayer on-line. Churches have begun sending weekly e-mail to their members asking them to pray for fellow members and friends who are ill, unemployed, or grieving. The associate pastor of Georgetown Presbyterian Church Merritt Schatz says using e-mail prayer lists is more accurate than the "telephone tree." Schatz says the problem with phones is that "by the time it gets through many people, the story changes." Thanks to Jim Wilson and his staff.
(FreshMinistry.org)

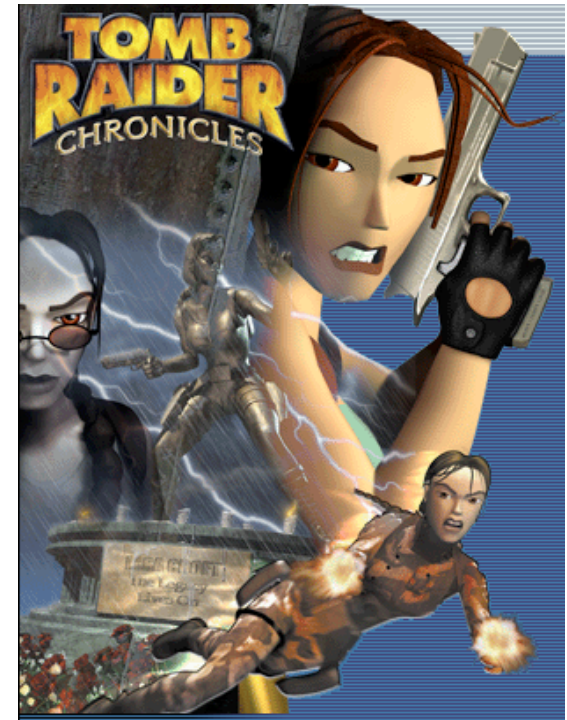
Results: New Topics

- Human expectations however often exceed reality. Reliance on technology rather than God will prove to be a mistake.



Results: Issues

- On the negative side, technology introduces new instances of a corrupt world (e.g., a corrupted file, a crashed hard drive, a computer virus).
- Technology opens new channels of sinful behavior (e.g., porn sites, computer fraud).
- Technology draws new lines of discrimination (e.g., accessibility, computer illiteracy).



Results: “Virus” Example

“Is your life cluttered with ideas, language and experiences that are unworthy of a child of God, a brother or sister of Jesus? One of the first computer adages which I was taught was garbage in, garbage out. It means that what we put into our computers (or lives) determines what we get out. Any of us who have ever downloaded a computer virus know the truth of this axiom -- what we downloaded impacted the whole computer. Yet, how many of us unconsciously download the virus of profanity or pornography or disrespect for others through what we watch or listen to?” (www.preachingplus.com)

Discussion

Technology, whether modern or ancient, must be factored into our study of psychology and our understanding of theology.

Future directions:

- Catalog of techno-sermon illustrations and topics
- Survey of attitudes about appropriateness of technological illustrations
- Web site at esoptron.umd.edu/theo_techno

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