

MEDIATIONS ON A DIGITAL WORKFORCE

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Abstract

The work presented here ranges from small-scale interventions on Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk virtual crowdsourcing job board to collaborations with the Turkers (workers) for exhibition and festival play. Virtual job boards have a tendency to commodify digital labor, often resulting in exploitative practices. In these works, the author offers the Turkers a reprieve from the tensions between play and labor (play/bor) with an opportunity to express themselves while being paid for their creativity.

In 2005 Amazon.com launched Mturk.com, a crowdsourcing marketplace where requestors (employers) post HITs (human intelligence tasks, or virtual jobs) and workers (employees) complete the HITs, typically ranging from a penny per task to a few dollars, through the Mturk.com interface. Unsurprisingly, soon after the launch of the virtual job board critics pondered its role and ethical implications: "Is it a boon for the bored or a virtual sweatshop?" asks Katharine Mieszkowski [1]. A 2010 article by Panos Ipeirotis indicates that of the 1,000 participants in his study, the majority of workers are divided between citizenship in the U.S. (46.8%) and India (34%). It seems the Americans are more often females earning a secondary labor (with a higher claim to working "for fun" or "to kill time") while the Indian workers tend to be males using Mturk.com for their primary source of income [2]. This study is in no way conclusive, but it offers insight into the demographics of the Turkers and probable motivations for their willingness to work for pennies.

When I started collaborating with the Turkers (the anonymous/eponymous name of these virtual workers) my interest was simple and seemingly one-dimensional. I wanted to pay the Turkers to make art. Aaron Koblin had already paid them to draw a sheep facing left at this point (and sold those drawings on his website—a choice that illuminates the type of exploitation that Trebor Scholz describes in his anthology on digital labor) [3]. I didn't want to dictate the precise outcome of the Turkers' work. I wanted them to be creative, to make something they probably would not have made if they didn't accept my HIT, and I also had a secondary goal: Can I ask the Turkers to do something that would require them to stop computing for a moment and move their bodies? Coincidentally, the 2008 Summer Olympics were just weeks away when I was considering a Turker collaboration.

Mechanical Olympics

I didn't expect the Turkers to accept my HIT right away: Create a video, no more than 30 seconds, of you or your friends performing an Olympic event, post your work to YouTube, and share the link with me for the Mechanical Olympics blog. Imagine my delight when, after posting the HIT before going to bed, I woke up to nearly half of my HITs fulfilled with Olympic-style funny, poetic and mundane videos that populated YouTube with the keyword "Olympics" in the title (Fig. 1). That year I collected more than 50 videos (at nearly \$4 each) and administered a voting poll where anyone could vote for gold medalists—who were paid a bonus for winning.

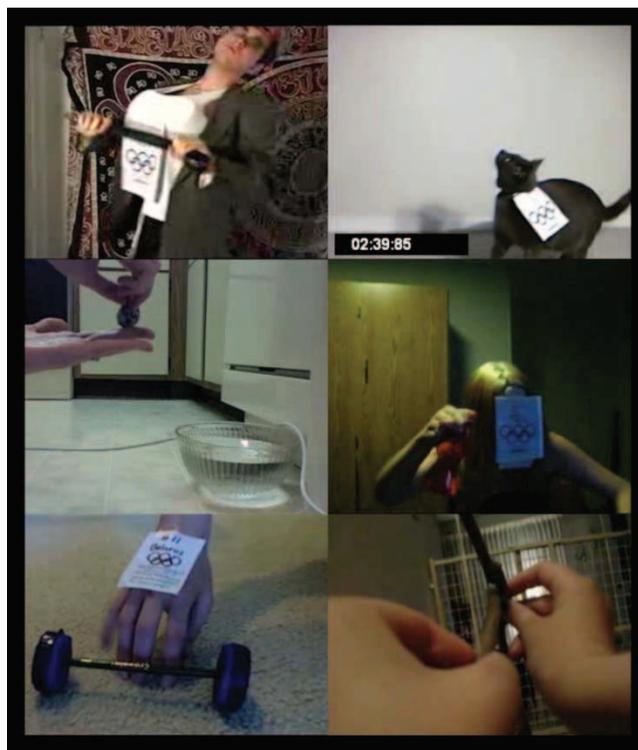


Fig. 1. Turkers performing various Olympic-inspired activities, *Mechanical Olympics*. (© xline burrough)

I repeated this project again in 2010 at Cornerhouse in Manchester (U.K.) for the Abandon Normal Devices festival as the *Mechanical Games* [4]. With a bigger budget and an added ambition of targeting senior citizens for the project, my U.K.-based project coordinator worked with a videographer to create films of seniors from various assisted-living homes, church groups and even a dance company to compete in the *Mechanical Games* against the Turkers. At the final awards ceremony I met many of the seniors (though of course, none of the Turkers). It was a touching experience to interface with participants who had been anonymous but present (in videos) during the time of production. Because this project is on video, where some or all of a performer's body is often included—and in many cases the bodies of the performers are also the bodies of the artist (or worker) themselves, the allusion to the disembodiment of our virtual collaboration is salient.

Mediations on Digital Labor

Similar to sketching or gesture drawing, I made other small interventions on Mturk.com between the first *Mechanical Olympics* (2008) and the second project I detail below, *Mediations on Digital Labor* (2015). In 2009 the Turkers sent my then-boyfriend a "Happy Birthday" message to his email for each year of his life—a fun way to celebrate if not a little spooky that suddenly many new people from all over the globe have your email address (well, it wasn't private anyhow). This is a small gesture in terms of art-making—it's literally the equivalent of making someone a birthday card. From the Turkers' point of view it's hard not to smile when writing a celebratory note to someone, even if you don't know that person. I hoped they would smile, as we would upon receipt of their messages, and enjoy a HIT that wasn't as tedious as the usual image labeling, captioning or sorting types of tasks.

Later I asked the Turkers to share a single thought—any thought at all—and created small books *A Penny for Your Thoughts* that I shared back with the Turkers, along with instructions for printing and binding [5].

In 2015 I had an opportunity to exhibit at Grand Central Art Center in Santa Ana, CA. Knowing I wanted to work with the Turkers and while maintaining what I refer to as a “failed” meditation practice (it doesn’t happen every day but I think about how I’m not doing it all of the time), I sat in meditation for what couldn’t have been more than 5 minutes. I felt rested, at ease and clear-headed, and in this moment I had the idea: The Turkers should get paid to rest. Off to my requestor account I went, and in just days I collected 60 thoughts the Turkers had after resting for 1 to 3 minutes (they received \$.25 per HIT).

With a spreadsheet in hand, I took chalk to the gallery floor and spent 50 hours, a meditative activity, drawing the Turkers’ thoughts in my best script and block lettering [6]. Worker IDs were included to cite my anonymous collaborators (Fig. 2).

After collecting Turkers’ reflections on meditation, a natural extension of the task was to ask my collaborators to record themselves chanting “Om.” I collected nearly 25 videos of Turkers chanting “Om” for 10 seconds. In some videos s/he is visible (one full head shot, and other partial features, mostly hands), in some the screen is amber as their finger covers the lens of the camera built into the computer (this is probably due to my suggestion of doing this if they wanted to remain anonymous). In one submission the Turker animates the mouth of a dog to chant “Om” while in another the chant itself is digitized [7].

Visitors to the gallery would find chalked lettering on the floor, a podium in the middle of the room where Om videos could be watched and heard with a headphone set and USB drives hanging from the wall in a never-ending sine wave pattern (Fig. 3). Each drive contained one Om chant. By stepping into the gallery, perhaps enticed by the podium, viewers were complicit actors in the destruction of what I think of as “unencrypted data,” that is, the workers’ voices drawn on the floor in chalk (Fig. 4). For the *OC Weekly*, Dave Barton demonstrated a rich understanding of this project, “The now ephemeral quality of work (and lack of security that comes with it) reveals itself on the installation itself. Patrons have to interact with the misery of the workers represented: If they want to read what has been written, they have to stand on other words to do so.



Fig. 2. Floor, Grand Central Art Center project room (pre-exhibit opening), *Mediations on Digital Labor*. (© xtine burrough)

Those words—and the work represented by those words—slowly becomes an indecipherable blur of white chalk dust after enough people have shuffled through it” [8].

Finally, visitors to the gallery were encouraged to participate in the preservation of the Turkers’ voices. If they signed up to redraw the disappearing texts on the floor for half an hour—manual, not digital, labor—their reward was one of the hanging jump drives.

I’ve come to realize that this work with the Turkers has something to do with self-care. The Turkers, by nature of being disembodied and usually exploited, could really use an advocate for the care of their bodies and minds. I have every intention of hiring the digital workforce to light a candle, say a prayer, take a nap and laugh with a friend. That is, I want for them the same basic things that I want for myself, despite our “worker” or “requestor” status.



Fig. 3. Project room at Grand Central Art Center, *Mediations on Digital Labor*. (© xtine burrough)



Fig. 4. Floor, Grand Central Art Center project room (post-exhibit opening), *Mediations on Digital Labor*. (© xtine burrough)

References and Notes

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