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Local dummy hates being Microsoft fool

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Computers and their programs use nothing but electricity, inanimate components and binary codes to operate—all of which are devoid of grudges and puckish artifice. So why is my new set up -- Windows 7, Outlook and Word 2013 -- making me feel jinxed?

I admit to some base-line hostility toward computers and cellphones. They've led us into the heart of social-media darkness where lurks the flesh-eating thumbola virus that first consumes its victim's opposable digits and then crawls into his brain where it grows for 17 years and emerges as a reality-television star.

I admit that I accept the benefits of these technologies and use them myself. They have made my work easier, faster and more efficient.

But I note their costs to our physical health and safety, our perforated privacy and our lowered ability to resist integration into a single, wired-together matrix.

I admit to fantasies about using a 12-pound sledgehammer to smash cellphones -- the smarter, the better -- while whistling "The Ballad of John Henry."

I once thought that Microsoft forced consumers to buy new-and-more-confusing programs for the low-tech reason of making money. Now I think it's about keeping us feeling stupid, anxious and at the mercy of our technological betters.

With each new program, the gap grows between the handful of people who master its complexity and use it fully and those of us who mumble and fumble in an effort to make sense of unexplained error messages, random jams and whimsical disappearances of text and emails.

Why are the simplest tasks made harder in each upgraded version? What other tool in our lives is sold *without* an instruction manual? Why

do so many of us now fatalistically anticipate and accept a nightmare when buying upgraded programs?

I'm tempted to write that my forced march away from the dependable Window XP-Outlook Express-Word (1997-2003) combination was almost like going through a regimen of cancer therapies. Maybe I'm better off now, but the treatment made me upchuck.

I feel like a refugee who has washed up on a hostile shore.

I'm only half-joking when I write that I think the obfuscation and needless rigmarole built into these upgrades are part of a humiliation ritual whose intent is to keep users passive, dependent and resigned.

Well, all of that is my old radical self braying at The System.

Maybe, when it comes to computers, I'm just jinxed.

A jinx is something you believe in. It predicts that something will go wrong, because either you've done some other thing wrong or a bad-luck curse is now stuck to you like a hungry tick.

When I was seven, I convinced myself that I was jinxing the Pittsburgh Pirates, because it seemed that almost every time I listened to their radio broadcast, they lost.

In 1952, the Pirates went 42-112, a winning percentage of .273, and finished 54½ games back. It was the fourth worst record in the majors since 1900.

Who can quarrel with my empirical conclusion that my listening caused their losing? Hard data proved that I jinxed the Bucs that season. (I've never understood why my academic career as a quantitative social scientist ended after six weeks.)

Baseball is well-known for its jinx-superstitions.

There's the "Curse of the Bambino," which was said to prevent the Boston Red Sox from winning a World Series for 84 years after the club's owner, Harry Frazee, traded Babe Ruth to the Yankees in 1920. The sophomore jinx is supposed to spoil the second season of star rookies. And there's the no-jinxing rule that prohibits teammates from verbalizing the obvious when their pitcher is working on a no-hitter or perfect game.

In his 1912 book, Pitching in a Pinch, ghost-written by John Wheeler, Hall of Famer Christy Mathewson said:

A jinx is something which brings bad luck to a ball-player.

...a jinx is the child of superstition, and ball-players are among the most superstitious persons in the world....

Mathewson never doubted the power of a jinx. He wrote that whenever he saw a cross-eyed man, he neutralized the automatic jinx by spitting into his hat. Mathewson attended Bucknell University for four years and was widely considered to be baseball's leading intellectual.

A jinx is real to the extent that my belief in it controls what I do. If I spit in my cap, would I no longer have trouble with Microsoft products?

Closely related to being jinxed is being star-crossed, which holds that an unapproachable cosmic force is shaping events and your role in them so that they work out badly for you. Being star-crossed is more about something you think is being done to you, and less about what you've done to yourself.

Recall the star-crossed lovers, Romeo and Juliet, who are doomed by the celestial order and misunderstandings to suicide, and "doth with their death bury their parents' strife."

Had Romeo spit in his cap, they might have come up with a less dramatic way of resolving the dispute between their families and, in the bargain, gathered more than one night of marital bliss.

I've felt star-crossed from time to time, particularly when good intentions get trounced.

With a jinx, you try to find a lucky charm to defang the curse's sabre-teeth. With crossed stars, you just slog through and hope that you survive the wreck.

On reflection, I think Microsoft is star-crossing its customers, but they want us to think we have jinxed ourselves. The blame for conversion woes is rigged to fall on me, not them.

Christy Mathewson showed me how to offset a jinx, but uncrossing my stars seems undoable. Google coughs up no user manual regardless of how many thumbs I throw at it.

Perhaps in the digital age, we simply have to make do with products that treat us like fools.

Well, maybe I'm just being old and grumpy.

I'm always ready to admit that my "...head is as full of quarrels as an egg is full of meat, and yet [my]...head hath been beaten as addle as an egg for quarrelling." ("Romeo and Juliet," ACT III, Scene I.)

I keep spitting on my new computer, but it doesn't seem to help.

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