

Glossary

(OR Everything I Know About Computers I Learned From Mother)

agent A software program that performs a service, such as alerting the user of something that needs to be done on a certain day; or monitoring incoming data and giving an alert when a message has arrived; or searching for information on electronic networks. An intelligent agent is enabled to make decisions about the information it finds.

Mother operated as the intelligent agent for all of the members of the family. Among the plethora of services provided by our personal agent she found art lessons for me, tutors for my little sister, colleges for all of us, and home care nurses for my grandmother. This of course meant she had little or no time for herself, her interests, and had no agent of her own. The selflessness of the intelligent agent is both a gift and a curse.

avatar A pictorial representation of a participant in a three-dimensional chat environment. The avatar is chosen by the user and may look like a bird, a fish or some other colorful character.

Mother had many avatars of all genders – Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and the Tooth Fairy, to name a few. She was so adept at these personas that it was years before we figured out it was her.

background task A task that runs on its own while the user interacts with the computer on another (foreground) task; for example, some computers can run a printer in background while the user edits text or reads other files.

There was always something going on in the background with a family of five children. It might be laundry hanging on the line, homework, music practice, or something cooking, but you could be sure that more than one thing was happening at any given time. This requires a constant juggling of background and foreground activities making for a scattered sense of self and a surreal compression or expansion of time. The extreme toll it takes on body and mind showed up in Mother as a deep and recurrent depression.

Women with children are the unsung heroes of our world - something feminism taught me in theory, and which I only understood in practice. And I have learned that it is both unfair and magical that women are biologically the chosen people to bear children. I have lost a lot of my theory in the process and found a humility that reminds me that, despite what I thought I knew, I really don't know much about anything anymore, except that the Teletubbies - Tinky-Winky, Dipsy, Laa-Laa and Po, all love each other very much.

Joanne Fedler



Nutritional Product Preparation Device



What is interactivity, I thought, but expertise in structuring and restructuring complex and shifting relationships; what is parallel processing but expertise in handling multiple simultaneous events, skillfully choreographing continuous and interruptible tasks; what is the cybernetic and surveyed body/self but one that can sustain integrity with blurred boundaries and even multiple bodies and identities as in the case of childbearing? What is networking, a raison d'etre of the electronic environment, but an acknowledgment of mutual interdependence – complete with such vulnerabilities as viruses, which only confirm mutuality.

Catherine Richards

Primitive Human Reproduction Method



batch processing Processing a group of documents or files all at once.

In batch processing, the user gives the computer a job, for example, printing letters to everyone on a mailing list, and waits for the whole job to be done.

Mother taught me to do laundry when I had enough like colors to make a full load. If I needed my gym suit or something for the next day it might be hand washed by itself (transaction processing.)

cache A temporary storage area for frequently-accessed or recently-accessed data. Having certain data stored in cache speeds up the operation of the computer. A cache hit (accessing data from a cache) takes much less time than retrieving information from the main memory.

There were always caches of lunch snacks, certain foods, small gift items, and school supplies hidden around the house in strategic locations so that they could not be accessed by unauthorized individuals. Mother had her own well hidden private caches of candy bars for her sugar addiction.

computer A programmable electronic machine that performs mathematical and logical operations and assembles, stores, correlates and processes information.

We expect as much or more from the Mother as we do from the computer and yet we condemn the Mother that breaks down under the pressure. If the computer breaks down, we upgrade the hardware, software or memory. In other words, we provide what it needs to function reliably. There is no parallel of provision for the Mother.

daughterboard In a personal computer, a small printed circuit board that plugs into a motherboard.

An offspring of the Mother. (See Motherboard)



debug To fix problems in hardware or software.

Homework, toys, sewing, friendships, arguments... need I say more? Mother even debugged the dog. Literally. Of course, that left her no time to deal with her own problems, such as a husband with an alcohol problem, feelings of isolation and despair, lack of romance, and no time to pursue her own interests or even figure out what those might be.

delete To erase data from a file or remove a file from a storage medium.

On the computer, deleted files are no longer visible in the directory, but the files may still be on the disk, and recently-deleted files may sometimes be recovered.

If it was trash or if it was of no use it went in the garbage can, but it could be retrieved until the trash was taken out or the garbage collectors came. This method was also useful for collecting old clothes and toys to be taken to Goodwill (an early form of recycling).

Easter egg A secret message hidden somewhere in a program, that can be revealed by entering some unusual combination of commands, such as pulling down a menu while holding the command and shift keys. Computer users can stumble upon Easter eggs by accident, or hear about them through rumors. The messages can be jokes, political statements, music, or pictures; often they are credits for the developers of the software.

A candy egg or soft-boiled egg that is hidden in the house or yard for "hunting" during the Easter holiday season. The child who collects the most eggs or finds the golden egg wins a prize.

elegant Simple, graceful, yet effective; demonstrating the highest efficiency and economy of design. For example, in mathematics, an elegant proof; in computer programming, an elegant program.

Father was a Mason and Mother was an Eastern Star. On the nights that she went to these events she wore an evening gown, perfume and red lipstick. I thought she was the most beautiful and elegant creature that walked the earth, even though I did not want her to leave me behind with the baby sitter.

Through the use of cybernetic information theories in motor development research, children are interpreted as flexible, as capable of being programmed by environment and activities. Flexible bodies are tolerant and "unresisting" in the sense of loosely bounded and not rigid. Flexible bodies do not apparently say "no." They are represented as nonspecific to time and space, not embodying nor particular to local culture. The narratives of these texts of human infant motor development, as forms of American folklore and as encapsulations of professional wisdom, are part of the resources from which parents, physicians, and educators actively construct the body and its capacities for movement.

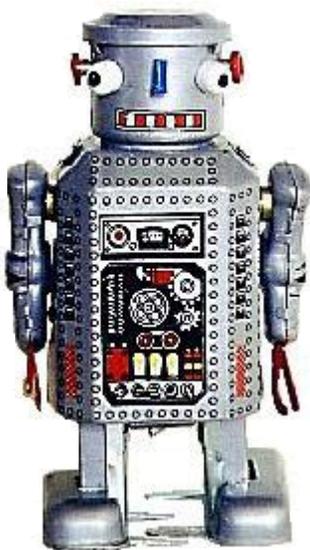
Jennifer L. Croissant

Roving Toaster



..from that moment my life's mission of being my own boss was terminated. Here I was, a warrior, a fighter, in whose path men trembled in fear, at the beck and call of a shriveled little ET person who did not understand that I was a woman who ran with the wolves. Suddenly all that I had imagined I was, was fundamentally challenged. I had strived all my life for independence, respect, control. Now, I was a leaking, sagging, encumbered zombie.

Joanne Fedler



Early TotBot® Prototype

error message A message that appears on the computer screen to let the user know the computer cannot carry out an instruction, or there is some other problem.

Error messages were communicated in a number of ways. One particularly effective message was a look. It was all in the eyes. She didn't have to say a word. If you weren't looking at Mother, she might poke with one of her long fingers and then give you the look. The worst of all was the private talk, it makes me squirm just to think about it.

fault tolerance The ability of a system to keep working in the event of hardware or software faults. Fault tolerance is usually achieved by duplicating key components of the system.

Mother always had a back-up plan for the important goings on in the family, whether it be a spare car, working around weather, or surprise guests. There was never a standstill in the family machine. It kept on cranking – come what may.

FIFO First In First Out. A method of storage in which the data stored for the longest time will be retrieved first.

We also knew this as First Come First Served, and ordering by age of child. It worked for anything from serving dinner and riding in the front seat of the car to entering rides at the state fair and making dentist appointments.

GIGO Garbage In Garbage Out. The idea that if the data put into a computer or program is not good, the result the program comes back with will not be worth much.

We never had soft drinks and rarely had candy or desserts. We were encouraged to read as much as we could of all sorts of books, were never indulged in the B movies of the day, and never, but never, allowed to do things or have material items because others kids we knew were allowed. I did not appreciate this at the time.



guiltware Freeware or shareware that has a message attached which attempts to make the user feel guilty until making some kind of payment.

Parents are some of the best at enlisting guilt and Mother was no exception. It sometimes worked for getting rooms cleaned, the trash taken out (see delete), and other assorted chores. As I got older it was used for life decisions, keeping in touch, and coming home for the holidays.

help Explanations, available on the computer screen, about the various icons and tools and how to use the computer. Many programs have help menus that explain all their capabilities.

Life questions, homework questions, "how to" questions, if Mother didn't know the answer she would find it or someone who did.

hot fix Repair of a component while it is operating.

Burnt brownies, a last minute costume, a torn hem, a missing button, a ride didn't show, no date for the dance...

ill-behaved Programs called ill-behaved are designed to bypass normal operating system functions, which may result in better performance but makes the program less portable and more likely to be restricted to specific hardware. (See well-behaved.)

This type of action restricted you to the house. As simple as that. If you couldn't behave, you couldn't leave the house. We weren't badly behaved as kids, but managing a car full of five children was such a chore that we just didn't go out that much. The only restaurant that we ever went to was a Chinese place owned by a friend of Father's. I guess they figured friends would be more forgiving if we misbehaved or became unruly.

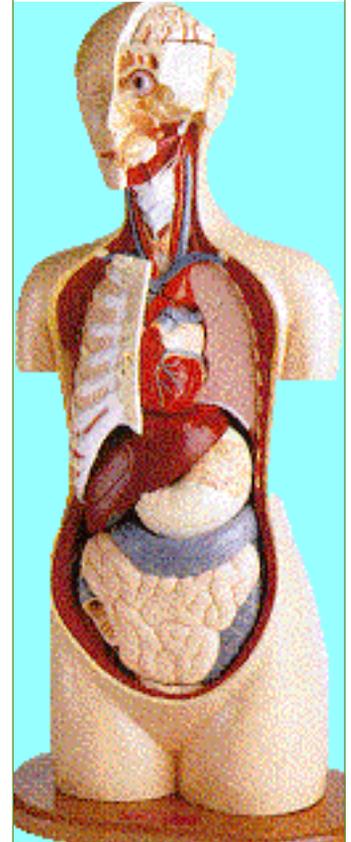
intelligent agent A software routine that uses intelligence to do an assigned task; for example, searching through incoming mail and reserving items related to a certain subject.

See Agent.

Even more explicitly cyberneticizing than the motor development milestones, parents are actively encouraged to be "synapse builders" and to develop the information processing capacity of their children's brains. Parents are encouraged to use flashcards, count, and teach very early memorization (which entails buying products) so that babies are exposed to many bytes of information, by which they will develop their storage capacity and learn information to synthesize with additional data later in life.

Jennifer L. Croissant

Spare Parts



When children today remove the back of their computer toys to “see” how they work, they find a chip, a battery, and some wires. Sensing that trying to understand these objects “physically” will lead to a dead end, children try to use a “psychological” kind of understanding. Children ask themselves if the games are conscious, if the games know, if they have feelings, and if they “cheat.” Earlier objects encouraged children to think in terms of a distinction between the world of psychology and the world of machines, but the computer does not. It’s “opacity” encourages children to see computational objects as psychological machines.

Sherry Turkle



Universal Power Supply Unit

iteration The process of running a series of instructions over and over until some condition is satisfied. Or, one repetition of the series.

ABCs, shoe tying, flashcards, spelling tests, music practice, multiplication tables... Over and over and over, until we got it right.

JAM Just A Minute. (Chat Expression)

An expression used daily in order to reach a stopping point in the task at hand before responding to a call. JAM was used frequently by all members of the family and often used as a stalling factor. Mother would also use it in conversation to stop a train of thought as in disbelief or outrage. “Just a minute there young lady!”

knowledge base A database of knowledge about a subject; used in artificial intelligence. The knowledge base for an expert system (a computer system that solves problems) comes partly from human experience and partly from the computer’s experience in solving problems.

I still consult Mother the Database about cooking, cleaning, child raising, marital relationships, and so on. And believe it or not, sometimes my knowledge base is of value to her.

LIFO Last In First Out. A method of storage in which the data stored last will be retrieved first.

LIFO is best demonstrated by lunch boxes and overnight bags. Mother would put the lunch items in the box in the reverse order of consumption, so that the first thing to come out of the box or bag was the sandwich. This also helped to prevent mushy bread (especially in the case of peanut butter and jelly – there’s nothing worse than a soggy purple sandwich.). When packing a bag for an overnight with a friend the last to go in were the pajamas and toothbrush, because they would be the first items needed.



machine A device consisting of fixed and moving parts that modifies mechanical energy and transmits it into a more useful form. A system or device that performs or assists in the performance of a human task.

The incorporation of machines into the household goes back thousands of years. A day in the life of a Mother requires interaction with a number of technological devices; vacuum cleaners, garbage disposals, washers, dryers, microwaves, automobiles, telephones, answering machines, TVs, VCRs, computers, calculators, cameras, blenders, and food processors, to name just a few.

motherboard The main circuit board inside a computer, which contains the central processing unit, the bus, memory sockets, expansion slots, and other components. Additional boards, called daughter boards, can be plugged into the motherboard.

Also known as Mother - the central processing unit of the family system.

multiprocessing Using two or more processors in the same computer, or two or more computers connected together, to execute more than one program or instruction at the same time.

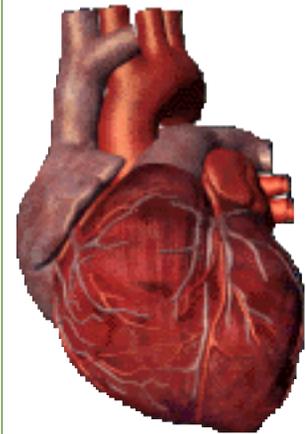
Field trips always required multiprocessors. Several Mothers would volunteer their time to assist in the oversight of the class outside of the school grounds. This prevented unruly bus rides and losing children at museums or historic sites.

multitasking Running more than one program at a time. When a machine has this capability it is easy to switch between programs without having to quit, or to copy material from a file in one program to a file in another.

Mother could switch between tasks, demands, and thinking at notice. In fact, she never had the luxury of concentrating on one thing at a time. Everyone said that there was never a dull moment in our house, which also means that there was never any peace, rest, quiet or time to be with oneself. The idea that Mother might get away for some time alone or to vacation was unfathomable.

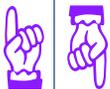
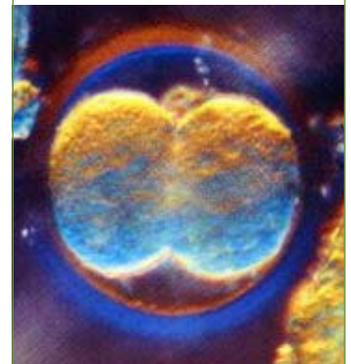
Though they are invisible and seemingly unnoticeable hybrids of machine and human, the material hybrids bring to the surface the price of transgressing embodiment. If one desires to transcend the material body it will be painful. One could suggest that this physical pain is also the sign of psychic pain as we reorganize our psychic structures.

Catherine Richards



The Organ Formerly Known as the Heart

Modern Reproduction Technique



To express it simply, when we are dependent on technology for so much, especially in the use of computer communications and information, does it matter that these devices are not yet directly attached to our bodies?

Afshin Yaghtin



Insufficient Desire Stimulators

Silicon Desire Augmentation



nag screen A screen displayed in a shareware program that reminds the user to register and pay the fee. It usually appears when the program is opened or closed.

The look on Mother's face when you didn't do what you were supposed to or you did what you weren't supposed to – no words necessary. (See error message)

off load To remove data from a computer and put it on another computer or storage medium.

Out of season clothes were uploaded from the closets to the attic until needed along with holiday decorations and old toys.

outsourcing Paying an outside contractor to provide certain services which they may specialize in, such as software development.

Tutors, birthday cakes, riding lessons... Mother outsourced some house cleaning, but most of the enormous demands of running the household remained with her. This left her too busy to play, too busy for affection, too busy to enjoy her children and too busy to enjoy much of life.

overwrite To write over data that is already on a disk; for example, when updating a file.

Permission for a thing, an act, or an event was overwritten due to behavioral changes or in the case of trying to go around Mother and get permission from Father. Approval or permission from Father was easily and often overwritten.

packet switching A technology for sending packets of information over a network. Data is broken up into packets for transmission. All the data packets related to a message may not take the same route to get to their destination; they are reassembled once they have arrived.

A common process for quilting, where individual members of a sewing circle constructed a block or section of fabric at home. Patterns and fabric were distributed, members sewed at individual locations and then met to assemble the blocks into a single quilt.



parallel processing Using more than one computer at the same time to solve a problem, or using more than one processor working simultaneously within the same computer.

A technique used for bake sales. Each Mother would bake a pie, cake, brownies, or cookies, then congregate at the designated location and sell the goodies to raise money for school or church activities.

quantifier One that quantifies; in mathematics or logic, a prefixed operator that states for which values of a variable a formula is true.

Mother was the quantifier for stating which values were true. We often disagreed with her, but we did use her basic formulas for developing our own value sets.

quit To exit a program.

A sometimes controversial technique for exiting an activity or debate - i.e. "quitters never win." We were never admonished for not being able to follow through on a difficult activity whether it was sports, music, or a club membership.

random access A way of storing and retrieving information in which all information locations are immediately available. For example, on a music CD any song can be selected and played randomly.

"Mother, have you seen my...?" She knew the location of everything at all time and was constantly besieged by six people always searching for something.

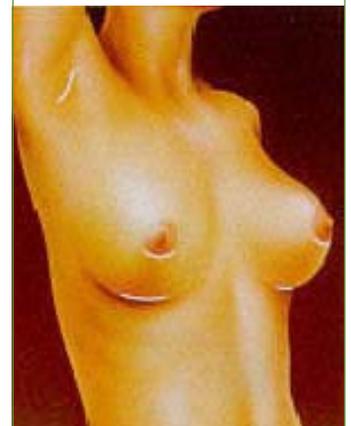
remote login Logging in to a remote computer by a program based on Telnet, to access files, etc.

Logging in by phone was required if you were to be late from a date or upon arrival and departure from activities or events.

One senses that hostile external forces, rather than self-motivated ones, are constructing us as individuals.

Critical Art Ensemble

Sufficient Desire Stimulators



Just as children exposed to electronic toys and games begin to think differently about the aliveness (thinking in terms of psychology rather than physical motion), so children exposed to parallel processing begin to think about life in terms of emergent phenomena.

Sherry Turkle



Carcinogenic Communication Unit

save To store a file on a disk or other storage medium. When a file is being edited, the changes are only in temporary memory (RAM), and will be lost when the power is shut off. To keep the changes in permanent memory, the file must be saved. It is a good idea to save often when working on a file, because if there is a power failure or the computer has to be restarted, all data not saved will be lost.

Family photos, report cards, art works, cherished books, awards... Mother saved it all for the time she would pass it on to us as mementos of precious memories. She also saved a lot of junk. Every nook and cranny of the house was filled with stuff. She said that Father was a pack rat, but the truth is that she was just as bad.

shared logic An arrangement in which two or more terminals close to each other share a computer that does the processing. Shared logic is commonly used with word processing applications.

An arrangement in which many children with similar and different needs share the same Mother. Children of the same Mother are called siblings or sisters and brothers.

shared resource A peripheral device which is shared by more than one computer, such as a printer, disk, etc.

We called them hand-me-downs: clothes, books, toys, and tools shared or passed on from child to child. This saved money, time and generated an appreciation for well loved objects as well as new things.

task management In a multitasking environment, the part of the operating system that controls the running of tasks within the computer, coordinating resources when several tasks are running at the same time.

Just think of Mother as the part of the family that simultaneously controlled the execution of tasks and the coordination of resources. The Control Center. And, boy, could she be controlling...



user-friendly Easy to learn and use, especially for people who are not experts. This term is most often used to describe software.

The Mother to child interface is implemented from birth. Ours was user-friendly with an infectious laugh and a sense of humor. This is not the case with all Graphical Mother Interfaces.

upgrade A newer, presumably better, version of hardware or software.

Cars, appliances, houses, schools – there was always something under consideration for upgrade by timing, and cost. The move was usually not made until the item no longer worked or was on the verge of no longer working. This is a hard model to follow with current computer technology due the speed and cost of change.

virus A program that infects a computer by attaching itself to another program, and propagating itself when that program is executed. A computer can become infected by files downloaded over a network, or by the installation of new software or floppy disks that are infected with viruses. Some viruses are only pranks, and perform harmless actions like displaying a screen with a joke message on it. Others can destroy files or wipe out a hard drive.

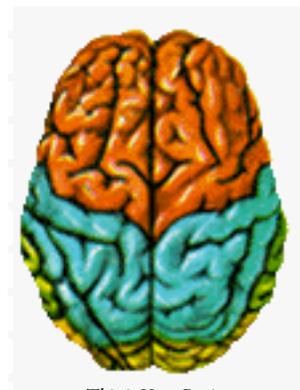
If one of us got it we all got it. Nothing much could be done about it except for taking us to the doctor and nursing us back to health. But who took care of Mother? Illness became a method for Mother to check out of the system. She wasn't able to give herself the time or care that she needed, so taking to bed was the only way for her to escape the demands, isolation, and drudgery of life as a housewife and mother.

volatile memory Memory that loses its content when the power is shut off. The main memory (Random Access Memory or RAM) of the computer is volatile memory. Any changes made to files must be saved to disk before the power is turned off or they will be lost.

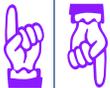
We called it forgiveness - forgetting all the bad choices, hurtful behavior, and mistakes. We put Mother through various kinds of hell and she forgave and forgot it all. I have yet to forgive myself for some of it.

As the cyborg image seems to move closer to the feminine bachelor machine caught up in its own self-referential motor, it increasingly appears as a mirror image of a too-familiar condition.

Catherine Richards



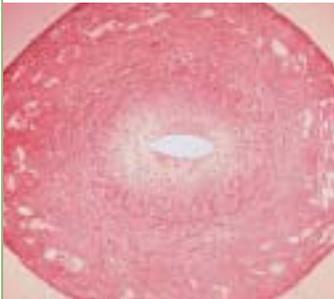
This is Your Brain



Who owns the technology? Who controls it? For whose benefit is it used? Shall the technological artifacts that make us cyborg be the instruments of our liberation, or of our further oppression? Those questions are as relevant for mining the moon as for giving birth.

Robbie Davis-Floyd

Reproductive Organ Imaging



Primitive Human Neural Transmitter



well-behaved Acting in accordance with standards; software is said to be well-behaved if it uses the operating system in the expected way for such tasks as screen display, keyboard input, disk input/output, etc. (See ill-behaved)

Simply, what we were expected to be.

workaround A temporary fix or bypass of a problem in a system.

Safety pins on a shirt or hem, a bit of glue, a note to get out of gym that day...

XOXOXO Kisses and hugs. (Chat Expression)

No explanation necessary.

YAFIYGI You Asked For It, You Got It. Refers to user interfaces which are not WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get). With YAFIYGI, the file on the screen may show text and code, but does not show what the printed out copy will look like.

A term usually associated with disappointment in a much requested new toy or food product. Closely related to BCWYWF (Be Careful What You Wish For - you just might get it.)

zap To hit with a sudden, concentrated force. When things get zapped in comic books they often are killed or destroyed; but in computer jargon, zapping can refer to various processes used to fix things. For example, to "zap the PRAM" means to reset it.

1. Warming up leftovers in the microwave. 2. Using a television remote. 3. Enforcing disciplinary measures.

ZZZ Also known as sleep. This occurs when the screen dims on a computer monitor in order to save energy and preserve the integrity of its image capabilities. Or in the case of laptop computers; sleep mode conserves battery power.

Sleep. The process by which the brain and body are rejuvenated and energy is restored. Also known as something of which a Mother never gets enough.

