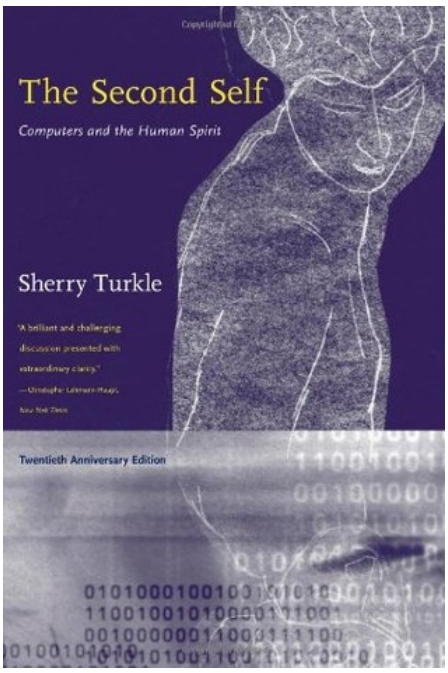

The Second Self: Computers & the Human Spirit (20th Anniversary)

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A new edition of the classic primer in the psychology of computation, with a new introduction, a new epilogue, and extensive notes added to the original text. In *The Second Self*, Sherry Turkle looks at the computer not as a "tool," but as part of our social and psychological lives; she looks beyond how we use computer games and spreadsheets to explore how the computer affects our awareness of ourselves, of one another, and of our relationship with the world. "Technology," she writes, "catalyzes changes not only in what we do but in how we think." First published in 1984, *The Second Self* is still essential reading as a primer in the psychology of computation. This twentieth anniversary edition allows us to reconsider two decades of computer culture--to (re)experience what was and is most novel in our new media culture and to view our own contemporary relationship with technology with fresh eyes. Turkle frames this classic work with a new introduction, a new epilogue, and extensive notes added to the original text.

Turkle talks to children, college students, engineers, AI scientists, hackers, and personal computer owners--people confronting machines that seem to think and at the same time suggest a new way for us to think--about human thought, emotion, memory, and understanding. Her interviews reveal that we experience computers as being on the border between inanimate and animate, as both an extension of the self and part of the external world. Their special place betwixt and between traditional categories is part of what makes them compelling and evocative. (In the introduction to this edition, Turkle quotes a PDA user as saying, "When my Palm crashed, it was like a death. I thought I had lost my mind.") Why we think of the workings of a machine in psychological terms--how this happens, and what it means for all of us--is the ever more timely subject of *The Second Self*.

The Second Self: Computers & the Human Spirit (20th Anniversary) Details

Date	:	Published September 30th 2005 by Mit Press (first published January 1st 1984)
ISBN	:	9780262701112
Author	:	Sherry Turkle
Format	:	Paperback 372 pages
Genre	:	Nonfiction, Psychology, Science, Technology, Sociology, Computer Science, Computers, Philosophy

From Reader Review The Second Self: Computers & the Human Spirit (20th Anniversary) for online ebook

Dave says

I find this quite fascinating, and I'm only on the first few chapters, asking children "Are computers alive?" The answers she gets are very interesting.

Matthew Leroe says

“Where we once were rational animals, now we are feeling computers, emotional machines.” — Turkle

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youzicha says

The book is about how people think about and interact with computers: Turkle interviews computer users and tries to tease out the conceptual frameworks that they use. It was originally published in 1984 and then re-issued in 2004 with a new preface/epilogue, and being 34 years old actually turns out to work to its advantage. The book is interesting because it shows that your own commensense assumptions are not natural or inevitable, so it's helpful that the interview settings are ancient and alien.

The first chapter of the book is a good example of how the book works: Turkle observes and interviews a group of 4-8 year old children, and analyses what criteria they use for classifying things as alive or not alive. Apparently Jean Piaget did a classic study on stages of conceptual development: a 6-year old may think that anything that moves is alive; an 8-year old may restrict aliveness to things that move without an obvious external cause; and by 12 they may consider notions such as growth or metabolism. However, when you give the children electronic toys (e.g. a Speak and Spell, a moving miniature tank, or a toy that plays Tic-tac-toe), a whole new set of criteria become relevant: whether something can talk, if it has feelings, if it can cheat in games, if it has a "brain" or only a "mind", if it was artificially produced by someone else, etc. Later in the book, Turkle turns to adult philosophers, and comments on Searle's Chinese Room:

> Searle sticks tenaciously to the primacy of things over process. He looks for a man in the room, for a neuron in the brain, for a self in the mind. His AI opponents stick just as tenaciously to the primacy of process over things. A system might be made of silicon, Tinkertoys, or fluids—this is irrelevant. [...] For Searle the proposition “a room thinks” is definitionally absurd. In the AI culture, the conviction that it cannot is an archaic belief. For them, the idea that an agent in the room must be “doing the thinking” is just a modern echo of the idea that there must be a “soul” in the pineal gland.

To me the Chinese Room debate seems like a particularly bad failure of philosophy: both sides just listed hypothetical scenarios and asserted that it's intuitively obvious that they are right, and completely failed to

convince the other side. Turkle's approach seems much better—she tries to figure out what underlying model generated those intuitions, and suggest that the basic models might be present already in childhood.

Turkle also does a lot of theorizing. Several times she defines a binary, and then explains the people she interviews in terms of that spectrum. For example, people may approach programming in a “hard” way (objective/mathematical/planned) or a “soft” way (empathising/tactile/improvising). Or people might consider computers as mechanical and predicable, or as kindof alive and magical, and which they prefer depends on they personality and appetite for risk. Sometimes these feel a little bit like insight porn, but they are often surprising and provocative. People deal with the computer in what at first feels like a self-evidently "wrong" way, and Turkle shows how it makes sense for them. But whether or not you trust the theories, the interviews are fun to read, because Turkle is perceptive and has a talent for noticing unexpected quotes:

- A four-year old boy announces that “Spiders are not alive. Because you can kill them.” That is, one of the criteria he uses for classifying something as alive or not is whether there is an ethical injuction agaist harming it.

- A fifth-grader from a poor, religious family, talks about her family's strict rules for her about religion, demeanor, playmates, etc, and comments: “I think that I am programmed like the computer. Other kids in the school aren’t as programmed as me. They have to do things, but they don’t have to do them in order. My mother did my programming. And the Pope. Well, not really, the priest did it. But the Pope did his.” Turkle first interprets this as a metaphor for being impotent and constrained, but the girl (who has been learning computer programming in school) continues: “Well, you know, you can change the program. Once you know how, you can change the program. I can’t do it now, but that doesn’t mean that I won’t be able to someday.”

- Turkle runs into Marvin Minsky in the cinema after watching *Tron*, and it turns out Minsky really likes the move. “That was great. That’s a whole lot better than bits! I am in the middle of writing a paper which proposes to outlaw the whole idea of bits. It’s no way to think about what goes on inside of a computer.” The *Tron* setting is like his agent-based “society of mind”.

In addition to random observations, Turke pursues an overarching theme, namely that computing metaphors will give people new ways to think about their own psychology, much like Freud did:

> We live in a “psychoanalytic culture,” which has little to do with how many people have been psychoanalyzed, are in therapy, or even have read Freud. A set of concepts that offer guides for what is important in thinking about the self, for what is useful in thinking about personal experiences, has filtered out into the culture as a whole: repression, the unconscious, the superego, the Oedipal struggle with the father. In everyday conversation, when people talk about their problems, they make reference to these.

To that end, Turkle interviews people who talk about being “stuck in a loop”, or “debugging” themselves, or use “machine language” versus “high-level language” as a metaphor for overcoming your genes and upbringing. And she describes several cases where learning programming was itself theraputic by providing a new set of concepts, much like going to a therapist might. You can certainly find similar isolated examples today, but it doesn't seem that it developed into a generally shared “programming culture”—I guess because (contrary to expectations in the 1980s) people in general never learned to program. Turkle mentions the

success of *Gödel, Escher, Bach* as evidence that academic ideas about AI had reached the mainstream, but (sadly) it's now largely forgotten, and the ideas themselves didn't really survive the AI winter. On the other hand, reading this book it *is* striking how much less common psychoanalytical thinking has become today. It's jarring when Turkle describes the gender gap in computer science, and goes on to explain that, ultimately, school boys are more interested in computers than girls because boys suffer from the Oedipus complex.

There is another social change which is dramatically visible in the book: our relationship with software. One gets the impression that the years in the early 1980s was a brief golden era. Before, authoritarian companies and governments used big mainframes to track you, and computers were opaque and frightening. By the end of the 1980s, we had established a similarly opaque and imposing IBM PC/Microsoft Windows monoculture. But the scenes in this book are very different:

- Microcomputer hobbyist talk about finally being able to understand something in detail, hope this will spill over into more interest in the the economic/politicals “system”. They dream of eco-friendly decentralized “knowledge co-ops”.

- A 12-year-old boy plays computer games which are distributed as source code listings in magazines, and experiments with changing them to create new effects. He laments a new trend where manufacturers put games in cartridges so the user cannot change them “There are so many great games and they’re really protected. They’re trying to not let people copy them. It’s really frustrating, because there are so many exciting things you can do with a game.”

- School kids learn to program, not through teacher-led instruction, but by free access to microcomputers so they can discover new tricks and share them with their friends. Turkle tells moving stories about how disadvantaged kids learn math or writing or self-discipline through their computer play.

- Places like the MIT AI Lab do not use commercially bought software, but instead employs groups of “hackers” who get a salary and control over the computers, with a vague job description of “continually improving the system by adding features to it (improvements on its editor and mail and message programs) that test the limits of his knowledge”. (One of these hackers was Richard Stallman, who launched the free software movement.)

I guess this only ever existed in small bubbles, but today it sounds as utopian as something from *The Dispossessed*, even though this book is shelved under non-fiction. Even if you don't care about the folk psychology, the book is a fascinating guided tour through these now-lost subcultures.

Helen Heath says

Interesting study on how we place value and human attributes onto electronic things like computers and Tamagotchi. A bit dated now however, children these days (that I know) of 9-11 do not cry when their Tamagotchi dies, they know it isn't alive.

Clay Williams says

As a computer scientist who thinks a lot about user experience, I am immensely interested in the topics covered in this book. Surprisingly, at times I struggled to stay engaged with it. For example, in the section on children and computers, I felt I fully understood the author's key points, but upon looking ahead, I saw I had chapters to go. These chapters primarily reiterated what had already been said, making the reading more of a slog than a pleasure. Although I recommend the book to others with an interest in the human relationship to technology, I do so with the caveat that reading this book can feel like work at times.

Saadia Carnes says

Such a fascinating book. If you are doing any type of project on how the Internet and social media relate to people this should definitely be on your list. Very well written and an enjoyable read for a scholarly work.

Abner Rosenweig says

Turkle offers some good commentary on the relationship between humanity and computers, and how computing is, in essence, a new category of being that is redefining our humanity. I was disappointed by the heavy amount of ethnographic research early on. While interviews may support sociological claims, they make the writing feel dated. Also, I was reading this book for a more abstract and philosophical consideration of the topics. This philosophical discussion does come in the latter part of the book and is brief but insightful. The book also includes an interesting analysis of hackers as examples of humans with extreme relationships to computers.
