Notes Concerning a Number of Things
Related to My Work Machine

My desktop is forever covered, not littered with the flake-like icons (mostly the remains of spur-of-the-moment downloads and late-night investigations), but buried deep, deep down, beyond windows, sedimentary layers, crushed beneath the surface of the screen. It is a hidden treasure that every so often I will stumble upon, almost by chance, surprising myself with a nearly forgotten photo, or — worse yet — a nameless galaxy, supplied by the maker (Mr. Jobs himself, I like to think). Thereupon lies an odd mix of unlikely friends, arriving one at a time from opposite ends of a spectrum: either an item of the most urgent importance, or of no importance at all.

It is not always easy to tell at a glance to which end a particular item belongs, and, as we age together, my Work Machine and I, it becomes harder still. There are the unfortunate many, who, starting at the top of the ladder, slide — some quickly, some less so — to the bottom, eventually to be lumped in with those who were born into their lowly positions. As an example, those once-new compositions, which I was certain were destined to become staples of my daily ritual, and which I've opened not more than a half dozen times since their inception. And of course there are also the lucky few who begin as refuse, or have ended up on there by accident, which manage to finally make themselves useful, or turn up just in the knick of time, instantly becoming worthy of adoption by a willing parent folder.

Roughly once a year there is a deliberate culling of the Desktop herd, a crude but necessary measure enacted to control the population. The winnowing is always followed by a repositioning and reordering (by name, as the alphabet is my preferred index), and is met with great satisfaction for that short period of time before which the inevitable sediment returns, and the herd begins to grow anew.

As a whole, the Desktop creatures have a predictable lifestyle. Regionally, they maintain a preference for the northeast, always yearning to be as close to the top-right corner as they can (alphabetically speaking). Whether they've simply emerged from the aether into their new home,

saved there in a hurried moment of downloading, or were dragged there haphazardly (willing or no), the survivors all begin their slow migration in that direction. With every culling, a new set of opportunities arises for them; some will slide with grace towards the right, towards the top, while the luckiest of the bunch may even find new homes.

It is no surprise that in the bowels of this beast, my mask and my extension, there exists a place known as 'jon.' (You'll note the use of lowercase. This ensures that we two do not get confused, and helps me to remind myself that I, in fact, am the one in charge.) This 'user home' is somehow my reflection, a collection of bits and pieces that describe, in part, the way I am. Unlike the land of Desktop, jon is tightly organized, containing a deep hierarchy of files and folders within files and folders within files and folders, ad infinitum[1]. Upon entering this realm, some structure is readily apparent (though, admittedly, perhaps less so to one whose image this mirror does not so closely reflect as my own).

The first thing to recognize is that the top most level of jon, ignoring those ghost-like members with period-prefixed names[2], is composed entirely of folders. That is to say that unlike the Desktop, where files are often strewn about carelessly, commingling with their folder brethren, in jon the law of the land states clearly that all files must be contained within folders, and that each folder's name should clearly announce the category, whether broad or specific, of the files it contains. An attempt has been made to adhere strictly to this folder-based taxonomy, and although new categories do join the crowd from time to time, out of necessity (or, occasionally, carelessness), most often an existing home can be found for newcomers to the region. Some examples of a few categories I've chosen: Artwork, ARCHIVE, Development, Electronics, Projects, SfPC, Workshops. Inspecting these categories leads to one of the great flaws, in my opinion, of the computer work machine as it currently exists: many, perhaps most,

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[1] In a peculiar warp of space-time, on the Desktop sits the hard disk, in which lies the user home jon, in which lies the Desktop, on which sits the hard disk… etc.

[2] These are not in fact phantoms of files past, but so-called 'hidden files.' Many of the applications present on my machine use hidden files and folders to store information that most users do not require access to. I, however, like to know exactly what is where, and, as often as is convenient, why. So I've made the decision to permanently show all of the hidden files in the finder. A few examples of important things which I end up toying with now and again:
- .bash_profile
- .ssh
- .gitconfig
- .vimrc

files do not easily fit into a single category, but rather belong partially to several. For example, it is not at all uncommon that I have a piece of Artwork that contains elements of Development and Electronics, is a Project, and might be related to a Workshop. What to do?

The hierarchical system used to organize files and folders is an anachronism that should have been long-since discarded. The historical reason for such an implementation is clear, 'files' and 'folders' having been modeled directly after their physical ancestors from whom their names are derived. But it is artificial — the physical location of a file in memory on the hard drive does not necessarily correlate to its position in the exposed hierarchy — and is more of a hinderance than a boon when navigating to an item on the computer. As such, a handful of tools have emerged which circumvent the need to drill down into folder after folder, replacing this action with a quick set of keystrokes, enabling the immediate retrieval of any file or application. I predict that as computer interfaces continue to evolve, the construct of the hierarchy as a paradigm for storage organization will fall away in favor of a flat, metadata-based structure.

One such piece of software, an application that has managed to make its way into a surprising number of my common tasks, is Quicksilver. So seamless is its use that I often forget I'm using it at all — the ultimate sign of a truly valuable tool. Without touching the trackpad (or worse, the mouse), I can navigate to and open any application or file. I recently heard it described as a "command-line interface for the GUI," which is a bit ridiculous, since the familiar OS X is usually considered a *superior* GUI for the command-line interface, but actually is not too far from the truth. And that brings me to what has become the most used item on my Work Machine: the terminal (aka the command line).

It is funny to think that, despite years of ingenuity and invention, avid computer users often revert to using what at the outset seems to be the most primitive interface for accessing and controlling the computer. The terminal, an old, non-graphical, text-based application requires more than a little patience and practice before one becomes comfortable with its operation. But once a level of comfort is achieved, one quickly begins to understand the level of speed and control that can be obtained by mastering this antique instrument. This vast tool chest, filled with the most wondrous and exotic tools: nano, pico, vim, less, more, cat, top, ping, to name but a few. Any new software program worth its salt provides a corresponding command-line interface, allowing tinkerers such as myself to explore the possibilities of

executing the application's functions programmatically. For instance, if one sits at my computer for a time, she'll notice that it automatically begins backing itself up, over any network connection, to a remote location. This action was readily possible thanks to Apple providing a command-line interface to its popular Time Machine software (tmutil).

And so, from Desktop to command-line, from handy tools to my electronic doppelganger, my Work Machine undoubtedly has much to say about my history and my preoccupations. Before I had a computer — that is, a computer of my own — I'm certain there could not have been such a complete record of who I am. No diary nor doctors report could represent in such concise a manner my daily practice, the details of my experience.