Protocol Watching
A Guide to Field Identification

Taxonomies

Protocols are everywhere, once you start looking! Most protocols are unique, but share many qualities that allow us to create taxonomies. Consider these important ways to characterize protocols (see *Safe New World*[1]) found in the wild:

- *structure:* social ↔ material
- *scale:* atomic ↔ systemic
- *failure mode:* Kafka- or Bartleby-type (see *Kafka Index*[2])
- *lifecycle:* budding, juvenile, mature, dead

With these dimensions, it becomes easier to isolate and identify protocols in the wild. You can document common varieties and even assemble an evolutionary tree. To add some fun, the same protocol can be spotted in different stages of its lifecycle or in a failure mode.

Some further questions you might consider:
Who's involved? How playful is the protocol?
Is the protocol implicit or clearly stated?
What is the protocol constraining? What is the goal?

Rules of Engagement

Protocolwatching is a productive hobby. Many want to find good protocols for their own use or improve protocols in their day-to-day lives. Before making big changes, keep these two principles in mind:

- *Most of the time, protocolwatchers should maintain a passive role.*
- *The second rule of protocolwatching: don't take protocols for granted—they're often there for a reason.*

When you seek to improve a protocol or rescue one from failure mode, it's important to first discover why it was there in the first place. Generally speaking, seek to improve protocols, not participants. People following or even disregarding a protocol are doing their own thing.

Topographies

Where to look? To begin: go where the humans are. Some environments carry more protocols than others. *Humans + technology = high protocol density*

Hotspots for protocol watching that tend to be protocol-dense:

- sociotechnical intersections
- encounters between humans and nature: weather, animals, viruses, and other uncontrollable forces
- coordination hubs: businesses, government offices, air traffic towers, libraries, marketplaces, public commons, events

Notation

A standard reporting format will make it easier to expand your logs and get other people in on the hobby. We recommend this template as a base:

PROTOCOL NAME	
EMOJI / NOTAE	
HEALTH STATUS	
LIFECYCLE STAGE	
DESCRIPTION	
PHOTO/SKETCH	

Tools

What you'll need:

- phone camera
- notes app for logging
- AR/AI apps for deciphering symbols
- tracker apps, like for planes, container ships, satellites
- notepad and writing implement of choice

We recommend storing your sightings in a notes app, with a photo of the protocol, its instructions, or a quick sketch or diagram of how it works. Use a physical notebook if you feel like going old school. See back for some sample log entries.

1 summerofprotocols.com/research/safe-new-world 2 summerofprotocols.com/research/dangerous-protocols

Protocol*Kit*

Sample protocol log entries

PROTOCOL NAME	roadway speed gradient
EMOJI / NOTAE	↗️ 🚗 ↗️
HEALTH STATUS	mostly healthy
LIFECYCLE STAGE	mature
DESCRIPTION	Drivers stay in the rightmost lane until they're being slowed down by the car ahead. They move left to pass, then return right. Keeps traffic flowing and introduces predictability into maneuvering patterns. Fairly high adherence. Breaches are socially regulated by aggressive drivers.
PHOTO/SKETCH	

PROTOCOL NAME	communal bear bins
EMOJI / NOTAE	🐻 👎 🍔
HEALTH STATUS	mostly healthy, declining
LIFECYCLE STAGE	mature
DESCRIPTION	Campers place food in bins overnight to avoid attracting bears into populated areas. Bins are several hundred feet from campsites. They double as message boards for recent wildlife sightings. Bin space is first-come first-serve. Sometimes ignored, especially for scented hygiene products.
PHOTO/SKETCH	

PROTOCOL NAME	bus passenger queueing
EMOJI / NOTAE	🐜 🚌 🔗
HEALTH STATUS	healthy, but highly variable
LIFECYCLE STAGE	juvenile
DESCRIPTION	Passengers queue prior to boarding. Usually in one line, sometimes several strands. Typically this happens parallel to the road, but sometimes perpendicular (as below). Priority often given to those requiring assistance. Occasionally queueing channels are formalized with paint.
PHOTO/SKETCH	

PROTOCOL NAME	dedicated reshelving shelf
EMOJI / NOTAE	📚 🚶 🛒
HEALTH STATUS	slightly unhealthy
LIFECYCLE STAGE	mature
DESCRIPTION	Library and bookstore patrons are encouraged to place unwanted books into this shelf, rather than reshelving themselves. Saves patron time. Reduces inventory mixups. Lots of benefits, but adherence is spotty. Potential legibility/awareness issue.
PHOTO/SKETCH	