

Telephones

Ring!
Ring!



Then there is the voice mail system. We have moved into a new house, sorted out phone and electricity but it took us two weeks to discover that we also had voicemail. I just happened to ring home from work and stay on the line long enough for it to cut in. When we sorted out access codes that evening there was a pile up of message from people built up over the last two weeks, the last of which was me saying 'Ohhh, gosh. I didn't know we had voicemail'.

The frustrating thing with the voice mail service and with most other telephone services is the long drawn out nature of the interaction. The first few times around it is useful to be spoken too like a deaf simpleton, but after a few months of daily use it gets tedious when each interaction begins with 'Welcome to the voice mail messaging service'. Being greeted each day anew is something I expect from my loved ones not from my telephone.

Worse still the voice mail service is 'intelligent'. Unlike a simple answer phone it will take a message from a caller who rings while you are engaged in another conversation. Indeed the voice mail is so intelligent that it even goes so far as to ring you up after you have completed the call to tell you that there is a message. Useful, but it was quite a shock to have the dormant, subservient voicemail lady suddenly taking things into her own hands and ringing me up for a change. 'Wait a minute, you can't call me, I'm meant to call you!'

However the strangest service was two jobs ago. Working late in the lab. No one was at home so I had set up the home telephone to pass all calls through to my work number (I used to do this a lot until I found out how much it cost!). It was late and dark,

there was no one there to talk to so during a break in the writing I idly wondered what would happen if I rang my home number from work. What sort of infinite loop would the phone system attempt to set up as I rang home and my home telephone tried to route it back to me. Would I be able to hear myself? In the deserted and eerie lab I rang my deserted home. There was a few seconds beeping... and then a deep, male voice said 'yes hello?!' Who was it, a burglar at home, the secret service tapping the line, some strange lost spirit that had got stuck in the telephone exchange and only got a chance to talk to humans late at night when they tried strange things with the telephone net?

No. It turned out to be the night porter. After-hours he functions as the telephone switchboard as well. When I got redirected back to my own number it was engaged (by me!) and so the call was passed on to him. However despite this simple logic we did have a very strange start to our conversation as he first had to convince me that he wasn't some strange lost spirit that had got stuck in the telephone exchange.

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As the telecom world spirals upwards, out of control, the humble consumer is being bombarded with no end of new and wonderful telecommunication services. What I am talking about here are not the sub-micro, GPS enabled, satellite, internet, mobile telephones that people use to shout 'Hi, I'm on the train, I'm going to be about ten minutes late'. I'm talking about the new interactive services that are being produced by clever (and not so clever) combinations of technological possibilities. Digital sound storage, knowing the number of incoming calls, touch-tone feedback.

By ringing a certain service number you can have an automated voice tell you the telephone number of the last person that called you. Great! We would come home after a day in the park and ring the service number only to spend the next ten minutes puzzling over the number that had last rang us. '9733445 do you know who that is?', 'Well it can't be John'. Several times we ended up ringing the offending number just to satisfy our curiosity. 'Hello, no I don't know why I'm ringing, why did you ring us..'