

# The Nitty Gritty of PhD Dirty Work. if you can get it

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# Process - wrong!

- Pick Institute
- Find Advisor
- Find Topic
- {work, writeup, publish}\*  
• S/paper/chapter/  
• Submit thesis
- Defend thesis
- Get Faculty Position

# Process - better

- Pick Topic
- Find Advisor
- Change topic - not rare
- Change advisor - not necessarily bad
- Change institute - difficult but not un-heard-of
- Do Research (no prescription for this)
- Write thesis (*thesisometer* no particular help)
- Defend thesis
- Get Faculty Position

# If in doubt...

- Do a Masters (MSc/Mphil)
- If still in doubt...
  - Do not do a PhD
- If merely torn between several interesting alternate topics....
  - See which advisors/inst. you like best
  - And follow the money

# Funds

- PhD funding comes from several places
  - You
  - EPSRC or equiv. via DTAs (or DTCs)
  - EU projects
  - Industry (you may lose IP, but gain a job later)
  - Univ (CISS, Gates) & College scholarships
  - Your country's benefactors
- Most places require 3 years funds up front
  - They don't want you to have to leave for reasons of poverty
  - Speak to possible institute/advisor *with your idea*
  - As this may make them think of the alternatives

# Picking Topic Part b

To do, is To Be

- First off, Don't be Hamlet
  - “to be or not to be, and all that jazz”
- Be Jean Paul Sartre
  - “to do is to be”
- And for landsakes, don't be Frank Sinatra
  - “do be do be doo”
- But not Scooby Doo (or Fred Flintstone)

# It is really essential to do some actual work

- Work precedes thought in many cases.
- Simon Peyton-Jones' maxim
  - writing a paper being about writing down your ideas to clarify
- Leslie Lamport's:
  - Writing down your ideas in code is an even better way to bring precision to your ideas

# Software works for you

- But working code also does work for you.
- You can use it to get results.
  - Results are really useful since they tell you about things:
    - *reproduce*,
    - *contradict*, or
    - *improve* on other peoples results,
- All fodder for chapters of thesis



# Zero Day Knowledge

- Most people start a CS PhD with some idea how to write code, and a vaguer idea how to write a dissertation.
  - Some may have written a paper once or twice.
  - The writing bit is a lot easier when you have a system to describe and results to report.
- This means that from Day Zero, you can actually get on with things...
  - ...even when *you don't even know what you are doing!*

# Some navel gazing errors

- Decisions not to make
  - Big v. small
  - Bottom up v. top down
  - Gap analysis v. synthesis
- or
  - Just do it...

# Socialize your ideas

- Meet people, talk to them as often as possible
- Write papers and give talks at every available opportunity
- Get feedback, listen to it
- Meet people again.

# Finding that elusive problem...

- If you are only moderately lucky, the devil will be in the details, and...
- hey presto, you have
  - hypothesis (H0) and
  - a plan (P0), and eventually
  - a dissertation (D0) and...
- ...a diploma in thinkology (ThD) (TM Ozco)
- So what about those details...

# Impact & luck

&

the essence of all true comedy

- If you're very lucky with timing
  - You might have a lot of impact....
  - Even if you made mistakes (loop freedom, not)
  - Actually, making mistakes gets you more citations:)
- You might do really cool work
  - But vanish without trace
- This is not something you can plan for
  - It won't affect the validity of your PhD
  - So don't worry about it
  - I'll say that again: do **not** pursue impact

# You might get gazumped

- Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery
  - Doesn't matter provided its during, not before your work
  - Proves you are right:)
  - Risk of being a fashion victim
- On the other hand, you might be so far ahead of other people...
  - They don't even notice you gazumped them
  - Unless they are patent lawyers looking for prior art:-)

# Obscurity ain't necessarily bad, but prepare to be disappointed

- ...that you won't get gazumped
  - You might work on something very outre...
- And you will get a cool thesis
  - But you'll never hear of it again with high probability
- On the other hand, a .0001% performance hike which the annual speed up in PCs does anyway and noone uses is a Bad Idea

# Misguided heroes

- You might write your own OS
  - This is probably fun but very very risky
  - If you really know where you want to go next and only if your advisor agrees
  - And you don't believe in sleep
- Brave, or Foolish?
- Better to be a cog in a big machine
  - (see below)



# “A PhD in a year” - the anti-hero

- Several students claim they did it in 1 year...
  - Actually, it is fairly common that the work in the dissertation represents 1 year But the previous 2 years were necessary to get in to the state of mind and skills base to do this.
- Note Bene:- you can talk about all those other things
  - etc in your viva -
  - just leave them out of the dissertation!!!

# The gateway character

- Like the geni in the lamp
  - In story writing, a gateway is a person who gives you your task:
  - “now Frodo, will you take this ring...”
  - “Your mission, should you choose to accept...”
  - ...”to boldly go...”
- Your supervisor/advisor *may not be the gateway*
  - Often its another student or person at a conference, or author of a paper you dismantle
  - The more you socialize, the more likely you find your elusive gateway

# Really useful may or may not be research

- Really useful stuff might not be research in itself
  - but the actual research...
  - ...turned up in doing them, of itself
  - i.e. (again), the devil is in the details
  - Research is almost fractal...

# Being a cog

in a big machine

- Being part...of a really **big** organisation is good, *not* bad
  - Your name may be lost in a cast of 1000s
  - But you are at least on the credits
  - And that's what your next job is likely to be like too
  - Key in big projects:
    - is to partition work cleanly
    - and define shared components cleanly

# Writing it down -

papers may be chapters

- If you are at a loss(pun:-),
  - write it down or
  - say it to someone
- Levels of abstraction are good
  - math v. code v. design tools
  - “lab” books
- Papers may become chapters
  - But not always -
  - only if you are lucky:
  - that progression of work matches thesis *story*
- A thesis is more like a novel than a paper
  - But a chapter like a short story version of a paper
  - Narrative is good.

# What next?

- Framing your PhD:-
  - Do you wannabe an academic
  - Or an industry lab researcher
  - Or an industry builder
  - Or do a startup
  - Or a consultant
- roughly even mix in my 50.3 PhDs so far
- Timing of papers is slightly affected by this

# Dissertations

- Shorter is better
  - Proofread by normal humans is better
  - Spellchecked by programmes is better
  - Error bars, bibliographies, captions, glossaries, legends are all better
  - Giving advisors and friends more than 24 hours warning is better
- In defense of examiners....
  - They work quite hard for very little “pay”
  - So make their lives easier
  - Prepare for viva properly

# On writing dissertations...

- There's no formula
- Two patterns common
  - Glom papers together and see what you have
    - Edit edit edit
  - Read through all your notes/papers,
    - throw them away and sit down and
    - write from start to finish
- Hybrids abound...
- If in doubt, leave it out.



# Examiners/Defenses (UK)

- Examiners are usually 2
  - 1 local (generalist), 1 (expert) external
  - Defense is private and 1-5 hours
  - Some inst. Let advisor be present, but silent
- There's no formula for a UK defense
  - But having 15-20 min summary of your contributions ready does no harm
  - And offering any errata you've found between submission & defense doesn't hurt either.

# How examiners are chosen

- Typically, a degree cttee ask advisor for suggestion for external
  - But BOGS filter out for inappropriate (conflict, overworked, inexperienced)
  - Internal is usually from different group
  - Or possibly different but related department
- Some places let you have 2 externals
- Some let you have 3 examiners!
- Europe (mostly) has a huge committee
  - (and public defense as well as sometimes private)

# Viva outcomes

- Range from accept, through to
  - minor corrections (very common),
  - major corrections (quite common),
  - re-submit (with or without viva) occasional, or
  - (rarely) MPhil “only” and
  - a big no (very very rare)
- If your friends and advisors all say ok,
  - then you ought to be in one of first 3.
  - There’s always some uncertainty
- make sure corrections requested are
  - very well specified (including time frames)
  - (although this is really the local examiner’s job)
  - & understood (your job)

# Q&A&B

- Questions....?
- No, Answers...?
- No, ok, so Beer?

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