Tech service

John Valenti
Tech Service
A Memoir By John Valenti

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF FINE ARTS
IMAGING ARTS/COMPUTER ANIMATION
SCHOOL OF FILM AND ANIMATION
ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
ROCHESTER, NEW YORK

May 2012

____________________________
Tom Gasek, Chair
Assistant Professor
School of Film and Animation

____________________________
Malcolm Spaull
Professor
School of Film and Animation

____________________________
Babak Elahi
Associate Professor
College of Liberal Arts
# Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................. 2

A Brief Moment of Candor .................................................................................. 3

Concept and Script .............................................................................................. 4

Directing and Producing ....................................................................................... 7

Editing and Sound Design ..................................................................................... 11

Score ..................................................................................................................... 13

Finishing and Screening ....................................................................................... 16

Closing Remarks .................................................................................................. 17

Appendix A: Thesis Proposal ........................................................................... 21

Appendix B: Script ............................................................................................... 29

Appendix C: Production Stills ............................................................................ 46
Abstract

The graduate thesis film *Tech Service* is a 21-minute surreal memoir-parody of its creator’s day at work in a tech support call center. Having quite literally separated his at-work self from his not-at-work self into two independently existing personae—the former an ambitious technician whose only goal in the world is to fix a customer’s telephone, and the latter a more cynical, quasi-beat poet who narrates the story—the film rambunctiously ponders and pursues the meaning of life, if life were reduced to the job you have to go to but don’t really like that much.

The film was shot in HD using DSLR cameras and edited in Final Cut Pro.

This paper discusses the thought processes, goals, and the actual legwork from its conception until after the film’s first screening at RIT.
A Brief Moment of Candor

I think there are parts of the film making process that are fairly easy to put in linear terms: “I did A, and then I did B, and then…, etc.” In my experience, the very beginning of a thesis project is not like this. It is perhaps more Rubik’s cube-like in that putting one idea in motion might alter or destroy all the other ideas you already came up with, so you end up changing a lot of your ideas—perhaps even your intentions for making the film—until you finally arrive at something cohesive. Maybe I had a lot of reasons in mind for making a film before I actually started playing with ideas and seeing whether they’d work together. I never set out to make a film about my job, nor did I ever tell myself I was going to make a film that explored some particular theme. These were things I discovered along the way that I found were interesting to me. What I began with were ideas for scenes which may have originated from dreams I’d had or offhanded comments I’d heard people make. All I knew was these scenes made me laugh and that was at least good enough to consider using in a film.

I have to say, this seems like a pretty contrived way of going about making a piece of art. It’s basically admitting the project had no vision behind it and was sort of a crapshoot. Or at least it’s somewhat contrary to how I think I envisioned artists I admire going about it: having some pre-existing enlightened viewpoint which they coughed out into the world. Regardless of whether or not artists like this really do exist, through the making of this film I’ve become much more secure in admitting ignorance and relying on my intuitions to craft the raw, visionless material into something that at least appears “inspired” to some people.
Concept and Script

I have been working in tech support in a local phone company roughly since I started graduate school at RIT. As many may relate, I have never embraced my job as having anything to do with what I’m passionate about in life. And yet, part of the apparatus of companies—mine being no exception—is that their employees put forth extreme effort toward reaching some goal they might not even care about that much. There’s a real battle going on here, because even though a person might only spend about 8 hours at work per day, depending on the kind of work, this may sap him of the personal resources he would need to pursue things outside of work that are important to him. I don’t mention this in order to set up some kind of Marxist agenda through my film. Rather, I’m merely stating something I think is so familiar-sounding with regard to jobs that it’s kind of a cliché. I also mention it because a lot of my humor is based on having fun with clichéd sentiments such as this.

In a way, my motive for creating a film about my work was to ensure that I was getting more back for my time there than just my wages. Inasmuch as I found my job to be miserable a lot of the time, it was also a fertile ground of absurdity. How could I not be inspired in such an existential environment? However, the idea of making a movie about one’s job also seems like a huge cop out to me. My antidote to this possible self-indulgence of making fun of my work was to push the self-indulgence as far as it could go—by actually including myself in it. Watching Ross McElwee’s film Sherman’s March, in which the director sets out to create a civil war documentary but gets sidetracked into making a film about his own personal life, pushed me in this autobiographical direction. This idea of being ‘sidetracked’ in such a way that a
distraction ends up becoming the main storyline had also fascinated me for a while. I would credit Luis Buñuel’s surrealist film *The Phantom of Liberty* as well as Italo Calvino’s novel *If on a winter’s night a traveler* for making a virtue of this as a plot device and doing so in a way that excited and inspired me.

Whereas McElwee’s protagonist is literally himself, I decided I didn’t really care about being factual about my own life, but it would be funny if I acted like I was trying to be factual, especially if I had really ridiculous things happen. I’d seen this work to some extent in *Eraserhead* and experimented with it a lot in my previous films. I liked the idea of setting up a seemingly normal and even kind of boringly realistic world in the beginning of a film, and then gradually introducing things that don’t make any sense but the characters go on as if they’re totally normal. I suppose this would be a form of “deadpanning”. It would also give the audience a sustained sense of the film “pulling its leg”, to coin a phrase. The notion of a memoir also had a very epic and perhaps melodramatic connotation to it, and I liked what this might suggest about my autobiographical character’s attitude toward himself and his workday. It seemed to further the sense of the film taking itself extremely seriously while being anything but serious.

While distractions seemed like an interesting way to order the plot, they also had a very metaphoric use. Whereas on the one hand, my job has demanded working on many things at once, resulting in a loss of focus on any one goal and a methodical half-assing of tasks, the idea that even in my (not-at-work) freedom I might be equally distracted from pursuing my own natural ambitions was equally hilarious and tragic to me. I mean, it's quite possible that even with infinite time on my hands and no job to worry about, it
I think the assumption would be that outside of work, my character, relieved of banal responsibility, would do activities that made sense, in contrast to the nonsensical behaviors that characterize his at-work life. It struck me as much funnier, however, if my not-at-work character’s life was just as disjointed as that of my at-work character, so I decided to have my not-at-work character (the narrator) appear sporadically throughout the film doing odd and mundane things in varied situations. It also added another layer of absurdity to the film which steered it away from any blunt anti-corporate message, which I would’ve found pretty clumsy and pretentious.

In the process of conceptualizing and eventually writing a draft of the script, it became clearer to me what my values were for this movie. I had no motive of making a ‘subversive’ film or mocking my company or ones like it; I mainly wanted to make people laugh, and I made everyone in the film, including myself, pretty ridiculous. This was important to recognize because I didn’t want this movie to be about me complaining about my job or making jokes that only my coworkers could understand. In Skip Battaglia’s remarks after my screening at RIT, he mentioned there was no real antagonist, or rather the antagonist seemed to be the job itself. I took this as saying the film didn’t make anyone out to be a villain. Ultimately, I thought the story about how my character dealt with his own ambition was much more important than trying to point out one external source of the problem. In tech support we do try to point out the problem, and
sometimes we hand you off to someone else to do this, but not in my script, which obviously (thankfully) isn’t tech support.

**Directing and Producing**

While creating a thesis project made it necessary that I would be directing the project, playing the role of producer was an extra bit of house-keeping that naturally fell to me. This came as a result of not knowing anyone who was particularly interested in committing lots of time to a project that in all probability they wouldn’t be getting paid for. Ironically enough, I often felt that I had too much time on my hands during the months of production. I would send lots of emails and make lots of phone calls and then just wait (a lot) for people to get back to me, which was tough because it didn’t feel like I was getting anything done. And yet, no matter how much I would try to plan, it wasn’t uncommon to change my plans at the last minute because of sudden unforeseen circumstances.

After passing my proposal with RIT faculty and finishing a draft of my script, I went on to find other people who could help me create the film. In a student production, I knew it would be impossible to count on having the same crew members for each shoot, but I at least wanted to find a reliable D.P. with whom I could communicate well. An RIT professor recommended an undergraduate student, Tom Atwell, and from our first meeting it was clear he fit that description. It was fortunate that in addition to being easy to work with, Tom was also very talented, especially for such a young D.P.

Most of the characters in my film would only be in one or two scenes and have very few lines, but the character who would play “John at work” would be on screen for
most of the film. I’d originally cast a fellow grad student of mine in the role, but after a few rehearsals, he’d decided he didn’t feel right for the part. This put me in a tight spot, because I’d already scheduled the first shoot for the weekend following when I found this out. It would have been tough to reschedule the shoot, which was going to take place on my parents’ boat in Lake Ontario, about a forty-five minute drive away. It was a very natural decision to ask Chris Rathbun, who’d been the main actor in my previous RIT film, to play “me”. I’d known Chris since high school and we worked well together. He read over the script and agreed to do the role, and within one week, we’d rehearsed a couple of times and begun shooting.

The lake shoot was in the end of July 2011. Having no access to any of RIT’s equipment again until the fall quarter, I had over a month of time where I wasn’t doing any production. I location scouted in August but was having a really hard time finding an office building or a restaurant to shoot in. I felt strange asking my work to let me shoot there because if anything went wrong—something broke or they took offense to my script—it could sour my relationship with my employer and be pretty awkward thereafter. When I had no success with other call centers in town, I had no option but to ask my company if I could film in the office in which I actually work. After very openly explaining to them what I was looking to do, they only made me agree not to show any company branding in the film and to make sure if any of their employees appeared on screen, they would sign a waiver. Had I not been employed there for a few years at the time, and had a reputation as a good worker, it’s highly possible I wouldn’t have had such an easy time convincing them to let me film there. A huge benefit of shooting at my work was that many of my coworkers were willing to be extras. It was becoming oddly more
autobiographical than I’d planned, since my actual coworkers were now acting as my 
coworkers in my movie.

One of the greatest headaches of producing was scheduling shoots on days where 
everyone involved happened to be available. After all, I wasn’t paying my actors or crew 
in anything but meals so I had no way of insisting that they be able to work for me on any 
given day. When I did find a day that worked for everyone I had to hope the location was 
also available or go find another one that was. Jay’s Diner had been a popular location for 
RIT student shoots. The owners were happy to let me shoot there, but the times they had 
available were no good for my actors and crew. I was told I could use Henry’s on RIT 
campus, and though I wasn’t especially inspired by it, I at least had it as a backup.
Ideally, you want to be able to take full control of a location in order to light it, isolate 
sound as much as possible, and not have on-lookers bothering you. The week before the 
“Lunch Scene” shoot I stopped over at a place called Bob’s Diner on East Henrietta 
Road, which I’d eaten at once before. The hostess, a Greek lady named Athena, told me I 
could film there as long as it wasn’t busy. I really liked how the place looked and it was 
already well lit, because the entire front of the restaurant was windows. However, the 
shoot would need to be extremely efficient in order to work around the restaurant’s 
busiest hours. I took some snapshots of the place and decided to go with it. The next 
weekend I showed up with a crew of only two people and the three actors who were in 
the scene. My actors were already comfortable with their lines and all the shots had been 
visualized beforehand. We carried in no lights and only recorded scratch audio, so we 
didn’t have to spend lots of time on setup. All the audio would be entirely recreated in 
post. Most of the props (a lot of which were food items) and the craft service I simply
ordered from the diner so we were paying customers while we were occupying tables there. Luckily, the restaurant never got very crowded and our group was small so that we weren’t terribly conspicuous. Athena also agreed to be in the opening shot delivering menus to the table where my actors were sitting. It was an extremely barebones shoot with minimal on-set preparation but we were able to pull it off successfully by planning ahead.

The scene I saw develop the most through rehearsals was the “Supervisor” scene, in which John’s supervisor, played by my brother Jim, reprimands John and then goes on to praise him for his attendance. I’d seen Jim pull off a great deadpan before but there was a lot of work involved in getting him to really push the seriousness of this scene. A few somewhat technical directions really seemed to go a long way in getting the right performance out of him. One was having him sit in this very unnatural-looking posture, holding his elbows and kind of hunched over, and keeping his head perfectly still while staring at Chris. I had him exaggerate the pauses between his lines to make the situation more awkward. I also asked him to try speaking from really high up in the back of his throat, which gave his voice a more musical quality and a touch of sadness (we ended up scrapping the original audio and re-recording it later, but Jim was able to recreate the performance quite well in ADR). The difference in the performance after giving these instructions was dramatic, and by rehearsing the scene repeatedly in chunks at first, we were eventually able to put it all together seamlessly with blocking.

On the whole, working with my main actor Chris was fairly effortless on my part. I trusted his instincts and creativity, and mainly just tried to be attentive to any questions he might have had. There were small actions I would think of having him do, like while
he was driving the boat, slowly tilt his head back and close his eyes. I didn’t see it as necessary for the two of us to be synchronized in how I performed my version of John (the narrator) and he performed his. In fact, I liked that his performance was more naïve whereas my voice was more reflective, revealing moments in which the character’s behaviors betrayed his thoughts and exaggerating that the at-work and not-at-work life were literally two separate lives.

Editing and Sound Design

I would back up and start logging my footage in Final Cut Pro as soon as possible after each shoot. All raw footage from the Canon 5D and Panasonic GH2 cameras had to be converted using Apple ProRes 422 codec for editing. Creating bins for all of my clips by scene, and then sub-bins for each angle was a useful system for organizing the material. Each scene’s audio would also get a sub-bin, and I would create an entirely new bin for each scene with audio and video clips synced. Between converting, systematizing, and syncing all of my clips, it would take several hours before I could actually start editing with the footage from even just one scene, so it was important that I keep up with this process regularly after each shoot rather than wait until all production was finished. I also tried to cut each scene together in the week following when it was shot, so that it was still fresh in my mind, then I could tweak the cut later on.

Many of the scenes required ADR sessions afterward. Sometimes this was planned, but often it was a result of capturing noisy audio because of using lav mics instead of a shotgun mic and boom (my fault for trying to simplify things by micing my actors wirelessly). While ADR turned out to be much more work than I’d expected, I was
I was glad for the experience and pleased with the results. I conducted the ADR sessions in my home studio, which I had to rearrange so that my computer monitor and sound equipment were right beside the door. This was so that I could put my laptop outside the room while recording and not pick up the extremely noisy fan which would kick on as soon as I’d hit record. I captured the audio with Cubase 5 software, which I was already very comfortable using to record music. My laptop wasn’t powerful enough to handle playing back the uncompressed video files, so I had to export each scene to much smaller H.264 files to be used as reference for my actors.

The process of piecing together the new dialogue clips after doing several takes of each line and finding the ones that worked the best was extremely tedious. For the most part, I tried to pick the takes that were as faithful as possible to the original reference audio, but there were also instances in which certain inflections or even words were changed in ADR. In the “Supervisor Scene” I noticed there was a lot of breathing sound in the original audio which added to the intensity of the scene, but the heavy breathing wasn’t included in the ADR performances since we’d just recorded one line at a time. Instead of having my actors come back in for another ADR session, I actually just recorded myself breathing in all sorts of ways and added it to the ADR tracks.

When I was mostly satisfied with the edit of the entire film I screened it for my advisors, received their feedback, and made some changes. One criticism was that having two actors (Chris and myself) to play John while at work and John while not at work didn’t seem justified; it was unclear what the point of this was. Malcolm Spaull suggested including a line in the narration at the very beginning that would explain this better. I took his advice and wrote this line into the end of the opening voiceover monologue:
“I think it’s funny how, whenever I go to work, for eight hours I become someone whose hobbies and ambitions are totally remote from my own.”

I liked how this really exaggerated the idea that my character had to become another person at work.

I exported a compressed H.264 of the “fine cut” of my movie as well as an OMF file containing all of the audio clips used in my Final Cut project. These could be imported into Cubase, where I would be able to edit, remove, and replace individual audio clips as needed. All of the original dialogue tracks, ADR, foley, ambiances, and sound effects went into one Cubase project, which is where all of the sound editing was handled.

**Score**

I had one main theme in mind, which I’d come up with very casually one evening long before I’d even started working on *Tech Service*. It was a very simple melody and chord progression that was a bit melancholy sounding. I’d had a recording of it on my computer for a while and it reminded me of something Nino Rota might have written—one simple theme that could be played several times throughout a film and become a noticeable motif, like the trumpet melody in Fellini’s *La Strada*. The theme I’d written seemed to push the “memoir-y” aspect of the film above the “techy”, which I liked. My character, after all, seemed to fashion himself as more of a poet forced into an artless work environment than a computer geek. While I liked how it sounded sung by just one voice, I thought a choir would push it a little more over-the-top. Some friends of mine played in
an avant-folk ensemble called the 23 Psægz and I asked if some of them would mind singing for a film project I was working on. One night after one of their rehearsals, I taught them the theme and recorded them singing it. I recorded acoustic guitar later on in my studio.

Once I had recorded the main theme, I played it back against different places throughout the film to see where it worked best. I also tried to get a sense of where additional scoring was needed. I knew I wanted something more majestic sounding for the “Lake Scene”, but still didn’t want to get away from the sense of melancholy from the main theme. I experimented with similar chords but used an electric guitar with a washy, distorted surf-rock tone. This seemed to work well in a lake (or whatever body of water it was). In the beginning of the scene, the John played by Chris is driving a boat with no land in sight, so there is a feeling of desolation but also of a restful escape. I had the guitar come in very abruptly with a couple of chords and then just fade to silence a few times. I also faded the sound of the boat moving through the water along with the decaying guitar chords to emphasize the sense of emptiness and solitude in the scene, which made it more ironic when a couple of African pirates just happened to show up. I recorded lots of other guitar lines and created loops with them, some of which I only used in the end credits of the film when I brought back the “Lake Scene” theme.

Adding music to the “Lunch Scene” was partially an attempt to make the scene move along more steadily. While it upheld the absurdity of the rest of the film, the scene was talky and not as funny as some of the others. I thought it would be kind of funny and appropriate to use the main theme but style it like generic hold music, recalling the customer John had left on hold before going on break and then lunch. It would also help
draw a connection between the caller and the waitress John was waiting on. I created a very uniform drum loop and played the main theme over it on a toy piano. It was unclear whether the source of the music was in the restaurant or if it was non-diegetic, since the now recognizable melody distinctly began at the beginning of a clip and was allowed to play out once, but as the cuts got progressively shorter, the beat and notes would also stop and then start up again in a new place on each cut, as if edited along with the picture footage. I liked the ambiguity of this as well as the sense of confusion it created.

For the film’s climax, the scene in which John goes to Beatrice’s home, I wanted the music to be distinctly different from the music elsewhere in the film. I thought it should emphasize the sense of being on an important mission in a strange place. I tried starting in a minor key, playing chords that descended in half-steps on the guitar, which felt to me a lot like how the film felt overall: a series of tangents, or as if the piece were constantly just starting. It mirrored John’s loss of focus in the scene, as he goes to fix Beatrice’s phone, drinks a whole bottle of tequila, sleeps over, ends up feeling like a bad guest, etc. The end of the piece was truncated by one of my “narrator” vignettes so there was never any formal conclusion; like John’s goal of fixing Beatrice’s phone, the end of the music was just sort of “forgotten about”.

All of the scoring was handled in separate Cubase projects for each piece of music and then combined into one project that spanned the duration of the film, where I could place each piece at the proper timecode. I exported a mix of the entire score and put it into the project containing all of the other sound in the film. Here I was able to adjust levels to balance the music with the rest of the soundtrack and then export everything as one WAV file to be put back into Final Cut Pro.
Finishing and Screening

A student in the Motion Picture Sciences program at RIT, Joe McCormick, was able to color correct many of the clips in the final cut of the film, but because of time constraints and with screenings approaching, I had to finish the color correction myself. I was not looking for any specific stylization, preferring a fairly natural look. I did spend quite a while working on the “Beatrice Scene”, which had an ugly reddish tint in the original footage and I ended up accentuating the blues and greens more. In other scenes, I mainly brought down the blacks and desaturated slightly, following Joe’s advice.

I also went for a very simple layout for the titles and watched a lot of credits sequences of other movies to get ideas. Kelly Reichardt’s film *Wendy and Lucy* was an especially big influence for how I formatted the text. It was not flashy and actually reminded me of a lot of book covers, which I thought might also suggest memoir. Tom Gasek had recommended using the same yellow color for the lettering as the rain boots which John is seen wearing when walking home in the final shot of the film.

As the film was coming together toward the end, I felt reasonably confident that I’d made something at least a small niche of people would really enjoy. If it didn’t get huge laughs, I knew it would at least be found humorous in a quirky way and relatable. The response at the RIT screening was extremely encouraging because it was obvious the majority of the crowd was able to respond to my sort of humor. I received lots of praise from other filmmakers as well as non-filmmakers, many of whom said they wanted to watch it again. As I spoke with close friends of mine who had seen it, however, I kept on hearing that if the film had a weak point, it was the “Lunch Scene”. One person said that
this was the only part that “took him out of it”. This was difficult to deal with because at
that point I was exhausted with working on this film and really just wanted to be done. I
knew the scene couldn’t simply be dropped because it contained an important plot point.
I’d also come to a place where the scene didn’t really bother me that much personally,
though I knew it might be lost on a lot of people. For a couple of weeks after the first
screening I struggled with whether I should try to “fix” the scene or leave it alone and
treat it as a lesson to keep in mind for next time. When I finally convinced myself there
was no harm in cutting into my film one last time, I found the best option was to remove
about one minute of footage from the scene. Whereas in the original edit John asks the
waitress (played by Brianna Byrne) if she’s ready to order and she replies, “I’ll need just
a minute,” I was able to skip right to where she says, “I think I’ll just have a coffee and a
slice of cherry pie,” by cutting right after the word “I” in the original line (it was just luck
that both lines happened to start with the same word so her lips still matched the sound). I
showed this version of the scene to three people whose opinion I trusted and they all said
the overall flow of the scene was dramatically improved. What I sacrificed by making the
change was a couple of shots that I thought were particularly nice and some lines of
dialogue that I’d originally thought were clever but in the end realized they weren’t
absolutely necessary—in fact, the scene didn’t “need just a minute”.

Closing Remarks

There are touches I wish I’d thought of before to make the film better. I wish that when
John returned to work from lunch he’d had a toothpick in his mouth, for instance. I also
wish I’d known what a polarizer was before we shot out on the lake; it might have made
the colors look a little nicer. I have to say that for the most part, however, I’m extremely satisfied with this film. While I found producing to be laborious and stressful, and probably not something I would want to do again if I can avoid it, I’m proud of the fact that I was involved in every aspect of the film’s creation and was able to carry it through to a final product that people enjoyed.

Of course, to say I accomplished this on my own would be ridiculous, inappropriate, and probably even socially awkward. Finding hard-working and reliable collaborators on film projects is invaluable, as I experienced with Chris Rathbun and Tom Atwell, among many others who contributed to this project. I also learned that crewmembers actually want to be used as much as possible when they’re on a set (even when it’s unpaid work). During production, I found that trying to take care of things on my own as I saw fit would only lead to my crewmembers standing around without a job and feeling bored. Allocating tasks that might’ve gone beyond their specific role made them feel useful and took a lot of stress off of me, and usually they were happy to help out.

During the making of this film I tried to be very open to others’ feedback and constructive criticism. I was fortunate to have a committee of advisors whose opinions were varied and I was able to trust. I think determining other people you can confide in for this type of feedback is important, especially for a time-consuming and personally-motivated project like a thesis. Not only was this good practice for accepting criticism from clients on future projects, it also helped me keep an eye on the bigger picture of my film while concentrating on individual aspects of it. I found it difficult to stay inspired by such a short project over the course of many months and sometimes the simple act of
viewing it with someone who’d never seen it before helped me see it from a fresher perspective. Though I’m sure if I watch this film again in several years I’ll think of more things I could have done differently, getting it done now with confidence may not have been possible without hearing what a few others in particular thought about it.

Technical aspects of the production aside, I’d like to reflect on what this film has meant to me personally. Though I would hesitate to call this a “personal” film, the audacity and perhaps narcissism it took to make a film about myself came surprisingly natural to me. This isn’t because I think I’m some sort of exceptional person with memoir-worthy experience, but because of how common it’s become to wistfully make one’s private life public through social media and other forms of self-broadcast – and if I could parody this phenomenon to some extent, then I felt more justified and comfortable about using myself as a subject. Often enough, I hear complaints about the minutiae people post about their lives in text and picture form. Just because it happened to you doesn’t mean it interests others, and there is no exception to this for artists. I would consider it an abuse of the medium of film to try to make a movie version of one’s Facebook account unless it could be made interesting to strangers, and I was mindful of this as I was writing *Tech Service*.

There’s no doubt, however, that writing this film felt like an act of self-expression for me, though not nearly in the same way enumerating my interests or posting some autobiographical sentiment on my Facebook wall is. I treated my character as an abstract character, not as myself, and what was most satisfying to me creatively about the John(s) of my film was how he served as a metaphor for an experience that wasn’t just unique to
me. Still, in trying to explain what my film was about whenever people would ask, there was always a hint of guilt or the fear of not being taken seriously, because a movie about my work just sounds like the most obvious, uncreative, and self-indulgent idea ever. It’s a conversation I think I grew better at having throughout the process, and I realized that the better I knew what my film was really about and the more enthusiastic I was about it, the more interested others would be. My film has perhaps made me a better public person, since it pushed my sense of humor out of hiding and into a place where it was vulnerable. It has enforced the rediscovery of one of my great loves in life, which is to make people laugh – and at the risk of sounding pretentiously academic, to make people laugh in a philosophical way, making jokes that imply something about the human condition.

Is this some sublime mission, to cause existential self-reflection in laughter? This may be taking it too far, ascribing too much importance to comedy, but if so I feel unapologetic about it. It was only a passing utterance of my search for ambition, the most irresistible of human inclinations.
Appendix A

Thesis Proposal (Submitted February, 2011)

SYNOPSIS

Tech Service is an 18-minute fictional autobiographical account of my day at work in a tech support call center of an internet phone company.

RATIONALE

As an employee in a tech support call center, often having to multi-task and give quick, insufficient answers in order to tend to the next customer in line, I sometimes come home feeling robbed of mental energy which I would prefer to put towards my own ambitions. This situation is so common it’s almost a cliché. I therefore look upon it as a perfect opportunity and jumping off point to defy audience expectations in the form of comedy.

A person’s job is an interesting environment to experiment with filmically because, on one hand, it may demand extreme concentration and mental strain, and on another hand, the worker may feel no sense of pride or duty to the job itself outside of earning a paycheck. For me, my job is a place I try to partition off from the rest of my life. I’d like to be able to enter my job each day as if it were a vacuum where time is irrelevant, and then to re-emerge not knowing where I’d been for the last eight hours. In Tech Service I want to delineate my work life from my “real” life and then put one inside the other. In effect, the film will ask: What if the most important goals of my life were really just the same goals my supervisors had for me?

TREATMENT

The film will consider the possibility of finding purpose in one’s daily work, even when that work in itself has very few merits. I will talk about my day at work as if it is my entire life and my only chance to accomplish and be anything. Rather than base the action of the film on the work itself, I will highlight the many distractions which constantly keep me from reaching my goal of fixing a customer’s phone. The nature of these distractions is absurd even though each distraction can be recognized as a normal, functional routine of everyday life. The rationalizing of distractions during my workday will therefore be utilized to comic effect.

I begin by briefly introducing myself to the camera as a call center technician for a company that provides cheap phone service over the internet. The device we give our customers to do this is called a DTA (digital telephone adapter) box. An actor wearing the same clothes as I am is seen in a cubicle answering the phone and saying “It’s a great day at Telelove, this is John, can I start by getting your Telelove phone number, please?” (From now on I will refer to this actor in the first person). The customer on the other end is shown, asking a question unrelated to tech support or phones. After ending the call, a supervisor tells me we have another meeting in two minutes. Before he has finished his
sentence, the phone starts ringing again. I answer it and give my “Telelove” spiel as before. The customer is a woman who has a legitimate problem with her phone. I put the customer on hold and go to the meeting.

In the training room, a teacher goes over some updated technical material. Behind him, two pictures are being projected onto a whiteboard. One of the pictures is labeled “unmowed lawn” and the other is labeled “mowed lawn”. The entire meeting is dedicated to explaining the difference between the two. The teacher provides an in-depth analysis and fields questions from the techs who are in attendance, then announces that we will continue with some more material on this topic next week. By the end of the meeting, I begin to realize a “twinge of pointlessness” about my job. When I return to my desk, I remember I’ve left a customer on hold—that was over an hour ago, and yet for some reason I decide to leave her on hold and take another call. The customer I speak to is the same person who called in earlier to ask a non-tech related question. He asks another non-tech related question and I transfer him to the billing department.

I’m stressed from all the work and training I’ve done this morning and decide I’d better take my ten-minute break. On my break, I’m driving my dad’s boat alone in some vast body of water, with no land in sight. Suddenly there are four threatening-looking Africans on board with me. I’m scared because I think they could be pirates. Finally, one of them speaks up, cutting me off from a brief attempt at making conversation. He says: "We want to buy 500 DTA boxes." I’m relieved that they seem harmless—also that the request isn’t tech-related. After I explain that they would have to order from our website they just remain there on my dad’s boat, having no apparent way of going back to wherever they came from. Further attempts at conversation are futile and the situation becomes very awkward. I remember the customer I put on hold. Now that feels like ages ago, but somehow it just doesn’t seem like the right time to resume the call. I keep her on hold and go to lunch.

I go to a restaurant with a coworker of mine. After being seated, a waitress comes by. I give the waitress my menu and ask her if she’s ready to order now or will she need some more time. She replies, somewhat embarrassed, that she’ll need a minute. She leaves the table with the menu. Several minutes pass and she still has not returned. I become antsy and complain to my coworker that the ordering around here is really disgraceful. Finally, the waitress returns. I take her order, which is a cup of coffee and an egg. She leaves the table again and frantically gives her order at several other tables, remarking that she’s covering for another waitress who called in sick.

When she returns to my table, I have a cup of coffee and an egg prepared for her. I put the items on a large tray which she is carrying. I ask if there's anything else I can get the waitress. She requests a clean fork. She goes away and comes back for her fork. I ask if there's anything else I can get for her. She requests ketchup and then goes away, returns for the ketchup. Giving her the ketchup, I ask again if there’s anything else I can get her. She requests marriage. She goes away, returns. I ask again if there’s anything she needs and she responds, "But you still haven't married me". I tell her, “Oh, just a little while longer.” She goes away again, returns. I start to ask again if there’s anything else she needs, but she cuts me off, saying, "You're never going to marry me." I realize I've been
foolish. Once again, I think about the customer I put on hold before, how I’ve just been wasting time avoiding her.

After lunch I discover the customer I put on hold has finally hung up. Another call from the person who always asks non-tech questions comes in, and I’m depressed, wondering if I’ll ever have the opportunity to accomplish something meaningful at work again. I wait forty-five minutes before another call comes in. It is a Spanish-speaking woman, probably in her 60’s, whose phone had suddenly stopped working overnight.

I realize it’s time to get serious. I tell her I will need to remote into her computer from my computer. She obeys my instructions and installs some software, and now I am in her house. I follow the woman to the room where her DTA box is located. After studying the DTA box for several seconds I notice there is a bloody human finger lodged in the ethernet port. I inform her in Spanish that I think I see the problem, but I’ll need my tools. The customer hands me a bottle of tequila, and, somehow thinking this is a good way to address the issue, I start drinking it. I end up getting highly intoxicated and feel guilty about it because the customer wants to go to bed and I’m stuck in her house, too drunk to leave. She says it’s fine if I spend the night though, and I do, since I really have no other option. When I awake I notice lots of other people there, behaving obnoxiously and belligerently. Some of them are downright freakish looking. It makes me feel less guilty because I’ve been a pretty easy guest, I think, but I still feel bad that I never fixed the customer’s issue. I can’t even find the DTA box anymore so I decide to log out of the customer’s computer.

My boss comes by and tells me it’s time for my monthly evaluation. I sit down with him in his office. He informs me that he’d been monitoring my last call and I’d broken policy by handling a third-party router. He tells me what I already know: that according to policy, he’ll need to impale me with a sword. He pulls a broadsword (like from Medieval times) out from under his desk and says he can impale me right now or I can wait until tomorrow morning. In any case, he goes over my evaluation and tells me I’m “Not exceeding, but meeting expectations,” and asks if I have any complaints. I tell him that none come to mind at the moment. Estimated running time: 18 minutes.

TECHNIQUE

Narrator

I will be the narrator of my story and appear throughout the film in order to give necessary background information and convey the thoughts of my character. The use of a first person narrator will increase the sense of the story being “autobiographical” and like just a regular guy talking about his day at work. Establishing a normal guy in a normal world at the onset of the film will emphasize the absurdity of the situations later on.

The narrator will appear in a different environment, involved in some random activity every time he is seen, as if he were relating this story from the standpoint of a completely separate, non-work related (and equally disjointed) life. For instance, he may be in the middle of dinner or shoveling a driveway or writing in a book with an
obnoxiously elegant quill while narrating. The inconsistency of the narration world will further the sense of digression and distraction presented in the story world, as well as add another dimension to those themes. Having another actor to play my character will also imply a kind of phoniness in either the world of the narrator himself or the story about his day. Neither one is determinately the “real world” or a fictional one.

Style

Though on paper the world of the film seems nonsensical, the characters do not suspect that anything is out of the ordinary. The teacher giving a course on “Mowed Lawns versus Unmowed Lawns”, for instance, behaves as if he genuinely believes he is going over important and relevant information, and the students respond accordingly. If the style of the film could be guided by an overarching principle, it would be that for every action there is an opposite and inordinate reaction. The “large-scale” existential thoughts and emotions of the main character are incongruous with the “small-scale” situations in which they take place during his workday.

The film will have a fairly consistent naturalistic look throughout. However, it might be effective to ease into one sequence that is visually distinct (using stop-frame or some other in-camera technique), accompanied by music.
**FILM BUDGET**

*Tech Service*

Directed by John Valenti

Pre-Production (10+ Weeks)

Production (9 Days)

Post-Production (10 Weeks)

Shooting Ratio – 6:1

Format – HD Video (Canon DSLR)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Account#</th>
<th>Fee</th>
<th>Overall Total (Cumulative)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>100 Story</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story and Script</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>200 Talent</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive Producer</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Producer</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actors</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrator</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extras</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>300 Production Personnel</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camera Operator</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaffer</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grip</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makeup/Prosthetics Artist</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Director</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Camera</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Effects</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sound Recordist</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>400 Travel and Locations</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cast and Crew Meals</td>
<td>900.00</td>
<td>900.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petty Cash</td>
<td>300.00</td>
<td>1200.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel Expenses</td>
<td>200.00</td>
<td>1400.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous Expense</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>1500.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>500 Production Equipment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camera and Support</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1500.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Quantity</td>
<td>Price</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lighting</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1500.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grip</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1500.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sound Package</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1500.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Effects</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1500.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>600 Art Direction</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Props</td>
<td>500.00</td>
<td>2000.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set Dressing</td>
<td>300.00</td>
<td>2300.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makeup Supplies</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>2300.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costumes</td>
<td>200.00</td>
<td>2500.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>900 Sound and Music</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composer</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>2500.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1000 Titles and Opticals</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art Work Cards</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>2500.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artwork</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>2500.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title Photography</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>2500.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1100 Editing and Finishing</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effects</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>2500.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1200 Office</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duplication</td>
<td>50.00</td>
<td>2550.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office Supplies</td>
<td>50.00</td>
<td>2600.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SUBTOTAL</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>2600.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contingency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>390.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>2990.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TIMELINE

Winter Quarter 2010
- Meet with faculty advisor
- Propose
- Begin first draft of script
- Look into possible grants/fundraising

Pre-Production

Spring Quarter 2011
- Week 1 – 3: Continue writing script
- Week 4 – 6: Begin storyboards and shot visualization
- Week 7 – 9: Cast actors and begin rehearsals
- Week 9 – 10: Scout locations

Summer 2011
- Raise funding
- Finalize budget
- Continue rehearsals
- Begin composing and recording score
- Finalize Locations
- Collect Props
- Begin shooting A-roll EXT locations if possible

Production

Fall Quarter 2011
- Weeks 1, 2: Finish all A-roll EXT shooting
- Weeks 3, 4: Shoot INT locations
- Week 5: Review footage and plan pickup shoots
- Weeks 6, 7: Shoot EXT and INT pickups
- Weeks 8, 9: Shoot B-roll EXT and INT locations
- Week 10: Review B-roll footage and begin rough edit
Post-Production

Winter Quarter 2011

- Week 1: Shoot winter B-roll EXT locations if desired
- Week 2: Finish rough edit
- Week 2, 3: Begin Foley and ADR work
- Week 4: Finish recording score
- Week 5: Lock picture with music
- Weeks 6, 7: Begin color correction and necessary composite work
- Week 8: Finish sound design
- Week 9: Work on titles and credits
- Week 10: Screen film
INT. NONDESCRIPT LOCATION

NARRATOR addresses the camera directly.

NARRATOR
Today I went to work. Let me tell you about it. I work in tech support. I don't work in billing and I don't do sales. I don't touch your money. My company provides inexpensive phone service over the internet. We send you a three and a half by four inch box called a DTA. That stands for digital telephone adapter. It's pretty advanced. You plug it into your modem, and then you plug your phone into it, and then your phone makes calls over the web.

INT. CALL CENTER

Phones are ringing and technicians are taking calls. The atmosphere is hectic.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
It's pretty much the same deal every morning. I clock in at 10 and immediately start answering calls from people whose phones aren't working right. This could be for a number of reasons. Perhaps they no longer have a dial tone. And, in spite of our highly detailed, full color instructions, they managed to hook up their box incorrectly.

JOHN, wearing the same clothes as the Narrator, sits in a cubicle and answers his phone using a headset. (His tone alternates between one of patronizing politeness and annoyance.)

JOHN
(getting a word in edgewise)
Yes. Yes, the blue hole. Right. Okay, thank you for calling. Have a great day, thanks for choosing
BROADCOM GLOBAL.

The phone rings again as soon as the last call ends. John hits a button on his phone to answer it.

JOHN
It's a great day at BROADCOM GLOBAL. This is John. Can I start by getting your BROADCOM GLOBAL phone number please?

MALE CUSTOMER (70s or 80s) answers, possibly speaks with a Long Island accent.

MALE CUSTOMER
Yes, I'm calling because I understand it's possible to look up various information pertaining to different topics and issues, in the form of news articles, photographs, video clips, what have you, on the computer. I was wondering if this was true, and if so, could you please assist me...

During the customer's rambling, the tech support SUPERVISOR touches John's cubicle.

SUPERVISOR
John, we got another meeting in like two minutes. Training Room B.

John gives his Supervisor a thumbs-up. The Supervisor continues on his way.

JOHN
Sir. I-- I'm sorry, but we only provide technical assistance for our own product, which happens to be BROADCOM GLOBAL phone service. Okay? Alright. Thanks for call--. Yea. Have a great day. Okay. bye.

John answers the phone.

JOHN
It's a great day at BROADCOM GLOBAL. This is John. Can I start by getting your BROADCOM GLOBAL phone number please?

FEMALE CUSTOMER #1 (V.O.)
Yes, John, it's 589-805-6954.

John types the number on his computer.

JOHN
And your name?
FEMALE CUSTOMER (V.O.)
Shelia.

JOHN
Right, Shelia. And how can I help you today?

FEMALE CUSTOMER (V.O.)
Well, I just tried checking my voicemail messages and it said I was locked out.

JOHN
Oh, I'm so sorry about that, Shelia. Um, what I'll need to do is just put you on hold for a moment. Would that be okay? Okay, great, thank you.

John hits the hold button on his phone and looks at it for several seconds, slowly removing his headset.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
At the time it just seemed like, well, this woman's concern can wait. I mean, I had training. In this job, you've got 40 things going on at once, so you're constantly prioritizing. I made sure to jot myself a note so I wouldn't forget her issue.

John scribbles something on a notepad, then gets up from INT. TRAINING ROOM B

John and three other techs are sitting at desks (or a long table). The SUPERVISOR sits on one of the desks off to the side. A TEACHER has already begun giving a class. Behind him, two pictures are being projected onto a whiteboard. One of the pictures is labeled "Unmowed Lawn" and the other is labeled "Mowed Lawn".

TEACHER
(indicating with a pen)
So this is a mowed lawn. And this is an unmowed lawn.

Beat.

TECH #1 raises his hand hesitantly.

TECH #1
So, what's the difference?

TEACHER
(astonished)
Excellent question. Now notice: the mowed lawn is -- shorter -- than the unmowed lawn. Also, the mowed lawn has been mowed, whereas the unmowed lawn has not been mowed.

TECH #2
So, has the mowed lawn been mowed by, like, a person or by, like, two people?

TEACHER
(blown away)
Well, sometimes you catch the teacher a little off guard, and I am going to have to look that up tonight. But I will have the answer for you tomorrow. Any other questions?

The Teacher looks around the room for other questions for a second, then continues.

TEACHER
Okay, next week we're going to review this. We've covered a lot of ground today.

Tech #2 laughs out loud.

TEACHER
What's so funny?

TECH #2
Well, just that you said "covered a lot of ground today", and because it's lawns...

TEACHER
Oh yes, not today--obviously--but next week is when I'll actually be taking you to some real lawns. So, yeah, I get it. I get the humor in it.

cut to

INT. KITCHEN

Narrator is at a kitchen sink, washing his hands while speaking to the camera. When he's done washing his own hands, he bends down and washes a dog's front paws in a bowl of water. He then reaches off screen and pulls toward the sink the hands of a person who has apparently been waiting there. He washes the person's hands as well.

NARRATOR
The class was informative. And yet, somehow, this feeling, which I like to call a twinge of pointlessness,
suddenly overcame me with regard to my work. I had caught a train, only to realize--seconds which may as well have been years later--that it was the wrong train. Of course, it may just have been that I didn't have my priorities straight.

INT. CALL CENTER

John returns to his desk. Customer #2 is still on hold.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
When I got back to my desk, I remembered I'd left that customer on hold. For some reason, I decided I ought to keep her there a little longer, and I took another call.

John answers another call.

JOHN
It's a great day at BROADCOM GLOBAL. This is John. Can I start by getting your BROADCOM GLOBAL phone number please?

It's the same customer from before, Male Customer #1.

MALE CUSTOMER #1
Uh, yes, I'm calling because, I need technical support. My DTA box happened to be crossing the street at the same time a large motor vehicle, roughly the size of an ice cream truck, but not an ice cream truck was also coming down the street. And there was a collision. Uh, since then, my box has not seemed to be working properly. I was wondering what the troubleshooting steps for this issue might be.

JOHN
Sir. Sounds like this is something you're gonna want to address with Billing. I'm gonna get you over to them? Okay?

MALE VOICE #1
Sure, sure.

JOHN
Okay, please hold for just a moment, sir. Thanks for choosing BROADCOM GLOBAL.

John transfers the call.
NARRATOR (V.O.)
I was feeling stressed from all the work and training I'd done this morning, so I decided I'd better take my ten-minute break.

EXT. LAKE - DAY

John is driving a boat alone on some unknown body of water with no land in sight.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
I was out driving the boat alone--my dad's new boat.

Out of the corner of his eye, John realizes there are three African men sitting behind him on the back of the boat. The men just stare at John. John continues to look forward, not ready to confront them.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
Suddenly, I realized three Africans had boarded. I was scared because I thought they could be pirates and there was no land or other boats in sight. I tried not to show any fear. Finally, one of them spoke, cutting me off from a brief and shameful attempt at conversation.

Finally, John turns his head to confront the men.

JOHN
So do you guys prefer "I Can't Believe It's Not Butter" or real bu--

AFRICAN MAN #1
We want to buy 500 DTA boxes.

cut to:

INT. RESTAURANT OR CAFE

Narrator is sitting across a small table from someone as if they've been having a drink together. He addresses the camera.

NARRATOR
I was relieved that they seemed harmless. Also that the request wasn't tech support-related.

Narrator resumes conversation with the person at the table.
cut back to:

EXT. LAKE - DAY
JOHN
Did you try to order from our website?

AFRICAN MAN #1
Website. No.

JOHN
You have to place your order online at our website. I'm sorry, but it's the only order method.

African Man #1's gaze lowers. It takes several seconds for the meaning of John's words to set in, and a look of disappointment and slight embarrassment sweeps over his face.

NARRATOR (V.O)
After that it was just kind of awkward. My further attempts at making chitchat were futile.

CUT TO:

John is sitting down with the men.

JOHN
(disgusted)
You're trying to tell me you put ketchup on a steak? You are absolutely psychotic.

CUT TO:

John is driving the boat again and the four men are still sitting in their original positions.

NARRATOR (V.O)
I remembered the customer I'd put on hold. That felt like ages ago. Still, it just didn't seem like the right time to resume the call.

The boat travels away from the camera. There is still no land in sight.

NARRATOR (V.O)
I kept her on hold and went to lunch.

INT. RESTAURANT

A hostess is seating John and a Coworker at a table with a menu on it.

JOHN
(to Coworker)
I just don't understand, if they
expect us to be handling customer service, why don’t they just call us the Customer Service department instead of Tech Support?

COWORKER
But Tech Support is Customer Service. Billing and Tech both come under the category of Customer Care, therefore...

JOHN
Look, can we please just not talk about this? When I’m not at work, I prefer not to think about work. Okay? Seriously, please.

A WAITRESS comes by shortly. She has a small piece of toast in one hand, which she has been munching on.

JOHN
(to Waitress)
Hi, Miss. How are you today?

John opens the menu and gives it to the waitress.

WAITRESS
Fine.

JOHN
Great. Are you ready to order or will you need some more time?

WAITRESS
(a little embarrassed)
I’ll need just a minute.

JOHN
Okay, that’s no problem.

The Waitress leaves the table with the menu and goes to another table, where some customers are sitting. There is a muffin and a glass of milk on a tray on the table. One of the customers lifts the tray up to the Waitress. The Waitress thanks the customer and goes back to a corner of the dining area to consume the food.

CUT TO:

John looks around for the waitress.

JOHN
(to coworker)
Where’s our waitress? You know, the ordering around here is really disgraceful.

COWORKER
There she is, maybe you should try flagging her down.

JOHN
No, here she comes.

The Waitress returns to John's table.

JOHN
Have you decided what you'd like to order, ma'am?

WAITRESS
I think I'll just have a coffee and the fruit bowl, please.

JOHN
Coffee and a fruit bowl. Certainly.

The Waitress leaves the table.

COWORKER
I think she might've heard you talking about her.

JOHN
Well, if she did, good. Got her over here, right? And she was pleasant enough.

COWORKER
She's paid to be pleasant. The server-client relationship is a complete formality.

JOHN
Yes, well, a formality that makes it so we can have a lunch and get back within the meager half hour they give us. You know, she should try our job.

The Waitress returns. John gives her a serving tray with a cup of coffee, a bowl of fruit, and a napkin and silverware on it.

JOHN
Is there anything else I can get you, ma'am?

WAITRESS
Uh, yes, this fork looks a little dirty. Would you mind getting me a new one.

JOHN
Of course, ma'am.
The waitress goes away, comes back shortly. John hands her a clean fork.

JOHN
Anything else, ma'am?

WAITRESS
Creamer?

JOHN
We only have half & half, will that be ok?

WAITRESS
Yes, that's fine.

JOHN
Certainly.

The waitress goes away, comes back shortly. John hands her a bowl of half & halves.

JOHN
OK, ma'am, will there be anything else?

WAITRESS
Marriage.

JOHN
Yes, of course.

The Waitress goes away, comes back shortly.

JOHN
How is everything, ma'am? Anything else I can get you?

WAITRESS
But you still haven't married me.

JOHN
Yes, just a little while longer.

The Waitress goes away, comes back shortly.

JOHN
Anything I can get you ma'--

WAITRESS
(angrily)
You're never going to marry me.

John's expression turns from one of obsequious politeness to humility and regret.

NARRATOR (V.O)
I realized I'd been foolish. Once
again, I thought about the customer I'd put on hold before, how I'd just been wasting time

INT. CALL CENTER

John arrives at his cubicle, pats his stomach as if full, sits down in his chair, and finds there is no longer an active call on his phone.

NARRATOR (V.O)
When I returned from lunch I discovered she'd finally hung up. I felt depressed and aimless, wondering if I'd ever have the opportunity to accomplish anything meaningful at work again. Just then, another call came through.

The phone rings and John answers.

JOHN
It's a great day at BROADCOM GLOBAL. This is John. Can I st--

MALE CUSTOMER
Yes, yes. Listen, I was calling to inquire with technical support what should be done if perchance my BROADCOM GLOBAL device were to become stuck in a large tree or other tall flora, a large potted plant perhaps...

JOHN
So, was your DTA box stuck in a tree?

MALE CUSTOMER
Um, no. However, I was calling because I'd like to know the proper troubleshooting steps if perchance my box were to become stuck at some heighth that is, strictly speaking, much taller than my own stature...

JOHN
Sir, sir. I'm gonna get you over to sales, ok? Yes, they'll take care of you over there. Yes, thanks, just a moment. Thanks for choosing BROADCOM GLOBAL...

John transfers the call.

EXT. PORTRAIT STUDIO

The Narrator is in front of a backdrop about to get his picture
taken while addressing the camera. A photographer is posing him so that his thumb and forefinger touching chin, pensively.

NARRATOR
What a downer. After I transferred the call, I just sat there and waited. And waited, and waited. Forty-five minutes before another call came through. But when it did, I knew it was time to get serious.

INT. CALL CENTER

The phone rings and John answers the call.

JOHN
It's a great day at BROADCOM GLOBAL. This is John. Can I start by getting your BROADCOM GLOBAL phone number please?

BEATRICE
Yes, it's 230-434-7300.

JOHN
And your name please?

BEATRICE
Beatrice.

JOHN
Hi, Beatrice, how can I help you today?

Camera stays on John as he speaks with customer, but sound fades for Narrator's voice over.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
The customer was female, probably in her 60's. She said her phone had stopped working overnight. Her English was a bit broken, and, having spent a few months in Spain right after college, I insisted on carrying on the conversation in her primary language.

INT. CHAMBER

Narrator is at a desk, writing with a quill.

NARRATOR
I suppose this was also due to a habit of mine to avoid seeming stereotypically "Anglo". You know, of being stubbornly ignorant of other culture groups in America and
especially languages other than English.

INT. CALL CENTER

John is still talking on the phone with Beatrice. He speaks to her in Spanish with no attempt at a Spanish accent, meanwhile, she carries on in perfectly fine English.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
In order to get a better look at the problem, I told her I would need to remote into her computer from my computer. I said, Ma'am, I'm going to need you to download some software.

John closes his eyes and tilts his head back messianically and as if with a broken heart, waiting for a wind to take him.

INT. BEATRICE'S HOUSE

John has been transported into Beatrice's house literally. Beatrice greets him there.

BEATRICE
This technology is great.

JOHN
Si. Me gusta mucho la tecnologí a.

BEATRICE
Can I offer you a coffee with milk?

JOHN
No, grathias. Dónde está la cajita?

BEATRICE
Come with me.

JOHN
A ver.

Beatrice brings John to the room in her house where the DTA is located. She points to the DTA, which is still offscreen at this point, and John walks up close to it and kneels down to get a good look. He studies it for several seconds but doesn't actually touch it or say a word. Finally, he points at the box and continues to stare at it.

JOHN
Creo que veo la problema.

The DTA box is finally shown. It has a bloody human finger lodged in one of the ports where an ethernet cord should be.

Slowly, John puts down his hand and turns toward Beatrice.
JOHN
Pero voy a nethesitar mis herramientas.

Beatrice now has a bottle of tequila in her arms. She holds out the bottle, offering it to John.

John takes the bottle, unscrews the top, and starts drinking.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
My consumption of the bottle was unbridled. Somehow this seemed like a logical way of addressing the issue. It was as if in addition to translating my speech into another language, I was supposed to translate my troubleshooting methods as well. Somewhere in that haze of remembering, it occurred to me that the word tequila sounded an awful lot like it could be a variant of the Spanish word for tech. Of course, this was just profoundly wrong. But you kind of see where I was going.

John finishes the bottle. He stumbles around, besotted.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
I ended up feeling really guilty because it started getting late, the customer wanted to get to bed, and there I was, stuck in her house, too drunk to leave.

Beatrice is taking bedsheets from a closet and putting them in John’s arms.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
She said it was fine if I stayed the night though, and I did, since I really had no other option.

John wakes up on the floor, wrapped in sheets as if in a cocoon. He looks around him, getting his bearings.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
When I awoke I just felt terrible. I mean, I'd completely inconvenienced the customer and hadn't even fixed her issue. And then I looked over and there was a voracious cannibal, a militant jihadist, and a flesh-eating virus all drinking hot tea in her living room, without any coasters.

CANNIBAL and JIHADIST are having tea together on a couch. There’s also a cup of tea on one of the couch cushions that's
otherwise empty.

EXT. A PARK

Narrator is sitting at a picnic bench with a hamburger in front of him, addressing the camera.

NARRATOR
It actually made me feel better because I figured, as a guest, I was nowhere near as much of a handful.

Narrator takes a bite of the hamburger.

INT. CALL CENTER

John sits back in his seat and hangs up the phone.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
Beatrice was nowhere to be seen, so I just logged out of her computer.

John's Supervisor approaches John's desk.

SUPERVISOR
John, can I have you go into one-on-one?

NARRATOR (V.O.)
My supervisor had me sit down with him for my monthly eval.

INT. SUPERVISOR'S OFFICE (OR LARGER CUBICLE)

John sits perpendicular to his Supervisor at his desk. There is a long silence.

SUPERVISOR
So. I happened to be monitoring your last call.

(beat)
You logged into a third party router. I saw that you were messing with some settings. Did you know you were doing this?

Supervisor waits for a response.

SUPERVISOR
You know this is against policy. Are you aware what, according to policy, the disciplinary action for changing settings in a third party router is?

JOHN
That you impale me with a sw--
SUPERVISOR
--impale you with a sword. Yes.

Long beat.

SUPERVISOR
So, I can impale you right now or
we can wait until tomorrow morning.
Do you have a preference?

JOHN
Um. I'll take tomorrow morning.

SUPERVISOR
K. In any case, I want to go over
your monthly eval. You're doing good.
You're--not exceeding but meeting
expectations. And your attendance is
impeccable. So, we're gonna be
giving you an award at the next
quarterly. So, excellent job. Any
questions? Complaints?

JOHN
None come to mind at the moment.
(beat)
Come to think of it, I should feel
so lucky to have a job at all when
so many Americans are suffering
from unemployment right now.

SUPERVISOR
(nodding)
I wholeheartedly agree with you. It
would be almost ridiculous to
complain, right?
(beat)
Alright, well you're set. Just sign
this for me.

The Supervisor hands John his evaluation form. John signs it and
gets up to leave.

SUPERVISOR
Oh, hey, just one other thing.

John stops and turns back around.

SUPERVISOR
It is a known issue that some of
our devices have been getting stuck
in trees recently. It's been mostly spruces,
actually, but, oddly enough, there
have been a few reports of oaks as well.~
So, just a heads up, in case you
get any calls about that,
Engineering is on top of it and
should have the issue sorted out in the next few days.

John acknowledges this with a nod.

JOHN
Alright, sounds good.

Beat.

SUPERVISOR
Hey man, know what? The queue's slowed down a bit and you just look beat, so I'm gonna let you go a little early and we'll see ya in the morning, alright?

JOHN
Ah, thanks.

INT. CALL CENTER

John approaches his cubicle. He shuts down his computer and begins removing items from the overhead compartment. The items are: a wetsuit, galoshes, a heavy winter coat, and mountain climbing gear. He begins suiting up with these items. Then he walks over to a closet and removes a saddle from inside. He leaves the building.

Narrator's V.O. monologue begins as John is performing the preceding actions.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
Sometimes. When I'm practicing the piano or tying the long arduous lace of my boot, and I'm suddenly distracted by the lachrymose ring of the telephone, and when I answer, the hiss of an analog phone line gently licks my ear, I wish I had complained. And that's my cross to bear.

EXT. CORPORATE BUILDING - AFTERNOON

Outside it's a mild, mostly sunny day. John starts walking down the sidewalk of a nondescript suburban office park. He has the saddle under his arm. Where he's walking to isn't exactly clear.

FADE OUT.
Appendix C

Production Stills

Opening title

Training Scene
Pirates

Lunch
John on the phone

...there's an emaciated boy stuck in your ethernet port.

John troubleshooting
Going home

Copyright (c) 2012 John Valenti

Don’t steal this film.