

Amazon Mechanical Turk

IRB CONSIDERATIONS

February 9, 2017

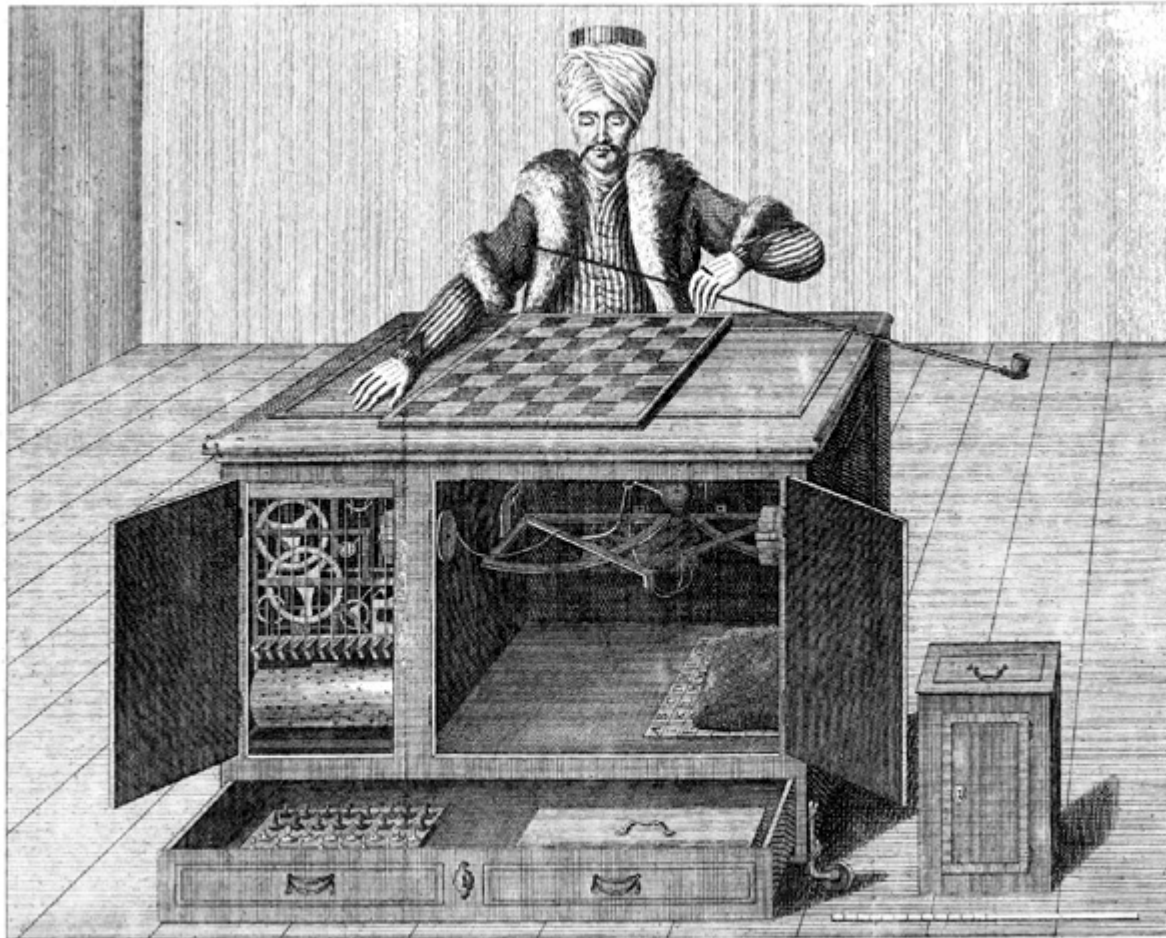
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“The Mechanical Turk” chess playing automaton



W. de Kempelen del.

Ch. a. Mehel. excud. Basilea.

P. G. Piatz. sc.

Der Schach-Spieler, wie er vor dem Spiele gezeiget wird von vorne. Le Joueur d'Échecs, tel qu'on le montre avant le jeu, par devant.

Amazon Mechanical Turk

HITs

Human Intelligence Tasks

Workers

People who complete HITs

Requesters

Post HITs for workers to complete

Amazon Mechanical Turk

- Workers are paid small sums of money for each task they complete
- Typical pay ranges from a few cents to a few dollars
- Depends on task complexity and length

Amazon Mechanical Turk

- mTurk was designed as a crowdsourcing platform for business – not a research platform
- This makes mTurk unique among online survey platforms
- Leads to unique challenges

Amazon Mechanical Turk

- Academic researchers have widely adopted mTurk as a research platform
- Easy, cheap way to recruit large numbers of subjects quickly

Who are mTurk workers?

Pew Research survey of US mTurk workers in February 2016

N=3,370

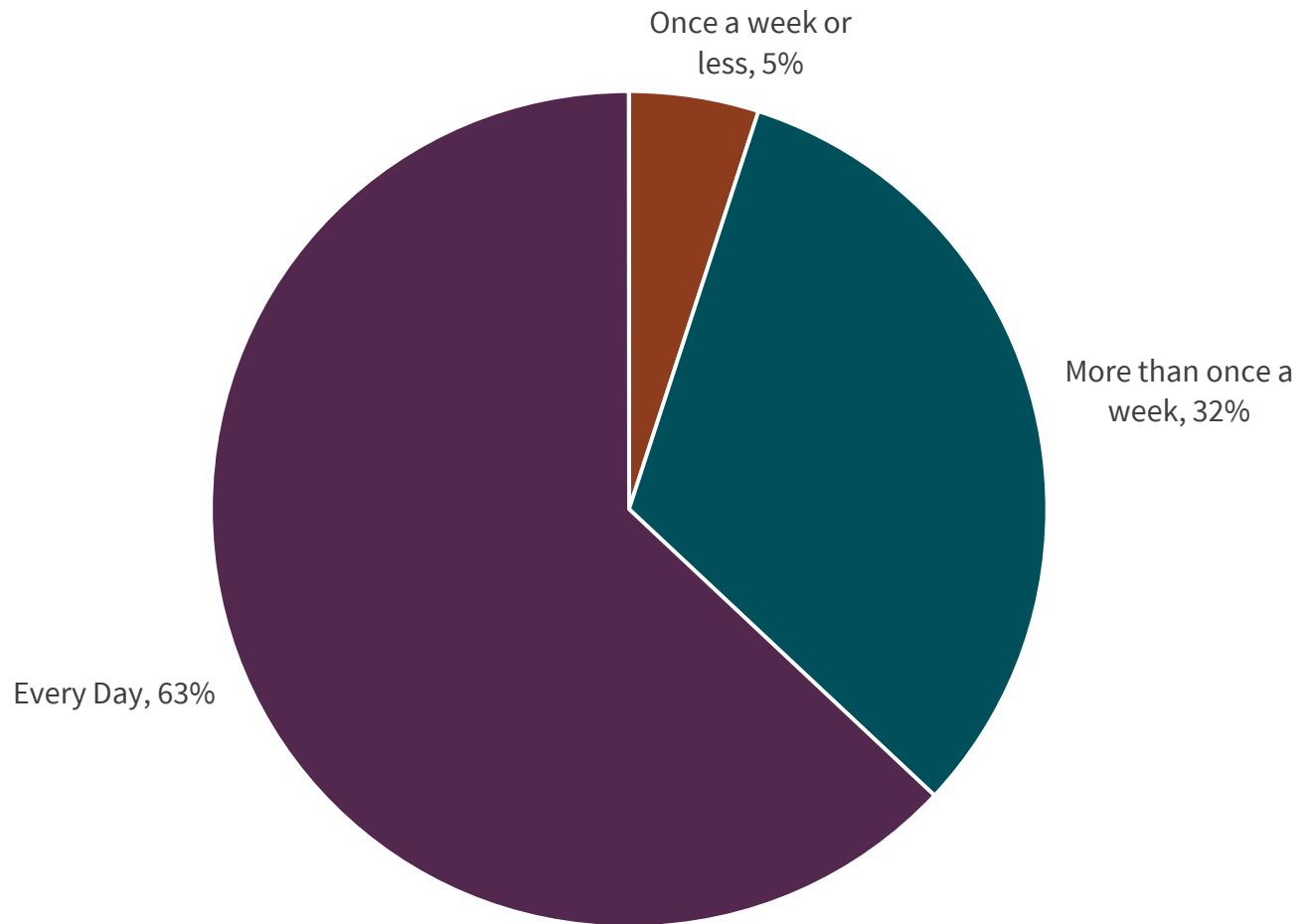
51% Male, 49% Female

88% under the age of 50, 41% under 30

77% white, non-Hispanic

51% have a college degree

How often do Turkers work on mTurk?



Source: Pew Research report "Research in the Crowdsourcing Age"

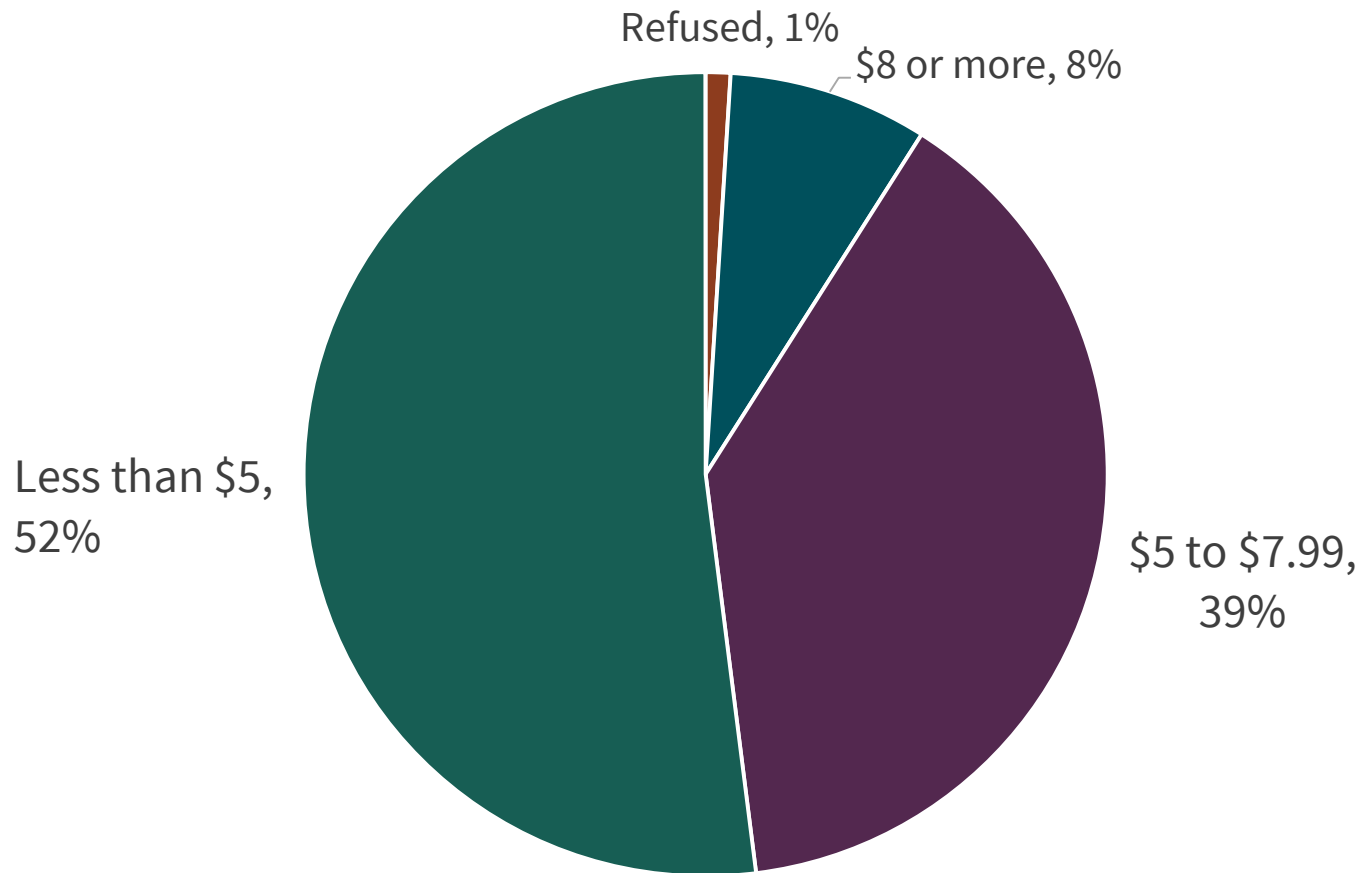
**Ethical and regulatory
concerns with mTurk as a
research platform**



mTurk Ethical Concerns

- Low pay is the norm
- Asking workers for identifiable information violates Participation Agreement
- Steep learning curve for new requesters

Turkers' Hourly Pay



Source: Pew Research report "Research in the Crowdsourcing Age"

mTurk Worker IDs

- All mTurk workers have a “Worker ID” that is supposed to be anonymous
- In reality, worker IDs are not anonymous
- A worker’s Amazon.com profile can be accessed via:

[www.amazon.com/gp/profile/\[worker ID\]](http://www.amazon.com/gp/profile/[worker ID])

Steep Learning Curve

- It's difficult to fully understand mTurk worker culture
 - Dynamo worker collective can help
- Easy to underestimate how serious workers are
 - Due in part to low pay

**Workers
are
VERY
serious
about
mTurk**

mTurk Regulatory Concerns

- Requiring workers to complete all tasks in order to get paid
- Impossible to know if a subject is under 18 years old
- Waiver of Documentation is required

Common complaints to the IRB from mTurk workers



Common Complaints to the IRB

- Our IRB receives more complaints from mTurk workers than from any other research population
 - Complaints tend to be very detailed
 - Workers are very persistent

Common Complaints to the IRB

- Most common complaint type is a HIT rejection
 - Workers do not get paid if a requester rejects their HIT
 - Rejection lowers the worker's HIT acceptance rate

Sample Complaint #1

- HIT rejection
- Task was a 50-minute survey that paid \$5
- HIT rejected due to not checking a box on consent form
- Three similar complaints about this study
- I advised researcher to accept all HITs, pay the subjects

Sample Complaint #2

- HIT rejection
- Photo/text matching task
- Researcher believed subject wrote a computer script to complete the task quickly many times
- Subject began harassing researcher and the IRB
- I advised researcher to:
 - Accept the HITs
 - Pay the subject
 - Throw out their data

Helpful links

- Amazon Mechanical Turk: www.mturk.com
- Dynamo worker collective: www.wearedynamo.org
- Dynamo Guidelines: www.wearedynamo.org/guidelines
- Turkopticon: <https://turkopticon.ucsd.edu>