Amazon Mechanical Turk
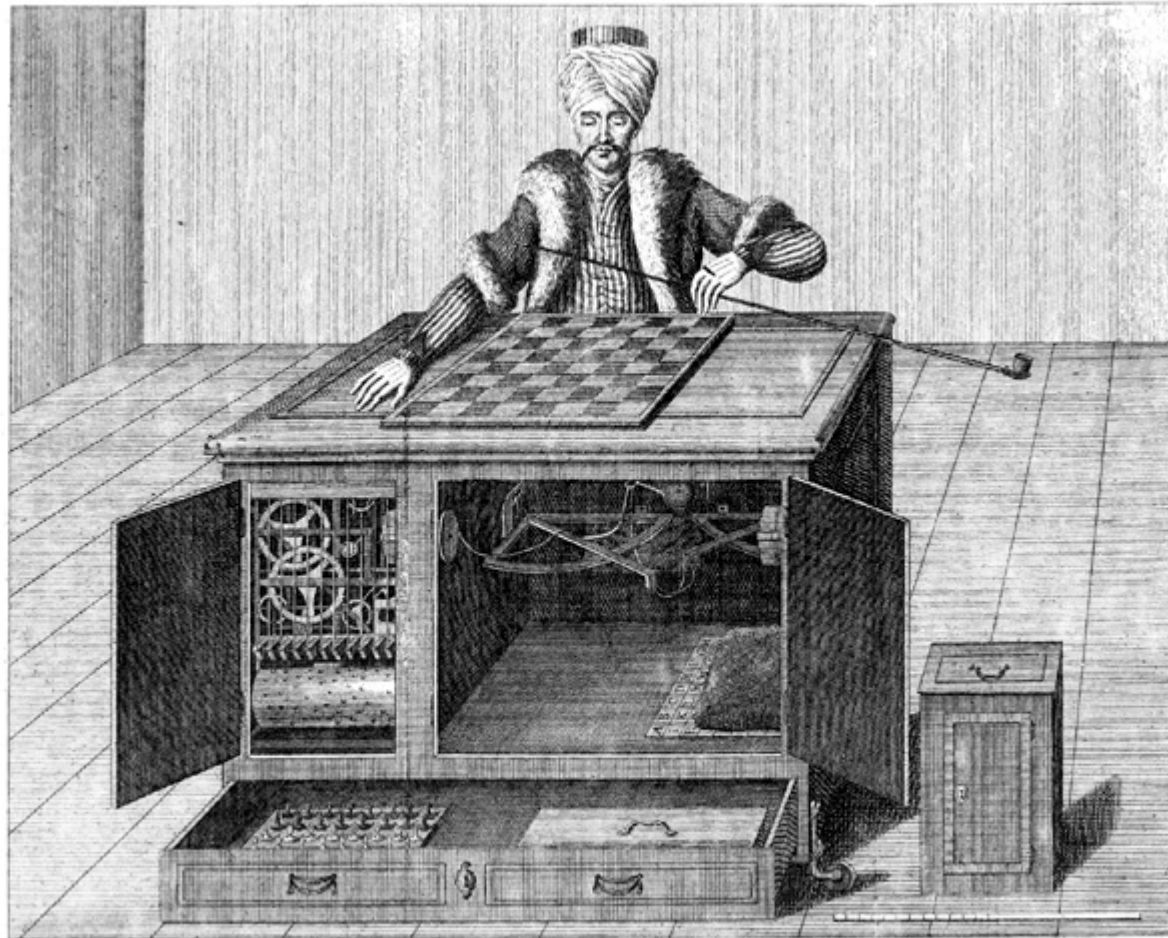## IRB CONSIDERATIONS

February 9, 2017

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"The Mechanical Turk" chess playing automaton

Stanford University

HITs

Human Intelligence Tasks

Workers

People who complete HITs

Requesters

Post HITs for workers to complete

- 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

- 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

- Academic researchers have widely adopted mTurk as a research platform

- Easy, cheap way to recruit large numbers of subjects quickly

Who are mTurk workers?

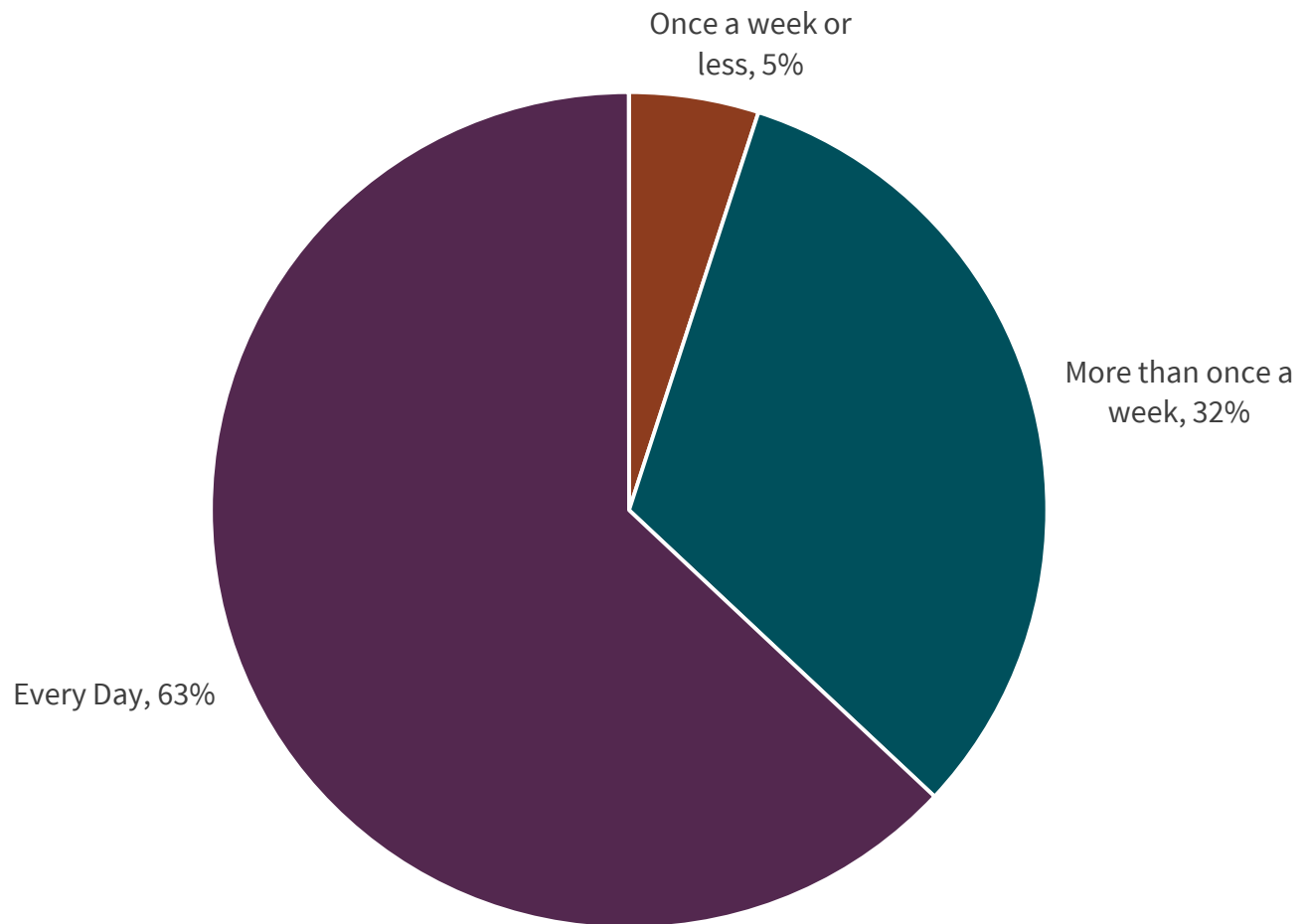Pew Research survey of US mTurk workers in February 2016
N=3,370

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?

Once a week or less, 5%

More than once a week, 32%

Every Day, 63%

Source: Pew Research report "Research in the Crowdsourcing Age"
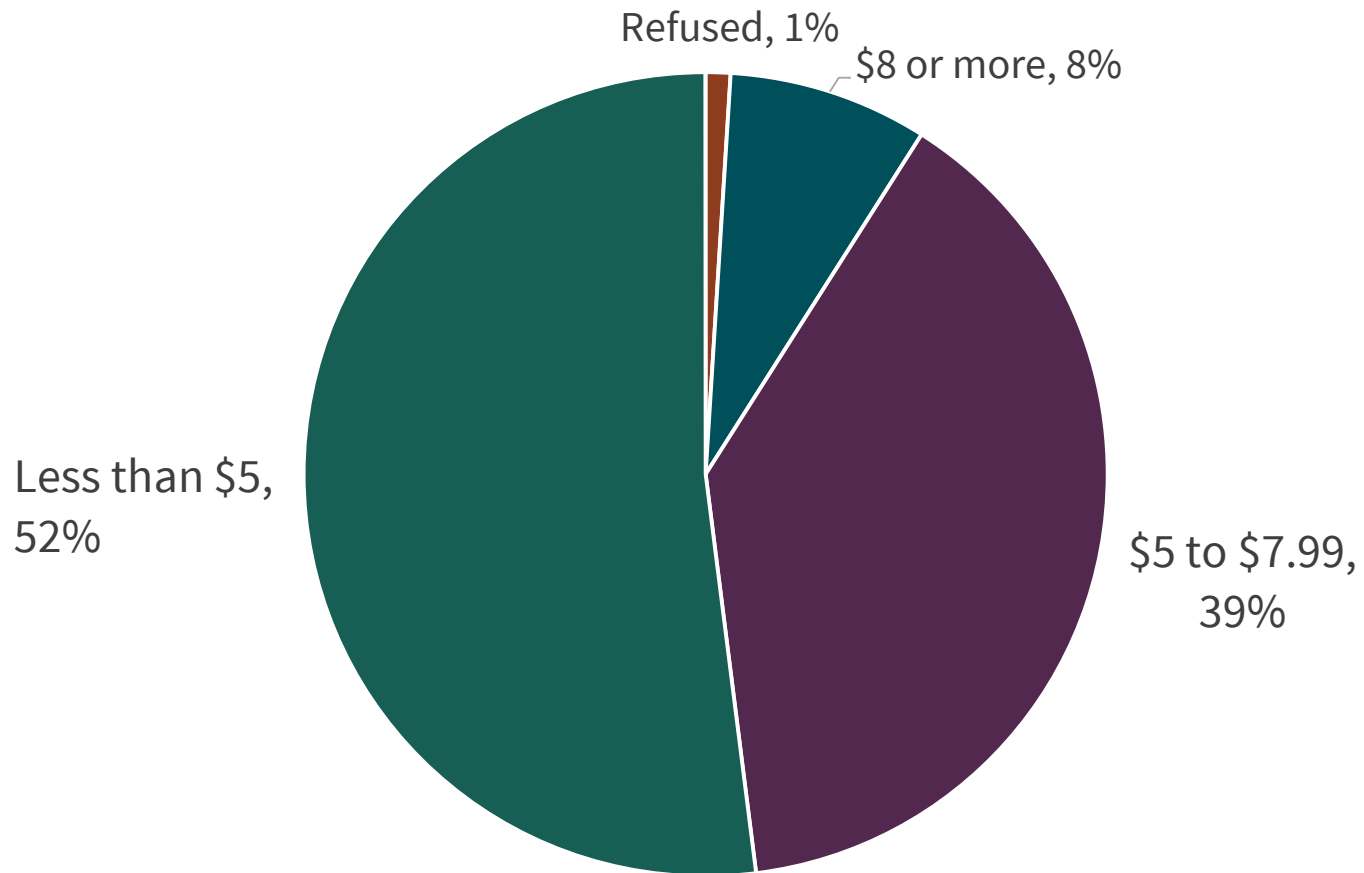
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Ethical and regulatory concerns with mTurk as a research platform

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

Refused, 1%

$8 or more, 8%

Less than $5, 52%

$5 to $7.99, 39%

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

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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]

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

- Our IRB receives more complaints from mTurk workers than from any other research population

  - Complaints tend to be very detailed

  - Workers are very persistent

- 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