

Incalculable yet conceivable; the story of my life

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As a child I could spend many days playing train conductor. I placed all the dining room chairs in a row, placed my teddy bear and other favourite cuddly toys on the chairs, and with the cap on my head and card cutter in my hand I walked past the line time and again.

Later, when I started to focus on how boring job activities could be automated, I, and with me a whole (IT) professional group, continued to think primarily functionally (unilinearly). The idea that tickets can be digitally supplied and checked, so that no one would have to carry on that "boring" job of conductor, made IT practitioners almost heroes. Not far removed from wearing a Batman cape, I devised algorithm after algorithm and I went to battle against those boring, pointless jobs that turned people into machines. Some ICT specialists - especially system administrators - had "Superman" as their computer name.

Meanwhile, we know many functionalities can be automated, but that this rarely says anything about the "real" contribution of the employees. For example, we still have train conductors, who also still check the validity of admission tickets, but mainly because they thereby have "legitimacy" to travel among travellers, and camera surveillance cannot compete with their presence with regard to both travellers security and feeling security. This also makes their commitment financially more than justified. The same applies in cinemas, where the cash registers are replaced, but to curb the indifference and derailment of (adolescent) "peacocking", more employees are required now on

"scut duty" (popcorn remains sweeping or walking around and saying something friendly to every visitor) than were previously required for the cash registers and at the toilets.

In other words, automation (and now robotizing) is regularly in line with the simple unilinear functional thinking of the train conductor playing child. And let's be honest, now that I am almost 60 years old, apart from driving, there is nothing that I do for my salary that a 6 year old child would not be able to do. Only through nonlinear system thinking we see the limitation of automation. Why is a train conductor or a professor still needed? Precisely, to find the right words to explain or make safe the human context of travellers, students and / or other fellow people. By doing this in a way that is incalculable yet conceivable, this confirms that we live and are not robots! Meaning is both man-made and the highest achievement of humanity.

No matter how strange it may sound, either consciously or unconsciously ICT companies do not realize this. Incidentally we're all confronted with a number of IT laws after every major system update. Two examples. The Law of Gates (1): software updates require more processor power faster than hardware companies can deliver, with the result that after each update your computer or tablet functions just a little slower. Imagine a service manufacturer breaking into your house with an "update" and giving your furniture a fresh new colour. After the last Apple update, even the keyboard layout has changed, which means that I am constantly deleting bits of text while typing this column.... Now I think Apple and Microsoft are fully aware of this and built their business models accordingly. But in that case we - the consumers - are the fools.

To conclude with a different IT law - (2) the Hanlon Razor (a variant of Ockham, who stated that under the same circumstances the simplest explanation is usually the right one): never assume evil intentions if stupidity is also a good explanation. Sorry Apple, Android and Microsoft, it is malicious or, with a wink at our Dutch queen (speaking about our king), "a bit stupid". You may choose!

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