

Will machines take over our world?

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In Cracking Contraptions, a series of Wallace and Gromit animation shorts, our hapless plasticine heroes showcase a number of ridiculous devices designed by irrepressible inventor Wallace to "save Gromit's legs" (Gromit is Wallace's multitasking dog responsible for the running of the household) or make their lives more entertaining.

Creator Nick Park parodies the world of Verimark devices with phrases like: "All the goals, none of the fuss", Wallace's description of his Soccamatic, which lobbs footballs mercilessly at goalie Gromit. Other inventions include the Snoozatron, which has Gromit masquerading as a sheep to aid insomniac cheese-chomping Wallace's sleep, a burglar deterrent called the Bully Proof Vest and Mission 13, one of Wallace's guided shoppers big enough to accommodate a very large ball of Edam, Wallace's favourite cheese.

The machines regularly malfunction or turn on their creator, but as Einstein said: "Anyone who has never made a mistake has never tried anything new". Wallace's inventions are for the most part benign and, if anything, expose the shortcomings of machines when it comes to lateral thinking. When they run amok it is clear that they still need human intervention to control and regulate them.

The ideal is a happy medium between the technocrat's vision of a world where machines can run without human intervention and we are finally freed from the error which makes us human, and the neo-luddite approach which opposes the encroachment of so-called technological advancement that threatens our self-determination.

The technocrat is guilty of acting on technical information without regard for human input. The neo-luddite could be accused of destroying the creative efforts of others, in the way that the stockinging Luddites sabotaged the textile machines that threatened their livelihoods in the early 1800's.

Technology is all about mimicking the effortless automation that nature possesses: pumping heart, spiralling earth, unfurling flower, a billion hermaphroditic corals simultaneously broadcasting their gametes to the ocean in an orgy of frenzied reproduction. Nature illustrates perfect time management and supreme synergy packaged in an awesome display of the self-generated forces that hold it all together.

The new generation of computer system tries to capture the symbiosis that the universe has mastered. The tool is the computer network, which enables communication between man and machine as never before. The theory is that by combining the accuracy and speed of the computer and all the data that it can generate, with the vast collective intelligence of the human brain, solutions to basic human problems will be discovered. Computers compute and humans make confident logic-aided decisions based on analysis of results. What software designers and marketers have learned is that the human element is here to stay and that computers that are user-independent will not sell. Microsoft's business management solutions are "people-ready", with a great deal of focus on empowering people through technology, rather than replacing them with machines.

Although Microsoft claims that it is this human input that places it ahead of the competition and Apple sells gadgets by marketing them as tools to enhance your life rather than rob you of your individuality, it is still important to maintain a healthy dose of Luddism in the face of advancing technology. After all, The Three Mile Island nuclear event was largely due to over-reliance on "automated safety" systems.

Remember: "For very many rapidly changing tasks, it is difficult to replace human beings, who are so easily retrainable within a wide range of tasks and, moreover, so inexpensively produced by unskilled labor."
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