

Luddites of the World, Unite!

During the early 1800s in England, there was a movement protesting progress. In particular, a young man named either Ludham or Ludd (history is murky on this point) gave his name to a movement dedicated to smashing technology to protest the industrial revolution. While their reasons might be considered sound (the new technology allowed the hiring of less-skilled and cheaper labor to replace skilled artisans), their methodology was certainly illegal. The Luddite movement lasted only a few years, but for a brief time the British had more soldiers fighting the Luddites than they had fighting Napoleon. Nowadays, Luddite is used to describe one who is opposed to industrialization, automation, computerization, or new technologies in general.

All I can say about the Luddites is...sometimes I feel their pain; like when buying gas.

I recall that in the good old days I would fill up, walk in, and give the attendant some cash.

When charge cards became popular, you walked into the station, the attendant zipped your card on a paper receipt, and you signed it and were done. Within a few years, the process improved so that you simply inserted your card at the pump, and after filling up, a small receipt emerged from the pump, and you drove off. The system was almost perfect. However, the last time I was at the gas station, I was forced to go through the following process:

- Upon inserting my credit card I was asked, "David, are you a member of the rewards program? If so, scan your rewards card!" (The pump knew my name, surely it could keep track of the fact that I am a rewards member, and get a \$0.03 discount).

- After scanning my rewards card. It asked, "Do you want to apply your \$0.03 discount?" (Why, would I not want my discount?)

- After pressing yes, the pump replied, "Do you want a car wash?"

- No. The pump then replied, "Is this a credit or debit card?" (Well, legitimate question, other than I was using my American Express, which really is always a credit card.)

- I pressed credit, then I was asked to enter my zip code. (I am going to figure that if a thief has my credit card and name, he can probably figure out where I live—probably because he has my wallet. Mind you, had I pressed debit I would have been asked for a PIN.)

- Now I am asked, "Do you want a receipt?" (Do they realize that the printer on the pump has been broken for two years now?)

- Finally, am prompted with the words, "Please select grade".

- Nope—not done yet. After I select 87 octane, it responds, "Please hit start to begin". (Please note that this button will either be hidden among many other keys, and/or the word, start, will have long worn off the button, and I am guessing. Heaven forbid I hit cancel instead and start over. Can we please make the start button large, bright red, and extremely well labeled? For that matter, can we assume that once I select the grade of gas and remove the pump nozzle, I am pretty sure I am going to use the fuel. Just turn the pump on!)

I often find myself talking to the pump, explaining that I just want gas—not a hand/eye coordination and reading test before I can start the pump. By the way, once the entire above process is complete, I forgot the final step:

- As soon as the gas starts flowing, the pump now responds with a blaringly loud obnoxious advertisement for the weekly store specials, usually along the lines of, "Now on sale this week for only \$4.99—EZSprinkle Shoe Deodorizer." Which, of course, makes me press blindly for the mute button. Heaven forbid I accidentally hit cancel.

Things I used to do on a full-sized computer I now do on a tablet or a smart phone. I find myself using full-sized computers less and less, and other devices such as inter-connected cable boxes and DVD players more and more. My personal smartphone is now my mailbox, contact list, and Google search interface. There will always be a need for personal computers—but, now, instead of a "personal computer," I use devices that are "more personal." The software that runs it all, however, continues to increase in size and complexity. And sometimes decreases in end-user simplicity.

We cannot neglect the human element. The need for software that is simple and understandable remains. Maybe I am a Luddite. I am deeply opposed to progress that makes my life harder. I want things to evolve towards simple and easy to use. The need for end-user buy-in and reliable and understandable software is constant—regardless of the size or shape or evolution of its processor. As it should be.

David A. Cook
Stephen F. Austin State University
 cookda@sfasu.edu