



Who's Driving the Software World Anyway?

Let's face it folks, these days software is a lot like oxygen, we don't think about it a whole lot, but it pretty much keeps everything running. Perhaps a better analogy might be the electric power grid – with apologies to our California readers – of something that runs just about everything, but no one thinks about it. Until, of course, it breaks down; then not only do we think about it, we realize how much we depend on it. Then we inevitably get angry and a bit irrational. We do odd things like buy mail order windmills and photocells and listen to engineers on the radio. This is a frightening prospect for any community; but what if it affected all of us, and instead of the lights, it was the software that went south?

Do I hear a chorus of, “been there, done that”? True enough, the software-initiated have learned to live with the equivalent of rolling blackouts, but it can still get under your skin. Take my father-in-law's car for example. When purchased, it was a nice sort of upscale sporty model that had the requisite number of gizmos. Everything was electronic. It featured one of those on-board computers that could tell you everything about your drive to the grocery store. I thrilled my wife with the news that the stop sign at 49th Street and my lead foot had combined to produce an instantaneous gas mileage of .01 miles per gallon!

Of course the automakers have yet to take a lesson from the F-16 and add a heads-up display to this little number. So every time I felt the deep-seated urge to check my instantaneous vs. trip mileage, or see what the DTE was (I never did figure out what that meant), it was time to pray for a straight road. Fortunately, my wife's early warning system always seemed to distract me from the computer in time to avoid a total system crash. But even she could not save the operator from a feature called service monitoring.

I never got to see this service feature in action. That's because my father-in-law Jim did. It went like this: On a drive to work

one day the service monitor announced to a surprised but grateful Jim that it was time to service the car. It did this with the usual visual warnings and a beep. This was good for Jim, who didn't know his car needed attention. It was soon bad for everyone else on the road because the beep never quit, and Jim became a heads down button-pusher – without the benefit of my wife.

One could understand this if the wheels were about to fall off, or if the engine was red-zoned. But this computer was pulling out all the stops for a check-the-fluids drill. Jim was reminded of his delinquent checkup all the way home, and therefore dutifully complied with his car's software demands at the earliest opportunity. After that, all was right with the software – and Jim's driving – for a few days. Then the demands started again – time for another service call. I believe it was on the third service visit that Jim took back control of his life from his car's software. Taking a cue from the classic *2001, A Space Odyssey*, he asked the mechanic, “Can't you just disconnect the @#%\$# thing?” Jim has been driving happily with his neutered software ever since.

Another Detour

Irritating beeps in the car are one thing, but the really important software is much better than what is under the hood. Take the code that runs your bank; when it comes to money, the stuff has got to be bullet proof. That's what I thought until one afternoon when my wife's laughter caught my attention. She was opening the mail and had just happened upon an innocuous envelope from the bank with our new credit cards. These were those nifty new cards that include your picture on the front to help make your transactions more secure.

Thinking this a great idea, I had dutifully visited my local branch and had my picture taken. The lady at the bank was very nice and agreed that a second picture was warranted in my case, as the first exposure was sure to embarrass the kids at

checkout time. Now I knew the second photo was nothing to post on the Internet, but neither did I think it merited the obvious entertainment my wife was enjoying. It was a gem of a photo, although not quite as I remembered it at the bank. I was now a woman in her thirties with nicely set hair.

Sure enough it was my credit card number and my digitized signature on the back, but a photo that would forever separate me from my children at the checkout counter. Embarrassing? Hey, this could drive the kids into therapy. I imagined my clergyman dropping by to see what he could do. I agonized over my next “may I see TWO forms of ID,” experience.

Faced with such horrors, I called the bank hotline to see if I could get my face back. They explained that their system had now assigned this, well, rather attractive face to my account, and there was no way they could find my old digitized face. So the only thing to do was visit the nice lady in the bank again and hope for a more true-to-life exposure.

Now I realize that I may be denigrating my bank's software without due cause, after all, this may be how that nice lady gets through a long afternoon. But digitized pictures and databases gave cause for guilt, and software got the blame.

Now I could go on as there are more tales to tell, including my favorite of when one of my service providers upgraded their computer system then started giving me months of free service – despite my protestations. But really, despite my occasional crashes with software, things are well. Jim's car is still on the road, and the kids willingly let me use my credit card (with the old face). And I must admit that life is a bit nicer because of all that software doing such a great job. But then, once in a while I wonder, if my picture didn't get on my credit card, where did it go?

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