

Click, click, click, was that your train sir ?

As a change from all our security woes, I have been suffering from unnecessarily complex computer controlled technology in transport all week. My woes started when I was trying to get up to Kensington Olympia for a conference. I don't do this very often so my defences are weak. First of all the existing machine at my local station was out of order because it had run out of change. Normally it works something like this:- press mode of travel button, press destination, enter a ten pound note, (this is the railway we are talking about), and then wait about 30 seconds for the ticket to be printed and precious little change returned. So far so good. However, the absence of a skip full of change meant that I had to join a queue to talk to a human. This is OK unless the person in front of you wants a season ticket and wants to pay in say, melons. Again a couple of buttons and you're off.

This time however, a very polite uniformed young man standing next to the queue asked me if he could issue my ticket on the fancy new machine hanging round his neck. My train was imminent, I had one person in front of me trying to buy a season ticket to Tashkent paying in tea-bags and another who looked as though he were about to set off for Australia via Scapa Flow and Alpine, Texas, so I accepted. After offering my destination, the polite young man started clicking on his machine. After 30 or so clicks, a look of consternation, appeared so he asked his colleague who said something like "ah you've got to press all these options for there ...". There followed a long, protracted and somewhat frenzied set of clicks not unlike a woodpecker on ecstasy at which point my train arrived. And left again. More clicks. More consternation. At this point, I noticed that the entire ticket hall had cleared leaving only me, my two uniformed 'helpers' and a chattering machine. I thanked them as profusely as I could having missed my train, and bought my ticket in the normal way - two buttons and I'm off. Who on earth designed these new machines ? They seem to have a user interface designed to paralyse anybody sufficiently far up the evolutionary ladder to be able to whistle.

Up to the platform and now for a defect. The train announcement boards show the next train, its time of arrival and where it is going underneath, ("08:24 to Waterloo, calling at ..."). My train was cancelled but this did not stop the train destinations appearing underneath, ("the 08:14 is cancelled, calling at Raynes Park, Wimbledon, ..."). Maybe I'm just a little over-sensitive to system mistakes but how could they miss this or do they simply consider it unimportant ? For the benefit of the engineers if they are reading, the following code might help, "if (cancelled){print_destinations(FALSE)}".

Which brings me finally to the Government's £50 million internet journey-planner project, <http://www.transportdirect.info/>. This really is a hoot and I strongly recommend you have a go when its not crashing. If you try any of the suggestions, make sure you pack iron rations and a sleeping bag. Typing Waterloo gave "No options found for Waterloo as station/airport". :-)

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