

Super-market but inferior-IT

I sometimes think that computer scientists should get out more and see just what kind of systems get dumped on the unsuspecting public.

I accompanied my wife to the local supermarket this week to act as chief trolley pusher. As usual, I was catatonic by the time we reached the check-out but then things brightened up no end. Every time the check-out lady entered a product with a price reduction on it, (lots of them if you shop late as we were), she had to rip off the price reduction bar-code to reveal hopefully what was left of the original bar-code underneath and read that. The price reduction bar-codes were always stuck over the original bar-code and appeared to use super-glue. Nowadays I can smell an IT system fiasco a 100 miles away upwind (its a calling) so I had a chat with the check-out lady to find out why.

The price-reduction bar-code (a big red label) only has the old price and the new price on it, both bar-coded and in numbers, but they do not have the product code. However, their check-outs can only read the normal product bar-code so they have to carefully remove the price reduction bar-code from on top of the original product bar-code so that the check-out reader can still read it and then they have to code in the new price by hand to over-write the old price. If they damage the product code underneath, they have to enter the numbers in by hand or more frequently send somebody to get another one. Another bar-code system elsewhere in the store can read the price reduction bar-code but not the product bar-code. The bottom line with this is that if there are lots of special offers, things go at snails pace. In fact this is how I noticed it because I could keep up bagging easily whereas earlier in the day when there are no special offers I normally finish up crushed beneath a huge mound of groceries at the end of the check-out to much hilarity.

After discovering that it had been like this for a long time, the check-out ladies and myself started discussing what a suitable punishment would be for the programmers who built this Heath Robinson system. They all thought that a month on the check-outs without breaks would do the trick.

Which brings me nicely to junk of the month. I have previously chronicled the wilfully erratic behaviour of my television freeview box and its penchant for freezing completely every few hours requiring it to be unplugged for 30 seconds whilst it recovered. Having something of a masochistic nature, I bought a replacement this week. My short-lived joy at finding BBC4 for the first time, (which I thought was a folk myth like the South Circular Road in London), rapidly changed to depression when after 5 minutes it invited me to update its software. I did, it hung, corrupted itself and has not worked since. I returned it to find I was not alone. Sigh.

I know its probably just me but can't we make systems just a teeny little bit better than this. Just for a change. Please.

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