

A Revolution in Fantasy? (unabridged)

One of the most striking characteristics of new technology is its lack of imagination. Many people will protest: “But look at the new cellular phones! Look at the plasma screens! Look at the DVD players! Look at the iPod, the Palm Pilot!” (or similar personal assistants). Well, let’s take a look. The Nokia cellular phone costing \$20,000 is made of platinum. Five minutes of excitement. After that, it is still only a cumbersome, inconvenient telephone that some people take with them, even to the bathroom. Let’s face it, after billions of dollars and euros were spent on air—radio spectrum, that is—the most people do with their cellular phones is to send photos from one to another, photos that more often than not are as unmemorable as the technology used to capture them. And at a price impossible to justify. I will never forget my colleagues, *Dick and Doof* (or were they T&T?), trying to convince their students that they knew what computers are: the cellular phone, the Palm, even PowerPoint were part of their routine. They were all set to add their own mediocrity to the world of boring new-tech gadgets. Quite frankly, a child displays more fantasy than the “great” designers and technologists behind the newest gadgets. Children take the simplest shapes and invent a world of fantasy not equaled even by the new “factories” of special effects in Hollywood, Berlin, or New Zealand.

Do I want to demonize new technology? To speak it down? By no means. I am part and parcel of the technological revolution, and I do not state what I state with a light heart. It hurts. My students in Germany and in many other countries know that I am an enthusiast of this age, but not one blinded by its deceptive spectacular appearance, rather one that is willing to state that despite all the promise of new technology, we—professionals and consumers—continue to settle for the lowest common denominator. “Idiot-proof”—the great adjective used by those working in human-computer interaction—means what the words say: For idiots. Ourselves included—the scientists, technologists, designers, and marketing people who are not willing to raise the stakes, or at least point out that the emperor’s new clothing don’t cover his nakedness.

For all practical purposes, I could consider that my contribution to *Living at Work for changeX* ends here. But I am only at the beginning of my article. With the real question to be posed when facing such a blatant shortage of fantasy: “Why?” This is the most intriguing question ever invented and which we generally leave to children. As we grow farther from our own childhood, we hide behind the “What?” and “How?” that make up our identity. “What” tells the world something about our trade, and “How” says something about what we, afraid of competition, reluctantly share with others.

So, why is technology as we experience it so boring? Where is our fantasy? Our imagination? Playfulness? Is it cheaper to settle for the lowest common denominator? More effective? More rewarding? More profitable? Had that been the case, Picasso would have been as well known as you or I, Beethoven forgotten, Schönberg erased from the archives of even the people who hated his identity (but who never listened to his music). All the poets, from Homer to Hölderlin to Yannis Ritsos, and all the writers, from Cervantes to Chekhov to Borges and Nadine Gordimer would at best be mentioned as a “No-no” example by teachers eager to have their students pass the exam authorizing the latter to produce MTV programs and computer games. Or run cellular phone companies rushing to sell information about pizza parlors (or other parlors) around the corner or the next eBay auction.

Is there a reason why technology finds itself in this desolate state of idea shortage and fantasy deficit? Some will argue that market pressure is the culprit: You need to sell so many products that it is better to have all the idiots and their sisters buy them. (On credit, idiocy is even better: it makes many other businesses happier.) I, for one, refuse this argument. Industrial society lived on the model of one-to-many. It was effective, but it maintained a leveling mediocrity of human education, lifestyle, product quality, healthcare . . . you name it. The post-industrial age, that is, the age of the digital, of networks, is an age of extreme individualism—provided that forces contrary to such individual unfolding do not counteract the process.

At this juncture, the reader might be (finally!) perplexed: Boring new technology, but so much promise? “Why?” is the question I hope you are asking yourself. Let’s face it. The lack of fantasy did not hit designers, engineers, and computer scientists overnight. The process was started some time back. Its

consequences are being felt not just in technological development, but also in education, healthcare, and other areas of human activity. The lack of fantasy can be traced back to government policies, which display no imagination at all, no willingness to make an effort at daring, at the exceptional. Take retirement benefits. There is less work available in offices and skilled professions, and, for reasons I shall soon address, there will be even less. But the government's response is: Extend the work age, have people work past 65 if they want a decent retirement. Nobody calls the government's bluff because nobody realizes the absurdity (not to say ineffectiveness) of such measures. Take a look at another government sphere of control: education. Boring bis es geht nicht mehr! Long years of one's youth wasted in learning things—such as Latin—pertinent to the past, but totally irrelevant today, and even more irrelevant for tomorrow. Or look at the office—it makes no difference whose: Joschka Fischer's, designed with the aid of virtual reality technology, or the offices in which employees at banks, factories, government agencies, and cultural establishments work. Fantasy is excluded by law. Government regulates square meters, air quality (conditioned, of course), light, noise levels. Consider work itself—in an office or wherever else—nothing but a monotonous exercise in repetitive tasks controlled in detail by laws and regulations.

“Why?” was my question. Because a long time ago, admirable scientists proclaimed that all that exists can be reduced to a machine. Are Descartes and La Mettrie, and all the others who preached the new religion of determinism and reductionism guilty of the fact that we now face a technological development that castrates fantasy and chokes imagination? By no means. Descartes made expressive drawings to illustrate his ideas, and La Mettrie had a sharp tongue in attacking those not willing to see the human being as nothing more than a machine. Today, we hire professors (and agencies) to make PowerPoint presentations for idiots, and ghost writers to put in writing ideas that reflect opinion polls, not deep convictions, not even unavoidable truths. The machine metaphor became an obsession. How can one make sure that an accountant, secretary, personnel manager, or company president performs as predictably and precisely as a machine? They are trained, given technology to automate some of their tasks (adding, subtracting, typing letters), and their performance is measured on the quantity of their output. What they can say and do and think is regulated. And since this all comes about through the consensus of governments, owners, and unions, the human being ends up reduced to a machine. And here is the catch: the expensive “human being reduced to a machine” can indeed be replaced by a machine. And will be. And this machine will be produced in some part of the world where labor is even cheaper. The training of software developers from India who replace the expensive programmers from the USA, Germany, and England is carried out exactly by the people who will lose their jobs as a result of this equation.

I have already stated that, within the reductionist machine model, there is less work available, and even less down the road. This holds true for everything boring, repetitive, lacking fantasy, normed to the extreme. Even if governments were to require that people work until they reach the age of 70 years, or 80, this would not change the very simple equation of the West's industrial model: The broader the base of the social pyramid is, the more means are available to satisfy social expectations. And expectations are growing! One yearly vacation abroad? Why not two? One car? Why only one? And bigger. Cosmetic operations are no longer a luxury, but a right; so is access to digital television, to the Internet, to medical care for your pet. There is no limit to expectations. And since someone has to pay for all we desire, the pyramid of taxpaying citizens should be broad enough to keep up with an aging population, higher expectations in education and healthcare, national and international stability.

What does this have to do with the fact that new technology is boring? For those readers who have not yet perceived the connection by now, I will spell out the logic: Those in charge have taken the industrial machine model that ensures uniformity, instead of stimulating distinctions that lead to the exceptional. The result is that there is little work left for people who have accepted to “work” like machines. (Remember Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times*?) Although unemployment rates are heading up, try to find someone competent to fix your plumbing or electricity, your car, your television set, your cellular phone; try to find a doctor who will take time to listen as you describe your pain or discomfort. Doctors have an average of seven minutes for a patient, regardless of whether the patient has a headache or cancer, a scratch or a hemorrhage in the brain. It is a paradoxical situation. We want—but we do not want to pay for—what is individualized, creative. We find it too expensive and settle for mediocre mechanics. And what is mechanizable is eventually taken over by machines, and we are treated like machines in turn. We don't like it, no matter how much we have been conditioned to homogeneity. The citizen turns out to be the

product of a machine—for some reason called democracy—that guarantees uniformity, euphemistically called “equal rights.” The result is a society in which there is no individual left. And fewer and fewer cast their votes.

Living beings by their nature are infinitely diverse. This is what makes each encounter with another human being so exciting, so promising. The machine is predictable, repetitive, and limited to its scope. This is why machines, no matter how advanced they are, no matter how well designed, will never be as exciting as the living. In the age of the digital, we can overcome the limitations of the deterministic reduction to the machine. We can stimulate individuality, distinction, uniqueness. Machines embody our understanding of the world as a sequence of cause-and-effect; in short, as an expression of action-reaction. The living reacts also, but the living has the additional attribute of anticipation—of danger, pleasure, laughter, surprise, creativity.

Imagine the free unfolding of differences: no longer one product designed for everyone, one office system for all, a life regulated by another’s definition of what is best. As opposed to the society based on the industrial model, this prospect is achievable in the new context of science and technology. What prevents this from coming about is the lack of fantasy on the part of society, and the stubborn defense of the industrial model by those who profit the most from it—or believe they do.

Indeed, we will work less, in the traditional sense of the word. The reproduction of our work ability is already guaranteed by automation. This is why human work will have to be creative. This is the only thing that renders the human being irreplaceable by machines. The individualized, custom-made product is the future, not mass production of boring gadgets that lack fantasy and which will disappear even faster than they appeared. Once we reach this level, the immense territory of fantasy and imagination will open up. If you do not believe this, if you do not understand how and why this has to happen, you are getting, and will continue to get, exactly what you deserve. If, on the contrary, you are prepared to let your creativity come to expression—everyone is talented, but for something else—then what to me seems to be a necessary development will accelerate: a democracy living by the credo “Vive la différence!” and not by the slogans of equality falsely understood and which settled at a level of common mediocrity that the mediocre call democracy. A revolution of fantasy? Why not? If we need a label for everything, this one can do. A creative journalist or an inspirational speaker can use it as a motivational slogan. For me, the age I describe here is one of the free unfolding of the individual in the context of a society that knows it will find its last best resources in human creativity.

For German text, go to: http://www.changex.de/d_a01603.html

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