

Never mind machines getting cleverer – is technology making me stupider?

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On New Year's Eve I watched *The Matrix* for the first time. I appreciate I'm late to the party on this one but I thought it jolly clever. And a bit worrying, obviously. The fear of artificially intelligent beings turning on us – be it by taking all our jobs off us, or tearing us limb from limb, or both – is widely held. I think it will happen, but not quite in the way that's been assumed. It will happen not so much because artificial intelligence becomes more and more intelligent, but rather because it's making us more stupid with every year that passes.

I base this conclusion on a study I've been conducting. There is a cohort of one: me. It concerns an ostensibly indispensable function I recently discovered on my Apple watch. I had owned the thing for three years before I found this feature, which is evidence enough of my mental slowness. It works like this: if I'm unable to recall where I left my phone, I can merely press a button on the watch that makes the phone play a jaunty tune and reveal its location.

As an Olympic-standard mislayer of things, this felt like the most useful appliance of science since daily disposable contact lenses were invented. I considered how many times a day I couldn't find my phone and, with the ringer invariably off, how many hours I would spend looking for it. All that wasted time I could now reclaim. I found myself actually looking forward to losing it.

Sure enough, before long I was pressing my watch's phone-find-rescue button and overjoyed to hear it dinging away. Oh, how good it felt to be alive at this time; I would have made a rotten caveman with no button to press to make my hunting club ding to reveal where I'd gone and left it.

At first the dinging would be distant. Oh, silly me, left it in the bedroom, I'd say. Or: there you are, in my coat in the wardrobe. But over time the dings have come closer and closer. Frequently, they are so close they make me – and the dog – jump. The phone is often right under my nose. It seems to me that this technology has eroded my already poor faculty for phone-finding. It has gone the same way as my once great ability to navigate without satnav and even turn a bathroom light on at night (mine comes on automatically; don't judge me). Also, when I walk away from my partner's car with the key in my pocket it automatically locks itself. Already – and I don't even drive it that often – the must-lock-the-car facility on my mental hard drive has been all but erased. When I walk away after driving any other car now, not least my own, I invariably leave it unlocked. None of this is going to end well.

If, God forbid, I press the find-phone button and it turns out the Bluetooth is off, I feel something close to panic: the chances of finding the non-dinging phone feel close to zero. Despair reigns. And the cruel irony is that, in the end, the phone-finding miracle on my wrist isn't even saving any time. The awareness that I can find the phone at the press of button appears to have made me even worse at hanging on to it. In all, I'm pretty sure I now spend more time seeking out my dinging phone than in the days before I couldn't ding it at all. Last night, a new low was reached: having mislaid a glass of wine, I found myself reaching for my watch to press the "Where's my wine?" button which, at the time of writing, hasn't been invented.

Long before the machines get too clever for us, we'll all be too stupid for words. The Matrix 2050 is going to be a right dreary watch: rows of bored-out-of-their minds robots watching us zombies lumber around looking for stuff we can't find. We must call a halt to the development of these dangerously useful apps before it's too late. But before we do that, perhaps they might squeeze in three final ones for me: LocateMySpecs, WhereIsMyWallet and FindMyMarbles.

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