Minimum Viable Technology

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This blog post deals with the idea of **Minimum Viable Technology**, one of the most important basic concepts that governs the wider application of positive constraints. ...

Introduction

Technology is there to solve the little problems of existence and support us in our lives. There's a lot of amazing tech out there and it's easy to get sucked into saying yes to every little advance, whether it's needed or not.

Technology solves problems. That's good. But when the problem is solved, I think we should stop there. Paying for something when I haven't got any cash on me is a mild inconvenience, but my debit card solves it with little fuss. Saving a further twenty seconds at the checkout is simply not a problem that I have.

In fact, far from being a problem solved, shaving seconds from that interaction is actually a bad thing. Solving problems that aren't problems will always have consequences. In this case, it alienates us a little further from the people who serve us our Meal Deals.

I'm far from being against all technology (he says, publishing this on the vast interconnected technologies of the internet), but I do think we should always use the **minimum viable technology** for a task. In other words, we should use the most basic tools that will still get the job well done.

The Main Benefits

The more basic the technology, generally speaking, the greater the skills you must learn and deploy.

For example, motorists who grew up in the 40s, 50s and 60s had to become semi-skilled mechanics in order to keep their cars on the road. Modern motorists have no such need. In fact, car manufacturers deliberately make their technology unhackable, so that you *must* go back to the approved dealer for expensive repairs.

The same is true of modern computers. You used to have to understand the fundamentals of programming to use a PC properly. Nowadays, user interfaces have evolved to the point where the internal workings of your computer are shrouded in mystery. When something goes wrong, the user is clueless and open to exploitation.

Of course, for many people, myself included, this ease of use is a good thing. But ease of use and incomprehending dependence are two completely different things.

Dependence is hierarchical and undemocratic, concentrating knowledge and power in the hands of the few. It reminds me of the worst excesses of medieval religion, where divine forgiveness was sold to the layman by a corrupt hierarchy of priests.

The Hidden Benefits

Using the minimum viable technology for a task often has hidden benefits. For example, writing long hand on paper is important to cognitive development in children, helps you learn by combining visual, motor and brain processing, could make us more creative and stave off mental decline as we get older. Not bad for something that is so obviously "backward" in this screen-filled age.

These hidden benefits apply to almost every positive constraint that I've experimented with: No Hot Showers, No Mobile Phone, No Supermarket.

The Tool is not the Task

In our search for the most efficient technology, we forget that 99% of a task is not about the tools we use.

- **Cleaning yourself** is not about power showers, hot water tanks or expensive shampoos; it's about water and scrubbing. Jumping into a lake would do it.

- **Communication** is not about 4G, wifi or GSM; it's about talking to other human beings. Like the ones you see on the train every morning.

- **Grocery shopping** isn't about foil-packed for freshness, 138 different varieties of soup or self-service checkouts; it's about building a strong and healthy relationship to your food and the people who supply that food. You find that at your local greengrocer, not in the aisles of a supermarket warehouse.

The Best Things in Life are Simple

Using the minimum viable technology reminds us that the best things in life are not complicated.

There is nothing that gives me greater pleasure than pulling on a pair of walking shoes (my minimum viable technology for travel without blisters), slinging a small backpack over my shoulder (MVT for basic food and camping gear), walking out into the sunset, sleeping the night on a hilltop in my bivvy bag (MVT for sleeping) and waking to the warming glow of the sunrise.

I don't need much more than that. Anything else is a luxury and distracts from the task at hand: exploring the corners of the life I have been given.

Technology is there to support us *when we need it*, not to be taken for granted. When the support falls away – and it will one day – will you be able to stand on your own two feet?