

The Black Box Gets Bigger

by Bluebird, February 2017



I'm pretty sure my dog could survive in the wild if he needed to. It's part of why his breed appealed to me: they're genetically robust. They're little house wolves. He's a good problem solver, navigates streets and trails well, and he's a picky eater. This means he doesn't get tangled up or stuck in things, he doesn't overeat or get into things he shouldn't. He's low-maintenance; self-sufficient. But he also knows when to come to me for help. One of my favorite puppy memories is when he came to me with a Milkbone lodged perfectly in the roof of his mouth. It's something he couldn't fix himself — he couldn't even express the problem. I was only able to solve it by knowing his face well enough to notice his mouth was the tiniest bit askew. It was a serious bonding moment for both of us.

There are plenty of ways we can apply lessons from the domestication of animals to the anthropomorphization of technology, but I want to focus on this one: fixing technology helps us bond with it.



We used to have a more intimate relationship with our cars because there were more parts for drivers to touch. I've changed tires and bulbs, checked oil and fuses ... but I never got to do that 60s movie thing of fixing a fan belt with the leather belt I wore with my jeans for years just in case. That's because cars are better now. I can barely drive a stick for the same reason. I love the idea and challenge of a standard transmission, but there's no denying that cars are better at shifting themselves. I'd just be trading safety for pride. So instead of moving back towards the Model Fords, with an air intake valve on the dashboard, let's look forward to how AI can help *us* help *it*.

Though cars have fewer touchable parts now, they have just as many consumable parts. I have to just trust the mechanic that tells me I need some new filter. Why doesn't my car tell me? I'd like a car that teaches me to be a better owner.

This is especially important now, as we transition from drivers to owners. People keep their cars for decades, entrusting their lives — it's a very pet-like relationship. As our cars gain AI, we should design them to exchange information with their owner as seamlessly as they learn from the engine.

Fig. 2.

