

YOU GO CLICK

“BEEP BOOP”  
THE LIFE OF A  
PROTOCOL DROID

by Leo Alder racing to Aisle 5A

After a couple of months on the easy beat of Centrelink, my appointed job advisor informed me that tomorrow I was being sent with some of my other Centrelink compatriots to a Coles affiliated three-day 'how to make a good impression' course, to see if we had what it takes to pass a job interview. There, after three days of basic literacy and numeracy tests, plus a test to make sure we knew how to pick up a box, I found myself in a job interview, and a couple of minutes into that, I found I was now a man with a job.

That's not to say I was now doing what most people consider to be the archetypical supermarket job — that of the rugged and independent shelf packer, no. Instead I was to be the human extension of a machine, completely beholden to its wants and desires, equal parts an engine and a grabby crane.

The Coles I was at does home deliveries, and since any place that offers its entire inventory for the purchasing pleasure of the denizens of the online world needs actual physical flesh to run around picking the products up, that's what I was to do.

But this isn't your grandpappy's supermarket in which employees would run around with a list and a basket, this is the future baby, in which a machine does all the thinking for you.

What this entails is a large trolley with room for eight crates, on the top of which is attached a tablet that accepts only your employee number and your undivided devotion. Each crate is given a printed ticket which represents one person's order. On this ticket is their first initial and their surname, which is just enough to construct elaborate fantasies on who these people are and why they're buying ten Mars Bars (obviously relationship trouble), as well as a barcode which tells the

machine what stuff they've ordered. It then quickly computes the best path through the store to pick it all up. However, in this new fast paced world, everything is timed and this job is arguably more timed than any other. Your tablet computer master has a constantly ticking timer that measures your pick rate, and gets to increasingly angrier shades of colour the longer you take.

It's not a gentle pick rate either, it is undoubtedly the maximum possible speed the eggmen at Coles HQ have decided the average employee can function at, if of course they are a paragon of speed and efficiency, completely in sync with their robotic counterpart. In reality, however, this doesn't really equate to the real world with humans and machines living in symbiosis, instead it feels more like the tablet is the harsh taskmaster and I but its bumbling slave.

“Find me ‘Generibrand Suncream Lotion: Ultra-rare edition’ it'll scream, and I'll book it over to aisle whatever, manoeuvring this hefty trolley with the necessary reckless abandon required to appease the rigorous time constraints of an uncaring machine and constantly aware of the new direction my life would probably take were a small unknowing child to suddenly step out from behind a shelf. At the location it'll show me a picture of the product if one is on record, as well as its supposed location.

However, this information is so often incorrect, or a customer has moved stuff around, that most of the time is spent frantically going shelf to shelf playing some timed version of a consumeristic eye-spy puzzle. Since it is sometimes unclear exactly what it wants, a lot of time is spent just showing it barcode after barcode as it rejects the various similar products I've found.

I always imagine it chastising me, “No, not the 500ml sauce IDIOT, the 750ml one.”

Worse is when the machine demands a product completely outside of my limited knowledge of the shopping world.

I've lost track of the times I've spent trapped in the feminine hygiene aisle, staring slack-jawed in disbelief at the sheer amount of seemingly minute variations of a product so far outside



AND THE TROLLEYS GO CLACK

of my understanding that I don't know how to even begin looking for it. Or the one customer who wanted a ludicrously specific colour of brown hair colouring, in a long aisle of rows upon rows of indentikit smiling white women with minutely different brown hair colour, forcing me to search desperately for the one featuring light cappuccino with hints of chestnut or something.

Worse still is when I can't find something, but the customer has indicated that they will allow for a substitution when often there is never a clearcut example of equivalency. I'm sorry Mrs Johnson, I don't know what your baby likes to eat. Is Custard and Ham flavour equivalent to Peas and Quail Egg? Is your wee babe a picky eater or will they accept any slop?

The vast majority of the time I don't feel equipped to make these judgments, and the temptation to simply hit that 'no appropriate sub' button is always there. Would that decision doom a baby to go hungry? I have no idea, but I always end up wasting precious time trying to make the complex moral decisions that the computer never has to worry about.



It's not all a slog though. The best part of the shopping run is when I hit that sweet promised land, the chip aisle.

You better believe I can locate and bag every flavour of chip with military accuracy, as it seems all the time spent systematically poring over every possible flavour of chip throughout my life wasn't all for naught.

Unfortunately no matter how fast I go, no matter how much I bend that

damned machine to my will and feed its gluttonous appetite for product, sometimes it's all meaningless. A lot of the collecting is part of a service that allows people to order their stuff online, and then come and pick it up bagged and ready in the store, which is what most of the morning is spent collecting for. But if they don't come and get it by a certain time, we don't hold onto it, so the evening is spent just putting it all back.

All those moral quandaries, victoriously found hidden items, everything, all put back onto the shelves. Digging holes and filling them back up again. I wonder if the machine ever gets disillusioned with it all.

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