

Cars, Trains, and Computers

“Since the computer is limited to handling only so much experience as can be abstracted in symbolic or numerical form, it is incapable of dealing directly, as organisms must, with the steady influx of concrete, unprogrammable experience.” —Lewis Mumford (1963)

At about 7 p.m. on Wednesday, January 2, 2008, the organism looking at the computer was Bo Bai, a computer technician from Silicon Valley. Bo was in Bedford Hills, N.Y., coming home from a consulting job, and the computer was the GPS in his rental car. He was heading toward the Saw Mill River Parkway, and the system had just told him to turn right. The authoritative advice was correct, actually, but just a little premature—about 100 feet too soon.

In the darkness, the two lanes that Bo turned onto weren't the Parkway heading north but rather the parallel railroad tracks of the Metro-North Harlem Division line. The global positioning system showed no sign of understanding the jam it had gotten Bo into. It was still busy “with the steady influx of concrete, unprogrammable experience,” assuming now that they were humming along the Parkway, that much closer to home.

Bo, however, had dealt with the data he was receiving, and he was frantically trying to reverse the decision, and the 2006 Ford Focus, to somehow get off the tracks. His efforts only managed to wedge the rental into an unmovable position, plotted-in coordinates appropriate for a thunderous and fiery end as a GPS crash dummy. The evening commuters, 500 of them on one train, were on their way.

With no hope of escaping the final coordinates, Bai got out of the car, and, as Metro-North spokesperson



Artist's interpretation of
GPS satellite

Dan Brucker told the press later, “He tried to stop the train by waving his arms, which apparently was not totally effective in slowing the train.”

The impact was at about 60 miles per hour, and the compact burst into flames as it was shoved, screeching, 100 feet down the track. Fortunately, neither Bai nor any of the 500 passengers on the train was injured.

The final reckoning for the wrong right turn was estimable. Bo Bai was issued a summons for obstructing a railway crossing, but, worse than that, he and the rental company were now responsible for more than \$100,000, including damage to the train and 200 feet of electrified rail as well as the loss of revenue as three trains were canceled at New York's Grand Central Station and buses had to be hired to get the passengers at the scene home.

Spokesman Brucker summed it up. “[It was] one computer brain listening to another.”

Fortunately for the techie, the only memory that got erased that night was that of the GPS. ■