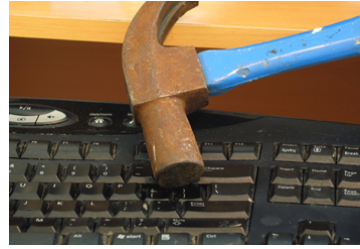


## *From the Kitchen*

6 January 2010

Wasting time on the Internet seems to be a part of modern life. I'm not talking about games or social networks or Googling one's own name. I'm peeved about forced time-wasting, struggling with badly-designed web sites. There is no excuse for this (the bad design, not the bad mood).



I recently spent a fruitless two-and-a-half hours on a site, trying to buy, download and install a European map on a GPS for someone about to travel there. The best way to describe the experience is to liken it to visiting a building designed by morons.

As I entered through the front door, the building supervisor knew I was from Australia (was it the flag on my jacket?) and gave me one choice: a door leading to the Australian maps department. I tried the doors to various European map sales but each one led me straight back to Australian maps.

After frustratingly trying a whole row of doors, I found I could place a chock in the 'Netherlands' door and, in the shaft of light this let through, find an unmarked door which led me to the sales counter for European maps. Daan 1 : morons 0.

I ordered a map of Western Europe. I was asked for my GPS model. I gave it. I was given a choice of maps. I chose the Western Europe one. I was asked for my GPS model. I gave it. I was given a choice of ... After more than five rounds of this, I found an alternative way of expressing the model number. I was given a choice of ... I chose ... I was given a price. I paid. I was given no map but, instead, was told to go down the corridor to be issued with an installation program. I did this. Daan 2 : morons 0.

With the installation program in hand I returned to the sales counter. I asked for my map. I was told that the map I'd bought was not for my GPS model – it must have been for a different model. Which model? The salesperson couldn't tell me.

I was €69 down, had no map and no known way of obtaining it. Daan 0 : morons ∞.

I consoled myself by wasting the next few hours Googling my name and the names of people I know and checking who was following my non-existent posts on Twitter.

I asked myself whether I'd learned anything from all this. The only thing I could think of was that it confirmed for me that there are still 'developers' out there who have no idea how real people interact with web sites. If the design does not lead to intuitive use, it's a *bad* design.

While computers and software and the internet and email are wonderful tools, they can also lead me to wish nostalgically for a quill and an abacus. I'm thinking of building a dovecote and buying a flock of carrier pigeons.

Actually, nostalgia leads me to remember an incident in London, in 1978, when I worked there as a residential social worker. I needed to order stationery for our unit but I'd run out of order forms. On the phone I was told that I'd need to come in and get a pad of order forms.

Down in the bowels of a government building was a counter supervised by a shrunken old man who looked decades past retirement age. "You'll need an order form." I explained that that was precisely what I'd come to obtain, as I didn't have one. Could I please have a pad of fifty? "You'll need an order form." I explained again. "You'll need ..."

On one end of the counter lay a pristine pad of forms. I tore one off, filled it in for a pad of forms and slid it over to the man. He was close to apoplectic in response to my audacity. Eventually he stomped off, as he now had a valid, completed form. After a long absence, he returned and slapped a pad of forms down. I nonchalantly swapped it for the pad I'd ravaged earlier.

I filled in a form for the required stationery, tore it off and handed it over. The poor man had his mouth moving wordlessly, his eyes moving from pad to pad. What magic had I invoked to obtain a pad of forms without a form? Clearly, his previously unsullied pad lay there, again unsullied.

I'm now sitting here at a café table with my dog panting at my feet, writing all this by hand, hoping the latest technology doesn't let me down when it comes to getting all this uploaded to where you can read it and shake your head at my depressing diatribe. Or, maybe, you'll commiserate because you can relate to my pain.

'Hit any key to continue' can sometimes take on a whole new meaning.