

Dialog



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People totally immersed in convenience grow weak Considering the Benefit of Inconvenience

People have long loathed inconvenience. But isn't it possible that a certain kind of joy can be obtained from inconvenience itself, from the fact that something requires a little extra effort? What do humans have to offer as a result of their pursuit of efficiency? This conversation between Hiroshi Kawakami and Toshihiro Hiraoka, researchers in the "benefit of inconvenience," or Fuben-Eki, attempts to reaffirm the appeal behind the benefits surrounding inconvenience.

Photos/Shingo Shiokawa Interviews and Text/Shiori Ito (JQR)



But I've never felt inconvenienced by not having one...



Professor, Unit of Design, Kyoto University

Hiroshi Kawakami

Hiraoka: Professor Kawakami, your specialty is artificial intelligence, isn't it? How did that lead you to explore the subject of inconvenience?

Kawakami: It all began when I first started as a (then) assistant professor at Kyoto University, and Professor Katai, who ran the lab at the time, told me that the benefit of inconvenience, or what we call Fuben-Eki, was a subject whose time was coming.

H: So you gave up artificial intelligence?

K: No, no. I haven't exactly given it up, but the benefit of inconvenience just seems so much more interesting than trying to replicate human intelligence with machines, don't you think?

H: When I was a student, I also did research in artificial intelligence under Professor Katai, so I kind of had a sense of the benefit of inconvenience even before there was a term for it. Later, though, I moved on to studying controls.

K: When you first came back to the university after having worked at a company, weren't you studying controls for automated driving systems for cars?

H: That's right.

K: How did you end up shifting to your current field of research?

H: I gradually moved from studying automated driving to researching driver assistance systems. I guess for a car enthusiast like me, a car that drives itself just isn't a real car! (Laughs) As I pursued that research, I thought it would be a waste if all the system did

was send out information. At the same time, I also wondered if, with a little creativity, we could get the system to send out the right information that would allow drivers to drive better by thinking for themselves and putting in a little effort.

K: That's exactly what we mean by Fuben-Eki.

H: I think there must be some way to use driver assistance systems to encourage drivers to feel that driving safely or more ecologically can be fun. To do that, we need some kind of hook to get them to try the system, and then a way to keep them using it without turning drivers off.

K: So the important thing is to get the driver to feel some attachment to the system, even if it's a little more trouble to use.

This is not just nostalgia for the "good old days."

H: Fuben-Eki research starts by asking "Are we seeing more things in the world that are convenient, but which may also be harmful?" What I'd like to emphasize is that this not simply nostalgia, a call to return to a more inconvenient past. Our aim is strictly to regain certain benefits by adding new inconvenience. We don't reject out of hand things that are both convenient and positive.

K: No, no. That kind of thinking is what we call the "Fuben-Eki right wing." Those of us on the left would actually

prefer to use something inconvenient, and then try to find some benefit in it.

H: Well I guess that's where we differ—I actually enjoy convenience. (Laughs)

K: Our goal is to build a system design theory that addresses the question of where and how we can make existing systems less convenient, while gaining benefit from them. Recently, we've been trying to codify Fuben-Eki using symbolic logic. The effort is still underway, but things have gotten interesting.

A talented group comes together to study Fuben-Eki

H: It seems people from a wide variety of fields have gotten interested in Fuben-Eki lately.

K: Not just engineering, but architecture, psychology and even Buddhists.

H: And all of those fields rely on having a user—the involvement of people.

K: That said, I'd hate for people to think Fuben-Eki is the same as ergonomics. Many of the "EKI" (benefits) in Fuben-Eki aren't something that can be expressed in numbers.

H: That's because the "EKI" in Fuben-Eki represents things we gain in taking the trouble to use an object—a sense of happiness, or fun—and for the most part, they're subjective.

K: In other words, you only get out of it what you put in, an idea that has much

in common with learning situations. For example, the vocabulary you worked hardest to memorize stays with you the longest.

H: You stop thinking of things as convenient; I suppose that's the whole point of something being convenient, but it really weakens a person's ability to think.

K: If something's inconvenient, it forces you to actively think about what you're doing. The process of trial and error turns out to be a good stimuli for the brain.

K: That said, it's not easy coming up with a new Fuben-Eki system. That's why one of our students devised these Fuben-Eki cards. They consist of two types: 12 Fuben-Eki Principle cards and eight Benefit cards. The Fuben-Eki Principle cards indicate what should be done to make a system inconvenient. The Benefit cards, meanwhile, show what kind of benefit might be gained in doing so.

H: The pictograms on the cards are really evocative. I always found it frustrating to try to describe Fuben-Eki to someone who knows nothing about it. These cards are great because you can get a general understanding of Fuben-Eki with just a glance.

K: The way these are used is first you use a Fuben-Eki Principle card to try to make an existing system inconvenient. Next, you use the cards to consider what kind of benefit could be gained from using that now-inconvenient system. Try using them in that order