Task 12: Speculative Futures (Mandatory task)

The Future Store

It was late afternoon in the year 2035, and the small general store on the corner of Maple and Fifth bustled with its usual rhythm. Despite the decade's relentless march of progress, this store had resisted the tide of digital registers, automated checkouts, and AI-driven inventory systems. Its owner, Mr. Alvarez, believed in the tactile honesty of handwritten receipts, mental arithmetic, and shelves stocked by human hands. Customers appreciated the quaintness, though many found it inconvenient compared to the sleek, technology-saturated shops elsewhere.

On this particular day, the store's attendance was unusually high. A sudden storm had driven people indoors, and the flickering of the old fluorescent lights hinted at trouble. The crowd murmured, waiting for their turn at the counter, when the inevitable happened: the light went out completely. The store was plunged into a dim hush, broken only by the sound of rain hammering against the windows.

The Argument

Among the customers were two university students, Clara and Jamal, who had stopped in to buy supplies for their study group. Clara clutched a notebook and a pack of pens, while Jamal carried a bag of chips and a bottle of juice. Mr. Alvarez, unfazed by the outage, began calculating their total by hand, scribbling numbers on a scrap of paper. He announced the sum with confidence, but Clara frowned.

"That doesn't add up," she said firmly, her voice cutting through the dim room. "The pens are three dollars, the notebook is five, and Jamal's items are four and two. That's fourteen, not sixteen."

Jamal shook his head. "No, Clara, you forgot the tax. It's ten percent. Fourteen plus ten percent is fifteen point four. He probably rounded up."

Clara crossed her arms. “But he said sixteen. That’s not rounding up, that’s miscalculating.”

The crowd shifted, some amused, others impatient. Without the glow of calculators or the certainty of digital registers, the students were forced to rely on their own reasoning. Clara insisted on recalculating aloud, breaking down each step, while Jamal countered with his own logic. Their debate grew animated, echoing through the darkened store.

The Effects of Progress

Ironically, though society had advanced in countless ways—self-driving buses outside, holographic billboards flashing in the rain—the absence of technology inside the store revealed a subtle fragility. Years of reliance on machines had dulled the sharpness of human calculation. Clara and Jamal, both bright students, struggled with basic arithmetic under pressure. Their logical reasoning faltered, tangled in approximations and forgotten steps. What once would have been second nature now felt like a puzzle.

Mr. Alvarez watched with quiet patience. He had seen this many times before: customers bewildered when stripped of their digital crutches. Progress had given humanity speed, convenience, and accuracy, but it had also eroded the confidence to reason independently. The outage was a reminder that logic, like muscle, weakens when unused.

Resolution

Finally, an older woman in line spoke up. “It’s fifteen point four. If he rounded to sixteen, that’s fair. You’re quibbling over cents.” Her calm authority silenced the students, who exchanged sheepish glances. Clara muttered an apology, Jamal shrugged, and Mr. Alvarez handed them their handwritten receipt.

As the storm raged outside, the store remained dim but steady. Attendance thinned as customers left, some chuckling at the students’ squabble. In that moment, progress seemed paradoxical: the world outside had leapt forward, yet inside the store, human reasoning revealed its fragility. The outage had illuminated more than darkness—it had exposed the quiet cost of technological dependence.

Reflection on *The Future Store*

Technology has undeniably brought tremendous benefits to contemporary society, offering speed, precision, and convenience that shape nearly every aspect of daily life. Automated systems reduce human error, digital tools support instant communication, and artificial intelligence enhances efficiency in ways previous generations could scarcely imagine. Yet, as *The Future Store* illustrates, these advancements carry subtle costs that become visible only when the systems we depend on suddenly disappear.

In the dim light of Mr. Alvarez's store, the power outage becomes more than an inconvenience it becomes a quiet revelation. Clara and Jamal, both capable university students, find themselves unable to agree on a basic calculation without the support of digital devices. Their confusion highlights a central paradox of progress: while technology strengthens society, it can simultaneously weaken foundational skills that once formed the core of everyday reasoning. This tension reflects Situation Lab's insight that "the future is a place we are creating, not just a destination we are headed toward." When we rely too heavily on machines, we may inadvertently create a future where independent thought is less common and less confident.

Mr. Alvarez's handwritten receipts and mental arithmetic stand in gentle defiance of this trend. His approach echoes another reminder from Situation Lab that the future is shaped by "the choices we make in the present." By maintaining manual practices, he preserves a space where human logic, patience, and mathematical reasoning still matter. The brief conflict in the darkened store ultimately reveals that progress, while powerful, must be balanced with deliberate efforts to sustain our cognitive strengths.

References

Situation Lab. (n.d.). *The thing from the future*. https://situationlab.org/project/the-thing-from-the-future/

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