

Controlling Your Vehicle

Have you ever had a nightmare where you are driving along a road, minding your own business and suddenly you realise the car in front has stopped? You jam your foot on the brakes, but your car keeps moving. You push down on the brake pedal with all your weight and pull up on the handbrake with all your might. Your car slows, and continues to slow down, but does not stop until... you wake up! In my youth, this fear of uncontrolled momentum, especially MY momentum, haunted my waking life as well as my dreams.

This fear was not just about momentum. I hate the feeling of someone or something controlling me or my body even now. Consequently, I have never been tempted to take recreational drugs or smoke recreational...um... smoke. I even hate anaesthetic. I fight oblivion with every ounce of my being, but barely make it to 7 (counting backwards from 10).

The need to control, especially my body, and fear of letting go which is maybe the other side of the coin, in retrospect, fed into my life choices and aspirations. For example, I had some aspirations about being a movie director or at least a video director. At the classes I attended on this subject one of the first questions the educator asked was 'Why do you want to make movies?'. It was a tough question to answer really, honestly. To be loved? To have lots of sex? That would be illegal now, scratch the concept of the 'casting couch' from the attraction of being a movie director. Damn! But the main motivation, in my heart of hearts, was because as a director you have some kind of control over the reality you are creating. It would be so nice to have this kind of control of my life; a life less stressful.

So far, the dream of making movies has yet to be realised. But I still have the habit of seeing the world as if I am watching a movie. The glasses I wear serving as a framing device. Weird, right?

Talking of weird, I have a paranoid belief that the Fates have a nasty sense of humour because the first cars I purchased, after eventually qualifying for a driving licence, all seemed to have problems with dodgy brakes. As a result, whenever I parked on any kind of incline, I had to make sure my wheels were turned into the curb and my gears were engaged because of a less than effective handbrake, or the worry that my handbrake might be less than effective (see 'dream history' above). As if to validate this fear, there were several occasions where my nightmares of uncontrolled momentum played out in reality.

Typically, the vehicle in front (in the real world) unexpectedly slows down because we have come up against some kind of traffic jam and suddenly the rehearsal I had gone through in my dreams flows through into a live performance. I try to stay within the present, but my mind is back in the dream, (or possible video I might direct one day). The muted smack of metal against metal is like a sound effect added in post-production and, fascinated, I notice how easily metal crumpled and glass shattered; CGI could make it more convincing? The repair bill(s) and the accumulation of scars on my valiant car(s) are definitely in the real world. Luckily, no humans were harmed in these productions.

Luck. I know all through history people have tried to control 'luck', through spells, amulets etc, including me. My father had quite a few theories about 'luck' and 'coincidence'. He had very bitter opinions on the debate between those who believe in free will (you control your destiny etc) and those who believe you cannot escape your fate. He was steadfastly convinced there was no freedom of choice, no control over your life. Your choices were shaped by circumstances and those circumstances were shaped by the 'powers that be'. By way of illustration, he explained the following example.

'You're driving along a road at night. There are no cars around, in fact there is very little activity at all. You are approaching an intersection. It is logical to assume that you could keep on going as it is very unlikely a car would suddenly appear at the intersection on your right or left-hand side, right? Wrong! Don't you believe it! At the precise second you arrive at that intersection there will most certainly be a car about to cross the intersection on your right. There will be no other cars in sight in any direction except for the one which has appeared to impede your progress at exactly the right moment.' He insisted that someone else is moving the pieces. The intention of this 'someone else' is to impede your progress, stop your momentum, throw a spanner in the works. Obviously not the patron saint of faulty brakes.

I tried telling him that it was all just coincidence, but he would have none of it and the strength of his opinion convinced me there might be an element of truth in his theory. Because I discovered this phenomenon of some kind of, I don't know, meddling presence with a twisted sense of humour, occurred in many forms.

For example, I live on a road which connects to the main street of the town. To walk to the shopping area, I need to turn right. Unfortunately, it is a blind corner so there is no way to see if anyone is going to appear at the corner from the right at the same time as me. Taking on board my father's Universal Law of 'same place at the same time to impede momentum' I try my best to remember to stop at the corner. Sure enough, there will be someone about to turn into my street or continue along the main street at the exact point I am about to occupy as I turn the corner. It is quite spooky how often I have avoided many potential collisions in this way.

An even more convincing example is the situation where the town planners in their infinite wisdom have placed obstacles along the sidewalk such as small trees or rubbish bins which restrict the flow of foot traffic. Whether I walk quickly or slowly there will be another person coming in the opposite direction who will reach the obstacle at exactly the same moment as me. Even worse there will be an entrance to a shop at that restricted position and a group of people will emerge at exactly the same moment as my opponent and I arrive at that common position. It is uncanny how often this happens.

Forearmed with this special knowledge, I am able to predict and plan my avoiding-possible-collisions manoeuvre. I feel at least some semblance of control over the situation in spite of the theory that someone else is moving the pieces to thwart my movement forward. Fortunately, the brakes on my body are much more reliable than those of the sad series of cars I owned in my youth.

The knowledge of this Law Of The Universe would be helpful when I work out how to block extras when setting up a shot. When I get a chance to make a movie that is. How do you direct people to create an illusion of a busy street? Now I know! Imagine how this law would pan out with a reasonable number of extras. Maybe make a flow chart? Wait, was I perhaps one of these self-same Fates in a past life? It would explain my fascination in designing how extras interact. What a scary thought.

Anyway, it is not just dodgy brakes that are an anathema to me. I hate using automatic cars. Maybe no surprise there. I rebel against the notion that the car decides what gears I should use and when I should use them. I prefer to decide when to change up from first to second and so on. Don't you? In addition, due to my past experience with randomly ineffectual brakes, it is comforting to know I can fall back on changing down the gears to stop as a plan B.

However, the choice of a manual over an automatic vehicle is taken out of my hands when hiring a car. It seems most people are preferring the easy option of learning to drive on an automatic and the car hire companies naturally pander to the majority. So when I hire a car inevitably it's an automatic and I have, like, 60 seconds to adapt as I drive out of their depot. My left leg, running on automatic, presses the nearest pedal expecting the clutch, but hitting the brake which jerks the car to a stop. The momentum of the sudden stop propels my right leg onto the accelerator jerking the vehicle forward again. Kangaroo hopping into disaster. Shudder.

It is rare I witness other people struggling to control the momentum of their vehicle. Except for the occasional kangaroo hop. However, there was one case that has been forever burned into my memory. I do not know if you have ever driven along the Princes Highway heading north towards Sydney. I am talking about the section where you pass Sydney Park and move into the dense, slow moving traffic of King Street, Newtown. Although there are two lanes of road in both directions, even though it is a major highway into the city centre of Sydney, these two lanes are reduced to one lane of traffic in each direction. That is because the lane nearest the kerb is removed from the equation to enable parking. This allows people to access the many eateries and indie bohemian establishments for which Newtown is justifiably famous.

In addition to a liberal distribution of traffic lights impeding the flow, there are jaywalkers, and cars trying to exit their parking position and squeeze into the flow or are attempting an impossible reverse park requiring a lot of see-sawing which blocks the flow of traffic completely as double yellow lines forbid overtaking. Sometimes these actions are taking place simultaneously as convenient parking spaces are as scarce as the proverbial chicken incisors. Then there are cars trying to enter the crush from the various side streets which fan out to the residential areas around King Street.

The only way these cars can enter this 'highway' from the side streets is through the good nature of one of the motorists lucky enough to be in the lane of oozing traffic. One who is patient enough to allow one more car length of space between themselves and their destination. Unfortunately, this new vehicle entering the flow of traffic will feel obligated to let someone else in, so the 'kind motorist' may well regret his polite, genteel

behaviour, as more and more vehicles enter the lane ahead of him. I speak from frustrated experience as a (normally) kind driver when I say this.

I was in the snail trail of traffic meandering slowly through the stop/go steps of moving forward when there was the inevitable car trying to merge with the ooze. I could see the young female driver obviously trying to summon the courage to enter the main flow from my left (in Australia we drive on the correct side of the road... that is...the left!). Even worse she was using her 'right hand' indicator which meant she wanted to cross my stream of traffic and enter the oncoming traffic, meaning the opposite direction. A well-nigh impossible task.

As I approached her intersection I was tossing back and forth in my mind whether to give way and allow her access to the main road. It just so happened that the movement of the oncoming traffic was somewhat freer than the lane I was in, so there were more gaps between cars for her to enter... if she timed it right.

I bit the bullet and came to a stop (at this point in my driving career my vehicle had effective brakes) and waved her through. But she didn't move. She was frantically looking from one side to the other, hesitating over whether to act. I realised she was unable to see the far lane so had no way of knowing whether or not a car was hurtling towards her on the other side. This then created a dilemma. Should I continue to keep my holding pattern, or should I say, 'you had your chance' and move forward. The cars ahead did not seem to be going anywhere soon, so I waved her on again.

I could see this was putting more pressure on to the poor girl. I could also see an older woman in the passenger seat beside her, possibly her mother, giving her advice. I felt so sorry that my action had now created increased tension and pressure for her. My good Samaritan, well intentioned, offer of help, had spawned a nightmare from which she was not going to wake up. She hesitated still, I held my position still, and waved her on one more time, fully intending that this was to be her last chance.

Then she moved.

What I had expected her to do was to move cautiously into my line of traffic and gradually nose her way into the oncoming traffic once she had a better line of sight. That would have been my script if I were the director. What she actually did was to explode out of the side street, across my lane and into the path of an oncoming car which arrived at the exact spot she was planning to occupy at the same instant (see universal law of stopping momentum). As I drove forward into the space she had just shot through I looked in horror into my rear view mirror (which operated as a movie screen) watching the disaster that unfolded. A disaster I had set in motion. Her vehicle did not stop. The momentum from the impact of the oncoming car (with the muted smack of metal against metal) spun her around ninety degrees. Her vehicle mounted the sidewalk and continued towards the red brick walls of a small old-fashioned gas station which brought the momentum of her vehicle to a sudden stop (with muted smack of metal against brick).

My lane of traffic had started to move. I craned my neck to see if everyone was ok. Should I stop and see if I could render any assistance? After all I felt responsible. But the

traffic was moving me away from the scene of disaster and the parking spaces were all fully occupied. As far as I can tell nobody was injured. My last glimpse was of mother and daughter, sitting, upright and stunned. I can only imagine what this incident did to the poor girl's driving confidence not to mention her relationship with the woman beside her.

As Newtown is a built-up area, the speed limit is low. Consequently, the oncoming car was not travelling very fast. I consoled myself with this. But the sight of her white car, charging out from the side street, totally out of control, into the path of the oncoming car, then the crumpled whirling white car heading into the red brick wall, and the sinking churning feeling in of guilt in my stomach, will always be in the back of my mind whenever I consider allowing someone to enter the main stream of traffic from a side street.

That was many years ago. I live in Melbourne now and have entered a love affair with the city's public transport (PT) system, especially the trams. I enjoy the slow controlled speed and the structure of stopping at specific places. The 86 tram is particularly useful, taking me through all the inner suburbs, some just as bohemian and indie and with just as many cool eateries and bars as Newtown, probably more actually. It takes me all the way into the centre of the city, Bourke street.

Maybe I have mellowed a little in my need to control, at least with regards to getting around town. I can let go and let the tram driver and the controlling tram rails take over. I do not have to worry about gears or brakes, or whether to let people in from side streets. I can just look through the window and watch the passing parade of people and scenery, and not have to worry how far ahead is the next car or how close is the car behind me.

However, I have discovered how the 'rule of impeding momentum' applies to public transport. Ta Dah! It does not matter what time of day or whether you are planning to catch a bus, tram, or train, invariably you are just a few metres away from the stop or station when the vehicle you want to catch is just pulling away!!! Or, you approach a level crossing to catch the train at the station on the other side of the tracks when the lights start flashing and an obstacle is thrust in your way to stop you moving forward. And you miss your train!

But like I said, I seem to have mellowed in my old age. I have discovered it is much less stressful to go with the flow of the PT. Sometimes I check the timetable, sometimes I take potluck, fully expecting the public transport vehicle of choice to be moving away just before I get there. But sometimes it doesn't, and I smile knowingly. The Fates are just trying to lure me into a false sense of security so they can get me next time and laugh into their beer. Let them laugh! I no longer care.

There is a niggling fear though, with the occasional news of derailments, that one day I will get into a train that has dodgy brakes and it will not stop.