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## Running, my Garmin and Me

When I run, I feel free; in flow, totally absorbed by the motions of my body and its interactions with the environment. As I run through familiar locations I am almost on auto-pilot as I navigate my way through streets, roads, town moor, parks, and city landmarks. I like to run early in the morning. Often, by 6am, I am standing by my front door in running kit, selecting 'run' on my Garmin watch face and waiting for the GPS to kick in. Then I run. Despite knowing the importance of even pacing, I usually set off too fast, perhaps wanting to be quickly immersed in the endorphins that are produced. I soon settle into an even pace, noting the KM splits. On a good day: 4:55, 4:59; 4:43. On other days: 5:30, 5:43, 5:33. Whatever the split times, the feeling of freedom remains and, despite clocking each KM split, this feeling of freedom in my body brings about a sense of liberty or loss of awareness of the details of my running experiences. In other words, during the flow of running, experiences are captured only subconsciously and so, for memories, I have come to rely on the data fed into my Garmin by my running body.

In *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*, Haruki Murakami, suggests that running 'makes for a lot of good memories' (2009: 178). For me, running is about keeping physically and mentally fit, challenging myself to go longer, and be stronger and faster. When I run, I am totally immersed in everything demanded of a runner's body. So how do I remember my runs? If I am so focused on the act of running, where do I retrieve the memories from? What is the relationship between the embodied experience of running and its recollection through data? These data are fed from my body into a Garmin sports watch and displayed in a smartphone app as part of a cyclical process, where data reawakens, challenges and reinforces memories that may otherwise exist only within the human body. In reflecting on my running and the data it generates, I consider whether I am, in the words of Ollivier Dyens, 'offloading [...] phenomenology onto technology (2012: 77) and explore whether humans have become dependent on machines to engage with the world.

### 9<sup>th</sup> April 2022, Filey

Heading along sharp downhill paths, I can hear and smell the sea. As I run along the beach, I start to become curious about the cliffs where the land ends, high up in the distance. Despite the height of the distant cliff, I don't recall there being a steep passage to get there. I remember the wind and the undulating terrain as I moved between well-worn path and mounds of uneven grass. As I move towards the cliff edge, the wind intensifies, and I begin to wish I'd worn another layer. Looking at the views out to sea and to other parts of the coast, I briefly yearn for a phone or camera, some way of capturing an image of the experience. Not wanting to lose pace, I don't take much time to enjoy the view; rather, I turn around and resume running. On this morning, I find myself running but getting nowhere. I am lost. Looking back at the Garmin data now, there is little there that evokes my experience of getting lost. The data are flat, like maps. They are empty of feeling and human

experience and yet it is the data that helps to bring these memories back to the present moment.

Early twentieth century philosopher Henri Bergson sees memory as being either habit or pure. Habit memory is the kind of recall that we use at will, for example when carrying out simple tasks. Pure memory, says Bergson, is elusive. It is hidden in the depths of the past and only recalled involuntarily. Pure memory is deep, enriched memory. It is powerful in that it evokes deep recollections that appear when our present perception is stimulated. The data produced by my Garmin cannot store such pure embodied memories, but it does work as a collaborator with my body, which feeds it time each I run. Looking at the data might be a prompt for some of these involuntary pure memories to return to the present moment, but it is an unreliable operation. Humans can work with data, but data cannot reveal the whole story.

### 12<sup>th</sup> September 2021, 9:51am

It is the first Great North Run since the pandemic and this event is the largest of its kind since the world went into hibernation in March 2020. This year, the usual route of Newcastle to South Shields – from city to sea - has been altered. Beginning on Newcastle's central motorway, the route goes over the Tyne Bridge, into Gateshead before turning around at Leam Lane and heading back towards Newcastle. Once more over the Tyne Bridge and then into the city centre, then onto the Great North Road by the town moor. 4.47, 4.38, 4.56, 4.43, 4.43, 4.53, 4.59, 4.49, 4.44, 4.49, 4.53, 4.51, 4.50, 4.44, 4.56, 5.08, 5.00, 4.53, 5.12, 5.19, 5.08. Average kilometre pace: 4.54. Finish time: 1.43.41

The flat data of this race, presented as charts, tables, graphs and maps have greater significance the further away from the event. When I review data following a run, I do so to check my pace, kilometre splits, and VO2 max. If I've taken a new route or unexpectedly explored, then I enjoy looking at the map and seeing the patterns created on the screen. When I look at the data now, I am not interested in the hard facts; rather, I am reminded of the smells and sounds of the race. I can remember a euphoric feeling of finishing faster than expected and the sensation of drinking beer on the town moor as part of my post-race recovery. These memories were dormant until prompted by the data.

What is our relationship with data? Sarah Pink (et al, 2017) describes the kind of data gathered during activities such as cycling and running as 'mundane' and investigates 'personal digital data's change-making potential and limits [...through] understanding [...] how they become meaningful, how they are felt/sensed and how they are produced in, and as part of, the everyday' (p. 2). It is this relationship between the mundane data generated by running whilst wearing a Garmin sports watch and my embodied human memory that I'm thinking of now. On its own, data are inert, entropic, and lifeless. It takes a human interaction to bring them to life, but it works in collaboration, in coalition, in cooperation with data.

In the 2001 Spielberg film *AI*, which is set in the 22<sup>nd</sup> century, an artificially intelligent child, capable of experiencing emotions such as love, is given to a couple whose human son has been placed in suspended animation. When the real child returns unexpectedly to the family home, there is no place for the artificially intelligent copy, and he is eventually sent away. Two thousand years later, when humanity has been finally destroyed, the AI child is used as a way of finding out about humans. In this scenario, the machine has outlived humanity, but machines still need humans (or as close as possible to human) to understand feelings and emotions. This relationship between humans and machines is a necessary part of living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Technology cultivates a kind of living by proxy, which Susan Sontag suggests is also true of our relationship with the photograph. In the words of Dyens' – we entrust 'our memories, rather than the ability to remember, to our machines' (2001, p. 36).

'We live in a world' writes Dyens, 'that is riddled, inundated, and infested with memories of both men and machines [...] We live in a world of mostly inhuman memories. If there is a memory of the world today, it is a memory of machines [...] When I am nostalgic about a remembered event of my life, I can only be so through a machine's recording and filtering of it' (2001, p. 38).

I look back on the data from 13<sup>th</sup> September 2020, 9:30am, the beginning of the Great North Run Virtual. The start line is unconventional as it begins at my front door. I am the only runner at this start line, but thousands of others are doing the same at this very moment. I run a route unplanned and unforeseen. Through the town moor, around Exhibition Park, past the university, the RVI, Northern Stage, Haymarket, Monument, towards Central Station, over the High Level Bridge, follow the River Tyne to Dunston then loop back. Over the Tyne Bridge, up Pilgrim Street, Monument, Haymarket, turn right towards the civic centre, another right turn to Jesmond and onto Osborne Road. Dip down to Jesmond Dene and then a steep incline towards Gosforth high street. Onto Salter's Road for the final kilometre. I run until I reach 21.1 kilometres. There is no finish line celebration; instead, a muted short walk until I reach home.

Are we, as humans, offloading our phenomenology onto technology? Are we able to exist without machines? In 1994, physicist Ursula Franklin observed that:

...technology has built the house in which we all live. The house is continually being extended and remodelled. More and more of human life takes place within its walls, so that today there is hardly any human activity that does not occur within this house [...] Compared to people in earlier times, we rarely have a chance to live outside this house' (n.p.).

The answer then might be to embrace technology even more so that humans can learn from it. If we are to stay living in a house of technology which is continually changing, then we must change with it. Humans have not become machines, but machines have become part of us. All we can do is to run with it.

