

Three hundred and eighty five. 385. Thirty five soccer teams. A train full of adults. How much time would it have taken them? Assuming an average of five hours, it adds up to 1790 hours. Eighty person days. Wasted. Plus her own contribution. Another 10 hours.

Synat shakes her head in disgust. She's so sick of this quest. The needle in the haystack. The pearl among the pebbles. Something, anything to work on. She should have taken a nap, instead of sifting through this rubbish. Result would have been exactly the same.

In her brighter moments, Synat remembers how this used to be a fun job. Relatively speaking. Pleasure and wage slaving, that's like spicy bland. But it wasn't all bad.

„You're a skilled software developer“ the head hunter said. „With a specialization in targeting. And you like books. The entertaining kind. The ones people buy without second thoughts. Just for the fun of reading them. In this job, you can make the most of all your strengths.“ Synat recalls both the suit, the smell of his after shave and the pitch as if their encounter had happened yesterday.

The proposal sounded attractive. Vague, but interesting. She agreed to engage with a meeting room full of Mmakuko Inc managers. Thought some sense into their very high level project outline. Got herself hired. Dove right in and did her targeting thing.

She was provided with three socioeconomic criteria. Audience must have, from a marketing point of view. Sufficient numbers. Acceptable purchasing power. Dearth of products.

Combining these requirements with publicly available data on reading habits, Synat compiled a little jewel of a prototype of an analytical tool. The good old days.

They didn't last long. At first, the downhill motion was gentle. Refining the beta version of her creation against both past bestsellers and middle-of-the-road fare involved some tedium. But it was the rewarding kind of drudge. Dig, dig, dig. See the correlations. Get a better idea.

Synat identified three promising target cohorts:

- Centrist to mildly progressive men with no or little tertiary education, ages twenty to fifty. The nicer kind of football fans, in her private words.
- Outwardly conformist, closeted anarcho-sarcastic women caring for kids. The momma bitches, to a career-first-no-time-for-family female person.
- Terminally old seniors of the non-nostalgic persuasion, often house- or even bed-bound due to physical ailments. Proto-zombies, for any younger-than-thirty mind.

To Synat's surprise and the joyful benefit anticipation of her superiors, her supposedly distinct groups turned out to share a number of preferences:

- They like their entertainment devoid of graphic violence and explicit adult content. Don't want to blush in case their spouse, kids or nurse has a look.
- They sometimes need their hands and eyes for other tasks, or have trouble using limbs or senses in the first place. Content has to be suitable for audio delivery.
- They cherish protagonists who look, sound and feel familiar. A cast of mostly straight black plain talkers. No racism, homophobia or cultural sense of mission involved. Just familiarity.
- They appreciate action over contemplation. Plots should proceed at a robust pace. „It needs to keep you awake“, in the words of a proto-zombie interviewed for in-depth understanding.
- They insist on happy to bittersweet outcomes. Too grown-up for fairy tales and too burdened with challenges in real life, they prefer the middle path.

Synat's next steps were obvious. Transform this very general understanding of the aggregate target audience into patterns a machine can learn to identify. Build a first, crude benchmarking tool. Test and tweak. Test again and tweak again. Again and again and again.

With hindsight, they weren't that bad, the later stages of the old days. Felt stressful, at the time. But only for her lack of an idea of real ordeals. If only a whole working life could consist of the stresses of first version development.

Synat recalls how she used to complain. Nearly drove out Lyreetsa, her companion, with her moaning. No sane being should have to monitor the processing of decades of straight couple, good bloke and best friend dialogues. Nor should she be forced to analyze the pleasure patterns involved in football fandom, housekeeping or shopping.

Synat suffered a nervous breakdown. She was diagnosed with acute mainstream pursuit empathy fatigue. Not good. But the money Mmakukos finally found a budget for the two assistants she had been requesting for a year. She pulled herself back together.

One horrible day, Mmakuko management declared her done. They called for files and triggered a deluge. Tens of thousands of potential books by nearly as many authors flooded the servers.

The wall of content. Synat feared for her poor software. Too big a task for such a fragile creation, fresh from the drawing board. To her shock, it performed impeccably. While she was still trying to slow things down, warning about the limitations of an algorithmic approach and arguing for wet vetting, their first local bestseller turned global triumph.

Translations into twenty-six languages followed. Hype all over. The news called Mmakuko the new Wr@z. Lagos was declared THE fiction hotspot. She was called a prodigy. And the dark witch. On social networks, she got stalked by precious few fans and innumerable trolls.

Writers make vicious foes. Good at finding the words that hurt. As if it was her fault, that a lot of newcomers scored high. Which they typically didn't even do. Not in their initial submissions. They were just more willing than proven authors to read the feedback, adjust and try again.

That's how it works, with Synat's Bestsellerator. You submit, it checks. Depending on traffic and submission size, you wait for a couple of minutes. Half an hour at most, at peak times. You find a score in your inbox. Accompanied by suggestions for improvement. You rewrite and resubmit.

Obigele Akwukwo, the author of Mmakuko's longest running series „Stuck and no go“, readily confesses she had to submit the first episode eleven times, to barely make it into the 90+% range that was considered sufficient in her days. Managed 89% in her seventh round, only to drop back. „Swallow your pride and keep trying“ was her standard advice for novices.

Ninety percent. So little. Synat marvels at the progress she has been privileged to witness. Nowadays, a mere ninety percent is nothing. 99%, that's the threshold triggering the alarm.

385 alarms, and not one with a clear potential for the 99.9% needed for a conventional publishing slot. Two might have a chance to get e-published, as niche products. Plus three more, if they adapt the cast. Everything else is hopeless. And her software is obsolete.

No more need for a Bestsellerator. If you want good, solid entertainment meeting current audience expectations, only a novelbot will deliver. More reliably. More precisely targeted. Synat provided the foundations, and the world built on them. From assessment to outright creation, a step that was considered impossible in her heydays, proved to be no big deal. The next generation just did it. Her software is obsolete. She's obsolete.

One more task best performed by artificial intelligence. And once again, humanity will split along the usual lines. Audiences will lap up novelbot output, glad to get exactly what they want. At a competitive price. Obsolete professionals will shriek. And politicians waffle.

„Synat? What are you doing, Synat? Don't tell me you're at it, again? Running the Bestsellerator, are you? Synat. We talked about this, Synat. You no longer need to do this. No more home office, Synat, remember? It is all fine without you performing, no problem...“

Lyreetsa. Even the tone of her voice triggers a rage these days. Pretending compassion. Only achieving to sound haughty. Talking like to a stupid deaf person. Loudly. With extra pauses between each and every single word.

Lyreetsa is going to say the new d-word next. Always says d-words. That's insulting. Completely insane herself. Still insists on writing poetry. Despite all the lyricbots out there, doing it so much better. For all tastes. Lyreetsa is totally mad. And dares calling her d-words.

„Synat, come on now, be a good girl. We will now quit this program, here we go. All is fine and backed-up twice, the way you like it, see? And now we will switch off...“

No way. There is only so much interference Synat is willing to tolerate, for the sake of peace and non-violence. Lyreetsa will not touch her machine. That's like rape, that is. Hitting out at the unwarranted hand trying to do the forbidden, Synat beats off the assailant.

„Ouch, you bloody bitch. What the hell was that for, Synat? I'm just trying to switch off that damn computer, and you hit me?! Do I need to remind you, again, what Dr. Morales said, about hitting? No hitting. Never no hitting, Synat. If you keep hitting, we will have to move you...“

She goes on and on. Synat won't deign comment. Pretends not to have heard the d-word. It has by now been mentioned, as she knew it would. But she won't react. As long as her machine is safe, she endures. It is her fundamental right to assess Bestsellerator submissions. Even if there are so few of them, nowadays, and of such poor quality. A right is a right.

Lyreetsa is still waffling. Poets = waffle. Takes her a couple of minutes to understand they are done talking. Finally beats a muttering retreat and leaves the room. So far, so good.

Once the door is closed, Synat quickly activates her spyware. She might be getting a tad oldish. Her thinking might be slightly less fast and flexible than it used to be. But she's still clever enough to stay one move ahead of a mere poet. If Lyreetsa dares call an ambulance to have her evacuated to an asylum, she will buy herself time by setting off fire alarms and dash off. Still a couple of tricks up her sleeves, even in pajamas. All hell will break lose if they dare.

But they don't. Lyreetsa only calls nurse Ramoles: „Ramo“ She always calls her that. Stupid, disrespectful nickname. „Ramo, she's driving me mad. No, you don't understand, just let me explain. She has been at it, again. For twelve hours.“ Here we go again. A lie. Can't even read a watch or count, the traitor. Ten hours. Ten. Not twelve.

„She has been sitting there all day, Ramo. Running that stupid software. She could do anything. Look out the window, watch TV, listen to an audio book. She could knit. They say knitting is very good, against the restlessness associated with dementia.“ And the new d-word again. Synat seriously hates d-words. The old d-word, depression, was bad enough. The new one is worse.

„Pretty quiet activity, knitting. Peaceful. Artisanal. Crafty.“ Poets. Trust them to waffle. The little information there is might be wrong, but never lost for words. Poets...

„She could knit. Bought her wool and needles. Trust her not even to try. Insists on running that stupid software instead. No, Ramo, don't interrupt me. I know you're going to say I should let her proceed. As long as she doesn't burn down the house,... I know, I know, I know. But this is a computer she's using. And it's fully connected. You can't be sure, nor can doctor Morales, that she's bonkers enough no longer to be able to wreak havoc...“

Twenty years ago, Synat would have held her breath in suspense. Nowadays, she lacks spare respiratory capacity, but excitement she still does feel. Did her ruse work?

„No, Ramo, she's not that gone. She only pretended no to be aware of the date, or recall her age. That was her at her deceitful best, a trick to be allowed to keep her infrastructure. Don't you dare call me paranoid, Ramo. I am not, and this is insulting. No, I don't. „Paranoid behavior“ is exactly the same as „paranoid“. I won't argue with you, of all people, about words...“

Synat relaxes back into the comfort of her multipurpose day chair. She won. Cool.

A couple of minutes later, she no longer remembers what the fuzz was about. Only recalls a very good feeling. Well worth the effort. Whatever that effort was. It did involve the Bestsellerator. Doing her job. That was vitally important. She has to keep it up. As long as she can.