

Drive Safely: How Not to Wreck Your Project

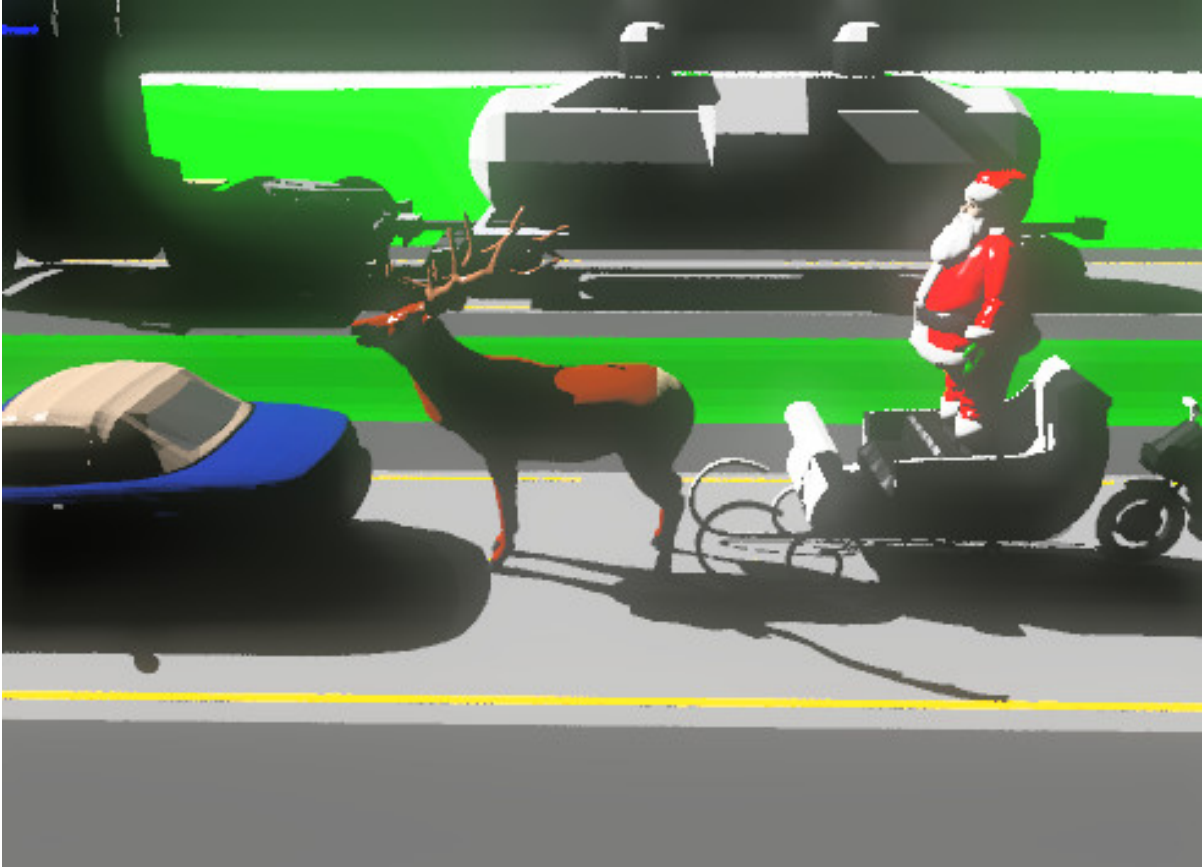
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1. Publication Information

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"Where we're going, we don't need roads." - *Back to the Future*

2. Backseat Driving

It's hard to avoid giving advice when you're sitting in the back seat. Or the passenger seat. It's also hard to avoid getting annoyed when you're on the receiving end.

- During my first job out of college, I often rode with several other coworkers who were not used to driving. The unlucky driver of the day would have an advisory committee monitoring his actions: "Slow down. Speed up! Watch out!" The constant micromanagement had the laudable intention of keeping the car and ourselves intact but, as one of the committee once remarked, "leave him alone, or we're definitely going to get

in an accident".

Of course, a navigator can be useful. But only if the navigation is good.

- I once had a friend visit me in the Bay Area who wanted to visit a certain restaurant in San Francisco. He would say "Turn here!" just as I passed the desired exit. Not helpful.

Give directions plenty of time in advance. Even my Tom Tom says, for example "after one mile, turn right".

3. Check the Roadmap

You can minimize last-minute confusion by planning your route. An interesting type of phone call I occasionally get is when a friend calls me up and essentially uses me as MapQuest, but without the starting location. ("How do I get to A?" "Where are you?" "I don't know") This seems to happen mostly around LA, perhaps a commentary on the freeway system here, but here's an idea - how about looking at map before you start?

I'm embarrassed to admit I've succumbed to this overlay casual trip planning more than a few times, and my overconfidence ("I'll just figure it out as I go along" or "I'll ask someone along the way") invariably has resulted in delays and detours and sometimes nerve-racking moments through parts of town that look dicey. But when I check out the route beforehand, I feel in control all the way through and can usually get back on track easily if there's a minor diversion.

- Projects often start out the same way. We'll know where we're going when we get there. Then, months or years late, with the destination far on the horizon, management tells everyone to drive faster and and hires more drivers to help.

Figure out where you are and where you want to be at the end of your journey. Look at the obvious routes, and take into account the possible delays and detours.

4. Get in the Right Lane

Short-term planning is important, too. It's slow torture watching drivers cruise along in a lane clearly marked to merge into another, waiting until the last possible moment to merge. What's plan B - drive off the road?

- I've been on more than one project where it was suddenly announced "we're delivering a release today". When I explained to one manager that it wasn't a good idea to just tell everyone to stop coding and ship it, he explained, apparently sincerely, that we knew we were going to have a release so it should be no surprise. Another manager thought it was a show of leadership - "Today you will give me a build". Rudeness, on to of stupidity.

Let's just say, those releases were not fit for final releases.

Don't defer decisions, whether out of complacency or indecision or a misguided desire to keep you options open, that have to be made. Execute them early, with a margin of safety and time for correction, and with everyone on board.

5. Use Your Turn Signal

If you do have to change direction, be clear about it. Among my many pet peeves are those drivers who are too lazy and inconsiderate to use their turn signals - there's a reason why those are built into cars at extra cost, namely to alert other drivers of your intentions so you don't end up driving into each other. And it is a courtesy - how often have you cursed drivers for cutting in front of you abruptly or leaving you waiting at an intersection for them to cross when in fact they were going to turn?

- It's not easy being a middle manager. I got stuck in one tragicomical situation where I wanted to move one recalcitrant employee out of a game design group - my boss agreed and yet within twenty-four hours assigned her a new game design task, after telling the IT guy to remove her from the game design mail list. The employee eventually got upset that the tasks she was unwilling to do were being assigned to others and started crying in front of me, jumping to the conclusion that she was about to be terminated. My boss then informed me she would be terminated, but apparently had a change of heart and I ended up hiding from that employee for a few more weeks while she gave me dirty looks.

Now, if that was confusing for me, imagine what it was like for everyone else in the group who had to work with that employee. At least I was able to hide.

Unless you're working in the equivalent of Boston traffic, where signaling your intentions is a sign of weakness, then it is important to signal your project members whenever you're about to turn or make a lane change. If you can't give signal your intentions clearly, anyone with initiative will just give up and you'll be left with those who fatalistically and passively wait for micromanagement.

6. Are We There Yet?

It's an annoying question from kids in the back seat - it's just as annoying from your project manager.

7. Don't Drive Aggressively

I marvel every day in traffic when I see someone rushing past me to squeeze in front of my

car when there's a hundred feet of clear road behind me. Some people just don't feel like they're making progress unless they're making it at someone else's expense.

- You can see that in the workplace, too. Despite all the platitudes about "win-win" solutions, the benchmark for others' success is often your failure. Some see life as a zero-sum game (though it's unlikely they are sophisticated enough to think about in consciously in those terms) Watch out for those sharks, and don't be one of them.

8. Drive Defensively

No matter how good your driving habits, you have to watch out for other drivers.

- The zig-zagging boss, the coworkers who cut you off.

Try to avoid the pile-ups.