

VAR IS A PERFECT EXAMPLE OF HOW TECHNOLOGY IS CHANGING OUR VIEW OF THE WORLD

On a scorching Sunday afternoon in June 1986, Diego Armando Maradona scored the goal of the century. A mesmerizing 62-meter solo run that lasted ten seconds. Maradona touched the ball 12 times, all with his left foot. With the final touch, he slotted the ball into the goal.

However, five seconds before Maradona received the ball, a blatant foul was committed on Glenn Hoddle. The referee didn't blow his whistle. Afterward, no one talked about it. The only topic of conversation was Maradona's goal.



But now imagine for a moment if there had been VAR. A Video Assistant Referee. The goal would have been disallowed. The goal of the century, disallowed by VAR, because rules are rules. Rightly so? Intentionally? Or not at all?

In 2017, VAR was introduced in football. It was inevitable. After all, technology changes who we are and how we see the world. In this case, the technology consisted of increasing camera angles and super slow motion, mercilessly capturing referees' mistakes. We had to do something with that. It was inevitable.

But, we quickly learned, solving problems with technology is a lot harder than you think. This doesn't just apply to VAR. It applies everywhere. It starts with the problem itself. Do we understand that enough? A common argument for introducing VAR is that technology makes football fairer. But I think that's a misunderstanding of the problem. Football is the most popular sport on earth because it's profoundly unfair. It's the only major team sport where you can be much worse than your opponent and still win. Or vice versa, of course. Football is a sport of moments. A sport of hope and fear. The underdog's hope that they can still win. The favorite's fear of losing. That's what makes football the most popular sport on earth. Making football fairer is therefore a bad idea. You see it everywhere. We deploy technology without knowing exactly what the problem is. What is good healthcare? What is good education? What is safety? Without a proper understanding of the problem, technology quickly becomes the right answer to the wrong question.

I think football shouldn't be unfair. You can lose because of a sloppy counterattack, which is unfair, but not because of a huge blunder by the referee. That's unfair. VAR seems to understand this too, because the rules clearly state that VAR can only intervene in the event of a major, obvious error.

A major, obvious error. We should apply that to much more technology. It probably would have saved a lot of trouble in the childcare benefits scandal. If I drive my car into a pole, I don't want my insurance to be automatically notified, but after a serious accident, 112 should be automatically called. I don't want to be able to track my daughter with her phone, but if that phone turns up in the middle of the night in the Mastbos, I do want to know. That's a major, obvious flaw, and that's a fantastic design principle.

Until we see how that works in practice. Then we quickly see that we no longer look at the possibilities of technology from the problem, but from the possibilities of technology to the problem.

For example, offside. Instead of settling for technology, which is better than a blundering linesman, we now try to determine offside down to the last centimeter. The latest systems have dozens of cameras, ball sensors, thousands of data points, AI, and animations. The most important question—is this still a major, obvious flaw—has long been forgotten. This is also because we humans have a need for control. Technology satisfies that need, even if the systems aren't entirely reliable. The illusion of control is also better than no control.

VAR is far from unique. Driven by our need for control, we look at the problem from the perspective of technology. For example, parcel delivery drivers often find themselves in front of a closed door. With a "smart" video doorbell, the delivery driver can be politely spoken to and instructed. But such a video doorbell can also be used to check for unsavory characters in the neighborhood. What good is having a new TV delivered if it gets stolen again shortly after?

Or, with "smart" cameras, we can identify fights in the city center, so the police can be dispatched. And then someone realizes that those cameras can also be used to issue restraining orders for notorious fight-makers. Isn't it a good idea to try to prevent fights in that way?

And then there's another problem with the design principle of the "big, obvious mistake." What exactly constitutes a "big, obvious mistake"? If a referee couldn't possibly have seen a player handling a ball, but with a super slow-motion camera and a ball sensor, it's obvious, is it a "big, obvious mistake"? Is it a "big, obvious human mistake"? Or has what we consider a "big, obvious mistake" been hijacked by technology? And is that desirable?

It's another phenomenon you see outside the football field as well. Technology allows us to see how often students log in to the e-learning environment, but do we really want to know? Does the number of logins determine whether someone is a good student? Companies can now use AI to measure how many keyboard strokes and mouse movements their employees make, but is that the definition of a good employee? Many

employers think so. The mouse jiggler, a device you can place your mouse on so it constantly moves and the systems think you're working, is always sold out for a reason. Starbucks can see how many coffees their baristas pour, but is that the benchmark for a good barista?

Isn't it enough to use technology to check only whether the student logs in, whether the employee is actually working, and whether the barista is there? In other words, to limit yourself to "really," major, obvious "mistakes."

Apparently not, because the VAR is everywhere. Ask yourself this: do you know someone who sits behind a screen all day, far from the shop floor, supported by technology, checking whether the rules are being followed? You probably do. That's your VAR. And there are more and more of them.

The VAR illustrates something we see time and again. It works like this: There are rules, and there's a purpose. We've known for a long time that the rules are quite different from "intention." Just try filling out an expense claim. Or apply for a supplement. Technology always sides with the rules. And with the people who love the rules. The result is that the conversation about intention only becomes more difficult. While that's precisely the conversation we should be brave enough to have.

A good match needs a good referee. Not a good VAR. Technology should make the referee better. Now, the opposite is often the case. We see the same thing with the man on the street, the woman in the classroom, or the person at the bedside. Technology erodes autonomy. It controls the rules. It makes people insecure. While education, healthcare, football, and security actually need a good teacher, nurse, referee, or officer. That's the intention.

And VAR teaches us much more. Cheering is under pressure. Data tells us little because the most valuable things in life are the hardest to measure. Our unwavering faith in technology clouds our vision. And there are flaws. Why, for example, is the referee called to the screen? Either it's not a major, obvious error, in which case VAR shouldn't intervene. Or it is a major, obvious error, in which case the referee doesn't need to be involved. Calling a referee to the screen is a rather unsubtle way to humiliate a referee.

You can read all about it in Don't Mention the VAR. Understanding VAR is the first step towards using technology more intelligently. We shouldn't abolish VAR. We need better VAR. Smarter technology, used more intelligently. Sometimes that also means less technology. That takes courage, but sometimes we succeed. Like those schools that abolished Magister. Or banned mobile phones. That worked out quite well.

That's my call. Think carefully and dare to opt for less technology every now and then, or abolish some technology altogether. Remember, you'll almost never regret that.

And while you're at it, keep an eye on VAR. If it works there, it should work everywhere.