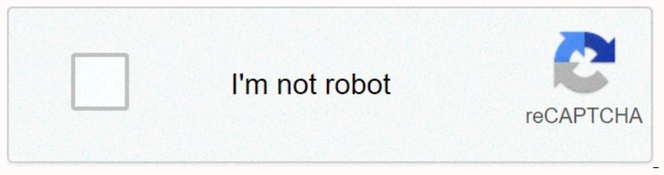

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Electronic battleship instruction manual

MIT researchers just got a computer to perform another task that most people are unable to do: It learned to play the game by reading the instruction manual. MIT's Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Laboratory has a computer that now plays civilization by itself - and it wins nearly 80% of the time. It's a better statistic than most of us could boast, but the real win here is the fact that the guide to instructions doesn't explain how to win a game, just how to play it. The results can be game-oriented, but the real goal of the experiment was to get the computer to do more than process words as data - and actually process it as language. In this case, the computer read instructions on how to play a rather difficult game, and then proceeded to not only play this game, but play it very well. If you take the same process and replace games with something more real that applies, such as medicine or automotive technology, you can have a computer that is able to act as more than just a reference tool. Much more. Take IBM's Watson. Sure, it's an amazing success in computing, but it's based on the idea that if you download terribly huge amounts of data into a computer that it can put it to use in a way that a person can. The results are pretty decent, but they're very specific to what data the machine has given - and right now the data is likely to be things like sales catalogs and insurance policies. Loading hordes of medical journals into a Watson-style machine can make for something very useful in diagnosis, but it's not going to be done by a doctor. Learning a computer to actually read medical books like a pupil at a medical school would, it's something completely different. It might be a bit far away at the moment, though. A shorter-term goal is likely to be language that meets the original goal of the experiment. Now that the computer has learned to read the instruction manual, it's not too far a leap to think it can read through books in a foreign language, and actually learn the language. What we would have at that point would be a computer that could translate phrases based on their intended meaning rather than simply process the definition of words and grammar rules. Removing the language barrier around the world would be a hell of a lot better than winning the game of civilization, after all. Read more at MIT News Everyone has an Ikea horror story. My wife's desk, for example, took her and my mother-in-law all day to gather, moving forward only in fitness and starting with frequent intermissions for damning. (I would help, but I was comfortably absent for reasons I can't think of.) Even Ikea itself seems to have accepted that reputation. A newspaper in Sweden described Ikea [furniture assembly] as something Wednesday that is between civil engineering and captaincy and I think that's a good description, says Allan Dickner, Ikea's deputy packaging manager. Still, there's one pointless method of turning Ikea's fury into a debilitating respect: assembling almost every other furniture brand. After an hour spent comparing piles of ambiguous components to a build scheme that looked like the wrong mimeograph from area 51, I somehow produced the ultimate HomeGoods table, as well as a growing curiosity about how Ikea was developing its own packaging and instructions that now seemed positively Eamesian by comparison. To adapt Winston Churchill's famous kip, Ikea may be the worst form of ready-to-assemble product design we have except for everyone else. According to Allan Dickner, whatever your most unpleasant Ikea experience, it could have been even worse - and most likely it was for a pack engineer who was testing even more sophisticated versions of the product before arriveing at the optimized design you unpacked on the living room floor. We had one furniture detail, a type of wardrobe that originally had more than 400 fittings and screws to hold it together, says Dickner. Of course, this extreme whipped-up industry term for disassembling products to make them easier and cheaper to ship to customers is a big reason why Ikea's wardrobe is so affordable. But when someone needs five hours to build it, you might ask yourself: have you gone too far with a flat pack? Dickner adds. It's always about finding a balance between ease of assembly and packing optimization. (This wardrobe, for the record, has been redesigned to knock down fewer components.) Ikea's flat packaging engineers are included along with product designers at initial briefings for any new Ikea offering. But after half a century of knocking down bookshelves and armayers, Ikea doesn't need to reinvent the wheel very often. For 80% of ready-to-assemble products, Ikea packaging engineers rely on what Dickner calls proven solutions: generalized templates that the engineer affects and adjusts according to the specifications of the new element. These proven solutions are not just algorithmically optimized (though they are)- they also include ground knowledge of living conditions in all countries where Ikea furniture is sold. It would be quite foolish to design a package that is flat and efficient, but wouldn't fit into a small elevator or staircase, Dickner explains. It sounds ridiculous, but in the United Kingdom, it was one of the most frequent reasons for a customer returning a product. He adds that global package projects are being tested in Japan and South Korea because they are customers who live in the smallest spaces. Turning a three-dimensional sofa into a pseudo 2-D flat-packed puzzle doesn't mean design feat. But if the assembly instructions makes sense, all this work is moot. According to Jan Fredlund, a designer working on these training booklets, there are two guidelines behind each page: clarity and continuity. The first term is fairly obvious, but Ikea is quite serious about the fact that instruction designers (or communicators, according to Fredlund), start by combining the product themselves. The test build provides an opportunity to find out if there is a risk that the customer may place a particular part in the wrong direction, which may not look like an obvious error at the moment, but will cause the problem many steps later, says Fredlund. Continuity, meanwhile, is what separates Ikea's instructions - even crazy - from other brands. Illustrations similar to Lego, frame-by-frame are based on building drawings, digital shots, eating models and video test assemblies. Designers take pains to make each subsequent picture from a single, unchanging perspective (mimicking that customer), so confusing rotations or promising changes are minimized, and the customer can stay focused more easily as he or she moves back and forth between the booklet and the parts. If the end result sometimes feels like a civil engineering project (as Dickner admits with some pride), it's because a high level of accuracy and exuberance is exactly what reinforces even Ikea's most complex or boring builds. They may not be pleasant, but they are at least rational and understandable—even sympathetic—by design. Think of this big whinging Ikea man who showed up by calling the company when he got stuck. He is not bullied or condescious. If anything, it represents some designer in Ikea who has already gone through exactly what you're currently going through on the floor of your living room: half-edking a look from a training booklet to a pile of details and back, hoping for the best, but trusting that it all at least makes sense. The chances are that you've lost some operating instructions over the years. Maybe they lie in a drawer somewhere or have long ended up in the bin. Fortunately, you don't need to be sent to replace – many of these guides are available online. You just have to find them. Device manufacturers often release guides through their websites , sometimes they can be read online, sometimes downloaded in PDF format. You'll even find guides for many older devices. Sure, you probably won't find instructions for your old cathode ray TV from the 70s, but guides to a lot of things from the early 2000s are out there. For example, I managed to find a booklet for Game Boy Advance, which was released in 2001. The biggest problem you'll face is just keeping track of the right instructions. They often bury deep in the backs of the company's websites. For manufacturers that make multiple devices, such as Nintendo, the process is pretty simple. For manufacturers that produce hundreds of different products, however, finding the right guide can be a monk-like exercise with patience. Step one: Figure out what exactly you own the first step is the work that you actually have. It's easier for some devices than others. You probably know what model of iPhone you have, but we'll guess you barely remember who made your fridge, let alone what model it is. First, just check the device itself. If your brand number and model isn't clearly written outside, check for hidden labels or stickers on the back, from the wrong side, or even inside the device. On many refrigerators, washers and dryers, for example, you can find the model number on the sticker inside the door. 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