

BEWARE THE “SYSTEMSPLAINER”

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We’re all familiar with the term mansplaining. We’ve either done it, had it done to us, or been wrongly accused of doing it. Some might even argue that I am (wo)mansplaining right now, pontificating from a condescending perch about something I have incomplete knowledge of, and assuming I know more about your experience with mansplaining than I do.

A confluence of recent interactions has led me to believe there is an emerging (or perhaps they’ve always been there) group of “systemsplainers”. Women rejoice, you, too, can be a systemsplainer as our ‘splaining categories have evolved to a more gender-neutral place.

But if explaining things condescendingly isn’t the business you’re in, you might find yourselves as frustrated as I am at the proliferation of explanations about systems that don’t lead to clarity or better action. These are the hallmarks of what we increasingly recognise as quintessential systemsplaining.

“Confusing people about systems will make them think we’re smart”

Consultants shouldn’t confuse you. If a company’s business model depends on creating confusion in clients so that they come back for more (confusing) explanations, it’s a good sign that they’re probably not the right outfit for the job. Call me bold (but don’t mansplain me), but I think a good consultant should help clarify and simplify things, not leave you feeling more confused about what to do next.

“Systems are so complex you can’t do anything about them”

This will likely strike a nerve for some as there are many complexionistas out there – those who believe systems are so nebulous, vague and ever-changing that one cannot do anything about them (except continue to hire them, of course). Sure, systems are complex, but in systems development, our explanations should help us understand that complexity in a way that supports better intervention. As a student of incentives, the following quote¹ resonates with me as an explanation for why the complexionistas continue to thrive: “Simplicity is a great virtue but it requires hard work to achieve it and education to appreciate it. And to make matters worse: complexity sells better.”

“I know stuff (because I say so), and I say so (because I know stuff)”

Mansplainers are notorious for underestimating other people’s competence – and over-inflating their own. systemsplainers too often make the same mistake – providing long-winded explanations of things we already knew, interrupting discussions to explain our own expertise to us and failing to provide guidance rooted in relevant experience. The field of inclusive systems development has plenty of challenges to overcome – too many to waste time on debating things that aren’t problems with people who aren’t yet qualified to help us solve the things that are.

“Trust me, I’m a very stable genius.”

The dark side of any ‘splaining is that it’s rooted in power differentials that let people get away with behaviour they wouldn’t otherwise dream of. Like mansplaining, systemsplaining is ultimately self-serving (even when it’s well-intentioned) – so why is it so prevalent?

Well, the answer to that is too complex to do anything about...just kidding! It’s simple really. The more we invest our attention, money and time in what we find valuable, no matter how clever, prestigious or pervasive the alternative appears, the less systemsplaining we’ll see. Suggested policy: If you come across explanations of systems development that don’t help you understand or do better systems development, click that X.

There has been a lot published about how to do systems development recently. Much of it is clear and applicable, based on empirical evidence, and written or taught by experienced, qualified professionals. Save your time for that and beware the systemsplainers.

¹ From Edsger Wybe Dijkstra (1984)