

AI age gap gets wider every day

In a recent column I offered an unenlightened but personally informed view of artificial intelligence, a luddite's perspective.

Well, the empire's struck back, and I type this with a sprained wrist and an ego damaged beyond repair. I planked, literally speaking, in a room full of AI aficionados who must have wondered who the dude was falling face-first into their midst.

It all began with Richard Handley kindly inviting me to attend the Powerco Future Tech "Glimpse the Future" show, a exhibition of virtual reality technology sponsored by the power company and staged at the Devon Hotel. The Pukekura Breakfast Rotary Club to which Richard belongs organised the event and had the clever idea of selling tickets whose buyers could give a free pass to a high school student.

The place was abuzz with youngsters riding around on brightly lit segways, and featured displays of drones and working AI geek stuff, like a piece of head kit that enabled a kid to drive a digital display with the blink of his eye or a thought.

On the night I went along there were three inspirational speakers, who presented on what the future has in store. They held the full-house audience in respectful awe while they expounded on how robots and brainwaves will increasingly interface with more aspects of our real lives, our cars, our houses, domestic appliances, travel - the list is endless.

Richard steered me to a display called "walking the plank", where Eve Kawana-Brown was standing in an alcove wearing a set of those head-encasing goggles, and tentatively placing one foot on a builder's plank that stretched out across the floor in front of her.

A big display screen showed us what she was seeing – a narrow platform that stuck out into space high above a city scene. She was viewing it from an open doorway in the side of a skyscraper. The plank led out into nowhere, below which the street was barely visible a long way down.

Wisely it turned out, Eve wasn't going anywhere, despite Richard's encouraging cry of "come on, Eve, walk the plank". I asked in surprise: have you done this, Richard? Oh yes, says he, although I did fall. Literally? Yes, off sideways - it's very real. He may then have urged me to have a go.

So, here's this white-bearded man who won't see three-score years and 10 again, talking feverishly to others in the queue young enough to be his grandchildren, who stare back blankly in disbelief that someone so ancient would ever want to try to foot it in their world. Foot it, walk the plank...oh well, never mind.

In front of me is a child of about seven with her dad. When it's her turn to follow a string of teenage males who strut the plank rather than walk it, the thing crashes. A better phrase is "goes down", or better still "stops working".

There is a bit of fiddling about and rebooting and then it's ready to go again. The operator sees me and invites me to step up. Feeling embarrassed at queue-jumping a child, I go into the alcove where they fit the goggles, which have ear muffs.

Instantly, I'm in a hotel lift and when I push the button saying "walk the plank" we're going up, bits of a city receding through a crack in the doors. They open. I'm standing at the plank, looking over the city...and down at the pavement a kilometre or more below, it seems.

I stride confidently out, but falter as the thing seems to wobble. I know that can't be real, because the actual plank on the floor is heavy and solid. But I'm teetering, nonetheless.

I know from having watched the screen while waiting that eventually I will plummet downwards to oblivion, so I attempt to get it over with by stepping off the end of the virtual plank. Next thing, I hit the real carpet. The goggles are off and I see concerned faces. I scramble up and away, feeling like the fool I am.

What can be learned from this? Obviously, the world of AI is strictly for those under 30 at this stage, although eventually we will all have to embrace it. Another thought is that older people do indeed begin to lose their sense of balance. I didn't stick around to see how the seven-year-old got on, but I'm betting she danced it.