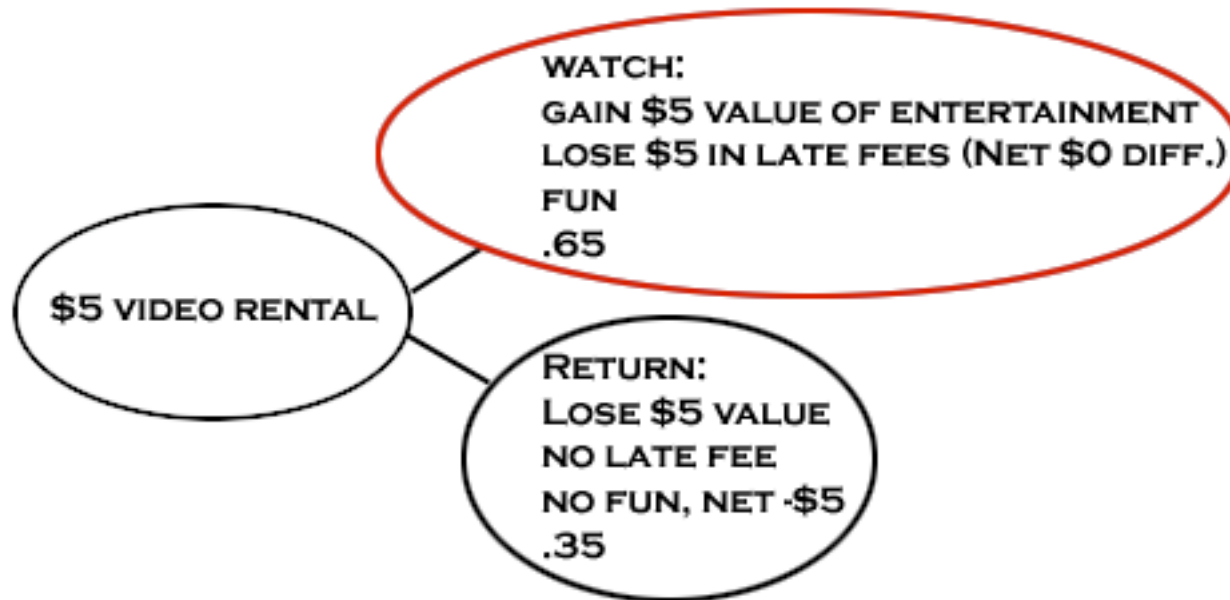


When we first started looking at decision theory, I recall asking, “Why am I late to class?” While the decision tree analysis is an excellent tool for examining more complex issues (I think there’s a curve, as well – some issues are probably too complex to map with one, two, or ten trees), I think it can also be of assistance in examining smaller, everyday issues such as this one. It’s the little, constant decisions that fascinate me; the devil, they say, is in the details, and I find it to be all-too-true in my own life. I have very little trouble with large decisions, but consistently muff the small stuff.

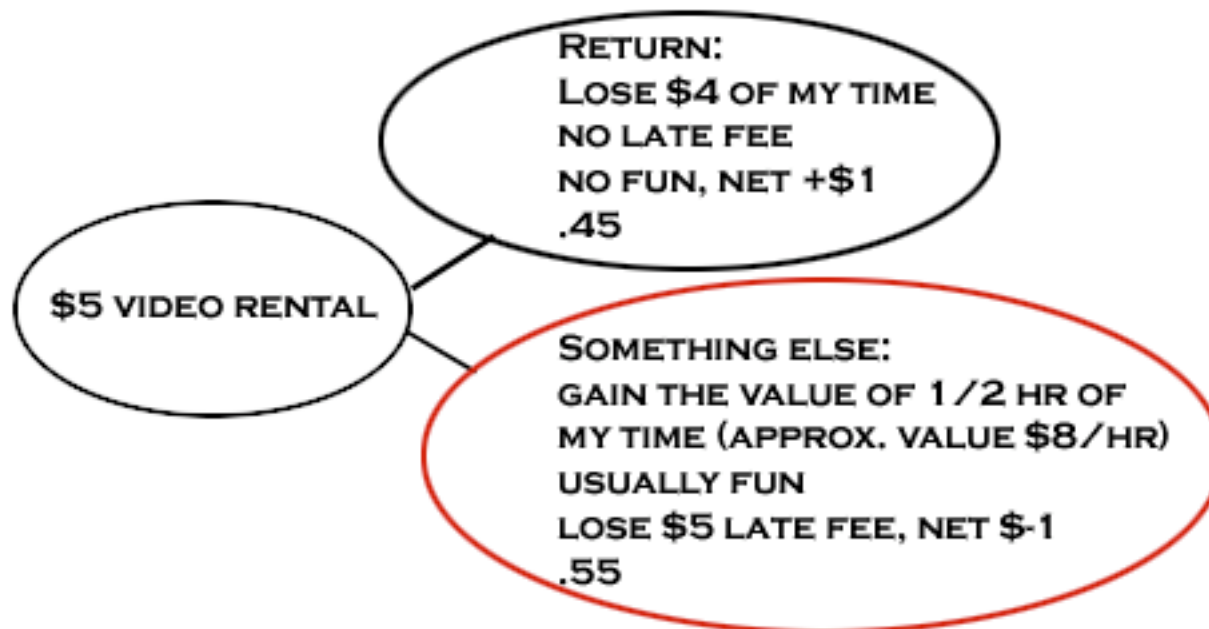
I was doing my grocery shopping today, thinking longingly of the end of school and being able to watch movies again as I parked near the video store. Then I remembered the last time I’d rented a movie – I hadn’t watched it, but I *meant* to, and I *meant* to, and then I *meant* to return it a few times, too, and by the time it was back at the video store I could have bought it twice for what it cost me in late fees.

So I hope you’ll indulge me; I’d like to use the decision tree analysis to examine exactly why it is that I get late fees on video rentals.

It starts out with the “watch or return” decision. We assume, at this point, that the video will be late if I choose “watch”.



Then (when I have watched it or when I have finally accepted that I am not going to get around to watching it after all) it moves on to the “return or do [something else]” decision.



Individually, each of these decisions is sort of a toss-up. I generally favor the “watch” and “something else” decisions, for the reasons set out in the model.

What the model doesn’t account for is that the decisions aren’t isolated. The accretion of the “watch” or “something else” choices forces me to return to the same decision, over and over.



math contributes to the late fee issues, but I'm really looking at the decision aspect here. The longer I take to watch a movie, the more logical it is for me to choose the "watch" option, as the value I have invested in the movie is greater over time as the late fees rise. The longer I take to *return* a movie, however, the greater the incentive to return it, as the accumulated late fees grow out of proportion to the value of my time.

I don't think a decision tree can accurately represent a satisfactory solution to this dilemma. Each decision is logical in and of itself; eventually, it comes down to self-knowledge. I have to know *when* I will stop making the decision to "watch" or "something else" (several steps along the line) in order to make the decision I have before me *now*. The sheer volume of my late fees over my lifetime indicates that this level of self-knowledge, even when attained, is hard to act on; one always feels that one will make a better choice *next* time.

Apropos of that hope, and in conclusion, I'd like to leave you with a thought that has guided me since I was young. The punishment sentence assigned at my grade school for misbehavior was actually three sentences, which I bitterly resented when I was assigned to write 200 repetitions for stuffing Eric Techel in a locker after school. (He grew up to be an accountant and vote Republican – d'you think it's my fault?) Now, however, those sentences have become part of my life philosophy. Thank you, Browns Valley Elementary.

*Life is a series of choices. The choice I have made has brought with it the consequence of writing these sentences. Maybe next time I will make a different choice.*

One can always dream, after all.