

THE HEXADECIMAL KID AND HIS FAITHFUL DOG ASCII

=====

[A Fantasy in Sixteen Bits]

Copyright (C) 1977, Richard Forsyth.

Bit 0 (The Least Significant Bit)

The Hexadecimal Kid ('Hex' to his friends) with his faithful dog Ascii and a few trusted colleagues has retired from public life on the Network to a remote mountaintop retreat, where he can devote all his energy to perfecting a system for translating from Reverse Polish into Double Dutch, and then back to Pidgin English.

Bit 1 (The Bit Between His Teeth)

The Hexadecimal Kid was reclining on a multiplexor, quietly humming the Asynchronous Idle, with his faithful dog Ascii (the dog with the Post Office approved interface) curled contentedly at his feet chewing the remains of an old flowchart template. All was peaceful in the AI Lab.

Then Ascii yawned, stretched and began to nose around the room, sniffing out juicy morsels of papertape. Hex drifted into a reverie. After a while he looked up -- just in time to see Ascii's bionic teeth plunging into a power cable.

"Don't byte the hand that feeds you!" warned Hex, aghast. But it was too late. There was a blinding flash, then total darkness. Hex made a negative sign with two digits: it was not a two's compliment either.

He stumbled over to the corner where he had last seen Ascii. By loading FFFF (hex), which aptly described his feelings, into his accumulator he was able to illuminate the poor dog's motionless body just enough to assess the damage: his teeth were charred, and one of the ROM chips was on the blink. Otherwise he seemed all right.

"He'll need some re-programming," thought Hex, "but we'll soon have him back on his wheels." He began to tread warily through the darkness to seek a spare ROM chip, his path lit only by the flickering red glow of his console lamps.

Suddenly his outstretched hand met something warm and soft.

"Simula!" he exclaimed with relief. "What are you doing here?"

"Trying to find my way out," she replied. "Some idiot has fused all the lights."

"Listen," said Hex, "we need a new 64K of ROM to get Ascii working again. He chewed through the power supply. Can you go and look for one while I try to fix the lights?"

"That stupid dog," said Simula, "needs a new operating system. Why couldn't you get him properly de-bugged before letting him loose?"

"De-bug yourself!" snapped Hex, but regretted it immediately. Simula disappeared into the gloom without another word. Hex sighed, then turned to feel his way to the basement where the standby generator was installed.

Just then a booming voice rang out through the murk. "Pay attention, you despicable androids! It is I, Dr Null, crusher of systems. It was I, the last free human on this planet, the only one mad enough to escape cybernation, who coated your mains with aniseed. You are in my hands now; and I have work for you. I shall take over this lab. If any of you refuse to obey me, I shall put you into an endless loop." He laughed.

For the first time Hex experienced the choking sensation of page-thrashing as his self-preservation routines furiously searched virtual memory for a solution.

Dr Null began again: "Now if one of you will kindly go downstairs and switch on the emergency generator before your batteries run flat, I will explain what you are going to do for me."

"Goto Hell!" shouted Hex defiantly. His retrieval system had discovered that humans could be made less effective by insults.

From the far side of the room came an involuntary gasp, as Simula winced inwardly to hear the unspeakable obscenity 'Goto'.

"Ah!" said Dr Null, "the elegant and beautifully formed Simula, if my ears do not mislead me."

Simula did not reply, and Hex stumbled down into the basement, cursing himself for not implementing the software to drive his infra-red sensors, which were even now flooding his perceptual system with useless uninterpreted information. Before long, he had the lights on again. When he returned upstairs, Dr Null was standing behind Simula, holding something over her head. He looked older than Hex had expected, and surprisingly unimpressive considering his voice.

"You see this, Kid" he said as Hex emerged. "It is a powerful ultra-violet lamp. You can imagine, I am sure, what would happen to our charming friend if I turned it on."

"He could be bluffing," said Simula bravely, but without conviction. Hex felt the sinking sensation of underflow.

"Now my friends," went on Dr Null, this time sounding quite amiable, "we are all assembled (if you will forgive the expression) and I can explain the purpose of my visit. My aim, as you no doubt know, is to destroy the Database; and you have an important part to play in my plan. With your talent for software design and your intimate knowledge of the Network, allied to my genius for exposing the fatal flaw in every computer system, we shall corrupt the Database, and bring down the decadent robotic civilization that depends on it. I shall not rest until I have had my revenge on the inhuman race -- until I have seen the day when every flip-flop, every bistable, every bit in every field of every record in all the discs, drums, tapes and cores throughout the world, whether in storage or transmission, is zero!" His voice rose to a crescendo, then tailed off into silence.

Can Simula and Hex outwit this madman?

What is the mad doctor's fiendish plan for perverting the Database?

Find out in our next issue!