

THE HEXADECIMAL KID AND HIS FAITHFUL DOG ASCII

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[A Fantasy in Sixteen Bits]

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Bit 8 (A Little Bit Better)

[Dr Null, the madman who plans to destroy civilization by putting the System into a gigotic loop, has retired with Simula to her bedroom and locked the door. Hex has been frustrated in his bid to call for help over the Network by petty syntactic errors, but at the last moment, is surprised by the arrival of the garbage collector with two heavy industrial robots. Hearing a scream, Hex and the robots race upstairs to rescue Simula. As they break open the door, they do not know what horrible sight will meet their eyes.]

The door crashed down. On the bed lay Simula, her clothing in disarray, obviously shocked by her ordeal but otherwise unscathed. "He wanted to invert my files," she gasped. "He fled through the window when he heard you."

"Thank Babbage he didn't take you hostage!" replied Hex.

"He's escaped," exclaimed the garbage collector. "Quick lads -- after him!" They ran downstairs again.

Hex helped Simula off the bed. "I'm glad you weren't working for him," she said.

"No," Hex replied. "I was just waiting for him to make a mistake. Humans always do."

They rejoined the others to find Execute limping after his mauling. The garbage collector was bending over Fetch. "I'm afraid the human got away," he said, "and this robot is in a bad way."

"What happened to Ascii?" questioned Hex.

"Your precious dog," responded Execute bitterly, "ran off with its new master. But what happened to you -- showing that maniac confidential information? You ought to be tried for treason. As for you," he said to Simula, "you're beneath contempt. Here were Fetch and I, savaged by that misbegotten hound in an effort to save the Network, and all you could do was invite him up to gaze on your etchings."

"Don't be absurd," replied Hex. "The manuals I showed him were five years out of date. In any case he can't have absorbed what he read: you're forgetting how bad humans are at data capture. And Simula was merely playing for time."

"I nearly had him," she put in, "he was about to drop his PROM-eraser."

"And a lot else," remarked Execute, still resentful.

The garbage collector broke in, putting an end to their bickering. "Well, he won't be bothering you again. He's had a good fright. Now, if you don't mind, we'll be on our way. We'll call at the next Remote Entry Point and tell the Error Squad about your trouble."

"Make sure you tell them his name: Samuel Synapse, alias Dr Null," stressed Hex. "He's wanted for serious crimes against inhumanity. Ask them also for help to repair Fetch."

When they had gone, Hex, Simula and Execute sat down to devise a plan of action.

"The first priority," stated Execute, "is to get Fetch working again and then re-establish links with the Network."

"Agreed," Hex said, "but we must track that human down. While he's free he's a threat not just to us but to the whole System. We can't wait for the Error Squad to catch him: he's given them the slip before. In time he may be able to transform Ascii into a gigotic launcher, an informatic doomsday weapon. I propose that Execute and I go after him while Simula stays to look after Fetch."

"But how will you find him?" queried Simula.

"Easy: he has Ascii with him, and I installed a radio beacon on Ascii when he was built. I can pinpoint his position to the nearest metre from a distance of 100 kilometres. I also designed an electronic dog collar in case Ascii ever got out of hand. Slip it round his neck, and he'll be as tame as a puppy."

"Well, you can be the one to put it on him," said Execute.

They got up and went to the workshop, Hex and Execute to collect equipment for the manhunt, Simula to obtain the first aid kit for Fetch. When they were nearly ready to depart, Hex picked up a paperclip, twisted it deftly into a shape resembling the mystic ampersand symbol, and plugged it into the graphics monitor. "There," he declared, "a teletype-compatible divining rod! Let's see where they're heading."

The paperclip vibrated meaningfully, and on the screen, against a background of a colour 3D contour map of the district, stood out the blinking paw mark that identified Ascii's transmitter.

"They're making for the Silicon Valley reservation," said Execute. "Perhaps he thinks that no finite automaton would dare follow him, on account of its reputation."

"Maybe he has friends there," suggested Hex. He typed out a message briskly on the console, now restored to full duplex operation. On receiving the reply he nodded. "Just as I suspected," he said. "Old Ma Synapse is still alive and living in Silicon Valley. He's gone back to see his mum. Let's pay her a visit too."

By the time Hex and Execute left night had fallen. They said goodbye to Simula, warning her to keep all entry points locked, and set out into the darkness guided only by the regular bleep-bleep of Ascii's homing signal. Before they were out of sight, Hex turned for one last wave to Simula, who stood in the doorway silhouetted against the light. Then they were alone in the wilderness facing the unknown, armed with little more than a minimodem and a paperclip.

- How long can Hex and Execute survive on their expedition, cut off from all data communication?
- Is Simula safe, left unguarded with the injured Fetch?
- What really happened when Simula and Dr Null were alone together?