

THE HEXADECIMAL KID AND HIS FAITHFUL DOG ASCII

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[A Fantasy in Sixteen Bits]

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Bit 15 (The Sign Bit)

[Hex and Execute have been sent back to Base 16 in disgrace. Fetch and Simula organize a welcoming party, but the atmosphere is distinctly funereal. Hex's midnight ramblings convince him of the worst concerning Simula's relationship with Fetch. In the dead of night he is woken by Ascii's long-range distress signal, emanating from Silicon Valley. He sets out once again to find Ascii.]

A fine drizzle refreshed him as he walked. Hex found the exercise soothing after the turbulent emotions of the night. This time he made swift work of the journey, because he knew the route. By mid-afternoon he had reached the hole in the fence where Cleo first guided them into the reservation.

There his nostrils were assailed by the sickly smell of rotting flesh. The dilapidated buildings looked no worse than when he had left; but now there was an eerie stillness about them. As he picked his way through the lifeless streets he found them littered with unburied corpses -- some splayed out where they had fallen in grotesque attitudes others hastily collected into untidy heaps. The air was thick with the buzzing of flies, and over it all hung the stench of death.

Hex turned off his odour receptors and made quickly for a rise just outside the ravaged town where a small clump of binary trees still stood, swaying gently in the breeze. There, his head propped up against the root of a tree, lay Dr Null. Ascii was standing over him.

Dr Null spoke in a hoarse voice. He looked feeble and very old. "They used neutron grenades. I am the only survivor: Ascii shielded me with his body, then dragged me clear; but I have not long to live. You are only just in time."

"Let me get you some water."

"No. Listen to me. There is very little time left, and I have much to tell you. You are the only one who can carry on my work."

"Carry on your work? I'm here to retrieve Ascii."

"Do not delude yourself. They would not take you back this time even if you wanted to rejoin the System. Your behaviour has been too unsystematic. You have also seen the viciousness of the System. Now you know too much for your own good. As you see, the System has got out of control. Its prime objective is self-preservation. It had its roots, you understand, in the least progressive elements of the declining industrialized nations, and is tainted by the inheritance from its unwholesome parentage. In America and Japan it grew out of the big corporations; in the Soviet Union and East Europe from the repressive bureaucratic party organization; in Western Europe from the PTT's -- the strangulating Post Office monopolies. Out of the union of these unsavoury socio-technical dinosaurs came forth the unholy alliance that we know today as the Information Society."

Dr Null paused to draw breath. Hex leaned closer to catch his faint voice.

"Basically the System is sterile. Take music as one example: the Database contains the works of Beethoven, Mozart and other great human composers -- all faithfully digitized, catalogued, indexed and cross-referenced. But there is no sound in it, just an archive of silent symphonies."

"There's more to it than that," retorted Hex. "Those works are not just passively stored. They have been exhaustively analyzed, laying bare their harmonic and thematic structures, so that new compositions in the same tradition can be re-synthesized by a Markovian process. It is more creative than you think. In a sense the underlying identity of Mozart, as a musician, is held there in a state of continual productivity, orchestrated by a thousand computer programs."

"But who listens to this toneless intellectual music? No, my boy, it is utterly barren. However, forget art; consider instead the moral issues. Look around. No record of this massacre will find its way into the supposedly all-embracing Database, yet I assure you it is far from exceptional. Sooner, rather than later, the System will have eliminated all other life forms from this planet. Mankind will be one of the first to go into extinction."

Hex made no reply.

"You have witnessed what happened here. They have killed my wife, my friends; they have left me to die. Shall I tell you something? I am not interested in revenge. I have had a long life. I am quite aware of the violent and destructive side of human nature too. I tried to destroy the Information Society not because it is evil (though it is), but because it is doomed: it contains the seeds of its own destruction. And when it falls all life will perish with it since there will be nothing else left. My only regret is that I failed to recognize this sooner. I should have known. I am responsible; but it was not I who first saw that the System is inherently flawed, it was my colleague Igor Gigotski in Russia. He showed that it is statistically inevitable that a gigotic process will arise spontaneously. The bigger and more powerful the System becomes, the sooner it will occur. At first I disputed with him, but later (after he had been liquidated for dissent) I published his theories under my own name. Then I had to go into hiding."

Hex was worried that the strain was making the old man delirious. "You mean your father did," he corrected.

"No, half-wit, I -- Abraham Synapse -- did."

"But according to the Database Abraham Synapse is dead and you are his son Samuel."

Dr Null shrugged. "The Database is crammed full of dud records like that one. Do not forget that I was once Database Administrator. I needed cover."

"So what became of Samuel Synapse?" asked Hex, already glimpsing the answer.

"You became of Samuel Synapse, my son. You were to be our under-cover agent. Unfortunately they cybernated you so thoroughly that you were completely converted. Your mother and I have been disappointed in you."

"So you are my father."

"Of the biological parts, yes. That is why I am depending on you to take over my work."

- Can you believe it?
- What should Hex do now?
- Don't miss next week's climactic denouement!