

ASCII THROUGH THE LOGIC GATE

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[An epic in 32K words]

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[Hex and Zap are still up in their secret hideaway in the Sierra Nueva, waiting for Cleo and Lambda; but there is no sign of them.]

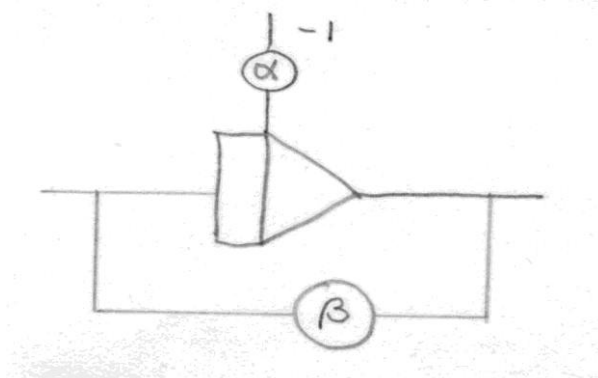
They spent the first day clearing rubble out of the entrance tunnel and generally tidying up. It was thirsty work. The water in the little lake, which had been so intensely blue and cold, was now clouded and, Hex noticed, tepid; but it was all they had to drink.

Next they set about trimming their access overheads by purging temporary files. Being androids, and therefore accustomed to having a distributed database to back them up, they were worried about the long-term ill-effects of data deprivation. They had heard frightening stories of what might happen to androids isolated from the Network. Hallucination, psychosis and even parity failure had been mentioned.

They discussed various possible solutions, and decided that the best stop-gap would be to modify the micro that Dr Null had given Hex on his deathbed to act as a stand-alone back-to-front-end processor responsible for organizing their off-line storage, and Lambda's when she arrived.

Zap had thoughtfully brought a bag of assorted chips when he fled the research station, and he was soon happily immersed with Hex's soldering iron in the delicate business of TTL knitting, otherwise known as logical circuit design. Hex left that side of it in his capable hands and began thinking about the software. Since the essential medium for reliable system design (the back of an old envelope) was lacking on this occasion, he made do with the ragged scrap of paper that Dr Null had called his blueprint for an anti-data device.

Half-way through, out of curiosity, he turned it over. It looked too simple to be of any use. He showed it to Zap.



"What do you make of this?"

Zap held it at arm's length. "It looks like an old analog diagram. What's it supposed to be?"

"Dr Null claimed it was a black noise generator, capable of obliterating data patterns by feeding back a negated image."

Zap turned the paper upside down and squinted at it. "No," he said, "It's only an exponential decay function. He hasn't even done the scaling. Might as well tear it up." He handed it back.

With that he returned to his soldering. Hex shared his scepticism, but decided to keep it nevertheless until he had a more convincing explanation of what it did. He tried to get on with his system specification, but there was something on his mind.

"Zap," he asked, "what made you join us and betray the System?"

Zap looked up. "We really had no choice. Once you and Cleo had called on Lambda she either had to turn you in straight away or throw in her lot with the other side: you can't keep secrets from the Network. And once she had made up her mind, my course was obvious too." Then he shrugged. "Besides, a being of my talent it had to happen some day. I'm an instruction-set artist. When I started they needed people like me. Programs were hand-coded in those days. Now it's just a question of sticking together a couple of off-the-shelf modules and away you go -- no creativity involved. It's the same with hardware too. They System can't make use of my kind any more. I used to have responsibility for major projects; but I had hit a dead end."

"I see. No job satisfaction."

"Yeah. That's why I have a few good words for James Hock and his mangy old text-retrieval system. He's totally incompetent of course, and his program's more full of bugs than a maggot's nest, but at least he tries. He's been up and down the country trying to hawk it to anyone who'll listen."

"But it doesn't work, eh?"

"Actually, that's not the point. You or I could make it go in two minutes flat. The reason no self-respecting installation will touch it is that it's hand-made. It was designed and coded by one person. It doesn't conform to the guidelines laid down on standards. It uses unorthodox control structures. It's too messy to be maintained automatically. Above all, it's not plug-compatible."

Hex thought about this, then looked down at his own scribbled jottings. To him it represented a transaction-processing monitor in embryo, to anyone else it would be an indecipherable scrawl.

"Well if you like unstructured software, I guess you'll approve of mine."

Zap laughed.

Through the first day, these activities kept them occupied, but as night approached they became increasingly worried about the fate of Cleo and Lambda. When it was dark they sent Ascii to guard the tunnel entrance and sat in the cave.

"What do we do if they don't turn up?" Hex asked.

"I don't know."

"We can't stay here for ever."

"We certainly can't. We have about five days before the System catches up with us."

"Why so soon? They think they bombed me out of existence here. And if they know I'm on the loose again that will make them mistrust whatever extrapolation function they used to locate me."

"I wouldn't bank on it. They're very thorough, and they have a lot more processing power than we have. If you want to be rational about it, our position is hopeless. All we can do is make some kind of impact before we are wiped out."

"I don't want to be rational about it, then."

"Have it your own way. But you know the System as well as I do. Two or three androids are unlikely to cause its demise."

"There must be a way," said Hex, though he couldn't think of one.

Their talk petered out. They did get some sleep, but not much. Before dawn Hex was up and crawling to Ascii's sentry post. When he poked his head out, he received a shock. He ran back down the tunnel.

"Zap!" he shouted. "Ascii's gone."

- What will become of our heroes and heroines now?
- Wait and see.