

ASCII THROUGH THE LOGIC GATE

=====

[An epic in 32K words]

Copyright (c) 1978, Richard Forsyth.

Block 12 (Logical Block)

[Despite Hex's objections, the gang have decided to deluge the System with Leibnizian Syllogistic Acid, an exotic elixir distilled from a rare species of mushroom with several fascinating properties. It can be transmitted monadically along wires, and it can cause computational paralysis. Meanwhile, Hex's relationship with Cleo has undergone a profound change.]

Hex spent the next day with Zap, putting the finishing touches to their timesharing system. It was configured around Dr Null's microprocessor and looked really stylish once the circuit boards and power unit were tucked snugly away in their smart matt black box. They named it the M5 (Multi-modular mega-micro machine). When it was built they showed off their handiwork to Cleo for her admiration.

She surveyed it coolly, without passing any comment.

"Nice piece of workmanship, isn't it?" badgered Hex.

"You're just building up a little System of your own," she replied -- a criticism not without force.

"At least it's ours," Hex answered.

"You have to admit," added Zap with relish, "that this little contraption really has Hex appeal."

This remark was enough to lift Cleo out of her somewhat sombre mood; and there the matter rested.

The M5 passed its benchmark tests with flying colours -- including a version of the travelling salesman problem set in 10-dimensional hyperspace (which is where travelling salesmen should be set). It was time to bring it live.

"Who's going to be the first to try it interactively?" asked Hex.

"You and Cleo," proposed Zap. "Surely it's time you made an honest android of her."

"No thanks," objected Cleo. "I don't want 115-volt currents coursing through my head."

"Such confidence!" retorted Zap.

"Let us three androids try together," interposed Lambda.

"There's confidence for you," said Hex.

"I'm game," Zap assured them.

They each plugged into one of the parallel interface ports and, synchronized, by the 64MHz clock, logged on simultaneously.

Nothing happened.

After they had been sitting motionless like statues for about ten minutes, Cleo wandered out into the bowl of the crater. Ascii was snoozing peacefully by the warm pool. To relieve the boredom she picked up a stick, prodded him into wakefulness, and threw it to the far side of the crater. He fetched her first throw but the second he left where it fell and, instead of retrieving it, sniffed intently at the crater wall. He had apparently caught the smell of an animal. Cleo left him to it and ambled back to join the others.

To her surprise, not to say consternation, they were sitting expressionless exactly as she had left them. They made no response to anything she said, nor did pinches or slaps induce any of them to bat so much as an eyelid. They just sat like waxwork dummies. She was relieved to notice that the status lights above Zap's brow were green, and the red 'system fail' indicator on Hex's chest was not illuminated. Apart from Lambda's instruction-counter register -- which was flickering in a suspiciously cyclic pattern -- these were the only signs of life. It was clear that she had to do something drastic.

All her life she had deliberately avoided learning about data-processing. A sixth sense had warned her to steer clear of such things. But now she wished she hadn't. There were three small white buttons on the black box -- marked 'On/Off', 'Load' and 'Reset'. She knew enough to realize that one false move on her part could endanger their very existence. Just ripping out the informatic umbilical cords that hung from the heads of her three comrades and linked them to the machine could have disastrous consequences, similarly, just turning the power off might well leave them in a state of computational limbo from which she would be unable to rescue them. It was a heavy responsibility.

There was only one thing for it: by a process of elimination she deduced that it had to be the 'Reset' button, so, taking her courage in both hands, she jabbed her forefinger into it.

A pitiful wail resounded round the cave, from three voices as from one. Hex and Zap sprang up, cracked their heads on the ceiling and, in falling, cracked their heads again against one another. They lay prostrate on the earthen floor. Lambda just collapsed backwards in a heap with a sigh like the deflation of a balloon.

"What have I done?" demanded Cleo of herself, mortified.

All attempts to rouse them failed. Her heart sank. It began to look as though she had precipitated the very crisis she had striven to avoid. It was quite possible that she had broken into their co-processing in the middle of some complicated mutual interlock from which they could now never be released, leaving all three in a perpetual wait state. It was too ghastly to contemplate.

In desperation she scabbled round on her hands and knees trying to understand how the M5 worked; but there were no instructions and no user manual -- in short, no documentation. Every time she tried to log in, it gave her rude messages about her id-code.

As a last resort she went outside to see if Ascii could help. She did not have to search for long: he almost bumped into her as he fled, yelping in stark terror, from the animal whose spoor he had been following. As Ascii scuttled into the shelter of the cave, she could see distinctly, shinning nimbly down the sheer rock face opposite, the creature he had disturbed. It was a huge man-like ape, covered in reddish-brown hair. She paused just long enough to estimate its height (it had to be eight feet tall if it was an inch) then darted back

in the cave where Ascii, very agitated, was doing his mechanical best to tremble. All she could hope was that the tunnel would prove too narrow for its massive bulk.

It was not long before a giant shadow loomed menacingly at the entrance.

"Ne sentu timon," boomed a deep resonant voice. "Mi manĝas nur vegetalojn."

- Will the Abominable Snowman make a meal of them?
- Not Yeti.