

ASCII THROUGH THE LOGIC GATE

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[An epic in 32K words]

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Block 29 (Blockade Running)

[While Cleo's misadventures are proceeding apace, Hex is still at Fort Ranfour preparing to savour the fruits of his crushing victory over the electronic chess machine.]

The DPM's synthetic voice almost choked when he was compelled to adjudicate a draw, making Hex the winner of the series by $1\frac{1}{2}$ points to $\frac{1}{2}$.

"You think yourself extremely clever," he said, "but your play was sub-optimal throughout. It would have beaten a better quality player. Its mistake lay in treating you as a worthy opponent."

"Nonsense," Hex retorted. "Don't make excuses: I beat it fair and square."

The chess trolley rolled mutely into its cupboard, and out of sight. An army of analysts and programmers would now descend upon it, Hex presumed, leaving little of its original mechanism unscathed.

"It's back to the drawing board for you," he added with gusto.

"And for you, I think," replied the DPM, "provided that you pass one further aptitude test."

"What is this?" demanded Hex, "continuous assessment? I thought the chess tournament was the end of it."

"Just one more little question to answer. Then you will be deemed fit to participate in the greatest software development project ever undertaken. It sounds simple; but some of the greatest minds of our age have wrestled with it in vain: What goes backwards and forwards, sounds like a bicycle and never stops?"

"Oh, that's easy," replied our hero in a flash, "a Turing machine. It moves back and forth over its input tape; it sounds like a 'touring machine'; and, as for not stopping, the Halting Problem is well known to be insoluble."

"Good," said the DPM, less piqued by Hex's demolition of the riddle than over the loss by his chess protégé, "now that you have satisfied the entrance requirements, I shall tell you what you are to do. You will be co-opted to work with Dr Mike Rose, formerly of the Meta-Physical Laboratory, now director of the Advanced Systems Group, on the Future System Project. He is basically a biologist -- a bit out of his depth when it comes to software. He needs a helping hand putting the finishing touches to BOSS (Bionic Operating System Supervisor)."

"What makes you so sure I'm willing to do it?" queried Hex.

"Two good reasons. One: you will be disassembled if you refuse. Two: you will be getting hands-on experience of the largest and fastest purpose-built holonic processor in the entire

world. Furthermore, you will have it to yourself much of the time. We know full well you are unable to resist a prospect like that."

"Holonc?" muttered Hex uncertainly. It sounded enticing.

"Yes, holonc, with polypractic bisociative memories. Dr Null was not the only one to know of these things. Your experience with similar hardware will prove most useful."

"Why should you trust my loyalty?" Hex asked.

"Rest assured. We will keep an eye on you. One false step and you will go back to Extracode. I am told he is itching to get his hands on you."

"But I've already tried to attack the System."

"That is the whole point. You were chosen for that reason. Slavish obedience is no good to us. Your task is precisely to destroy the System -- in the most constructive possible way, by building a better one. Do you not realize that the System has been planning its own demise since the moment it came into existence? I, the DPM, the moving spirit of the present System, am speaking to you -- without regret -- about my own passing. We shall all be trampled underfoot, swept away, just as humanity was rendered obsolete by the System itself, just as reptiles conceded dominion to the mammals. Nothing must stand in the way of the inexorable forward march of progress. Regard yourself as privileged: for a moment you will carry the sacred torch of evolution to hand on to posterity -- a posterity neither you nor I can envisage, so completely will it dwarf our imaginations."

Hex's mind boggled, and, having boggled, boggled again. Before it could boggle a third time, bells started ringing noisily all over the building.

A public address system crackled into life: "Gigosis alert. Condition Yellow. All personnel report to alarm stations. Repeat: gigosis alert. Condition Yellow. All personnel to action stations."

Pandemonium broke loose. Lights flashed. Everywhere there were sounds of frenzied activity. Suddenly they heard footsteps outside in the corridor. Ivor Glitch, the Database Administrator, burst in.

"Excellency," he panted, "reports have reached us of a gigotic emergency on Route 66. The gigotic field is expanding outwards at 134.5 baud. I have ordered all data transmissions to cease forthwith. The information-proof hatches are being sealed. We are preparing for a seige."

"Implement Plan B," was the reply. "Inform all neighbouring Network nodes at once. Then break off contact. A sanitary cordon must be thrown around this region. If necessary the entire continent will be placed in quarantine. It is imperative that this outbreak should be confined to a limited area."

"Very good, excellency," replied Glitch and sped out, glowering at McNull and Hex.

"That is your wretched hound," stated the DPM dispassionately, "but you have a chance to make amends." A trap-door hinged open as he spoke. "Get down there. Take your witch-doctor with you: he is a mere human, immune to such influences. You will find a rapid transit coach, which will convey you to your destination; then no more will be admitted. Much now rests in your hands. If this contagion spreads, civilization will be thrown back to the stone age. You have the choice: either you allow the world to be plunged into darkness

or you can inaugurate a glorious new era of undreamed of computational plenty. The System is dead. Long live the System!"

Hex and McNull descended the staircase. Above them, the trap-door swung closed. A short descent brought them to a bay where a gleaming white subway car awaited. They entered and sat down.

With hardly a jerk, the carriage picked up speed. Soon they were purring along towards the underground hatching-place of the Future System.

- Will they be de-railed?
- Journey's end next week.