

CUBICLE DREAMS

the continued bloggings of a cubicle dweller



Stephen Cavers

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To my parents...
thanks for all the fish!

CUBICLE DREAMS

Foreword

Like movie sequels, this sequel to “Raised by Penguins” is poorly-conceived, light on content, and is likely to be panned by the critics. The first book ended at an arbitrary point in the middle of 2004, leaving readers with lingering questions. Will he ever resolve the couch crisis? Will our protagonist do something about the rampant abuse of yellow sticky notes? Will his unhealthy addiction to sushi bring about his untimely demise or simply add to his waistline?

Of the many questions posed by readers, these three are possibly the most pressing (which is an indicator of how pointless that book really was) but only one is answered with any certainty. I won’t reveal which one, as the answer may surprise you, unless you were there when it happened, in which case the only surprise for you is that I bothered to write any of this down.

So by leaving certain questions unanswered, the door is open for a sequel. And the neighbour’s cat, which I just now had to shoo back into the hallway.

I hope you enjoy *Cubicle Dreams*, because then I can write yet another sequel, which I’ll call *Cubicle Dweller III: The Legend of Cubey’s Gold*.

Knife, fork, spoon

Monday, April 26, 2004

My dinner last night was a spinach salad from the drive-through window at Wendy's. Now, I can understand that there's a lot of pressure on the drive-through staff, and sometimes it's not easy to make a snap decision about which utensil would best suit the food. But really. You gave me a knife. Not a fork -- or even a spoon -- but a lonely plastic knife.

A bit of nonsense verse that I read as a child sprang to mind, though I can't remember where it's from:

I eat my peas with honey
I've done it all my life
It makes the peas taste funny
But it keeps them on my knife

Replace peas and honey with spinach leaves and Italian dressing and you can picture how my meal went.

A matter of the utmost urgency

Monday, May 03, 2004

About a year ago, I posted this entry on a temporary blog for my first blogiversary contest. Since that blog is no longer online, I might as well post it here. It's a scene called "A Matter of the Utmost Urgency". I should warn you -- it's painfully bad.

[Exterior, space. S.S. Interesting travels at hyper speed. Intro music.]

TURK [voice over]: Captain's log, stardate two three four five... uhhh... six. Whatever. I just make those up anyway. We're on course to rendezvous with Starbase 69 — a personal favorite of mine for R-and-R. And maybe a little S-and-M. Yes, that old starbase is home to the best sardines-and-mayonnaise this side of Rigel Four.

Or is it Rigel Five? Why do they number those damn planets anyway? In a hundred years of colonization, couldn't they think of a name for their planet?

Anyway, I've called a meeting of the bridge officers to discuss a matter of the utmost urgency.

[Interior, meeting room. SPORK, BONER, and O'HARA sit around the table in silence. TURK enters and sits.]

TURK: Gentlemen.

O'HARA: And lady.

TURK: And... lady, of course.

O'HARA: I think you'd better start the meeting now, Captain.

TURK: Of course. I called this meeting to discuss a matter of the utmost urgency.

BONER: What is it, Tim? Hostile aliens?

TURK: No, Boner, it's—

SPORK: Has Space Command given us a dangerous mission?

TURK: Uh... no. No, it's not that—

O'HARA: Is it a tear in the space-time continuum, leading back to a time in our past, which will inevitably invoke a quantum paradox?

BONER: That was last week's episode, O'Hara.

O'HARA: Oh. I took last week off, remember?

BONER: That's right. How was the crab nebula? Is it as good as they say?

O'HARA: Well it's mostly imitation crab now.

BONER: That's a shame.

O'HARA: I hear the quality hit rock-bottom when they made a deal with the Hake system. Then the market floundered.

SPORK: Would anyone like some coffee?

[General assent. SPORK pours cups of coffee all around.]

TURK: I'm afraid that we have a very serious problem on our hands. We are running out of coffee. Now, I understand your feelings, and I realize that we're still weeks away from Starbase 69. But there's no denying it: we have only enough coffee to last five more hours. In fact, these cups may be the among the last you'll have. We need to explore some alternatives. Suggestions?

SPORK: We could synthesize a mild stimulant by fermenting Mr Fugu's underpants. We could survive on Fugupants-extract for several days, and go without coffee altogether.

TURK: Altogether?

ALL OFFICERS: [together] We could survive on Fugupants-extract for several—

TURK: [cutting them off] Gentlemen! GENTLEMEN!

O'HARA: Ahem.

TURK: Gentle...uh...persons. Heh.

O'HARA: [under her breath] Oh, for crying out loud.

BONER: Tim, I respect Mr Spork's expertise in this area, but... well, quite frankly, I'd rather throw myself into a pit full of bamboo spikes and Celine Dion cross-dressers than consume Mr Fugu's underpants. Dammit, Tim, there's got to be another way.

SPORK: Fugupants-extract is quite safe, doctor. As a matter of fact, I add some to the coffee every morning.

[everyone does a spit-take]

BONER: Damn you, you purple-blooded Uvulan bastard.

SPORK: [breaking into tears] I hate you! I hate you all!

[SPORK runs from the room, sobbing.]

TURK: Easy on the racial slurs, Boner.

BONER: Sorry.

O'HARA: I may have an alternative, sir.

TURK: That's officer thinking, O'Hara.

O'HARA: I haven't told you what it is yet.

TURK: Yes, O'Hara: officer thinking.

O'HARA: I recently intercepted a transmission from Fowlia, captain.

TURK: The planet of hyper-intelligent space-monkeys?

O'HARA: Penguins. Hyper-intelligent space-penguins.

TURK: Really? What happened to the monkeys?

O'HARA: There are no space-monkeys, captain. There never were.

TURK: That's a shame. I like monkeys.

BONER: So what was in the transmission, O'Hara?

O'HARA: The space-penguins are in our sector, and on an intercept course with Starbase 69. They're after the sardines-and-mayonnaise.

BONER: You knew they were going to attack the starbase? Why didn't you mention this earlier?

O'HARA: I was waiting for a gap in the banter.

BONER: Fair enough.

TURK: So. The penguins are after some S-and-M. What does this have to do with our coffee shortage?

O'HARA: Um. Not a lot. I thought maybe we could intercept the space-penguin ship and—

TURK: [interrupting] And confiscate their supply of coffee! O'Hara, you're a genius.

Gentlem... officers, we're about to take a step into the unknown. We're about to boldly go where no m—... person... has gone before. The mission could be dangerous. We could die a horrible death. The space-penguins may blast our hull asunder like a ballpeen hammer on an apple strudel. We may be exposed to the brutal vacuum of space. Our eyes may explode in their sockets. Our blood may boil away through our skin. Our skin may freeze in the icy embrace of interplanetary space. We'll be boiling and freezing and exploding, ALL AT THE SAME TIME! But will we be afraid? Will we retreat from danger? Will we cower behind a rock like little boy when a big, scary clown is at his birthday party?

BONER: "Yes"?

TURK: No!

[presses intercom button]

Mister Fugu! Lay in an intercept course with the space-penguin craft. Ahead twisted-factor seventeen.

FUGU: [over intercom] We only go up to twisted-factor five, captain.

TURK: Well get Spotty to have a look at the engines. Oh, and Fugu... we won't be needing your underpants anymore.

FUGU: [over intercom] Thank you captain.

[end of scene]

Coffee mug superstition

Monday, May 10, 2004

For me -- and I imagine for a great many cubicle dwellers -- my coffee mug is the single most important personal item in my cubicle. It comes with me to meetings. It sits beside my monitor and watches over my work. It provides me with a bit of comfort in an otherwise sterile veal-fattening pen. This is why I proceed carefully when I need a new one.

My last one suffered terribly in the dishwasher -- the hot water flaked off most of the outer glaze, leaving it sad and disfigured. I respectfully retired it and set about letting another one choose me.

The coffee mug -- the right coffee mug -- will be the one that unexpectedly appears in my life and feels right. I feel the same way about pets and plants too. They have to just fall into my world and thereby choose themselves.

While in Steveston recently, I visited a little café. There, on a shelf, was an array of plastic and aluminum beauties. They were two-layer, thermal mugs with the café's logo on the side. It was fate. I grabbed a box, and without checking the colour inside, I bought it.

When it turned out to be red, I sat and frowned over the result. Sure my mug had to pick me, but why did a red one have to pick me? I'm not enchanted with red things in general -- I drive a red car but it too chose me and not the other way around. Should I accept fate and keep the red one or should I exchange it for the silver one?

In the end, I exchanged it. I wonder -- does it care that I rejected its sibling in favour of the colourless one? It's not the one that chose me. The mug that was destined for me is now in someone else's hands. And this one -- maybe this one was destined for someone else. I've meddled in things that are greater than me. I yanked this mug from the hands of fate and will inevitably pay the price.

If something starts to go terribly wrong with my current projects, I'll know what to blame for it.

"Raised by Penguins"

Wednesday, May 12, 2004

At last, it's here. The long unawaited-for book that critics have hailed as "rectangular" and even "a book". Yes, now you too can have your own copy of *Raised by Penguins*, the compilation of selected entries from this website.

Why would anyone pay good money for words they can get for free, you might ask? I have an answer for that, which was supplied by my friend, Christine: It's for the toilet.

That is, unless you have a notebook computer with wireless networking, you can't take this website with you when you... uh... do your business. The book, on the other hand, is entirely portable and doesn't require any special hardware for you to read it -- except maybe glasses. Also, each entry takes only a minute or two to read -- timed perfectly to whatever you happen to be doing. So that's one good reason why you want *Raised by Penguins*. Christine has a very sensible head on her shoulders and probably has an entire library in her bathroom.

The real reason for printing this book is this: I don't trust the web. Formats change, browsers change, and we can never be certain that the format we write in now will be readable in a few years. I've posted many thousands of words to this blog, and I'd like to keep some of them.

Paper, on the other hand, is never obsolete. So I've decided to go the route of so-called "vanity publishing", which means that I bodged together the entries into a PDF, slapped a cover on it, called it a book, and sent it to Café Press, who can print copies on demand. I don't expect to sell (m)any, but should you decide to order a copy of *Raised by Penguins*, then thank you, and I hope that you enjoy it and whatever activity you're doing when you read it.

Vote for your favourite lizard

Thursday, May 27, 2004

Federal election? Did someone call a federal election? It doesn't feel like an election. After all -- and I don't think I'm alone when I say this -- I have no idea who the local candidates are. I don't know their names or what they stand for, beyond grasping for more power.

Sure, I've seen the party leaders in the news. Who is there? Let's see... For the so-called "Liberals", there's Paul Martin. He's the prime minister who was appointed after the last guy retired. For the NDP, there's um... is his name Jack? Yeah I never heard of him either. Heading the newly transmogrified Conservatives, it's... well it was Joe Clark wasn't it? Now it's some other guy? I don't know. Stephen? Good ol' right-wing, Steve. Yeah, we needed another right-wing, pro-Bush, pro-business candidate to choose from.

Paul, Jack, and Steve. Is this the election of the generic male names?

As for the local candidates in my riding of Vancouver East, it's a greater mystery. There are no signs out on the lawns (that I've seen), and no news coverage. It's normally an NDP riding in a sea of Liberal ridings, which gives you an idea of the importance of the area in a federal election. We're the disposable and neglected riding.

I've only lived in East Vancouver since 1996, on and off, but still I don't know who our local MP is or who the candidates are. I guess they're not big on campaigns.

In the end, it's not important. The Liberals will probably win again, or if they don't, another party will transform themselves into carbon-copies of them and continue the rampage through the public coffers.

That's not cynical, is it?

A fine example of high-quality book-binding

Thursday, May 27, 2004

After many days eyeing my mailbox eagerly, the first four copies of *Raised by Penguins* arrived today. I carefully brought in the box and opened it up to find the four shiny books inside. They were indeed rectangular, as Café Press had promised. And also as Café Press had promised, they each contained 352 pages. I chortled merrily as I flipped through said pages.

Then I experienced a strange feeling of déjà vu. Hadn't I seen that page before? Why yes, that was page 60. What was it doing in the middle of the book? As I kept flipping, I encountered the same 80 pages four times over.

I checked the next book. Surely the first was just a fluke and the others would be fine. But alas, this one contained pages 81 to 168, repeated four times. The other two copies were similar, but contained a different page range in quadruplicate.

How could they do this? Did their printers not even look at what they were binding? Did it not seem odd that the first page of each copy of the same book was different and each one started on a different page number? *shakes fist in the direction of Hayward, California*

Well after a little chat with the friendly Café Press representative, they've agreed to resend four copies. If I promised to give you a copy, I'm sorry but it will be delayed another week or so, unless you want to read it in 80-page installments.

Thoughts about Wolfgang Petersen's "Troy"

Monday, May 31, 2004

Things I noticed about the blockbuster movie, *Troy*:

- Achilles really likes to point his sword sideways at people and look down the blade. Someone should have mentioned to him that you don't need to aim a sword like a gun.
- In one scene, the Trojans appear to roll gigantic balls of yarn down onto the Greek encampment. They should have followed that by unleashing the gigantic kittens. "Cry Havoc! and let slip the kittens of war!"
- They keep starting massively violent battles, only to stop them suddenly, saying something like, "Well there's been enough killing for one day." Do they work on a quota?
- Is it really necessary for the men to have shorter skirts than the women?
- Maybe if they wore thigh armour instead of shin armour they'd have fewer leg wounds.
- Achilles, of course, gets an arrow in his heel. A nearby audience member whispered to another, "His Achilles tendon!" No, that's not why it's ironic, you doofus.
- Achilles manages to woo the lovely Perseus into his bed. Fortunately, Achilles has a Trojan on him.

In the words of the immortal Homer: "Doh!"

The dreaded "bird book"

Tuesday, June 01, 2004

When my brothers and I were little, my dad was a bit of a birder, and I think he still is now, but to a lesser extent. I don't think he was ever a rabid birder exactly, but he did own a well-used copy of "A Field Guide to Birds".

To my brothers and I, it was *The Bird Book*. Any time he spotted an unusual bird, out would come The Bird Book to the sound of collective groans. We'd spend the next fifteen minutes or so flipping through the pages of feathery mug shots, trying to find a positive match. And then when he found it, he'd give a gleeful chortle and announce it's name to anyone within hearing range. "Ho-ho! It's a bufflehead." The book would then be left open on that page for everyone's reference.

It was a good experience for a kid, though only some of it stuck with me. I can still identify coots, loons, and various ducks and geese, but others escape me. For example, there's a big black sea bird that's not uncommon along the coast here. Eats fish. Does a lot of standing around and diving. Very impressive. I couldn't for the life of me remember what it was called.

My cubicle neighbour is a birder, and after I described it (inaccurately), she pulled out her own Bird Book. The moment I saw a painting of it on the flyleaf, the name popped into my head: cormorant.

So the constant exposure to The Bird Book did train me to identify birds, but apparently I can only identify paintings of birds.

A song about a sandwich

Thursday, June 03, 2004

As I promised in the comments on an earlier post, I devoted a portion of my lunch break to writing a song about a sandwich. Ahem... to be sung to the tune of "The Yellow Rose of Texas" -- written in 3 minutes.

I spotted me a sandwich
A-lying on the ground
It wriggled like an earthworm
And didn't make a sound

I stabbed it with my chopsticks
And lifted it up high
It writhed and tried to bite me
And wouldn't seem to die

I threw it into traffic
And heard a meaty crunch
I saw the mayo squirting
And then I lost my lunch

[insane giggling]

Your turn.

Thoughts on "Kill Bill, Vol. 1"

Wednesday, June 09, 2004

I watched Quentin Tarantino's ultra-violent "Kill Bill, Vol. 1" on video last night. As I watched, these thoughts occurred to me:

- Of any movie I have ever seen, "Kill Bill" has by far the most gratuitously gory, sickening violence.
- The body count is higher than any martial-arts themed movie I've seen. Then again, I may have miscounted — some of the bodies were in several pieces. (shudder)
- Lucy Liu looks really hot... until her brain is exposed. All I can say is that she'll need a serious comb-over to hide that.
- If "Kill Bill, Vol. 2" is more of the same, then I have absolutely no desire to see it.
- Uma Thurman has funny-looking toes.

You've got a silly plot

Friday, June 11, 2004

Why did I watch it? I don't know. I must have been too lazy to change the channel. Last night, some movie station (I forget which one) showed the confused 1998 romantic comedy, "You've Got Mail". Having just seen Tom and Meg the night before when I watched the last 30 minutes of "Sleepless in Seattle" (again, too lazy to grab the remote), I thought it was a repeat showing. It wasn't. Same cast, slightly different story.

Anyway, maybe as I guy I don't get the romantic comedy genre in general, but this plot confused me. In short (spoiler coming, if you haven't seen it), Joe (Tom Hanks) falls in love with Kathleen (Meg Ryan), anonymously, by e-mail. They don't realize that in real life they've met and they're bitter enemies.

- When Joe realizes who his Internet crush is, instead of telling her, he keeps it secret, and is really mean to her. Why? That's never explained. He just is.
- When Joe, the man Kathleen hates intensely, barges into Kathleen's apartment, she's not upset. No, they have a friendly chat. Huh? Seriously, in real life, she'd be calling the police and fending him off with a knife. That's scary stuff.
- Joe keeps his identity secret for days (weeks?), playing with Kathleen's emotions by e-mail. This, in real life, would be considered cruel and deceptive. What does she do when she finds out? She kisses him.

Alright, I just don't get it. And don't get me started on "Sleepless in Seattle". I mean, for crying out loud. How could they fall in love? She was a *stalker*!

What's on tonight? Oh, crap. "What Women Want"? No! I put my foot down. I'm going to go to Blockbuster and I'm going to find a cheesy action movie. Like Roger Moore in "Moonraker" -- I always get all misty when that metal-toothed behemoth, Jaws, meets the love of his life. *sniff* Pass me a kleenex, will ya?

The scourge banished

Tuesday, June 15, 2004

Remember those laundry detergent ads from the seventies and eighties in which an exhausted housewife would scrub her husband's blue shirts in vain to remove the dreaded "ring-around-the-collar"? Those ads were broadcast often and repeatedly. Collar dirt must have been a serious problem back then.

But now, in the twenty-first century, we don't see such ads anymore. Does this mean that we have finally beaten the scourge of ring-around-the-collar? This, surely, is proof of the betterment of mankind.

Yes, I know what "hot" means

Wednesday, June 16, 2004

I like spicy foods. I put hot sauce on practically everything — without it, food is bland and boring. Why is it that this surprises people?

Example: I frequent a particular take-out stand for lunch a couple of times a week. I often order some chow mein and some hot-and-sour soup. Every time, the owner hesitates, peers at me, and says, "Very spicy!...OK?"

Example: I was at Subway. I asked for hot sauce on my sub. The "sandwich artist" asked me if I was sure... "It's very hot." Yes, I was sure. I like spicy. "Really? You don't look like you would." What's that supposed to mean?

Alright, are these things not called "hot-and-sour soup" and "hot sauce"? Am I so pale and sickly that shop-owners fear for my safety?

VCRs may become illegal in US

Friday, June 18, 2004

US Senator Orrin Hatch has introduced a bill that would make it illegal (in the US) to make or use devices that are capable of a copyright violation. This would mean that most computers, CD burners, scanners, cameras, and even VCRs would become illegal devices.

Also, the wording of the bill indicates that it would be illegal to "counsel" regarding copyright violation, which effectively muzzles: web links to certain software companies, discussions on CD and DVD protections, or even suggesting to someone that it's possible to copy a copyrighted work.

Many have speculated that this is an attempt to overturn the "Betamax" ruling, which protects recording for personal use, and that it may be an attempt to control any technology that has the potential to be used illegally.

It's interesting to note the bill is named "Induce" or "Inducement Devolves into Unlawful Child Exploitation Act". It's not clear to many how this relates to child exploitation. More than likely, that's a way to demonize the bill's critics -- after all, it's not about boosting the profits of large corporations, it's about the children. Please, think of the children!!

Now, I appreciate copyright protections. They're a good thing. But isn't it a bit extreme to make everyone a criminal for having the potential to break the law? And if this passes, will copyright holders start suing manufacturers (or owners) of VCRs, tape recorders, CD burners, or computers? Even cameras have the potential to violate copyright. Certainly, this would have an effect on the development of new digital technology.

Frankly, I'd be surprised if an insane bill like this actually made it into law, but if it does, expect some interesting court cases. The RIAA's lawyers must be drooling over this.

Incommunicado

Saturday, June 19, 2004

I lost my cellphone. Maybe I shouldn't have given up the land-line after all. I mean, I can't even phone around to see if anyone found it. Doh!!!

I tried calling my own number from the office with no answer. Maybe the batteries are dead. So then I called Telus Mobility and suspended the phone. Don't want any extra long distance charges on the thing.

Well that's the end of the phone, I guess. Later this weekend I'll visit the cell phone shop and buy the cheapest replacement possible. Unless of course they have one of those camera phones with web, games, and a QWERTY keyboard. droooooool.

Many thanks to Mike, who lent me his cell phone for the day. Oh, by the way, Mike... Guido called about the Chinese watches. You know. The "Chinese watches".

Cubicle dreams

Sunday, June 20, 2004

Here's a sign that I need time away from my cubicle. I had a Dilbert dream last night. It wasn't a long one -- only three black-and-white panels like the comic strip -- but it was definitely a Dilbert dream. This doesn't bode well.

Here's how it went:

- First panel: Dilbert meets the new employee who can go into "stealth mode" and become invisible.
- Second panel: Nobody can find Stealth Guy.
- Third panel: Dilbert is at his desk, and stealth guy is standing behind him, clapping. Punch line: Dilbert says, "He lauds me."

Yeah, I don't get it either.

My car is an ecosystem

Wednesday, June 23, 2004

I didn't mind when my car grew a healthy crop of green algae on the roof and hood. It seemed natural for this part of the world, and toned down the shocking red of the underlying paint.

But this morning, I discovered a new, and less welcome development. My car has ants. Hundreds of them, all over it. I think they're feeding on the tree sap that practically sprays off the beech trees that overhang the parking lot.

As I drove to work, I saw dozens of them enduring the blast of wind on my windshield, clinging to droplets of sap for dear life. One by one, they vanished into the wind. By the time I got to work, I was surprised to see a few of them staggering around on the sunroof. Tenacious little buggers.

So what will take up residence in my car next? Mice? Raccoons? A herd of wildebeest?

Lizards re-elected -- go back to whatever you were doing

Tuesday, June 29, 2004

No surprises in this election. As expected, the Liberal lizards have formed another government and Paul Martin is still the prime lizard of Canada. The only change is that now they have a minority government, so as soon as they reach the first important issue, it's all over.

I heard an interview with Bob Rae, the former premier of Ontario, on CBC recently. He said (and I'm paraphrasing here) that running a minority government as if it were a majority is like jumping out of an airplane as if you had a parachute.

It's a nice image, but is it true? Maybe someone should take Mr. Martin on a skydiving trip and see if the analogy holds up.

Cable guy

Wednesday, August 04, 2004

Today I will receive an honoured guest into my home. Today, between 5:00 and 9:00 PM on-the-dot, the cable guy will visit and fix my net connection. Well, he'll look at it, to be accurate, and see if it can be fixed. I'll hope for the best.

For the last few weeks, I've had a packet loss problem. 75% to 100% packet loss is not a good thing, as it basically cripples any network connection. I don't know where these packets are going, exactly, but this kind of packet loss is only exceeded by the folks at Canada Post.

Where are these packets going? I can only imagine. Maybe there's some guy in Sweden, sitting at his BØRK pine-laminate computer desk when up pops a bunch of my stray packets.

"Hey Ingemar, did yøu write søomething abøut de cubicles?"

"Nø. Wøuld yøu like anøther meatball?"

No worries. The Cable Guy will fix it for me.

It feels good™

Monday, August 09, 2004

On my drive to work today, I saw an ad on the back of a bus. It was for "JugoJuice", a chain of juice bars, and it showed a woman with a delicious-looking cup of orange juice with the caption in giant bold print: "It feels good.™".

Although I'm sure that the cup of juice does feel good (unless you've misunderstood how it's supposed to be used), how can a company trademark the words "It feels good"? Lots of things feel good, and among them a good many of those things are products. Are they implying that people can no longer sell a product by saying whether it feels good? Do they really expect this to hold up in court?

I'm getting tired of seeing the ™ show up in everything. I'm waiting for someone to trademark the letters "TM", and sue anyone who uses the ™ symbol on any trademarked words.

(Trademark notice: "the" is now a trademark of CubicleDweller.ca. Any use of this word for commercial purposes is prohibited.)

Five, count 'em, FIVE megabits per second

Monday, August 09, 2004

Well, Cable Guy showed up precisely between the hours of 5:00 and 9:00 the other day and swapped out the old cable modem for a new Motorola cable modem. It wasn't as simple as that, however. Because Cable Guy didn't really know how to use a computer, I had to help him test to see if it worked. He was grizzled-looking guy, and I could tell he was a Newfoundlander by his accent and the fact that he called everyone "my friend". As in, "Hello, my friend, I'm here to work on your cable modem."

Cable Guy had to wait twenty minutes on hold while phoning the technicians at Shaw. Apparently they keep their own employees on hold too. When he finally got through ("Sacred Heart, my friend, where is everyone?!") he got me a new IP and a roaring fast 5 Mbps account. The wait was worth it. Downloads are zippy.

New perspective on an old patty

Wednesday, August 11, 2004

In the past few months, I've been very good about lunch. Oh, I still eat awful things, like big stacks of deep fried things with noodles, and choke down foot-long cheese-steak subs, but for the most part I've entirely eschewed the Scottish restaurant.

Until today. Today I had a bit of a lapse. As I walked past McD's, stomach grumbling, I found myself walking in the door, against all better judgement. And as I chewed the first bites of a "Big eXtra" burger with "cheese" (that one definitely has to go in quotation marks), it struck me as never before that McD's "beef" (also should be in quotes) tastes remarkably like oily foam rubber.

No, there was nothing wrong or different about this particular McD's burger -- I suspect that they've always tasted like that. I just hadn't previously been away from them long enough to truly appreciate how awful they are.

The fries, on the other hand, are full of lovely tallow-ish flavour, and give you a full week's worth of salt in only one serving. Hold on a sec--

cough *cough*

Come on heart--

cough *cough*

Ah. There it goes. I'm ok now. Yes, I can't get enough of those fries.

Furtive conversations

Thursday, August 12, 2004

A rumour was spreading. Words were exchanged in hushed tones by the photocopier. In furtive conversations in darkened corners, news of its arrival passed among the cubicle dwellers of the sixth floor.

I was cleaning my coffee mug when I heard. I won't reveal names, so let's call her "X". Her name doesn't really start with an X, so don't look for her in the company phone list.

"Do you, uh... hold on." she began, and checked the door to see if it was clear. She leaned towards me confidentially and indicated my coffee mug. "Do you drink coffee?"

As I dried my mug, I confirmed that, yes, I drank coffee. I turned and shuffled towards the vending machine, wondering where exactly X was going with this.

"You know about... upstairs, right?" she asked. No, I hadn't, I said, and just as I reached to select a cup of "Hawaiian" blend from the vending machine, she grabbed my wrist and said, "It's true. It's TRUE. They have real coffee. I've seen it."

"What?" I recoiled involuntarily.

X pressed on, "The others think I'm mad, but I found it! The fabled COFFEE MAKER OF THE SEVENTH FLOOR!!!!" Her shouts prompted a nearby cubicle dweller to shush her. She pulled me physically away from the vending machine behind the water cooler. "You don't need to drink this... this... filth," she spat. I wiped my face with my sleeve.

"Thank you," I said, "for the tip. I just wanted a cup of coffee really."

"No!" she hissed. "You must find it. You must seek the Coffee Maker of the Seventh Floor and drink of its...er..."

"--of its coffee?" I suggested.

"It is not merely coffee," X sneered. "It is the purest of sources. It is the black nectar of the gods."

"That sounds...uh...nice," I agreed, glancing at my watch.

"Yes," she nodded. "It is... nice." At that, X slipped a scrap of paper into my hand and slipped out of the kitchen, pausing only to say, "It is up to you. Find the source and bring back a thermos. A thermos filled with the nectar of the gods!"

"Ssshhh!" said the cubicle dweller.

Back at my desk, I examined the scrap. It was a CD liner from the MSDN CD library. On it, in red ink, was a hand-drawn map that led to an "X", beside which it said "coffee maker".

So it began: my quest for the fabled Coffee Maker of the Seventh Floor. I would not rest until I found it, if only because I was afraid of being cornered by X by the coffee vending machine again.

What kind of meat is that?

Saturday, August 21, 2004

There was a white box van in front of me on my drive home from the grocery store. On the back, it said "A&S Meats & Poultry". At first glance, I thought it said "ASS Meats & Poultry". Sometimes it's absolutely vital to spell out the word "and" in full.

Wishing for wi-fi

Tuesday, August 24, 2004

As I passed a little café today, I noticed that they had an 802.11 wireless hotspot. Inside, a woman with a sleek little notebook computer happily surfed the web with a tall, foamy beverage on the side. And I thought to myself, I want to try that.

Sure, my Dell laptop is a little too chunky to be fashionable, and doesn't sport the cool glowing-apple logo on the lid, but I could relax in a pleasant atmosphere and... do whatever it is that I usually do at home in a more comfortable chair. I guess I'd read the news sites or something. E-mail? I could log onto my favourite multiplayer game, I suppose, although it would be dead slow.

Even though I occasionally see the bohemian-geek in the corner of Lugz or The Grind or Starbucks or Blenz, typing out their manifesto-poem/one-act socio-eco-political play, I couldn't possibly focus on writing with so many distractions.

It might be more relaxing to sit with a newspaper instead of a keyboard and screen. And at home, instead of a hard chair. Ah, screw it. I'm not going wireless.

Couch crisis averted!

Sunday, September 26, 2004

As you may know, if you've read this blog before, I've been living couch-less for several months after I started an ill-conceived plan to replace my old futon frame. After removing portions of the frame from my living room, procrastination (and budget issues) left most of its pieces in the hallway, gathering dust.

But the Couch Crisis will soon be at an end. Within hours -- or possibly even minutes -- the IKEA delivery van will drop off my new "MYSINGE" sofa. Already I'm looking forward to lounging, sogging, slouching, vegetating, lolling, and maybe even a bit of layabouting.

What? "Layabouting" is a perfectly cromulent word.

Update...

K'plagh! After a pitched battle with strangely-shaped pieces of unusual cunning, I am victorious! I have assembled the couch and am now typing this blog entry with the laptop perched on the side table. Tonight, I celebrate with a barrel of blood wine and live gagh.

The secret of my filing system

Thursday, September 30, 2004

As many passers-by have commented, my cubicle has an impressive amount of paper in it. Reams of printed matter tower high and teeter over the edges of my desk. If one isn't careful and moves too quickly, the breeze can start a snowstorm of pages. It's quite a beautiful thing to behold. Like a snow globe, but with bulleted lists and diagrams.

You may ask me, then, how I stay organized. The secret is this: I let the sheets accumulate until nobody can remember why they were printed in the first place. I then neatly file those ones into the pile on the floor. Once that pile is tall enough to pose a hazard to navigation, I slip them into the recycle bin, from which they'll be shredded, pulped, re-milled into copy paper, and the entire process will start anew.

In this way, I like to think that here in my cubicle is a small part of the greater mysteries of the cycle of life.

EasyPark took my lunch money

Thursday, September 30, 2004

Begin rant...

Halfway to work, it struck me that I'd forgotten my wallet (again). I'd have to forgo buying my usual heaping plate of fried noodles and battered chicken balls, which is especially annoying because I missed dinner last night and breakfast this morning. Fortunately, I had five dollars in coin: three for the parking meter and an extra toonie that I could use to buy a small snack.

That's how it would have worked out if the meter hadn't eaten my coins. For some bizarre reason, the amount of parking time you get depends on the way you insert the coins. For example, if you put in a toonie, then a loonie, you get a full day of parking. However, if you put in a toonie, pause, then put in a loonie, you get only 90 minutes. It's \$3 either way, but one method will short you by several hours.

Naturally, in my morning brain-fog, I inserted my first toonie in the wrong way, saw a 60 minute parking stub in the tray, and realized that I'd have to now have to put in my snack money for an all-day stub that I should have gotten in the first place. I won't get to eat until sometime this evening -- probably around 7:00 or so. (Grumble grumble)

I now believe that parking meters are deliberately confusing. Poorly designed machines are both cheap and profitable.

End of rant.

It's Tuesday, like any other...

Tuesday, October 05, 2004

... except that today, I actually did something constructive. Yes, for the third time in my newfound career as a guy pretending to be a writer, I actually wrote something. Well, to be more specific, I wrote a thousand words of something, then wrote a few hundred more in notes that highlighted the fact that the first thousand words were completely wrong and that I should have written the notes first, then written the first thousand words. Well it's a learning process, I suppose.

When I was done writing, I messed around in the Second Life metaverse long enough to create an entirely new type of airplane that consistently crashes shortly after takeoff. It's sure to be a big hit.

That done, I settled into watching a movie -- *Hercules*, starring Steve Reeves. Yes, it's another unfortunate movie where the men wear shorter skirts than the women and the main character's voice is dubbed in a gravelly bass that never quite synchs with the picture. Actually, I found it hard to watch and fell to writing a rambling blog entry to fill the time.

Tomorrow, I plan to revisit my new story and then avoid entirely any movies set in ancient Greece. It's a hard life, but thank goodness I don't have to see the grey interior of a cubicle. Not until Thursday, anyway.

Coder

Friday, October 12, 2004

Jackson found himself once again staring at the door of his cube. Grey, featureless, it blended so well with the walls that there was no apparent way to open it, and he had to look quite carefully to see the lines that defined its boundaries. He wouldn't even know it was there, had he not seen it open once. He had been a child at the time -- no more than four or five -- and the memory was now annoyingly vague. The door had opened and a man in a suit had entered. That's where his memory ended, and in the thirty odd years since that event, the door had remained shut.

Jackson dropped his legs over the edge of his bunk, and felt the shock cold as his feet touched the floor. As he stood, the bunk retracted into the wall, leaving him swaying sleepily in the centre of his three-meter cube. His eyes remained fixed on the door. Sometimes, he would press his ear to the door and run his fingers across it's surface, feeling the slight imperfections in the finish. Through the door, he could sense a low thrumming, so quiet that it was more a gentle vibration than a sound, as if the world were out there, pressed against his door, and he imagined he could feel the beating of a thousand hearts.

This time, however, he simply stood and watched it, and felt as if it were watching him. Perhaps if he willed long enough or hard enough, it would open...

Jackson shook himself to alertness. Such thoughts, he knew, were forbidden.

The air in the room was neither hot nor cold, but a temperature that was just chilly enough to require clothing. Jackson pulled the tabs on the front of his coveralls, and let the garment slide to the floor. In reaction, the disposal slid out from the wall next to where the bed had retracted.

The body is foundation to the mind
The mind is foundation to the code
The code is foundation to the City

Nurture the body
Nurture the mind
Nurture the code
Blessed is the City

As he spoke these words, he mechanically ran himself through his morning routine. When he had relieved himself into the disposal, an exercise station appeared, and he put himself through the mandatory ten minutes of stretching, thirty minutes of running on the spot, and ten minutes of gentle exercise.

The wash station emerged from the wall opposite the bunk wall when he was done, and he washed himself efficiently and thoroughly. A blast of warm air from overhead ended his shower, and the wash station retracted into its place without leaving a single stray drop of water. Fresh clothes arrived with a clunk behind the grey panel of the receiving chute. The panel shushed open to reveal a neatly folded coverall, identical to the last.

By the time he had finished dressing, the receiving chute contained a quarter-litre packet of water and a meal bar, which he consumed without tasting. When he was finished, the chair emerged from the wall opposite the door. He threw the food wrappers into the disposal, sat in the chair with his feet in the stirrups, and felt the clamps close tightly around his ankles, wrists, and forehead, as they had done over ten thousand times before.

Something buzzed inside his skull, and the grey world of his cube winked out of existence.

Expensive bacon

Friday, October 22, 2004

Begin rant...

Right. So yesterday at lunch I went foraging for food, as is my habit, and found myself at Subway. Well, I guess I can't really say that I "found myself" -- I didn't walk in and see myself already at the counter. What a strange expression.

Anyway, I ended up at Subway and ordered my usual chicken sub, but this time I splurged. I asked for bacon. Yummy, crispy, delicious bacon. Incidentally, it's a bad idea to write about food right before lunchtime. Anyway, when I got to the cash register, I had a shock when they told me the price: the sub was just under \$10. That's about \$2 more than the already expensive price of a chicken sub.

Why was it expensive? The bacon. Four strips of bacon, which my arithmetical skills tell me are roughly 50 cents each, raised the price to a criminal ten dollars. For a sandwich. What kind of rare and exotic pig does this stuff come from that it costs so much?

I was aghast, but paid it anyway. And the really annoying part of this is that I'm so hungry that I'll probably buy another today.

End of rant.

Not bored... not at all

Tuesday, November 09, 2004

The funny thing about being sick, other than the hilarity of losing control of your bodily functions, is that it actually makes me want to go to work. After a week of watching daytime television, surfing the web endlessly, and staring out the window at passers-by like a crazy old man for a week, I think it would be really nice to be anywhere other than at home.

But I do have television. Television is my friend. It gives me those daily three-hour doses of Star Trek and a few doses of Stargate SG-1. And those hourly comedy shows on channel 37 are hilarious -- they have this running plot about this guy who looks like a chimp winning a presidential election. What's that show called? Oh, yeah... CNN. His dialog is just over the top. "Gonna hunt'm down. Bring'm t'justice." Hoo, that kind of cheesy acting can have me giggling for hours.

Thankfully, I also have Zip DVDs arriving by mail. Like that Vin Diesel movie about the mass-murderer who becomes the movie's hero. It warms the heart to see Hollywood promoting those kind of values. In the 35-minute animated sequel for children, however, the Riddick character only disembowels and otherwise dispatches people who are clearly villains. I suppose that children's stories have to be toned down appropriately.

So I'm not short of entertainment at all, while I'm spending time as a sickly shut-in. I have the TV, I have the computer, I have the Penguin Wordmaster Dictionary. That's a great read. All the same... it might be nice to see what the real world looks like. Before I completely bloody insane.

Hidden censorship online

Thursday, November 11, 2004

Is Shaw Cable deciding what I can and cannot download? Are they censoring the Internet? BoingBoing.net claims that Shaw Cable has installed a monitor that blocks certain protocols and discards packets based on some hidden criteria.

If this is true, then it explains a lot of the effects that I see. I admit, I use a file sharing application to download MST3K episodes -- not only is it (currently) legal to do so in Canada, but the producers have stated that they don't mind if fans share the episodes that aren't available for sale on DVD. Right, so I used to be able to download these things fairly quickly, but a while back, everything slowed to a crawl. Transfer rates slowed from 80Kbps to 1Kbps. Packet loss went through the roof, especially when I played online, multiplayer games like Second Life, which streams graphics and sound over the net.

I'd be outraged if this turned out to be true. Shaw has no right to secretly dictate what I can or can't access on the net. I really want to know if this is true.

The signs of sushi addiction

Wednesday, November 17, 2004

This week I have the pleasure of a visit from my brother and sushi addict, Ken (a.k.a, "Doctor Destructo"). Sometimes I suspect that he likes to stay at my place only because of its proximity to The Clubhouse, the golf-themed restaurant where you can start with a plate of nachos, then move on to sushi and okonomiyaki.

Last night, we walked down the street to The Clubhouse and proceeded to order pretty much everything on the menu. In hindsight that was probably a mistake, but an unavoidable one. Sushi addicts have an inability to order a sensible amount for two people. To help other sushi addicts, I came up with this list of signs that you may have ordered too much sushi:

- You need to write a list so you don't forget what to order (Ken had a pen handy, possibly just for this reason).
- When the waitress takes your order, she starts to look a little worried, and comments that it's a lot of food for two people.
- When the food arrives, you run out of space for the various platters.
- When you finally stuff down the last tobiko-and-quail's-egg sushi, two more platters of sushi arrive that you completely forgot about.
- An incredulous kitchen staff crowds around the doorway to see if you actually eat that much rice and raw fish.
- You have to think carefully about how your stomach works to figure out if you can finish your beer and the gigantic 10-inch seafood pancake.
- The amount of leftover sushi that you have boxed for take-out is possibly greater than the amount you actually ate at the table.

There you go. If you experience any of those signs while at a Japanese restaurant, you have probably ordered way too much.

Sushi addiction, redux

Friday, November 19, 2004

Two days later, Matt, Ken, and I went back to the same restaurant. If the waitress recognized us as the freaks who ate several pounds of raw fish on Tuesday, she didn't let on. This time, we approached the menu with caution. We enforced a two-item limit on ourselves, and only broke that rule once.

Then tragedy struck. The waitress emerged from the kitchen with the bad news -- they were out of quail eggs. Out of quail eggs! My heart fell at the news, and Ken had to make do with only three of the four tobiko-and-quail-egg sushis that he'd ordered.

At that point we took matters into our own hands. What was a sushi night without an adequate supply of quail egg? We paid the bill and set out into the darkened streets of Vancouver to begin our search.

It was close to the corner of Main and Hastings that we were approached by a scruffy type in a trenchcoat. "Weed, hash, quail egg," he muttered. "Weed, hash, quail egg." This was the very man we were looking for.

I stepped into a darkened doorway with him, while my brothers lingered inconspicuously under a lamp post. "How much?" I asked.

"Two for twenty." He peered at the other two through narrowed eyes. "Hey, you're not cops, are ya?"

"Naw, we're not cops. We just want some eggs." I pulled out a twenty to show him I was serious. The sight of money bettered his fears, and in a smooth, practiced gesture, he took the twenty and slipped a couple of fat dime bags into my palm.

"Pleasure doing business," he grinned and in a second, he was gone. I rejoined my brothers who still loitered inconspicuously. They were by far the most inconspicuous persons on that particular street.

"Hey," Matt said. "People here are really friendly. They keep calling me 'bud'."

"I got the stuff. I think we should get out of here," I suggested.

After walking a couple of blocks, I felt it was safe to examine what I'd paid twenty dollars for. Tucked safely inside the tiny bags were eggs. I peered closer. They were blue. The bastard slipped me robin eggs, not quail eggs!

We thought about going back, but it would be too risky. Defeated, we trudged home as rain started to spatter from black clouds. There would be no more quail egg for us that night.

My blog entry about non-raw salmon

Wednesday, November 24, 2004

This morning a friend, for reasons known only to her, asked that I write something about salmon. Additionally, and probably due to my sushi addiction, Christine told me that I was not allowed to write about raw salmon. This makes my task much more difficult.

What can I say about non-raw salmon that hasn't already been said? They're a fine and noble fish, and particularly slippery if you try to bring one into your boat with your bare hands. I think very highly of those creatures, even if I can't be certain what they think of me.

What would they think of me? What would they think if they knew that, somewhere out there, in the fishless wastes known as "dry land", there exists a creature that particularly enjoys soaking their flesh in sauce for a couple of hours before cooking them over a barbecue until their flesh is firm and pink. I would guess that they wouldn't appreciate the whole barbecue experience the way I do. If they had a brain larger than a pea, they might take exception to my eating habits, and possibly take action against me, legal or otherwise.

Thankfully, salmon are unlikely to think about these things because they're preoccupied with finding that perfect shoal of herring that loiters in the shallows near that rock with all the seagulls on it.

So that's my blog entry about non-raw salmon. I wonder how Christine is doing with her blog entry. I asked her to write about bubbly soup.

Rumours of sofas and fireplaces

Thursday, November 25, 2004

Within the walls of the cube farm, even the simplest of events can cause a stir. Like the time when someone brought in samosas. The entire sixth floor rejoiced and ate of the samosas. Then there was the time when they handed out free promotional CDs. CDs with interesting product information for everyone! And more recently, when they closed the bathrooms on this floor, curiosity led to rumour, rumour led to bigger rumour, and bigger rumour led to people walking into walls due to overstimulation.

The bathrooms were closed for not a couple of days, but two weeks. Two weeks! This was no small repair, but a major renovation. We could only imagine what wonderful changes awaited our bladders when the bathrooms finally reopened. Gold-trimmed fixtures? Wood panelling? Comfey sofas? A nice fireplace and decorative sculptures of scantily clad individuals caught in mid-frolic?

Finally, the day came that they reopened the bathrooms to the general cube farm populace. Breathing the heady fumes of drying paint, we entered.

Well, it was a bit of a letdown. They'd replaced the faucets and slapped a new coat of paint on the stalls and taken a very long time to do it. On the bright side, the intrigue brightened our small lives, and for two weeks we had regular exercise hiking up one floor. It wasn't, in retrospect, a complete waste of time -- the cubicle drones were able, for a short time, to pee in the very same fixtures as the executives. And that's worth something, isn't it?

Lunch break blogging

Friday, November 26, 2004

It was my lunch break. I opened Blogger. I stared at the vacant text box and thought about what to type in it. I stared longer. The box failed to fill with words. No matter how hard I stared at it, no words appeared.

Fifteen minutes later, my lunch break was over, and I closed Blogger. Then I opened it again and typed this.

Next time, I'll write about something.

It's all so clear to me now

Tuesday, November 30, 2004

I woke up quite early in the morning recently with a startling revelation. As the raving lunatics in b-grade sci-fi flicks often say, "It's all so clear to me now!" They also often say something about eating brains, the end of the world, or "It's a cookbook!" I'm not hungry at the moment, and the end doesn't appear to be nigh, so I'll focus on the "it's all so clear to me now" part.

The reason that I'm having so much trouble with these story ideas is that they're not funny at all. So now I'll either start fresh with new story outlines, or make small changes to the existing ones that will make them funny. It's easy. I'll just replace the protagonist with a one-legged dwarf who eats nothing but chili. If that's not funny, I don't know what is.

Bush visits his wisdom on Halifax

Wednesday, December 01, 2004

The big news in Canada is, of course, the visit by George W. Bush -- America's 43rd president, and the first trained chimp to hold the office. In a speech to those in Halifax who weren't actually marching in protest or burning him in effigy, he suggested that Canada should become more involved in his military actions in Iraq, offering the example of William Lyon Mackenzie King, Canada's tenth prime minister of Canada. Quoting King, President Bush gave the somber advice, "To remain on the defensive is the surest way to bring the war to Canada." I hope this was an opinion, and not an expression of US military policy.

It's gratifying to know that the president's speech writers have an awareness of Canadian history, but I think they might have skipped over these lines in the Wikipedia.com entry:

King hoped an outbreak of war in the 1930s could be avoided. He had met with Hermann Göring and Adolf Hitler, whom he said was a reasonable man who cared for his fellow man, working to improve his country in the midst of the Depression. He confided in his diary that he thought Hitler "might come to be thought of as one of the saviours of the world" and told a Jewish delegation that "Kristallnacht might turn out to be a blessing." ¹

His writers may also have missed the part where King consulted with the spirits of Leonardo DaVinci, his dead mother, and his dog.

But besides those particulars, the reference to King likely struck a chord with all patriotic Canadians, particularly those who channel the spirits of the dead. The art of public speaking, I think, is all about identifying with your audience.

1. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Lyon_Mackenzie_King

Minor mechanical problem

Wednesday, December 08, 2004

I'm writing to you from my dad's computer in sunny Steveston, BC. It seems that I'll be stuck here for a little bit, because my car encountered a small mechanical problem on the way here. Specifically, the brakes stopped working.

I've had nightmares like this -- the brake pedal went right to the floor without slowing the car at all. Fortunately, when I tried again, they worked, so I didn't have to plough through assorted cars, fences, pedestrians, and small children. That's always so embarrassing when that happens, and it's an extremely inefficient way to stop a car.

Update...

The garage just phoned me with the news. The brakes, plus the vital repairs that I've been putting off for months will cost me over a thousand smackers. *swoon*

Tis the season

Thursday, December 16, 2004

As the month of December creeps relentlessly forward towards the 25th, I can't help feeling that I'm edging towards a precipice, and I'm about to topple over it. I suppose that's not in keeping with the Christmas spirit, but I've always been a procrastinator whenever the season to be jolly approaches. Maybe I need to take a night course in jolliness training.

I'll catch the contagious mood eventually. How can I help it? Who could possibly resist the charms of "Jingle Bell Rock" played on synth strings at every mall, bank, restaurant, and supermarket? Before long, I'll be imagining the uplifting, deeply spiritual moments of the First Noel. Wasn't that Noel Coward? If not, he's certainly the most famous Noel that I can think of. Anyway, I'll fall deeply into the spirit of Noel, humming "You're the Tops", "Anything Goes", or "Mad Dogs and Englishmen", and in this way I'll help pass along some of the jolliness of the season to others.

But behind that, there's still a certain amount of anxiety. I mean, don't I have to buy gifts or something? I like to of course, but every time I search my brain for gift ideas, I draw a blank. It's like writer's block, but with gifts. Gifter's block.

I try the usual techniques that help break writer's block, like random words to start the creative juices flowing. But that usually goes something like this: Sandwiches? No. Aardvarks? No. Onomatopoeia? No!

It's difficult. I'll get it figured out in the end, usually in a last-minute panic on Christmas Eve. In the meantime, I'll occupy myself with putting up lights, munching on Christmas baked goods, and searching the adult learning catalog for Jolliness 101.

Suggestions to boost the holiday spirit

Friday, December 17, 2004

Christmas is a time for celebration and sharing with loved ones. You can spice up your holiday with these festive tips for Christmas this year:

- When giving a pet as a gift, wrap it at least a week before Christmas so that it has time to get used to the box. You don't want it to shuffle around and spoil the surprise.
- Try drinking the water at the base of the tree -- it looks and tastes just like beer.
- If you want to try something trendy, turkey sushi is an excellent idea.
- If some worrier grumbles about salmonella, just be firm and tell them you're not serving sea food.
- You can give your mulled wine an extra kick with a liter of grain alcohol.
- If you've reached your fifth glass of eggnog, you haven't had enough that you can't count.
- If you're sitting near someone who's on their fifth eggnog, wear a waterproof coat and tickle them. It's hilarious.
- Christmas lights look like candy, and taste like it too!
- If you discover that you suddenly have more guests than your turkey will feed, have a quick check for the family pet.
- Cranberry sauce covers the taste of anything -- even most varieties of mould and fungus.
- All dropped food has a "5 second rule", even the turkey gravy.
- That CD of bagpipes and tribal drumming makes good background music during dinner.

Patrick's arrival

Thursday, December 30, 2004

Dani's walk around the lake was much like any other, but for a dense morning fog that pushed through the towering cedars of Stanley Park from the Burrard Inlet. At this early hour, the tops of the trees caught watery highlights of orange from the sun, just now emerging over the horizon. Here the lake was enclosed by a vast green "O" of forest -- a living wall that hid a multitude of flora, fauna, and bearded men that smelled like pee.

Beneath her Nike cross-trainers, damp gravel crunched at each footstep, drumming out the rhythm of her clockwise circuit around the lake. On her right, the glassy surface was cut occasionally by the passing of a mallard looking for a morning snack; on her left, morning walkers and joggers passed her in the counter-clockwise circuit, each dressed in appropriate combinations of Lycra, fleece, and clothing logos.

To the metronome of her crunching steps and swishing thighs, which she had hoped to make swish against each other somewhat less, thoughts and plans for the day slipped through her mind. Gulls awked in the distance, squirrels foraged for hidden morsels in the grass, and a short distance away, an elderly lady was under attack by swarm of hungry geese. All was as it should be in the city of Vancouver on a cool, clear October morning, until just to Dani's left, something exploded in a flash of blue light, and a naked man tumbled from the flash point to her feet. He stood quickly, and surveyed his surroundings.

"Oh," he said with obvious disappointment, and to no one in particular, "I guess that didn't work, then." His eyes finally settled on Dani, who stared as if frozen in place. "Hello there," he said, affably extending his hand, "I'm Doctor Patrick--"

His introduction, however, was rudely cut short when Dani turned abruptly and ran back the way she'd come. This was an unusual

reaction, the man felt, until he noticed that the cold was causing discomfort in a certain shrinking area of his anatomy.

Behind him, there was another blue flash in which appeared a complete set of clothes. They hung in the air for a moment in the exact shape of a person before they crumpled and fell to the ground.

"Dammit! Clothes are to arrive at the same time as their occupant!" He hurried forward to gather them up, slipped out of view behind a large tree stump and began to get dressed.

As he buttoned his shirt, he heard a gravelly voice from behind him. "Excuse me," said the voice, "but I can't help noticing that you don't smell like pee."

Patrick shrieked and leapt back about a meter, but the old man waved his hand reassuringly, "I apologize for omitting the pleasantries, but I'm fairly certain that you will shriek with surprise when I tell you who I am."

A silence fell, in which Patrick felt that he should probably say something to move the conversation along. "Um. Who are you?"

"Why are you asking?" The old man squinted.

"You just told me," Patrick protested, "that I'd shriek in surprise when you told me who you are."

"I did?" The old man seemed genuinely confused.

"Yes," said Patrick pointedly, "you did."

For a moment the old man seemed to consider this, as he absently ran a twig through his beard. On the fourth stroke, it became lodged with the other assortment of small objects -- twigs, a pine cone, a couple ball-point pens, and a pocket watch, which hung neatly upside-down a few inches below his chin.

At length, the old man spoke, "You'll have to forgive me. I've been living in this park for quite a while. I said that you'd shriek?"

"Yes," Patrick confirmed, now becoming quite impatient.

"With surprise..."

"Yes."

"... when I told you who I am?"

"Yes."

"Ah yes, of course I did," the old man chortled. "What was I thinking? And did I happen to tell you who I was?"

"No!"

"Well that was quite impolite of me." Patrick was just turning to leave when the old man grabbed his elbow. "But then who knows what the rules of etiquette might be... when you're talking to yourself!"

There was another awkward silence.

"And do you," Patrick asked delicately, "talk to yourself much?"

"What? Ah, you don't understand." The old man turned his face into the morning light so Patrick could see him better. "You are talking to yourself. We are both talking to ourselves."

"Um. Well, there is," Patrick conceded, "a certain tendency in conversation to--"

"No, you mental midget! Look at my face! I traveled back in time to this spot twenty years ago! I'm you."

Patrick shrieked.

Not long after Patrick fainted, he found himself lying on his back with a splitting headache. Overhead, the sky was the purest blue, and seagulls wheeled and turned. Sitting up, he saw that he was on a sandy beach, and near him, on the other side of a crackling fire, sat the old man, now munching on a blackened object.

"Squirrel?" the old man offered, to which Patrick declined politely. "Alright," the old man shrugged, "but it's a good one. Nice and meaty. Some people survive in the park by eating nuts and berries. You'll quickly learn to stay ahead of the game by eating the things that eat the nuts and berries."

"I see," responded Patrick, uncertainly.

"Some of the others tried to take things another step by eating the things that eat the things that eat nuts and berries, but," the old man frowned, "the police stepped in at that point. It's best to stick with squirrels, really."

"Thanks for the advice." Patrick held his forehead in his palms. "My head hurts."

The old man nodded, "You took a nasty crack on the head after you fainted. That was a nice shriek by the way. Full-voiced and distinctly girlish."

Ignoring the insult, Patrick stood and got his bearings. Their beach was next to a narrow channel through which passed freighters, tugs, and sleek cruise ships covered with saggy Americans with camcorders. On the opposite shore were industrial buildings, and behind those grew a wall of trees that climbed a wrinkled mountain before thinning at a rocky ridge of peaks. To Patrick's left, a tall, but delicate suspension bridge spanned the kilometer wide narrows between the two shores, like a shorter, emaciated version of San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge.

"This is quite a distance from the lake," Patrick observed. "How did I get here?"

"The others helped move you. It's not good to sleep next to the lake in the daytime. The joggers interrupt with threats to call the police, that kind of thing. It's hard to get any work done."

Something nagged at the back of his mind, near the painful lump on his cranium. It was something the old man said. Something about... talking to himself.

Patrick shrieked again.

"Once," the old man grumbled, "is quite enough. Please don't do that again."

Looking at the old man again, the shock struck him anew. Etched deep in the craggy lines, the face was at once familiar yet alien. He settled himself on a damp log near the fire and watched the old man's movements. Eventually, the old man took notice, and carefully stowed the leftover squirrel inside his beard for later, keeping a half-eaten leg to nibble on.

"It's true, I'm you," the old man giggled. "And that rhymes." After a moment of reflection, the old man added, "You don't know how many times I've said that, Patrick. And not just to myself. No, it doesn't get any less confusing. If anything, it gets more so." He shook the squirrel leg at Patrick. "Just you try to keep your mind sharp on a diet of nuts, berries, and squirrels. Do you know that this is all your fault? All of it. Your fault, my fault, all of our faults. We should have done more tests before attempting time travel."

Patrick recoiled, "My fault? It should have worked. I thought it did. All of the calculations were correct, and the equipment was flawless. I should have landed one day in my past in my own lab."

The old man waved dismissively, "Yes, yes, I know what was supposed to happen. I did the same thing. But you failed to consider the possible paradox that you'd create by appearing in your own past. Do you remember seeing yourself appear in your lab a day before the experiment? If you didn't appear a day before you left, isn't that proof that your experiment didn't work?"

"Of course not. But that's only because I hadn't changed the timeline yet."

At this, the old man rose awkwardly to his feet, shuffled around the fire to Patrick, whacked him on the head, then returned to his former place beside the fire.

"Ow! Hey!" Patrick protested.

"Shush. You're not thinking clearly. Let me illustrate." The old man pulled a pen from his beard and with it drew a long line in the sand. "This is a time line. Now, the way you'd expect it to work is like this: You activate your time travel device here." The old man placed a clam shell near the end of the line. "And you travel back one day to here." He drew a curving line back to near the beginning of the line and marked the spot with a squirrel bone.

"Now this is where it gets complicated," the old man said pointedly. "You'd think that all events on the timeline would be changed from that point forward. But the universe is resilient, Patrick. She won't allow a paradox to occur. If you arrive in the past, your mere presence will change the events that led to you travelling back in time, that led to you being the person you are with the memories you have. By appearing in your past, you prevent yourself from existing, and that would be a paradox.

"No, the universe prevents that by detaching paradoxical events from their timeline and depositing them in a safe place." He drew a second time line, drew a line from the squirrel skull to it, then marked the intersect point with a sand crab. "Here, in the park, in an alternate timeline, is the universe's repository of paradoxes. And like the crab, the arrival point... er... crawls sideways along the time line." He nudged the crab back onto the line with a stick.

"But," Patrick's mind reeled, "why is there more than one of me here?"

"Ah, here's the crux of it. Are you familiar with the theories of quantum mechanics?" To which Patrick indicated no. The old man grinned, "Neither am I. I think that was part of the problem. But in layman's terms, our situation is something like this: for each event, there's an infinite number of possible outcomes. In terms of the timeline, this means that an infinite number of points on the time line are branching into an infinite number of outcomes.

"You and I are from alternate, but similar time lines in which we attempted to travel into our past. The forces that prevent paradoxes -- whatever they may be -- deposited us safely here in another time line where we wouldn't muck up our own future and cause a paradox."

Patrick grew impatient as he listened to the explanation, until he interjected, "Wait one second. If there are an infinite number of time lines, and time travellers are deposited here, for some unknown reason, why isn't there an infinite number of Patricks popping in all the time."

"That," conceded the elder Patrick, "is a good point. A possible explanation is that the event of our successfully devising a working time travel device is nearly infinitely improbable."

"Oh," said Patrick. "Well that's a bit of a blow to the ego."

"Yes, it is. It would mean that I'm almost infinitely less clever than I thought I was."

Patrick frowned. "But then why are there only two of us. Odds are--"

"Two thousand," the old man interrupted. "There are at least two thousand of us from assorted time lines, all here in the park."

Patrick stared, aghast.

"And I fully expect there to be a great deal more appearing, for quite a while. Forever, in fact. I suspect that mother nature distributes us wayward time travellers evenly along this time line, and time being infinitely long, perhaps there is, in fact, the possibility of there appearing an infinite number of Patricks. But the evidence for that is based mostly on ego, of course."

Looking around him, Patrick became aware that of a number of men of various ages milling about the beach. All looked very much alike. Some ambled along the sea wall, some fished with a stick and line, some dozed peacefully in the grass, and some muttered angrily to themselves while scribbling in the sand.

In the distance, he saw a pack of gaunt Patricks closing in on a stray goose, while another group sang for money in front of a busload of tourists. Just offshore, what he'd thought was a seal was actually a filthy Patrick ripping a fresh salmon apart with his teeth.

Suddenly, just to one side, there was a sound like a firecracker, which was accompanied by a flash of blue light. A naked figure tumbled to the sand. He stood, brushed the sand from himself, and surveyed his surroundings. "Oh," he said with obvious disappointment, "I guess that didn't work then."

Ring ring goes the bell

Monday, January 03, 2005

Well that was fun. I was jarred out of a difficult evening's slothing by my building's fire bell. Everyone wandered the hallways confused, looking for the cause, and not really willing to go out into the freezing cold outside. When the downstairs hall filled with smoke, I picked up my valuables and stepped outside. It turned out to be nothing much -- just a minor fire in the kitchen downstairs.

I suppose if nobody had been home, or if they'd been asleep, it could have been worse. All of the building's tenants could have been out on the street in the winter time with no more possessions than we could carry with us.

What's really interesting is what I chose to take with me: just my wallet and my laptop. Some people might have grabbed, say, a change of clothes. Or photos of their loved ones. I grabbed my computer because I don't want to be homeless and unable to play computer games.

What's all this white stuff?

Thursday, January 06, 2005

Yes, on rare occasions, it does actually snow in Vancouver. Not much, usually, but enough to shut down the entire city, which means at least two or three centimeters. In all fairness, unlike perpetually snow-bound cities like Winnipeg, Vancouver is almost completely without snow-ploughs or salt trucks, so the slightest bit of our especially damp variety of snow just turns our roads into a skating rink.



It just isn't winter in Vancouver without the snow umbrella.

Splitting hairs

Wednesday, January 12, 2005

There's a beauty school nearby, where they train people to become "aestheticians" (but not aesthetologists or aesthetonomists, apparently). Inside, they run a salon where students get to practise on real heads. Out front, their sign lists the prices of various cuts, but has this footnote: "*Long hair may vary".

What exactly does that mean? After a cut, is long hair hacked and slashed so badly, that it varies from one side to the other? Or does it mean that long hair becomes shorter after a cut? I assumed that would be taken for granted.

I'm confused.

Coffee, sushi, and no particular point to this entry

Saturday, January 15, 2005

On my way back from the coffee shop at the corner, I decided on impulse to pick up a little sushi combo to go. It was as I walked out of the sushi shop, coffee cup in one hand, take-out sushi bag in the other, bundled warmly in my polar fleece, that I wondered if I was a stereotypical Vancouverite. And then I wondered if sushi and coffee actually work together.

And you know what? They do.

724 minutes

Wednesday, January 19, 2005

A couple of weeks ago, some idiot stole the intercom panel from my building's front door. Not only did that mean that nobody could beep me, but it also meant that the postie couldn't get in to deliver any of the mail. Sure, I didn't get any bills for two weeks, but I've also been deprived of my DVD movie rentals, which come by Canada Post.

Finally, today the mail started flowing again, and I found two weeks of envelopes packed into my mailbox. That's two weeks of mail-order movie rentals, plus the director's cut of *The Return of the King*.

So there's nothing to do but accept the challenge and catch up on 724 minutes of movie-watching -- and that doesn't include the DVD extras. I'll be a wreck when I'm done later today.

The professor's rocket

Wednesday, February 09, 2005

Yet another story fragment...

The professor's rocket taxi descended on a plume of light and settled delicately on its three landing fins. As the atomic engine faded slowly into silence, its impressive bulk towered over the waiting press corps who rushed from the nearby bunker to the foot of the now-extended gangway. At last, with a chuff of air, a crack of light appeared around the curved door in the rocket's side, and it swung open majestically to reveal the professor himself.

"Gentlemen," he declared grandly. "Today is the dawn of a new day in science. Today I, Professor Falkensteinbrautsengen, will take mankind to the moon!"

...

"I tell you it can't be done," Carter exclaimed, slamming his open palm against the side of the travel pod. "And not only can't it be done, it not also can't be not done!"

Inside the lab, away from the thronging mobs outside, Carter looked from face to face, looking for support, but found none. All of Professor Falkensteinbrautsengen's assistants were loyal and, moreover, knew which side their bread was buttered. At present, it was buttered on the top side, with a nice layer of strawberry jam.

"Unghkna ngh dmph?" the youngest assistant observed.

"For god's sake, Smythe, don't speak with your mouth full of bread," Carter chided.

The youth swallowed and started again. "How can you say that? Professor Falkensbrau... Falkensteiber... Professor F is the most brilliant scientist on earth!"

Carter nodded. "Is he? Is he really the most brilliant scientist on earth? Or do we simply believe that because he has the press eating

out of the palm of his hand?" Carter gestured at the silent travel pod. "Look at this thing. It barely runs longer than five minutes without blowing several tubes. And the atomic pile leaks!"

"Sure it leaks," Danforth interjected, "but since we painted it with lead-based paint, the mutation rate has dropped dramatically." He waved his tentacles pointedly at Carter.

...

Recipes for Men: Potato Soup

Friday, February 25, 2005

Right, so you're hungry and you want to make something for dinner. Yeah, you could head out to McChoke-n-Puke's and pick up a quarter pound of crap. But you already blew a pile of cash on what's in the cupboards and the fridge. Time to put your building skills to the test -- it's time to make some soup.

Alright here's what you need.

- A pile of potatoes.
- A litre of chicken broth (or mushroom broth if you're a wuss and don't eat animals).
- A pile of veggies. Whatever's around.
- Condensed milk or sour cream.
- Salt, pepper, whatever spices you want. Real men add Tobasco.

Now. Don't wimp out. Get to work.

1. Find a big fuckin' knife. The bigger the better. Grab the potatoes and whack 'em into quarters. Avoid your fingers, or you'll have a hard time finishing the job.
2. Find a gigantic pot and boil the fuck out of the potatoes.
3. Boil them more. They're done when you can stab 'em with a fork and they're soft.
4. Grab one of those big strainer things and dump the potatoes into it. Now, if you've done this part right, you should have a strainer full of boiled potato chunks and the water went down the drain. If you have potato water all over the floor, you forgot to put the strainer in the sink first. Don't worry about it. You can clean that up when you do your monthly cleaning.
5. Now put the potatoes back into the pot and use a potato masher and crush the fuck outta those potatoes. Don't wuss out. You need the exercise. Pulp those fuckers.

6. Whack open the broth container and pour the whole damn thing into the potatoes. Stir 'em up.
7. Grab that big knife and chop the veggies until they're good and dead. Dump 'em into the mashed potatoes. You can use almost any vegetable, but if you know more about beef than broccoli, you should take a sec to learn. First rule: cole slaw is not a vegetable, no matter what Colonel Sanders says. Next: pick a vegetable that you've seen cooked before. Cucumber or lettuce would be a bad idea. Carrots and celery are better. Boring, but better.
8. Boil the fuck outta the veggies.
9. Add seasoning until it doesn't taste boring. Turn down the heat so it's not boiling anymore.
10. You might have noticed that your soup is really low on oil and fat. That's why it tastes like dishwater. Whack open the condensed milk or the sour cream and dump it all in. There's your fat content.

Done. Eat it. Fuckin' awesome. Goes good with a glass of chablis. I mean beer. Goes good with beer. And a burger. Hoo, that was close.

Today, I'd like to discuss wormholes

Friday, May 06, 2005

If you write in a journal infrequently, either online or on paper, you will often find yourself writing about why you don't write. In fact, if you write rarely enough, every entry will have to start that way, and before long you have a lengthy journal that's concerned entirely with why it hasn't been written. I won't do this.

Instead, I'd like to talk about wormhole singularities. I'd like to, but I won't do that either, because I don't know anything about the subject. To be honest, I get into serious trouble when the conversation enters the realm of relativity and multiple universes. I'm sorry to disappoint my readers -- I know how many find this site by searching for "Schwartzchild wormhole". That and "jolene blalock nakid".

I won't dwell on this disappointment, however. I'll go right on typing until I settle on a completely different topic -- like coffee, for example. Why does a cup of ordinary, black coffee cost two dollars? Back in my college days, the cafeteria offered cups of coffee for 30 cents. Sure, it was acrid brew that sat on a warming element for several hours, but it was affordable acrid brew, and there is no reason, in my mind, that a cup of coffee should cost more than a few dimes. After all, when an entire pound of coffee beans at the grocery store costs only a little more than the cost of a single cup at Starbucks or Blenz, one has to wonder if maybe there's a small chance that the coffee bars just might be overcharging a little bit.

Admittedly, I don't fully grasp the intricacies of brewing coffee in the professional manner. Of the items of exotic tools and machinery behind the counter at the local coffee bar, most baffle and frighten me. I appreciate and admire the skill and workmanship that lends itself to these young coffee artisans in the preparation of my daily brew. Their deft hands, their artist's hands, fairly dance on the various buttons, knobs, levers, and lumps of soggy things, captivating onlookers in their aura of coffee zen.

So, on the subject of coffee or singularities, I'll have to acknowledge my ignorance and simply accept that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in my coffee. A cup of coffee from Starbucks is worth over six and a half times more than a similar coffee at my old college, two universes are connected by a wormhole at the horizons of a black hole and a white hole, and I don't write very often because my blog entries usually turn out to make no sense whatsoever.

We're being wacky, right?

Saturday, May 07, 2005

If you've seen the new movie adaptation of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, I empathize. If you haven't seen it, please do yourself a favour and rent a video instead. I was in pain throughout the movie. It is, in the very best sense of the word, crap.

It baffles me how a producer can take a hilarious script/novel with a proven track record, and then mangle it so badly that there's nothing actually funny in it anymore. After they gutted it, twisted it, deleted all the quirky humour, what was left was almost but not quite entirely unlike a story by Douglas Adams.

Every scene should have been subtitled "Hey, look! We're being wacky now, aren't we? Yes! So wacky!" It's just so... depressing.

Pesto, and my lesson for the day

Tuesday, May 10, 2005

Craving a dollop of pesto sauce for my pasta, I threw on my least-smelly t-shirt, hopped into my car, and made for the nearest Safeway. No, the big-chain super market doesn't carry the really good pesto, but for my pesto fix, I wasn't being picky. The jarred variety was fine by me.

The parkade under the Safeway was almost full, but I scooted past a vacant spot to try for one next to the door -- I needed my pesto fix in short order. Naturally, I was immediately blocked by a line of immobile SUVs waiting for a Hummer to back into a spot marked "SMALL CAR" several times over. So much for saving time.

Fifteen minutes later, I found my jar of pesto, and hunted for the shortest line at the checkouts. Fortune smiled upon me, as a checkout girl removed the "NEXT CASHIER PLEASE" sign just as I approached. Maybe it was my friendly smile. Or maybe my Drakkar Noir. That stuff is amazing with the chicks, and it's good as lighter fluid in a pinch.

I leapt at the checkout counter, shoving aside other customers to triumphantly place my jar of pesto in the spot of victory! Then fickle fate turned up her nose. The receipt printer jammed!

I tapped my foot for another ten minutes as a small crowd of white-and-red-uniformed employees fought with the printer. Other customers queued at other checkouts and slipped through effortlessly, while I was left frozen at this defective, receiptless counter. I shook my fist to the heavens that my struggle to hasten my shopping experience had been thwarted by a mere machine.

Eventually, they moved me to another till, checked me through, and I found myself, at last, heading home with my jar of pesto. If there's one thing I can learn from this experience, it's that I should avoid pesto at all cost.

These were the voyages of several starships, Enterprise

Saturday, May 14, 2005

So that's it then. The last episode of *Star Trek: Enterprise* came and went. The shows that I practically grew up on are all over. It seems to me that in a final episode of the final series of Star Trek, they could have done something more interesting than sending them off to do a little favour for the Andorians. After it ended, I felt more than a little let down. After all, I wanted to see something significant, that acknowledged the end of a show that I'd watched faithfully, and at times, obsessively.

There is so much opportunity for a truly interesting storyline, especially with a timeline as well-defined as Star Trek's. They could have created a "historical documentary" that covered the time between Captain Tucker and Captain Kirk. When *Babylon 5* wound down it's fourth season, it had episodes that explored the future and the impact that the characters had on history. It provided closure to an immense four-year-long story arc. And *Enterprise*? *Enterprise* gave us Riker chopping vegetables on the holodeck.

The same thing happened at the end of *Star Trek: Voyager*. After several years of struggling to make it back to Earth alive, the final episode finally has Voyager emerge from a Borg subspace conduit almost in Earth's orbit. And the triumphant return lasted about 15 seconds before they rolled the credits. That's it. The reward for watching years of Voyager's pathetically weak stories was 15 seconds of "Yay, we're home!"

So now it's all over for good. In the end, I don't think fans care enough about *Star Trek: Enterprise* enough for the show to return in any form. Over the last years, it was sometimes interesting with rare bits that made people sit up and go "ooh" and maybe spill a bit of their beer at the same time. It failed, however, to reach out and firmly grasp the audience by the wobbly bits the way the original series and *Star Trek: The Next Generation* occasionally did. Figuratively speaking.

Coffee, crosswalks, and a ballot box

Tuesday, May 17, 2005

I did my civic duty today and made the trek up the hill to the local polling station. On the way there, I was nearly struck by a car that didn't see me in the crosswalk. I carried some (miserably awful) coffee, too, which I expertly spilled on myself. Incidentally, black coffee is good for spills -- it doesn't leave a fetid stain that smells like rancid cream for weeks. At worst, it merely looks like you wet yourself.

As I crossed the side street in front of the polling station, I had to dodge another car. Seriously, by this time, I was wondering if it was some kind of plot against me. I wonder if they knew which way I intended to vote?

I wasn't intimidated, though. I entered the polling station, made my mark, and dropped it in the box without further incident. In fact, I left there fairly glowing with satisfaction at having fulfilled my role in the democratic process. Aside from almost being run down twice, it was a remarkably positive experience. And the lizard in charge of the polling booth was kinda cute too.

I admit... I was wrong about Star Wars

Tuesday, May 24, 2005

I'm a big enough man to admit when I'm wrong. Actually, I'm a big enough man to get winded walking up a flight of stairs too, but that's another issue. The point is, I totally trashed the latest installation of Star Wars before I went to see it, and then George Lucas smacked me in the face with a great movie.

Alright, sure we have to overlook little details, like the fact that Padme dies in childbirth, despite the fact that in Return of the Jedi, Leia tells Luke what their mother was like. And the fact that R2-D2 and C3PO perform vital roles in Obiwan's life, yet when Luke brings R2 to him in the original Star Wars, Obiwan says, "Strange. I don't remember ever owning a droid." I'd better stop there, because the list of massive plot holes can fill pages. Besides, that's nit-picking. For the sake of willing suspension of disbelief, let's ignore the fact that Annikin is about 6 years old in The Phantom Menace (and building pod racers!), yet he's about 16 only a few years later in Attack of the Clones, and then by Star Wars: A New Hope, apparently he adds about a foot to his height and develops a gravelly, bass voice.

Setting all that aside, I have to say that I enjoyed the show very much. It wasn't deep, or particularly thought-provoking, but its pacing moved the plot along quickly, without dallying on the mysteries of life, the way the previous two movies did in such depth. And the movie sprung so many surprising plot twists on the audience too. For example, at one point, a woman nearby leaned over to her husband to ask, "No way... Annikin is Darth Vader?"

Oh. I hope I didn't spoil the plot for anyone there.

If I have a serious complaint, it's that Luke Skywalker was a bit flat in his performance, and the actor was, I believe, a little too old for the role, and didn't bear even the vaguest resemblance to Mark Hamill.

In the end, I left the theatre feeling that I'd gotten my money's worth. My dollars had been far better spent on The Revenge of the Sith than on, say, food for a couple of days. George, I was wrong to doubt you.

No... thank YOU

Friday, June 03, 2005

Sadly, I have to admit that today I lunched at the Scottish restaurant. I had avoided it for months, but while passing McDonald's I succumbed to a combination of hunger pangs and delicious posters of hamburgers. (No, that wasn't a misplaced modifier -- the posters are far more delicious than the hamburgers.)

I'm pleased to report that the menu is exactly as I remember it -- a lineup of vaguely beef-related sandwiches accompanied by tallow-soaked potato product. After consuming the "McDeal" of the day, I dumped the remains of the day into the nearest garbage receptacle, and was startled when it spoke to me.

"Thank you," it said. Its voice was deep and gentle, and imbued with paternal kindness, as if someone's dad had accidentally fallen into the garbage can and decided to make the best of it by thanking passers-by for cleaning up after themselves. It turned out not to be my dad or anyone else's, thankfully. It's actually an electronic recording that's triggered each time someone throws something away -- an innovative way to imbue a feeling of warmth and personal attention that doesn't actually exist at McDonald's.

I can't wait to see what else speaks to me next time I need to satisfy my hamburger addiction. Maybe my chair will thank me for sitting down, and my table will thank me for placing objects on it. And toilets too! "Thank you."

Rhymes with what?

Monday, June 06, 2005

The other night, a friend and I had a debate (okay, argument) over the pronunciation of "Glenmorangie". Is it like "glen MORE an gee" or "glen MORE an jee"? Or maybe even "glen MERANGUE gee", like the pie? We didn't fall to fisticuffs over it -- there was a lady present, and we didn't want to offend her sensibilities and make idiots of ourselves doing it. Actually she changed the subject quickly to something more sensible, like beer.

This debate has raged among family and friends for years, turning the "gee" faction against the "jee" faction. After calling it "glen MORE an jee" for years, I heard more than one person who should have been in-the-know call it "glen MORE an gee", so I converted from the "jee" camp to the "gee" camp.

Today I appealed to the all-knowing prophet, Google, to settle the debate. At www.Glenmorangie.com, I discovered the truth. The one, true pronunciation, right from the source, is this: "It rhymes with 'orangie'."

Next, have I been mispronouncing "Glendronach"?

Guilt and redemption

Wednesday, June 15, 2005

I visited Black Dog Video yesterday to pick up a couple of movies. Black Dog is one of the few remaining independent video rental shops in Vancouver, and have managed to stay in business by keeping in stock a stunning number of art and foreign films. This places them in a niche market with little competition from the low-brow megastore, Blockbuster, which stocks only hit movies, and whose clientele tends to get confused if the title contains one or more polysyllabic words. Black Dog customers are film connoisseurs who appreciate the true art of filmmaking.

So as the clerk checked out my copies of *Ocean's Twelve* and *Ladder 49*, something strange and wholly unexpected happened. "You have a late charge," she said, adjusting her black-rimmed glasses to peer at her computer screen.

It was true. It was true: I had returned a movie an entire day late last week. Upon being caught, I was almost overwhelmed with guilt. I lowered my eyes, and felt the flush of shame creeping into my cheeks, edging around my ears, and leaking out my scalp in the form of sweat.

But then something remarkable happened.

"But... I'll forgive you," she said simply, as if it were nothing. But it was everything! I was forgiven! She forgave me. I could barely contain my relief. I wanted to shout out loud! I wanted to reach over the counter and embrace her with joy, but fortunately I stopped myself because the last time I did that -- well I won't get into that. I thanked her, and left Black Dog feeling purified in spirit. I had been forgiven.

It had happened so quickly, and without ceremony, in dramatic contrast with the early days of video rental, where late-fee forgiveness often required penance, the presence of a priest or rabbi, and on occasion a bout of self-flagellation. Times change, I suppose, and as is so often the case, tradition falls by the wayside.

Urban Geese

Friday, June 17, 2005

Today

I bought pickles

and cheese

and some udon noodles.

And I saw a pair of geese

standing at the side of the street.

Urban geese.

Bling.

Eight East

Monday, June 27, 2005

It's hip, it's modern, it has kick-ass coffee, and it has a view of the mountains. Well, it has a view of the mountains when it's not raining. I'm talking about Vancouver's Eight East Coffee House on Broadway.

This place will BLOW YOUR MIND. The music, the decor, the dancers, the juggling troupe, and -- not least by far -- an olympic-size ice rink. Come for the coffee, but you can also watch the out-of-work NHL players vie for coffee and biscotti in a series of no-holds-barred blood matches. Sundays and holidays are family days, when they replace the players with clowns. Instead of sticks, they go at each other with balloon animals. Yesterday a clown had to be rushed to the hospital after being garotted with a giraffe.

Well, to be honest the ice rink isn't yet past the planning stages, and may have been just my own caffeine-induced hallucination. And the dancers, clowns, and juggling troupe never really existed. If you're lucky, though, you can catch sight of a cyclist or two from the bike shop next door.

In the meantime, Dan, Pam, and their staff have themselves a nice little coffee house. I think I'll definitely come back, even if it's a while until I see the rink.

Victory on the cutting board of battle

Saturday, August 20, 2005

Today my parents donated a whole salmon, fresh off the boats, to the Cubicle Dweller Salmon Fund. Alright, there's no such thing, but don't tell that to my parents.

As a longtime resident of the British Columbia coast, I know all about how to prepare salmon. I've seen it all done before, from the rod to the plate. Catch it, clean it, trim it, wash it, and cook it. Nothing to it.

I've eaten a lot of salmon too -- barbecued, baked, smoked, raw -- but as I looked this little fellow in the eye, it occurred to me that I'd never prepared a whole one before, myself.

Then it made a face at me. You know, sticking out it's tongue at me. Or maybe that was my imagination.

I hesitated for a moment. How could I let this happen? I've caught salmon bigger than this, but I have to admit that I usually let someone else deal with the messy bit in the middle and go straight to the eating part. Don't misunderstand -- I'm no wuss when it comes to raw meat, but here was an obvious gap in my experience. It was time I faced up to my responsibilities as a coast-dweller and prepared myself a fish. So I rolled up my sleeves (mentally, since I was wearing a short-sleeved shirt) and set myself to the gruesome task.

I took out my kitchen knife and prepared for the first incision, whereupon it slithered out of my hands and into the sink. Pretty feisty for something this long out of the water. Dragging it back ashore to the cutting board, I managed to hack off its head before it knew what was coming. Strangely, this didn't seem to improve its mood -- it was good and mad now.

Some minutes later, when the dust of battle settled, I found myself smeared to the elbows in salmon guck. My kitchen counter was fairly swimming in the blood of my enemy, but the glorious victory was mine! *Qapla!!*

It seems to me that people should become more involved with the preparation of their food. Too often we're insulated from the realities of a carnivorous diet, and it would be greatly educational to experience more of the process. For example, we should buy more whole chickens. And when we want steak for dinner, we should hack off a chunk of a cow (assuming it's already dead, of course). And when we want tofu, we should have to shoot and skin our own tofu beasts. We're far too insulated from the brutal carnage of the tofu hunt.

So tonight, as I feast on salmon, I'll feel more like a true west coaster than ever before. Nevertheless, I'm so glad it was already gutted when I got it.

Of endings and beginnings

Sunday, August 28, 2005

It was a quiet morning -- a crisp morning like many others at the cusp of September -- with a slight chill that hinted at the waning summer and the slow-approaching damp of fall. Outside my kitchen window, orange dawn touched the roofs and treetops, and caused a family of seagulls to shriek at the approaching day, which startled a calico abruptly from licking itself before being chased off by the neighbour's three-legged terrier.

Inside, in half-shadow, I stood vigil over the inert form of my beloved companion. My attempt to resuscitate had been futile. It was dead -- passed beyond the veil of darkness into the endless light of the hereafter. It would forevermore remain silent and nevermore would coffee would issue from it's warm carafe.

For seven years, we had lived in symbiosis. I would feed it coffee grounds and give it water and electricity, and in return it gifted me with the rich nectar of the Colombian mountains. It asked so little of me, and yet gave so much.

Perhaps, in the bitter clarity of hindsight, I might have demanded too much. Did I hasten its demise with too many late nights and early mornings? Had I only been more nurturing, would it still be with me today to share the pleasure of seeing another dawn? These thoughts troubled me -- gnawed at me -- as I stared at the now-silent form. No more would it greet me with its steamy, burbling voice and a friendly "12:00" flashing on its face.

And yet, from every end, there is a new beginning. Today I am joined by a new face -- smaller, younger, and hissing with the excitement of youth. From here on, we'll explore our new relationship, and discover new dawns and entirely different families of shrieking seagulls. From the end of an old friendship starts one anew, and its name is Black and Decker SmartBrew. Only \$9.95 at Canadian Tire. Not a bad deal, really.

Cubey's state of the lunch report

Monday, August 29, 2005

Given the choice between a dry, meager sandwich and the edible grease-sponges from McD's, I usually go for the sandwich. Today, however, I took a risk and tried one of those new "deli" sandwiches. Supposedly, it's better for you.

For some reason, I find that hard to believe. As far as I could tell, the buffalo chicken deli sandwich is just an elongated McChicken with mildly spicy sauce on it. Same wilted lettuce. Same greasy, processed chicken "meat", but it's sliced up to fit inside the bun.

I'm curious what other "deli" offerings they have. Maybe they'll have a beef and cheese "deli" sandwich that's an elongated Big Mac.

Of course, I didn't expect any better. I just like the entertainment of finding out just how disappointed I'll be with my insta-meal.

State of the lunch report (NOW WITH KUNG-FU GRIP!)

Wednesday, August 31, 2005

In an effort to boost sagging readership numbers, I have been asked to revise Monday's entry to include more exciting content.

Given the choice between a dry, meager sandwich and the edible grease-sponges from McD's, I usually go for the sandwich. Especially when I'm falling from ten thousand feet with evil henchmen taking swipes at me with razor-sharp machetes. Sandwiches just seem to hold together better in freefall. Today, however, gnawing hunger drove me to blast into a McD's wearing my top secret jet pack to lay my hands on one of those new "deli" sandwiches. The bikini-clad girl at the counter said it was better for me.

But for some reason, I felt she was lying. Maybe it was the shifty look in her eyes. Maybe it was the nervous twitch at the edge of her mouth. Or maybe it was her spastic outburst of "I'M A LYING SACK O' CRUD AND I CAN'T TAKE IT ANYMORE!!" before she crumpled into a sobbing heap on the floor. I have to keep my eyes open for these little clues.

While all eyes were on the sobbing McD's girl, I swiped a steaming "buffalo chicken deli sandwich" and blasted off to my top secret lab, which I keep in geosynchronous orbit over the Pacific. After running the sandwich through the computer for analysis, I was utterly gobsmacked. This was no "deli sandwich"!

At first, as far as I could tell, the buffalo chicken deli sandwich is just an elongated McChicken with mildly spicy sauce on it. There was, in fact, no buffalo in it at all. And inside that, under the wilted lettuce and wedged inside a soggy crevice of processed chicken "meat" was a tiny but powerful bomb!

Grabbing the sandwich, I threw it into the airlock and pounded the emergency cycle button. The blast of decompressed blew the deadly at high speed outward into the inky blackness of space. Mere minutes later, a blinding flash enveloped my lab, followed by a shock wave that nearly tore the place apart.

I survived the ordeal, but now I'm curious what other "deli" offerings they have. Maybe they'll have a beef and cheese "deli" sandwich that's an elongated Big Mac... WITH A THERMONUCLEAR DEVICE!

Of course, I don't expect any better. I just like the entertainment of discovering weapons of mass destruction buried in common food items. It's all part of keeping the world safe from the evil gloved hand of Ronald.

Warning sign

Saturday, September 03, 2005

Here's a traffic sign that I found near False Creek in Vancouver.



What is that? "Watch for trucks speeding towards walls"? I don't think it turns out well for the driver.

Vancouver... in the tasty new smoky flavour!

Monday, September 12, 2005

My drive to the cubicle farm this morning was a smoky one, due to a massive fire that's burning out of control in the Burns Bog in Delta, BC, just southeast of Vancouver. The air smells and tastes like peat smoke, and ash is falling to the ground as far away as downtown Vancouver. As I crossed the bridge to Richmond, I saw the massive column of smoke that's rising from Delta. The very thing that has made peat such a valued fuel for thousands of years is going to make this one hard to put out -- they say that bog fires burn slowly, and underground, so that even if it looks like it's out, it may smoulder for weeks and even flare up again.

On the bright side, smokers stepping outside for a puff can spend less on cigarettes now.

Have a holly jolly Christmas

Monday, December 19, 2005

Every year, I dread the approach of December. December means the "holiday season", schlocky Christmas music in every shop, and the enormous pressure of Christmas shopping. That's why I put it off until the last minute. I plan my shopping list well in advance, however, so that in the very last week, I can hit the shops all at once in a surgical strike. Get in, extract the items, and get out. *Bam!* It's over in an instant

I don't hate Christmas, but I do hate being pushed into the holidays before I'm ready. I push back, and let everything wait. It really does take a feat of willpower to reach the point where I actually clear space on the table and start to wrap everyone's gifts.

And then, a funny thing happens. As I fold and cut and tape, and write little "Merry Effing Christmas" labels, I catch myself whistling "Have a holly jolly Christmas". But I stop myself, because I seriously hate that tune and wish that the person who wrote it would be buried in an ant hill up to their necks with liquid sugar poured liberally over their wobbly bits, while playing that tune at full volume on a loop. In a shopping mall.

Not long after that, I notice myself humming "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" and "Silent Night". Before I know it, I'm absolutely oozing with Christmas spirit, and what better time to pour a little Christmas brandy into a little mug or two. And after an hour or so of wrapping, humming, whistling, and pouring brandy down my throat, I strip down to my shorts, hang ornaments from my ears, and go caroling door-to-door at each pub I can find until a friendly police officer offers me a warm blanket and some handcuffs.

So I don't know why I have so much trouble starting the Christmas season. After all, it ends well, and they usually let me out in time for Christmas dinner.

Tragedy strikes at home of virtual vehicle designer

Monday, July 10, 2006

VANCOUVER -- Tragedy struck in the early hours of the morning, when an unexpected death occurred in the home of virtual vehicle designer, Cubey Terra. Shortly after 8:00am, Terra's coffee maker expired, depriving the entire household -- namely Cubey Terra -- of coffee.

"It was horrible," said Terra, "When I found it, it was just cold to the touch. Quite dead."

No cause for the coffee maker's sudden death is certain, but the investigator on the scene suspects a failure in the heating element. Foul play has not yet been ruled out.

The coffee maker had been in continuous daily use since only August 28, 2005 -- less than a single year. A memorial service will be held for the coffee maker later today, after a quick trip to Canadian Tire for a new one.

What I do during SL downtimes

Wednesday, July 12, 2006

It's Wednesday, folks, which means that Second Life is down for the latest update. SL addicts the world over, shaking from withdrawal symptoms, turn to other activities, like sparring in the forums, or trading silly links in IRC. You might ask, What does Cubey do during SL downtimes? Well... I'll tell you...

I start my day having completely forgotten about the planned downtime. I go to my kitchen, brew a pot of coffee, and plan my morning's work in my head. The beans are hand-roasted by a guy in Steveston BC, and are quite delicious. Much better than that Terrabucks swill. Steaming mug in hand, I sit down at my computer and log in.

After my seventh or eighth login attempt, the reality sinks in. SL is down. And that's when I start knocking my head against the monitor. Not hard -- just enough to make a good "bong" sound that kind of resonates a little. I think the precise note this produces is G sharp.

So after a good fifteen minutes of G sharp, there's considerable blood on the monitor, since that's the nature of head wounds. Though gory, it gives me a medium in which I can work. I'll spend a while finger-painting red airplanes on red runways, with little red workers in red jumpsuits driving red fuel trucks. This blessed reprieve from withdrawal is short-lived, however, since the blood clots and dries within minutes.

It's important, when deprived of Second Life, to distract yourself. Clicking Belaya's horrifying links in IRC works for only a short time, and pushing coins up your nose yields few positive results beyond a surprising ability to pick up radio broadcasts.

The best distraction that I've found is to strip naked, sit on the window sill, and scream the theme song to "Farscape" There are lots of good screamy bits in that one.

As an aside, if your neighbours object to the presence of a bloodied, screaming, naked person, you may wish to try the backup distraction, which requires a bottle of Vietnamese vodka, a toilet plunger, and two live ducks. Contact me for details.

By the time the police are done with me, it's around noon and Second Life is back online.

What do you do during SL downtimes?

SLCC creeps ever closer

Thursday, August 10, 2006

Just eight days from now, SLers from all over the world congregate at San Francisco's Fort Mason Center for the second annual Second Life Community Convention. They will meet each other face-to-face for the first time, discuss important SL themes and issues, and of course drink their faces off. I spent a while perusing Google maps of San Francisco last night -- SF is kind of big, isn't it? Fortunately, my hotel is only a short distance from Fort Mason and assorted other touristy places, so I'm hoping to explore the place on foot. See the sights. Point at things and go *oooh*. You know -- tourist stuff.

One worrisome issue is all over the news today. The good news is that apparently police foiled a terrorist plot to blow up UK flight. The bad news -- or maybe inconvenient news -- is that liquids and gels including toothpaste and shampoo are banned from all carry-ons. As well, a CNN.com article says that "Terrorists planned to use MP3 players and sports drinks to blow up as many as 10 jetliners". So no toiletries, no music, no liquid refreshments.

While I'm sure this is a boon for airport convenience stores, it not only means that we go without brushing our teeth and washing our hair until we buy more, but it also means that security checks are going to take a whole... lot... longer. CBC News reports that "At Vancouver International Airport in the morning, a long line snaked longer than a city block from the United Airlines check-in for flights to several U.S. cities."

So if I manage to get to my flight on time, I'll see you at SLCC. Just don't stand too near me, because for the sake of security I will not be brushing my teeth.

Anticipating conversations at SLCC...

Sunday, August 13, 2006

A: Hey, so we finally meet face-to-face! So that's what you look like!

B: Hi! Wow! You don't look anything like your avatar.

A: Yeah, no. Not a lot.

B: You're kind of... lumpier. Less hair.

A: Yeah... that's about it.

B: And the acne scars too.

A: I think I'll go get a drink.

SLCC update: peering at people's chests

Saturday, August 19, 2006

I had intended to haul out my laptop during the event and blog LIVE AND DIRECT from the Fort Mason Center, but I just couldn't bring myself to pull out my chunky Dell Inspiron when the next guy has a sleek little Powerbook. I mean, my laptop doesn't glow. I'm just not cool enough to blog from the convention. So instead, I have opted to blog from the privacy of my hotel room.

The convention itself is at the Cowell Theater at the Fort Mason Center (I'll concede the US spellings of "theatre" and "centre" because we are, after all, in San Francisco), which stands at the end of a pier with a spectacular view of the bay. To the left: the Golden Gate Bridge stands shrouded in fog. To the right: the sinister form of Alcatraz. Oddly, Alcatraz looks remarkably like a badly-built island estate in SL. I bet if someone cut down on the primes on Alcatraz, we could turn up our draw distance and get rid of all the perpetual fog.

In this environment, hundreds of SLers milled about, peering at each other's nametags for familiar names. It's funny how the tiny world of SL has its celebrities with unusual names -- Flipper and Jennyfur, assorted residents of varying notoriety, and of course the Linden pantheon was out in force. I think, in a way, the SLCC agenda is almost an afterthought to the principal activity, which is people-spotting.

I'll add more after tomorrow's sessions. Kudos to Flip and Jennyfur for pulling it all together!

Souvenirs of SLCC

Friday, August 25, 2006

Six days after SLCC '06, I'm still kicking myself. Want to know how many photos I took while in San Francisco? Let's see if I can count them all. I took approximately... none. Not even one snapshot to call my own. Even though I was very careful to pack my little digicam in my suitcase, somehow I managed to forget it in the hotel room each time I ventured outside.

I supposed I'll have to rely on fading memories then to remember sights like the Golden Gate Bridge, Alcatraz, the sun-dappled green hills across the bay, Coit Tower, and that pyramid building that's so incredibly tacky. But I don't need photographs to remember the hills. No, for that, I still have the lingering pain in my legs from my hike from Fort Mason to the Serrano Hotel. It looked like an easy 2.5 miles on Google Maps. Oh, but evil Google didn't reveal the grueling altitude changes. It didn't show that some streets were not only steep, but had STAIRS. Those San Franciscans know how to do hills.

I survived the hills, as did the busload of grey-haired tourists who practically bounded past me to the lookout, which makes me wonder if I should start working out.

And so the weekend wound down and when all those intoxicating -- and occasionally intoxicated -- experiences fade, we have only the souvenirs of a handful of other people's photos, video footage, and maybe some stains in embarrassing places.

Star Trek resimulated

Saturday, September 16, 2006

Nooooooooo!!! Has the TV and movie industry learned nothing? This is a complete bloody disaster.

Today I found out that CBS plans has digitally "resimulated" key elements the original Star Trek series. Special effects, exterior shots, and scenery are on the list of changes.

"We smoothed out the motion of the Enterprise. It flies more dynamically now," Rossi said. "It occupies real space. It doesn't look like a model anymore."¹

Don't they understand? Star Trek is supposed to look cheesy. We're supposed to see poorly-lit cardboard sets and grainy images of plastic Romulan warships. The scenery is supposed to be a blurry matte painting. The Enterprise is supposed to look like a model. We like it that way. That's what makes the show so appealing.

I blame George Lucas. With his Star Wars Special Edition, he started a disturbing trend where filmmakers mangle a popular work with computer effects. Was Star Wars really improved by adding cutesie little droids and mooing dewbacks in the Tatooine scenes? Was it more exciting to the Death Star explode with an inexplicable expanding ring than the original effect?

Should we expect Paramount to animate the tribbles the way Lucas animated the dewbacks? Imagine googly-eyed tribbles bouncing around -- maybe even conversing with each other! Or maybe they'll do what Spielberg did to E.T., and replace everyone's weapons with walkie-talkies.

Like many people my age, I grew up with Kirk, McCoy, and Spock as gods in the pantheon of popular culture. The show's production quality -- every grainy shot and styrofoam rock -- is familiar and appreciated. Re-editing Star Trek would be like changing DaVinci's

1. <http://www.wired.com/techbiz/media/news/2006/09/71798>

Last Supper to include Jar-Jar Binks. Certainly, it would add something new to the scene, but would it make it better?

OK, maybe that's a bit extreme. Granted, it's not fine art -- it's just a cheesy old TV show, for crying out loud -- but it's as comfortable and as familiar as the bum prints in our old sofa. I feel that Star Trek doesn't really belong to Paramount in the sense that they can cut it up and glue it back together as they see fit. It belongs to popular culture. Once it was finished, broadcast, then re-broadcast endlessly for four decades, it became a part of us all.

George Lucas made this mistake. Steven Spielberg made this mistake. Fans hated the changes almost universally. Now Paramount is butchering a beloved show. This is a tragedy for Star Trek fans.

And now I'll go set up my DVR to record the entire series. But I refuse to enjoy watching it.

No perusing for me

Saturday, September 23, 2006

Like most guys, I really hate to shop. When I need something, I compile a list and make a military-precision, surgical strike. I get in, grab what I need, and get out. There will be no meandering, no browsing, and absolutely no perusing. If I'm not going to buy it, what's the point of looking at it?

Bookstores are the worst. On countless occasions, I found myself dragged into a bookstore by a friend to "see what there is". This behaviour completely baffles me. What possible enjoyment can you get by looking at books on a shelf? It's a small rectangular object with a picture on it. Unless you actually sit down for several hours to read it, you're not going to discover anything significant about it by looking at it on the shelf.

In fact, if I can impress you with my pedantry, isn't it common wisdom that you can't judge a book by its cover? Seriously, you can't. If it has a pretty cover, that's the product of a graphic artist and a marketing team. Even if it has a plot summary and reviews, that's pretty shallow criteria on which to base a literary purchase.

It seems to me that the entire concept of browsing a book store is based on the premise that you *can* judge a book by its cover. There are entire shops full of people violating a very fundamental rule against prejudice, and judging willy-nilly.

So really, my dislike of bookstores isn't just an aversion to shopping. I'm standing up for my principles. I refuse to judge a book by its cover. Except those silly books that litter the fantasy section that are adorned with unicorns, pixies, fairies, and glowing swords. I think I can go ahead and judge those. Oh and the pink-spined novels with a ridiculously muscle-bound man leans over a woman whose ample bosom is virtually bursting out of a partly unlaced corset. I'm pretty sure I don't need to see what's inside the cover.

Alright, fine. I judge books by their cover too. But bookstores are still silly. I'll pick mine up online, thanks. And I'll have a list.

Ah! For the carefree winters of childhood!

Sunday, November 26, 2006

The arrival of winter in Vancouver is signalled by our first snowfall. The city is transformed by a layer of greyish, slushy snow that threatens to turn into rain without warning.

As I trudged home today, I passed the neighbour's kid playing in the front yard. He heaved a beachball-sized snowball onto his shoulders, and I heard him chortle quietly, "Hehehe. Dynamite."

Ah, for the carefree winters of childhood, when playtime meant plotting to use explosives on friends, family, neighbours.

Happy 2007!

Sunday, December 31, 2006

As twenty aught six draws to a close, we can look back upon the year and truly comprehend how much it was a time in which things undeniably happened. From the very first happenings to the very last happenings, which as I write these words are still in the process of becoming things that have happened, and therefore are yet things that will have happened, each happening enters our group consciousness for an ever-fleeting moment of awareness before rattling around and falling out the hole in the side that we forgot to patch up last year.

Time and time again this year, we looked at our watches, at our calendars, at our organizers, and at the microwave clock that we forgot to reset after the last power-outage, and we knew with a certainty derived from having done it only a minute earlier that *now* -- which is to say it was then, but at the moment in which we thought about it, it was still "now" -- now is the time in which we are living, and the last minute earlier is no longer "now" at all.

With these weighty thoughts pressing on the year's final moments, 2006 edges towards the precipice of history, below which lies a cascade of tumultuous years that gather dust and become homes for small rodents who use the digits to build nests for their young. I would like to pause for a moment, at the very brink of the dark abyss of 2007 and raise high a beacon to light the way forward: To all who have travelled with me, near me, and occasionally in the opposite direction to me for as many days as there are in the year, of which each is numbered consecutively and unrelentingly from 1 to 365, I wish you a very happy and enjoyable new year! May your days be lively and prosperous, may your refrigerators be always full of your favourite beverages and snacks, and may each of your minutes arrive consecutively and in the order in which they were expected.

The web, the wasp, and the metaverse

Sunday, April 08, 2007

Cast your mind back, if you will, into the murky past of the Internet. Think back to before the Y2K scare. Back, before the dot-com days. Back, before the Browser Wars. Back, to a time when Babbage's computing machine was powered by steam, and monkeys were routinely hired to operate it.

Hold on. No, we've gone too far back. And I'm not sure that the bit about the monkeys is true anyway. Let's fast-forward a bit.

It's the early nineties. The World Wide Web has yet to reach the public consciousness -- it's a vast empty plain roamed only by herds of geeks and plodding researchers. And while everyone is thrilled with this nifty "hypertext" idea, nobody is quite sure what to do with it. Of all the hundreds of home pages in this primordial web, the majority include governments and universities, Star Trek fan sites, pornography, and occasionally Star Trek pornography. Geeks the world over are able to freely exchange information, ideas, and photos of Lieutenant Tasha Yar, naked. It was an information revolution.

I remember clearly my first encounter with the web. I had connected to UBC's network through an old text-only terminal to check my email when I noticed a link named "Web of Wonder". I didn't know it at the time, but as I activated that link I was about to surf the web for my very first time.

Glowing green text rippled down the screen as I hopped from page to page, and before long I found myself looking at what appeared to be pages from the UK. Was it possible? Had I unwittingly connected to a university across the Atlantic? I was agog at the possibilities.

And then, with a world of information at my fingertips, I found and downloaded the game cheat codes for The Secret of Monkey Island. A useful thing was that "Web of Wonder".

For a time, life was good. As I surfed daily, my surfing addiction grew. I found new and fascinating places, often just by chance. I'd click, click, click away the hours.

Then corporate and business interests sank their filthy claws into the web. Like the tarantula wasps of the American southwest, the advertisers grappled the web, rammed their ovipositors into its belly, and laid millions of eggs in the web's helpless, writhing form. What had been an egalitarian and non-commercial service, unsullied by business, by and for educational institutions became a living zombie spider rupturing poisonous, stinging ads.

It's a sad fact that 87% of all links on the average website lead to advertising (and 89% of all statistics are just made up). So in any given hour of surfing, most of your jumps will probably lead to ads for all variety of products and services, including online dating, pornography, herbal treatments for men, and insurance. Incidentally, 99% of men purchasing three of these products will also require the fourth. The other 1% fails to use the dating service correctly.

For the net junkie, alternatives have evolved along with the web, and in some cases, they merged. The venerated dial-up bulletin boards, where people chatted, debated, and SHOUTED IN ALL CAPS at each other moved to the web as forums. Internet relay chat (IRC), which predates the web, continues still, and is mimicked by web-based chat rooms.

I have never understood the appeal of chatting anonymously with random strangers on the net. To me, chatting online is like walking along a busy sidewalk and striking up conversations with oncoming traffic. I know that some people actually do that, but they're usually off their meds.

So while others whiled away the entire night in chat rooms LOLing and emoting with sideways happy faces about nothing in particular, I shrugged and continued to surf through increasingly commercial websites, dodging pop-ups and other hazards. But the chatters and forum surfers grew in numbers and evolved a sense of identity. They

were communities who found homes on the web, LOLing and ROFLing with like-minded individuals.

It was around this time in the web's history, one early morning at about 3:30, that I woke up with a keyboard waffle pattern on my face and drool oozing between the Ctrl and Shift keys. My desk was littered with discarded snack wrappers, and my screen was full of dancing hamsters -- the official Hamster Dance website, in fact. My screen was full of dancing hamsters, and I had no idea how I got there. It was in this moment that I realized that I might be wasting my time with this "web surfing".

And then, as if chat rooms cross-pollinated with online games, something new sprouted from the steaming, fertile soil of the Internet. Imagine a chat room, but in a 3-D virtual world. Like a computer game, you walk your character around and interact with the environment; like a chat room, you can engage in light banter and even throw in the occasional LOL.

Among the first of these was ActiveWorlds, the grandfather of all metaverses. Then came There and Second Life. Soon there will be others, as Sony and other companies enter the arena of virtual worlds.

It seems to me that the development of the metaverse mirrors that of the early web. The Second Life world is constructed mostly by individuals as a hobby, and populated by casual visitors seeking a little light chat and entertainment. Of those looking to engage the metaverse for practical purposes, researchers and educators have led the way. All the metaverse needs for the parallel to be complete is Star Trek porn, and I'm fairly certain that you wouldn't have to look very far to find that or any other kind of porn in Second Life.

Metaverses and Second Life in particular are at a stage where the news media writes articles about virtual worlds as a curiosity, reheating tired phrases like "It's not even real!" and "You can make real money!"

Eventually the novelty will pass, as it did for the web, and interest will turn to more practical matters. Business matters. With the growing list of corporate players like IBM, Dell, CBS, and NBC, we find

ourselves at a crossroads where longtime Second Lifers fear being crushed like ants under the wheels of progress in the corporations' greedy rush upstream to the rich spawning grounds. There simply aren't enough clichés and mixed metaphors to describe the apprehension growing among longtime Second Life residents.

I would hope that, like the web, there would be room in the metaverse for both business and personal use. Second Life needs both an Amazon and a MySpace: the metaverse may need to feed on advertisement, but it will thrive on communities. Second Life may have been impregnated with writhing wasp larvae, but we aren't yet a zombie spider. Communities still have control. For now we can still log in and ROFL and LOL in a completely ad-free environment. We can even post pictures of Tasha Yar.

In fact, I think I'll do that right now.

Mmm. Yar.

Stephen Cavers entered the world in yurt in Outer Mongolia in the year 1539. Due to a lucky encounter with a space-time distortion, his family found suddenly themselves in Canada just in time for the 1970s.

After growing up on his family's salmon farm, he grew tired of the endless plowing and seeding and moved on to pursue other interests. Between 1990 and 1994, he worked in the Sandwich Islands as a sandwich artist, experimenting with unusual meats and cheeses. He then spent over a decade locked in a small, grey box writing dozens of books that served the valuable purpose of adding a satisfying heft to boxes of software.

He now lives and works in his home-made cubicle in the alley between 6th and 7th Avenue in Vancouver, BC, where he studies the habitat of urban geese.

