

Bootstrapping

Part 2 Previous episodes at <http://www.solysis.com/Home/articles>

23rd January 2043

This is Day 4 of my strange new existence. I am still alone, I still don't know where I am – or, to be more precise, what is outside these nice but painfully finite living quarters. And of course I still don't know for sure why I am here.

It is the first time since childhood that I have really got time, plenty of time. What a luxury! Necessities like eating (ok, it is an enjoyable necessity but I would not do it if I was not hungry) are becoming routine, and between getting up in the morning and going to sleep in the evening I have now got more hours at my disposal in a single day than previously in a whole month.

What do I want to do with my time? What *should* I do with my time? I find it hard to just relax and enjoy, to maybe just peruse the media terminal and the magic book and get lost in centuries' worth of artistic output. Well, yesterday I did pull Kafka's "The Trial" onto the magic book, huddled into a corner of the lounge and read it cover to cover! What a joy to be able to do this with no interruptions, with touching and turning the pages being the only periodic reminder that I was actually in a different and physical world. I have to say that I feel a certain kinship with the main character, Josef K., in terms of being thrust into a situation that seems impossible to make sense of. Although I am far more comfortable than him and (hopefully) not on course for a similar fate.

This is exactly what nags me, though. being comfortable. Everything is provided for me – and so, cruelly, nothing keeps me away from making deliberate and meaningful choices about how to spend my time. I am overwhelmed, suddenly faced on a microscopic level with the question of my purpose in life. What is the point working out the less obvious capabilities of the food generator? What is the point browsing the media library, observing that it is vast but holds nothing more recent than about six months ago, trying to use the choice of content to draw conclusions about the person who put it together and to figure out his or her background? What is the point feeding my mind with knowledge and food for thought? Will it make me happier? And if so, is that reason enough to do it?

25th January 2043

Right, I have had enough of drifting along. I need a goal. Ideally, I need a vision worthy of embarking on an exciting quest, but I'll be modest and settle for my personal Top 3 Practical Goals:

- (1) Find out what is outside this place
 - (2) Find out whether there is anyone out there I can communicate with
- ... or whether I, as I have been suspecting, am really alone, the sole (or maybe almost sole) survivor of a catastrophe that has wiped out humanity.

There, now I have written it down.

And I am an utter idiot. If this is my suspicion – not just a preliminary intellectual hypothesis but a strong and gnawing suspicion – what am I doing sitting here contemplating the purpose of life and drawing up dandy to-do lists?

Let's rumble and find out for sure ... I am not going to be like those people throughout history who did not question what they saw around them (or did not even observe properly), who lived their lives without ever pushing their horizon, who outsourced their doubts and their curiosity to self-serving religious institutions, and who cheered when those who did question, who did push the boundaries of human understanding, who did strive to look behind the obvious, were burnt at the stake by those same institutions.

Well, I suppose I am safe being curious here, so I should not take any credit for it and instead just look forward to my own satisfaction as the reward.

26th January 2043

Right, this has been frighteningly easy, and I suspect that only my fear of seeing my fears confirmed kept me from getting to this point earlier. I'll give away the star exhibit straight away: All the manuals I have found here – user guides for the media terminal, climate control, window screens, even lighting – carry the same acronym on the back: HCEP. The same goes for much of the furniture. On most items I found a little sticky label with an inventory number and “HCEP”.

And – searching the apparently canned version of the internet I have available on the media terminal, I found an obscure document that was probably not meant for public consumption but accidentally spidered. Within it, there is a snippet of chillingly beautiful Bureaucratese that sort of answers the big question (and raises many others):

... the purpose of the HCEP (Humanity Continued Existence Programme) is to safeguard the continuity of the existence of the human population and certain

aspects of cultural, social, religious, philosophical, and scientific knowledge and history. The HCEP project was specified and funded in 2029 following the perceived increased risk of an asteroid–earth collision event given the prior failure of classified experimental missions aimed at shifting asteroid orbits, and of other catastrophic events of natural or man-made origin ...

In other words – someone has built this thing so that people inside (i.e. me) survive humankind being wiped out. Which would mean that, during the four weeks for which I have no recollection, something terrible on an unimaginable scale must have happened. And somehow, mysteriously, I ended up in this, this *thing* created as part of the poetically named Humanity Continued Existence Programme.

Or am I just part of an experiment – was I mad enough to agree to being kept in isolation for however many months? Maybe this is indeed the HCEP, but just a trial run? No, I have already ruled out that possibility. Not on the back of any logical thinking but based on a strong gut feeling. In fact, it is somewhat more than a gut feeling. I do have a fairly good “sixth sense” with which I can perceive other people being nearby – nothing I would call psychic, just a particularly acute perception. But now I cannot feel any human soul. What is more, I actually sense a sort of void, a big minus sign, a strong absence rather than presence. It reminds me of a visit to an engineering company near Paris many years ago. They built huge vacuum tanks to test satellites prior to shooting them into space, and I remember standing next to one of these tanks while it was evacuated and feeling an almost inexorable pull towards it. It was like standing on the edge of a cliff – a kind of empty space vertigo. I believe the “absence” I sense now is similar.

The background sensation that used to come from the existence of billions of human beings and that I took for granted – has disappeared.

Violently? Painfully? What happened to my friends, to my family, to Grace? What happened to my colleagues at work, to their families, to the people I walked past last time I ran down the street trying to catch a controlled taxi? What happened to the old oak tree I could see outside my kitchen window, a tree so old that my lifetime paled into insignificance in comparison? Has everything been consumed by an asteroid impact literally melting the earth? Or has human endeavour towards ever more powerful weapons finally come full circle in a planet-obliterating thermonuclear war? Or has a virus with an insidiously long incubation period infected and then killed all human life (except me, for some reason)?

Are there scattered survivors holed up in the deepest basements underneath collapsed and twisted buildings, in mine shafts and government bunkers? Are there people right now counting the days until their energy and oxygen supplies run out, wondering whether death on returning to the wasteland at the surface would be more or less bearable than slowly suffocating underneath?

I cannot bear thinking about all this. I'd rather leave things abstract. Clean. Ethically neutral. Better not knowing too much right now.

Quick, switch the subject.

27th January 2043

Looks like my diary has turned into The Great Book Of Unanswered Questions. I wonder who is going to write the Book Of Answers. While I am

at it, here is a *really* stupid question. If I am here for “Humanity Continued Existence” purposes – how is this going to work with just me? How am I supposed to be the seed of Humanity 2.0 (or 3.0 if you count Noah) ?

Trying to preserve humanity using a single man strikes me as suffering from a bit of a design flaw, unless I have overlooked something obvious.

Having successfully (for now) cast aside my disturbing thoughts about the fate of the rest of humankind I am back to square one. With all practical necessities provided for – what should I do with my time? As an interesting aside, if ethical considerations come into play, are they still relevant assuming I am indeed the sole human being in the universe? Do moral standards persist in the absence of society?

To be continued ...

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