

Bootstrapping

Part 3 Previous episodes at <http://www.solysis.com/Home/articles>

(0)1st February 2043

Guess how long it took me to decide whether to write today's date as "01" or simply as "1". Actually – don't guess, the truth is just too embarrassing. On one hand, it is wasteful to pad single digit days with a leading zero. But doing so gives me an inexplicably large amount of satisfaction – maybe because it chimes with the age-old way in which computers deal with numbers. Machines don't store a number per se but actually reserve space for what the number could potentially be. A day of the month? Well, that could range up to 31, so better earmark space for two digits. Computers consider the potential of a number to be more than it currently is, which is a rather uplifting thought. At least until you remember that, in this case, the machine's unquestioning belief in the number's potential has a strict upper limit at 99 (or whatever the internal representation allows). ... Anyway, I digress. Comforting to know that no-one is ever going to read these ramblings except me, otherwise I would constantly be tempted to play to the audience and would certainly not allow myself to occasionally go a bit silly.

And I need to be silly once in a while, otherwise I might go mad very quickly, being quite possibly the sole survivor of a cataclysmic event, and being stuck now in a comfortable but strictly confined space.

Yesterday, I made the first serious attempt to get out. Actually, this is not true – my primary instinct was that I wanted to *know* rather than to get out. I

wanted to know what is outside, and, yes, whether I *could* go there if I decided to. Lying in bed (i.e. in this foam groove) and glancing along the wall next to me I had noticed some time ago that its coffee chocolate coloured panels were not completely flush. It was hard to make out the tiny steps where two panels meet but I could tell from the diffuse light reflection on them that they were angled slightly differently. Almost from the first morning I had found this imperfection disconcerting given that everything else around me seemed to be engineered so flawlessly. Or maybe I just spent more time staring at those wall panels than at anything else.

Anyway, I fetched a kitchen knife and started probing the narrow gaps between the panels. The knife went in quite far in most places, nearly all the way to the handle. Fortunately, it only struck me much later that this was a foolish thing to do – I could have struck live electrics and killed myself instantly, or destroyed some vital element of life support systems and killed myself slowly. Wouldn't it be the ultimate irony if all the effort that had gone into the "Humanity Continued Existence Program" was thwarted by the reckless stupidity of an individual (namely me)?

But. No risk, no fun. No risk, no knowledge, no progress. No risk = standing still. No risk = a form of death. I gently twisted the knife to wedge it between two panels and pulled it towards me. Initially, I did not get anywhere but after patiently repeating the action in several places on the circumference of one particular panel I finally felt it coming loose. For one more fleeting moment I wondered whether it was really a good idea to take my living quarters apart, and whether I would really be able to put it all together again. Then I pulled the panel towards me like an oversized drawer.

It was in front of my face, and so I had to put it down onto the floor before I could see what was behind. Not much, actually. I was looking at raw metal

(Aluminium? Magnesium?) cassettes. They were welded together, and I was struck by the perfection of the welding seams that was in odd contrast to the rather rough metal surface. The cassettes were deep enough to provide space for bundles of cables and thin flexible pipes. At their edges, the cassettes had been drilled to feed these through. All in all, what I saw reminded me of the inside of an unfinished aircraft. Or the inside of a London underground tunnel during construction works. Or maybe the inside of a submarine.

Having made a start it was easy to remove further panels, and soon I variously felt like an engineer at an aircraft recycling plant or like an interior designer removing the sins of a bygone fashion wave. I uncovered more metal cassettes, more cables, more pipework. The latter was surprisingly intricate and looked more like the blood vessels of a giant animal than a piece of engineering.

I was on a roll now. Panels were piling up on the floor. I overcame a moment of panic when it struck me that the panels – despite their equal size and appearance – might not be equal, and that it might be an impossible puzzle to put them back in their correct positions. I relaxed when I realised that the little HCEP stickers on the reverse of the panels all carried the same serial number. And I continued pulling out panel after panel, until the two adjoining walls around my bed were almost bare. What was it that I found? Well, more metal cassettes, more cable, more pipework – rather disappointing. The only kick was the smell, this special scent of electronics that had been my very first sensual impression of this place. With the panels removed the scent was much stronger, and I knelt and trampled all over my bed to sniff individual cables. I must have looked ridiculous tracing brightly coloured strands of plastic insulation with my nose like a dog following an (optically invisible) trail.

My favourite were the red cables. Their bright red, almost pepperoni, colour had led me to expect, well, a pungent scent, but in fact they smelled like pressure-treated wood in outside deckings, railings, or playgrounds, triggering memories of holidays in sunny places going all the way back to my early childhood. Then, when I was just tall enough to reach the top of wooden railings with the tip of my nose, anything I watched through those railings became inextricably linked with the feel and the smell of treated wood.

I wondered why the yellow cables smelled differently. Was it really a different material, or was my mind playing tricks on me? I did not go as far as doing a proper blind sniffing test – but it is on my odd-things-to-do-one-day-list.

Slowly and methodically I pushed the panels back onto the wall.

02nd February 2043

I am a big believer in chance observations. Science makes steady progress through carefully observing the outcome of deliberate experiments, but it advances in leaps and bounds when a scientist picks up on something unexpected. The discovery of penicillin in an accidentally contaminated Petri dish is a particularly nice example.

My discovery is unlikely to change the world but for me it felt like it. When I wrote yesterday about my earlier panel stripping exercise I remembered something – a tiny chance observation that had lodged in a corner of my brain and was sitting there waiting to be processed. As I was pushing the last few panels back onto the wall above my bed a single cable got in the way, and I had to push it underneath one of the panels I had never taken off. Only

hours later, as I drifted off to sleep, did I realise that what I had felt with the tips of my fingers while trying to push the cable into a gap underneath the panel could not possibly have been other cables or pipes, and I would not have expected the edge of a metal cassette in that particular place, either.

Trembling with anticipation I jumped out of bed this morning, skipped breakfast and instead set to work with the kitchen knife again. This time round I was much more practised and managed to remove the panel in question very quickly. There it was – what I had felt with my fingertips was a large wing nut. More panels came off, I tossed them onto the floor carelessly, breathlessly, until I had uncovered a large hatch measuring about one metre across. Now I just had to undo the wing nuts and take off the oval metal plate held in place by them (would I be strong enough to lift it?). I raced around my “apartment” to try and find a tool to help me with the nuts – they were too tight to undo by hand. Maddeningly, I could not find any proper tools, not even a poky pair of pliers. I suddenly felt patronised. I had been entrusted with a highly sophisticated piece of engineering but no tools, no workbench, no cupboard full of spares and odds and ends. Eventually I discovered that the metal legs of one of the chairs came off. I held a leg at both ends, pressed it onto the dimple between the two wings of a nut and along the wings, and tried to turn it that way ... and, yes, managed to exert sufficient leverage to make the nut budge. I did this to each of the twenty or so nuts, turning each one just a fraction. I was almost there! I completely unscrewed the first wing nut. It was well greased and came off easily. Then I unscrewed a second one, started with a third.

And paused.

I felt weak, knees trembling, breathing superficially, heart racing. I had suddenly realised that I was quite possibly about to kill myself. What if I was

indeed in a submarine with only that metal plate keeping out tons and tons of water? I quickly ran my fingers along the edge, half expecting to feel the first drops squeezing through the partially released seal. Everything was dry. Or was it? The metal felt cool, and in my agitated state I struggled to properly interpret what my senses were telling me. In the end I repeatedly wiped the area with a paper tissue and inspected it carefully to convince myself it was indeed dry.

But this did not answer my dilemma. Was it safe to open this hatch (assuming it is indeed a hatch)? It might not lead to the outside world at all but rather give access to, say, an engine room. Or to a workshop with tools and spares and odds and ends. Or ... to other people. No, I did not want to contemplate that possibility. I am ok with the thought of there being other survivors somewhere but I don't want them nearby. This is my space, and until I feel in control of my surroundings I am not ready to let in anyone else.

And so I am sitting here with my diary, occasionally glancing over my shoulder towards the hatch. It is nice to have discovered it but in a moment I am going to screw the two wing nuts back on again. I am going to tighten them with my hands, and then I am going to use the chair leg again on all nuts to get them back to how they were until this morning. I am going to reattach the wall panels, wondering how it can be so difficult to decide what is the right thing for me to do.

To be continued ...

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