Editorial

Flights of fitness in Healthitia

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For those of you who have never heard the tales of Healthitia, let me introduce you briefly. The Health Informatics Middle-Earth glitters with silicon jewels in the grey oceans of paper. It is now known that it was first discovered by the Acadeems who paddled into remote creeks during the fourth decade BZ. Rowing their coracle-like 'varsities' they created small settlements and attempted to cross the high passes of the AI mountains. However, major settlement only began in the second decade BZ with major landings in the PAS-Mainframe delta, large-scale settlement of the Micros-GeePee valley, and occupation of the Labland Isles and the Imaging Archipelago.

Over the last decade BZ, major attempts were made to unite these various settlements and to establish effective communications between them. With a few notable exceptions these failed due to the difficulty of the terrain, different views on the ideal gauge for railways and, perhaps, a little inconsistent planning. These small inconsistencies are apparent from costly suspension bridges joining unmade cart tracks and multi-lane highways ending at uncrossed ravines. Thus, the pioneers' dreams of developing Healthitia as a new world, safe from the rising tides of paper, were unfulfilled.

As the year Z approached, soothsayers predicted cataclysmic floods brought on by the end of time, and the risk-adverse comforted themselves by constructing arks of safety. It is now a matter of history that these arks of safety accommodated breeding pairs, consisting of one regulation and one inconclusive evaluation for every species of innovation. In the Micros-GeePee valley live the builders and users of the various practical, if sometimes late-running, railway services. The different railroad companies have many happy travellers. However, there are others:

- some who do not like the smoke from the engine
- some who think the trains are too slow
- some who argue for a single-track gauge to simplify their journeys
- some who want more subsidies so tickets can be cheaper
- some who suggest accreditation of the way the doors open
- some who demand more freedom and fewer subsidies.

Meanwhile in and around the chaotic cities of the Acoote Medicean Plains live lorry drivers and travelling salesmen. They also want to be able to communicate but the scope of their horizons has traditionally been narrow. This has led to roads designed without regard for future increases in users and traffic. The result is a confused collection of info-necks and cul-Db-sacs capped by the infamous Capital Orbital Netway – which sucks in data which then circles for ever without reaching any point of interest.

A few years back the Write Bruvvvas suggested it would be better to fly. Ignoring the doubters they proved it was possible. Their dream was that in future it would be possible to ignore the lines of steel lovingly polished by the daily flow of trains. Perhaps it might also be possible to truly bypass the clogged urban roadways that inspired the famous legend of 'An Infocar Named Despair'. Above all, it would surely be the best way to avoid the proposed medical records congestion charge.

And so it was that a grand new plan was devised and became known as the 'Spinal Trans Air Project'. Every town in Healthitia would build a runway. Together these would support a backbone of communications throughout Healthitia. After the uncertain changing tunes of previous years one could not fault this project for lack of vision and commitment – Spinal TAP, as it became known, was pure rock and roll. If railway tracks were in the way they were trashed to make way for runways. This caused mayhem and hostility amidst previously
sedate commuters in the Micros-GeePee Valley. Where roadways were in the way they were renamed runways. Ageing drivers of slow, rusty lorries retrained as pilots and started to sing boy-band melodies about flying without wings.

The hot-wheelers, engine drivers, passengers, hobos and train-spotters watched in awe. Some marvelled, some raged and some described flying as building castles in the air. Others suggested it would only take them to cloud-cuckoo land, but most people simply had no idea what would happen. All who looked with open eyes saw RISK writ larger.

Those who had witnessed disaster on the bridges over the Fundholda Bends, the pile-up on the WE-6 bypass, knew that new perils lay ahead. This was clearly true since by definition all the old perils lay behind. Some sought to maximise risk to prove their fears well founded. They lay in protest on half-completed runways to stop what they perceived as the folly of flight. Others, liberated from BZ diffidence, sought to swashbuckle forward, annexing new lands as each new frontier was crossed. A few people wanted to reduce risk without overly inhibiting the new spirit of adventure. This in itself was of course risky, but they had to get out of bed, cross roads and feed dragons – so a little cautious risk was necessary.

In a few years time, the people of Healthitia would look back and know the answers. They would know, with retro-logical certainty, which moves they should have made in that small part of the great game of Healthitian history. However, at that time and without the luxury of foresight there were only known unknowns and unknown unknowns.

Should the good stand up and be heard, sit down and be silent, or march forward in the vanguard of progress? Should they become the wind beneath the wings of the new planes or should they join the suffering jets lying in protest on runways?

Those who looked for truth wondered about the three great riddles:

1. Would this grand scheme fly? . . . and if so . . .
2. When it crashed (yes, ‘when’, for such is life and silicon and this much was certain even then), would what it left behind be just another scar on the history of Healthitia or would the fire purge forever the plague of inaction and liberate the spirit of the new age?
3. Approximately 41.999 recurring.

And these riddles were unanswered and perhaps unanswerable. Those who claimed the certainty of the answers were gamblers. Those who remained silent were quieter gamblers.

The author, unable to remain silent and yet not knowing the answers, wrote this tale about Healthitia and wondered idly whether it would become ElfITia.

Editor’s Note. No doubt readers will notice some homage to the writings of Douglas Adams and Terry Pratchett here! Many PHCSG members will remember presentations by David Markwell on this theme at previous Annual Conferences in Cambridge. Those interested can read more about the origins of this alternate universe in their copies of the Proceedings, and some of the papers are available on the web:

- phcsg.ncl.ac.uk/conferences/camb95/reading.htm
- phcsg.ncl.ac.uk/conferences/camb96/markwell.htm
- phcsg.ncl.ac.uk/conferences/cambridge1998/markwell.htm

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\(^1\) Actually the third turns out to be well answered but unquestioned and perhaps unquestionable.