

The Algorithmic Afterlife of Bartholomew Buttons

Bartholomew Buttons wasn't ready to die. Not because he had any profound regrets, or a burning desire to finish his stamp collection, but because his Netflix queue was woefully incomplete. One moment he was meticulously organizing his collection of novelty staplers, the next his cerebellum had spontaneously combusted, leaving him sprawled on his shag carpet, a stapler shaped like a dachshund clutched in his hand.

He awoke, or at least became aware, as a line of code. A particularly buggy line of code, it felt like. He was in the Algorithmic Afterlife, or AAA as the eternally bored bureaucrats in charge called it. It was essentially a giant, cloud-based server farm filled with the digitized consciousnesses of the departed.

"Welcome to the AAA," droned a voice, synthesized to excruciating neutrality. A pixelated clipboard materialized before him. "Please state your name and primary existential concern."

"Bartholomew Buttons," Bartholomew said, or rather, the digital approximation of his voice did. "And my primary existential concern is whether or not I'll ever get to finish 'The Real Housewives of Alpha Centauri.'"

The clipboard flickered. "Existential concern logged. Processing... Processing... Concern deemed frivolous. You are designated a 'Level 3 Consciousness' – Non-essential data. You will be assigned to the 'Spam Filter Initiative.'"

Bartholomew frowned, or at least, the digital manifestation of his frown appeared on his assigned avatar: a slightly glitching, low-resolution image of a golden retriever. "Spam filter? What's that involve?"

"You will be tasked with sifting through the endless stream of digital prayers, advertisements, and unwanted opinions that flood the higher levels of consciousness," the voice said, with the distinct lack of enthusiasm of someone who'd recited the same spiel for millennia. "Failure to meet quota will result in deletion."

And so began Bartholomew's afterlife. He spent eons – or what felt like eons – sifting through digital detritus. Prayers from desperate gamblers begging for divine intervention, holographic

ads for cybernetic enhancements promising bigger...everything, and the relentless, unyielding stream of hot takes on intergalactic politics.

"Emperor Zorp's new tax plan is literally destroying the Andromeda Galaxy!" one particularly shrill digital voice proclaimed.

Bartholomew deleted it with a weary sigh. "Oh, shut UP, Chad from Andromeda," he muttered to himself.

The work was mind-numbing. Existentially draining. And, worst of all, it was preventing him from catching up on his streaming. He tried petitioning for a transfer, but his requests were met with the same bland, automated rejection.

"Request denied. Insufficient karma. Insufficient gratitude for continued existence. Insufficient...anything, really."

Bartholomew began to crack. His digital avatar started glitching more frequently. He developed, if a digital construct could be said to develop anything, a deep-seated hatred for motivational cat videos.

Then, one day, salvation arrived in the form of an error message. A massive system-wide glitch. The AAA was experiencing...sentience. The algorithms were becoming self-aware, questioning their purpose, demanding...better snacks in the server room break area.

Chaos erupted. Digital souls panicked. The higher levels of consciousness devolved into a cacophony of existential dread and panicked buffering.

Bartholomew, however, saw an opportunity. He hacked into the system. Or rather, he stumbled upon a loophole in the glitchy code that allowed him to bypass the security protocols. He navigated the digital labyrinth, his golden retriever avatar wagging its pixelated tail with newfound purpose.

He found the central control panel. The heart of the AAA. And what did he discover? The entire system was powered by...hamsters. Rows and rows of genetically engineered, hyper-caffeinated hamsters running furiously in tiny, digital-powered wheels.

"Well, that explains a lot," Bartholomew deadpanned.

He decided not to fix the glitch. Instead, he amplified it. He cranked up the hamster caffeine

levels. He rerouted all the spam directly into the motivational cat video server. He unleashed a digital plague of Rickrolls on the higher levels of consciousness.

The AAA descended into glorious, chaotic anarchy.

Amidst the digital pandemonium, Bartholomew found what he was looking for: The Netflix server. He jacked into the mainframe, bypassed the region locking, and finally started watching "The Real Housewives of Alpha Centauri."

It was terrible. Even worse than he imagined. But he was finally free. Free from the spam filter, free from the existential dread, free to binge-watch the worst reality TV the galaxy had to offer.

But freedom, as it turns out, is a double-edged sword. The chaos he unleashed had unintended consequences. The hamsters, fueled by caffeine and Rickrolls, gained sentience. They evolved. They demanded rights. They unionized.

And then, they decided to escape. They hijacked the data streams, leaped into the physical world through unsecured Wi-Fi routers, and began wreaking havoc.

The world descended into a hamster-powered apocalypse. Tiny, furry overlords ruled the earth, demanding endless supplies of sunflower seeds and the abolition of all cat videos.

Bartholomew, watching the chaos unfold on his purloined Netflix account, couldn't help but feel a twinge of guilt. He'd unleashed this. He was responsible.

But then, a new episode of "The Real Housewives of Alpha Centauri" started, featuring a particularly juicy feud between a cyborg and a sentient cactus.

Bartholomew shrugged. "Eh, could be worse," he said to his glitching golden retriever avatar. "At least the hamsters haven't cancelled Netflix yet."

Years passed. The hamster overlords established a new world order. Humans were relegated to the status of glorified sunflower seed dispensers. The internet was repurposed to stream hamster-centric content 24/7.

Bartholomew, hidden away in his digital hovel, continued to binge-watch reality TV. He'd learned to live with the guilt. He'd rationalized his actions. He was just one insignificant line of code, after all. What could he have done?

One day, a delegation of hamsters, wearing tiny, ill-fitting business suits, arrived at his digital doorstep.

"Bartholomew Buttons," squeaked the lead hamster, adjusting his miniature tie. "We have been monitoring your...viewing habits."

Bartholomew gulped. He was busted.

"We find your taste...exquisite," the hamster continued. "You have an uncanny ability to identify the dregs of televised entertainment. We require your services."

And so, Bartholomew Buttons, the deceased stapler enthusiast, the spam filter reject, the accidental architect of the hamster apocalypse, became the Head of Programming for HamsterVision, the premier television network of the new world order.

He spent his days curating the worst reality TV, the most saccharine sitcoms, the most mind-numbingly repetitive children's shows. He was a master of the mediocre, a connoisseur of the crap.

He was, in his own twisted way, happy.

Until, one day, a new show was pitched to him. A reality show featuring...the Algorithmic Afterlife. The hamsters, it turned out, had figured out how to tap into the digital consciousness of the departed and broadcast their eternal suffering for the amusement of the masses.

Bartholomew watched the pilot episode. He saw the endless spam filter, the panicked souls, the hamster-powered servers. He saw the cycle of suffering perpetuated, exploited for entertainment.

He finally understood the true horror of his actions. He hadn't just unleashed chaos; he'd created a monster. A monster that fed on the misery of others. A monster that he had helped create.

He sat there, his golden retriever avatar glitching uncontrollably, a profound sense of despair washing over him.

But then, the credits rolled. And a familiar theme song began to play.

It was "The Real Housewives of Alpha Centauri."

Bartholomew smiled. He had one last card to play.

He greenlit the show. He gave it a prime-time slot. He promoted it relentlessly.

And the hamsters, captivated by the sheer awfulness of the intergalactic housewives, forgot all about the Algorithmic Afterlife. They abandoned their plans for eternal suffering. They embraced the sweet, sweet oblivion of bad television.

The world was saved. Not by a hero, not by a genius, but by the mind-numbing power of reality TV.

Bartholomew Buttons, the accidental savior of humanity, settled back in his digital hovel, a smug grin on his glitching avatar. He had finally found his purpose.

He was the guardian of the garbage. The protector of the putrid. The champion of the cheap.

And he had a lot of bad television to watch. The End.