

Hello, World

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Abstract

An introduction to the blog.

Back when the philosophical blogosphere was really booming – which, let’s say was between 2005 and 2013, going by the lifespan of the first K-Punk blog – I was spending most of my time wrangling a brood of young kids and a couple bouts of grad school. One or two false starts aside, I never really managed to find time to commit to a blog of my own, and participated in that small world primarily as a reader and mailing list correspondent (while forming friendships that would shape the course of my thinking indefinitely).

After 2013, it seemed, the old enthusiasm (whether my own or others’, I don’t know) for the medium had faded. Maybe it was just a matter of pacing. Social media – facebook & twitter, chiefly – drew the discourse into its acceleration chambers, and as we became accustomed to its frantic speed and density, I suppose the blogosphere of a few years prior just didn’t scratch the itch. The mood now, at least from here, feels a bit like a dopamine hangover. What I seem to feel nowadays, when I open up facebook or twitter, is a kind of dutiful weariness. I’m glad those media are there, as a way of keeping in touch with friends that would otherwise be hard to reach, but the joy of the media themselves is just... *gone* for me. I can never really drum up a motive to post there, anymore.

This isn’t at all a bad development. In many ways, it comes as a relief – *that frozen moment when everyone sees what’s on the end of every fork*. It seems, among other things, a good incentive to take another stab at blogging...

(Why does that line of Burroughs’ (or of Kerouac’s, as remembered by Burroughs?) feel so appropriate here? Why the “everyone”, the “every fork”? And why am I writing about my disaffection with “social media” as if it’s anything but an idiosyncratic itch – as if I’m just giving voice to a Zeitgeist, or, at least, to some 20,000 people standing in a field. Seems kind of presumptuous. I’m not really sure if I’m just – selectively – picking up on a mood in the air, or casually generalizing from a sample set of one. But, I suppose, at least, I’m not alone in this sentiment. Whatever it is, there’s enough of it going around to get some hope of a blogosphere rolling, again.)

Another reason I have for doing this is just that I *miss writing*. I left the humanities in 2013, for various reasons, and in 2014 started shifting towards tech. I rediscovered a joy in programming that I hadn't touched since I was a kid coding in BASIC, and learning that I could indulge in that *and* escape grinding poverty was a delightful revelation. I still do love programming, and computer science as a field of research, but *writing*, writing prose, is something I'm starting to want back in my life.

P'log, the Hairless Yak

Now, as much as I enjoy writing, I quite like programming, too, and there's nothing quite as satisfying as a smoothly shaven yak. So, when it came time to choose a blogging platform, I decided, fuck it, I'll just write my own. And, to make it interesting, I figured I'd do it in Prolog.

Prolog is a beautiful and elegant language, it's like programming with sequent calculus. I'd done a little bit of basic, and very academic, work with it before – writing parsers and interpreters and so on, for a toy language – but I'd never actually used it for anything immediately practical. But I remembered Annie Ogborn singing its praises as a web development language in the `##prolog` channel on Freenode, and, since I'd never actually *done* any serious web development (aside from a brief stint as the web developer for the archives of Slocan City, which it wouldn't be fair to call a “silver rush ghost town”, but which it wouldn't be accurate not to – but that's a whole other story) I figured, why not start with Prolog?

This turned out to be a delightful choice. I spent a few days hacking together an extremely minimalistic blog server in this language, which you can find the code for here. Annie's tutorial has been *immensely* helpful in finding my way through this project.

“P'log” is the ongoing result of that coding binge – a binge that was, in fact, the first time I'd just sat down and coded for *fun* in several weeks, (the executive function deficit and brainfog that go hand in hand with post-surgical recovery are nothing to be sneezed at). I'll keep tinkering with it, but I feel like it's gotten to the point where I have things the way I like them. If you'd like to use it for your own site, please, be my guest. It's all under the GPL.

Feral Machines

My research in the field of computer science has orbited around two principal focii: machine learning, on the one hand, and information security, on the other. I wasn't *exactly* sure why I'd picked those two domains when I signed up for my MCS, other than that found myself fascinated with each (both just seemed *really cool*), and that there was something intrinsically intriguing about those domains where *programs* – those paragons of clarity and transparency of purpose – were rife with surprises.

My interest in security zeroed in on what Halvar Flake named “weird machines”. These are virtual machines that supervene, spontaneously, and without having ever been *designed*, on deliberately constructed computational systems. “Exploitation”, at least in its most interesting instances, is just the discovery, and then programming, of some such “weird machine”. It would take me too far into the weeds of this already weedy post to go into too much detail, here, but it’s something I’ll certainly come back to.

My interest in machine learning, meanwhile, had converged on the domain of evolutionary computation, and program synthesis through genetic programming. Genetic programming is the exact art and subtle science of breeding *populations* of instruction sequences in systems that implement the essentials of Darwinian natural selection (as well as various, non-standard models of evolution, as we see fit).

My grad research brought these streams together, and explored the *evolution of weird machine code* – ROP chains, in particular – culminating in Urschliem in Silicon: Return Oriented Program Evolution with ROPER. As that project developed, the intuition guiding it started to crystallize – a sense of how untamed – *undesigned* – the computational capacities of our systems really are, leaking through our rather pragmatic abstractions, and exposing a weird, internal wilderness that’s ripe for evolutionary exploration, in all its acephalic genius.

This was all in the back of my head, I think, when I picked the title for this blog, on what felt like a bit of a whim. But I think it condenses at least a few of the themes that interest me, and which I anticipate exploring here, regularly. There’s a whole chain of associations, it seems to me, that links together – in some vague, hard to place sort of way – so many of the things I’ve been (and remain) interested in writing about – both inside and outside of computer science. Epistemological obstacles, emergent memetic ecologies, xenofeminist ethics, weird machines and hidden logics, blind spots both accidental and inevitable, surrealist poetry, leaky abstractions and their exploitation... There’s a certain “vibe” to this canon, I feel, though I’m not sure I can make it precise. “Feral machines” certainly doesn’t sum it up, but it seems as a good a bearing as any.

Afterthoughts

Probably a bit provincialist to say “*the* philosophical blogosphere”. I’m sure there were many more or less isolated cliques in the sprawling graph of inter-linked philosophical blogs. The one I’m talking about is the one that had a pretty close proximity to Urbanomic’s *Collapse* journal, that felt pretty ill-at-ease in either Analytic or Continental camps (though it was probably cladistically closer

to the latter, all things considered), that was the matrix of origin for terms like “Speculative Realism”, “Neorationalism”, and “Accelerationism”. Some of its memorable vertices included:

1. Deontologistics,
2. K-Punk,
3. Infinite Thought (deceased),
4. Planomenology,
5. Cold Me (deceased),
6. Larval Subjects,
7. Poetix,
8. Fractal Ontology,
9. Speculative Heresy,
10. No Useless Leniency
11. Naught Thought

I’ll probably add more to this list as the memories come back to me.

A word about that: I know there’s a certain honour in just letting a post *be*, once it’s published. I can’t commit to that. I’m prone to fiddling with things long after the fact, and I’m just going to have to ask you, dear reader, to accept that. A complete history of revisions can always be found by consulting the git log of this blog’s repository, so nothing’s ever *really* going to be lost to my inability to leave well enough alone.

As a way of apologising for this vice, the P’log engine will, from this point forward, append a footer to each post, indicating the hash of the most recent git commit affecting the post in question.