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# Al Robertson

Computer forensics is the new heart of Copán. The reborn Mayan city has a vibrant economy of smart ruins. Pyramids, ball courts, tombs; dimension and location, form and inscription, stone and plaster come together to form a great, solid state computer that appears – superficially, at least – to be nothing more than a city centre's worth of Meso-American antiquities.

We manage the stone machine with the help of the Xukpi Indian co-ordination office, in the Hotel Du Palais Royal. Xukpi shamans share myths and legends with us; complex metaphor sets encoding a sophisticated pre-Columbian programming language. The whole system was originally devised to help calculate intersections between the sun, moon and stars, and the predictions encoded in sacred books of astrological prophecy. In terms of speed, precision and flexibility it was superior to anything the West produced until about 1957.

'Don't let Spielberg sign you up.'

'It's not one of his, Sir Robin.'

In Classic Mayan times, knowledge moved through Copán at 5mph, the running speed of a healthy adult male. Individual runners – control signal analogues – made the city-sized macroprocessor live by carrying instruction sets through it, hard-encoded as colourful glyphs carved into hand-sized stones, setting and resetting them in the abacus-stairs leading up each stepped pyramid.

The main temple functioned as a kind of file allocation system and master boot record, its priests programmers who managed the organisation, movement and resolution of information throughout the city and beyond. Now the priests have gone, and it's left to us to re-enact their data rituals. Computer forensics; miners of a dead culture, cracking and rewiring a physical programming language for a virtual age.

'Sarah, you from Florida?'

'No, I'm not from Florida, honey. I can stand cold, not heat.'

I'm a Computer Forensics op, so – despite all her security – I know that Sarah's from Germany. She's selling credit card numbers on a Russian website, lifted from the billing systems of a Czech hotel chain about half an hour ago. We'll have Interpol pick her up. It's amazing how easily Mayan software carves through modern security protocols. Once we're past the firewall, that's it. Your hard drive is always watching you: it's the spy in the machine.

Imagine the internet as a forest, as rich and dense and clinging as the green around Copán. Your hard drive records every movement you make through it: all you take out, all you put back, all that you are. It's an ever-changing data grove that tracks and records your visits to any site. And that data can live on even if you think you've wiped it away, crackable and trackable with subroutines hard-copied onto the North-South steps of the pyramids of Copán, a thousand years ago.

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'Bit of a wet after work, Neil?'

'I'm barred.'

The job's pissing me off, if I'm honest. I was never cut out to work in a temple, worshipping dead programmers who worshipped dead gods. I took my first degree and MA at Cambridge, my Phd at Harvard; higher mathematics. Then, numbers seemed to have an unfallen purity to them. Now, my monitor is hardwired to an altar in a broken pyramid, and I spend my days chasing hackers, fraudsters, spammers, sometimes even Mcartneys.

Next month, they're shooting some sort of action movie in the Hotel Du Palais. A friend's been doing the local casting, so I've got a small speaking part. Maybe that'll get me out of here. What'll my scene be like, I wonder? A battle scene? A love scene? I'm still waiting for a copy of the script. I love those films; their unscarred optimism, the clarity of purpose of their characters.

'Sure Neil, there must be quite a few Mcartneys?'

'Yes', I said, 'and most of them are pretty safe from us.'

There are some walls we still can't breach. Since we found the drive with the most recent Mcartney's details on it, I've followed the Computer Forensics motto and worked 'with constant and vigorous use', but I'm still no closer to tracking him down. Moments like this are the only time I feel like I'm doing anything remotely positive, and they usually lead to failure.

'We're banking on you to shut down those bastards.'

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'I'm on fire today.'

Not feeling it; and not compared to the coder priests of the Xukpi. Their Access Data software ignores any sort of operating system, instead walking directly through thick forests of information, generating its own infrastructure as it goes.

I imagine a priest, moving through the jungle, in the High Classic Period; coming on a stone column, about fourteen feet high and three feet on each side; a file, waiting to compromise its former owner. Physical infrastructure, incomprehensibly amusing and moving. In modern times, there is often too much detail of people's sexual interests, concealing the face of the monument.

'I'm thinking we'll need a bit more time.'

'Oh, well, maybe so.'

Mcartney sites trigger a blizzard of soft-porn pop ups, masking them as they shut down and disappear. Sometimes they are careless, and leave an incriminating file for us. Our first task is to copy it.

The Mayans dropped dubious data blocks onto a carving of a richly, curiously dressed man, calling down the blessings of the gods before they went to work on them.

Vista Ultimate has BitLocker; Max OSX has FileVault, so you can start to go through the process from there. The Mayan carvings become our data portraits, solemn, stern and final. An email arrives; my instructions from the film company. I too was going to be richly dressed, reading from *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* while facing the camera.

Not what I was expecting.

'I am very confident.'

'I don't think so, Sir Robin.'

The French built the Hotel Du Palais Royal as a palace for Princess Eugenie in the 19th Century. They were the first to understand the deep structures underpinning Copán, the first to attempt to re-energise them. The Eiffel Tower is a partially effective component of their failed attempt to create a city scale macroprocessor.

In England, Charles Babbage had tried to lay out something similar. Working with William Beckford, he developed plans for a 'calculating polis', to be built on Beckford's Wiltshire estate. Beckford bankrupted himself; Fonthill Abbey, the centrepiece of Babbage's plan, fell into ruin. The rest of the polis had been laid out, but never built.

We needed virtuality before we could even begin to approach the Mayan achievement. Digital technology has made us all residents in a world scale macroprocessor, linked by miles of wiring running over the ocean beds, a vast web of intercontinental arteries that animate the world, are animated by all our movements, coming together.

The Mcartneys use it for their own vicious ends. The last big attack crashed the London tube signal and traffic light systems for a week,

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every screen unstoppably shouting 'JOHN BURIED PAUL', a spasm that broke a city. They leave few remnants of their presence online. You can't get in to their sites, because they lock all the rooms down. One day soon, with the help of the ancient Mayans, we will open them up. A problem like that can always be solved.

'The freak in Boston wiped the cache.'

'Pretend for me, Neil, but I know it must exist.'

The real pros run for the slack space, the dead zone of the internet, well fitted to excite terror. It's like being trapped in a psychotic's custom car, a failed Grail quest, or, indeed, a film of *le Temps Perdu*. I had spent some time researching other attempts to adapt the book, an endless saga of unfinished scripts, withdrawn funding and aborted shoots; an unrealised history of unrealised films.

I imagined the story filtered through Copán. It would need long sequences of monkeys, the chattering of parrots; a distillation of the desolation of the city, the mystery that had hung over it before the arrival of the French archaeo-hackers.

We have the data portrait now, but there is nothing there to help us, and nowhere else to look.

A few weeks later, I report to the location for the shoot. Any hope is better than none, but there is no sign of any activity. There is a grey stone archway at the entrance to the Hotel Du Palais, two pillars supporting a flat lintel. Behind it, a workman talks in Polish; plastic flaps in the light wind. Apart from that the courtyard is empty, as is

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the road in front of it. A man on a moped drives past, and nearly stops. He stares at me as if he has a message to deliver, but then he accelerates again, and is gone.

I tracked the Mcartney down, briefly; even managed to talk to him.

'Where are you, friend?'

'I AM DOING EVERY AM WORKING IN CALL CENTRES.'

The only coherent thing he said. After that, a barrage of white noise, their security systems so much sharper even than ours. For the moment, we have to let them go. But a problem like that can always be solved. Even then, though, only some of the Mcartneys will be caught. There'll always be others out there, slouching towards entropy; a reality that cannot be suppressed, a truth we cannot ignore.

Mayan computation cycles always ended with human sacrifice, an incision made under the armpit, the still beating heart torn out and drunk from. Conquistadors had talked of charnel temples, clotted blood matting hair, clagging on skin. Perhaps propaganda to justify the massacres; perhaps not. Xukpi myths glitter like dark jewels. Before the cities, they lived in the forests, capturing travellers for sacrifice, leaving the skulls in the roads. Centuries passed, and then this magnificence; so many hearts on altars, beating to a halt. A final statement of a simple, binary truth; an index of our eventual failure. In the end, one always falls to zero.

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'I LOVE CLASSIC ROCK I LIKE DOGS TOO I LIKE TO SNIFF PANTIES

I LOVE ABBEY ROAD I LIKE THAT SEGWAY I LIKE CATS THAT LIVE IN

THE COUNTRY I LIKE PICKLED EGG I LIKE MY JOB I LOVE CONDOMS'

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This story was written during the Science Museum's Listening Post short story workshops with Tony White, Science Museum writer in residence for summer 2008. Fragments of text from the following sources were cut-up and remixed by the author to create a completely new story:

## Ronald Bergen,

'My role in the longest film ever', The *Guardian*, London, 22 August 2008

### Mark Hansen & Ben Rubin,

text sampled from Listening Post, London, 25 & 26 August 2008

## Xan Rice,

'Internet: Last piece of fibre-optic jigsaw falls into place as cable links East Africa to grid', The Guardian, London, 18 August 2008

## John Lloyd Stephens,

Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatán, London, 1841

## Pete Warren,

'Computer Security: Snapshots of Our Secret Lives', The *Guardian*, London, 14 August 2008

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He's also an occasional performance poet, vocalist with ambient doomsters Graan (www.graan.org.uk), and free-drone bassist and blogs on weird fiction, poetry and music at http://allumination.wordpress.com