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Some Rules and Restrictions May Apply

An inquiry into contracts and the Next Big Thing

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In many of our interactions with the outside world (solipsists can stop reading now, if indeed they ever started) we enter into contracts with diverse entities, some up front, some lurking below the surface. The commonly construed contractual theme is a mutual agreement where each party accepts certain costs and responsibilities, and in return can rely on certain benefits and rewards. Some sort of symmetry is implied, in that the rational parties favored by the economists (when they come out of their recessionary hiding holes) will weigh the positive and negative impacts of the agreement before “signing.” I will put aside the notions of Hobbes, Rousseau, Rawls, and that crowd that in merely being born—a mixed blessing to which nobody freely consents—we enter into some form of *social* contract with the combined prevailing laws of nature, nurture, and parliamentary whoredom.

We do our best, of course, to discern, codify, and obey the often-conflicting rules set by Life’s Grand Game. I refer you to the vast literature on ethics, altruism, selfish genes, crime and punishment, and the dangers of universal gravity, hot pokers, and programming in Basic. But where is the free choice, predictability, or mutuality? Einstein was doubly mistaken. Nature does play dice, and, be warned, the dice are randomly loaded! Einstein *was* right about space-time: geometry is cruelly bent. Don’t be fooled by Playfair’s axiom.¹ I support the Irish Olympic luge captain who demanded a level playing field.

In laypersons’ terms, why do rotten things happen to nice people like us? The Woody Allen option of “Returning to the womb. Any womb!” has practical problems if taken literally. Lest you detect some senile pessimism as I approach my four-scored birthday (refuting all the warnings against a wicked lifestyle), I must add that I would not have missed Life for all the World. It’s avoiding that possible Afterlife Inferno that keeps me going. Do I get to see the Erdős Book of perfect proofs, or will St Peter’s Clipboard (also known as the Lamb’s Book of Life) record that I used 3,141 GOTOs in 1968 alone, and left a particularly expensive ELSE a-dangling on September 15, 1985? (She has never forgiven me.) Such sins, they reckon, will consign me to an eternal Dantesque zero-Kelvin ice block alongside some obscure pope or famous software methodologist.

Interrupting this tasteless digression, I note that the word *contract* is stress-related, both phonetically and medically. Using that overworked apostrophe as a syllable-stress marker, we can see that *con’ttract* and *contract’* occupy remarkably disparate semantic areas, even though conventional etymologies offer no clue as to why a shift of stress should shift the meaning so violently. We (or rather I) have no idea whether the Romans varied the syllabic stresses in *contraho/contractum* to indicate our current distinction between *contract’* (to draw together, reduce the compass of, abridge) and *con’ttract* (an agreement or covenant between two parties; or to enter into such).

Logophiliacs are bound to chuckle over this blatant semantic somersault, given that their most recent encounter with *con’ttracts* was probably a multipage, unabridged, *uncontract’ed* agreement

with some software vendor, scrolling off the screen for days in shouting CAPs. Furthermore, the final options presented were: Agree? YES/NO. Surveys, if conducted, would show that 98.39 percent (with an error margin to be announced later) of us click YES without reading the furthermores and wherefore-to-afters. At least, with these contracts, we can't complain of sneaky small-print clauses. We know that clicking NO usually aborts the installation, and we are anxious to try out our new purchase. We have already broken the cellophane wrapper (there, that's giving my age away again!), which some lawyers say amounts to waiving our 28th Amendment rights: "The People shall have the inalienable right to Free Healthcare, Free Car Insurance, Free High-speed Internet Access, and Provably Bug-free Code." (The full details should be ironed out by the time you read this column.)

Yet, deep down, many of us sympathize with the vendors' convoluted precautions. They face an over-litigious culture like the rest of us. We are all potential software vendors these days, and already have on our desks or laps² (and/or floating above in the clouds³) the physical and mental equipment needed to become the next Microsoft or Google (or the next AOL if things don't work out). For each Facebook there are many Friends United (or never meeting, as the case may be). For every Apple there's a Lemon.

Which reminds me to recommend a most challenging article on Steve Jobs ("The god of cool things") by the perfectly named Bryan Appleyard (*Sunday Times* magazine, August 16, 2009). I leave it to your judgment whether Jobs's medical tribulations (of truly Biblical proportions) deserve the normal reticence accorded to those who seek privacy on their health status, or whether the prospects for a post-Jobs Apple, and its impact on shareholder speculation, should override the conventional decencies. Appleyard does offer a reasonably balanced account of Jobs's remarkable ups and downs, adding a few psychological insights (Michael Maccoby's "productive narcissism?") that may be new to Apple followers. Of Jobs's iconic "rock-god status" and "insanely great" ego, we read, "'He would have made,' said Jef Raskin, the brain behind the Mac, 'an excellent King of France!'"

Relevant to my theme of Everyman the Code-Warrior is the amazing success of iPhone and iPod Touch applications. Appleyard suggests that Apple has been "stunned" by the response to opening up the iPhone to outside software developers. Apple keeps tight control over the distribution of apps (now approaching 100,000 with more than 2 billion downloads), but the break with Apple's traditional antipathy to third-party software has surprised the market. In regard to the unpredictability of the NBT (Next Big Thing), Jobs quotes approvingly Henry Ford's motto: "If I'd asked my customers what they wanted, they'd have said a faster horse."

I too ducked the NBT prediction quiz in a recent interview with Jan Samols, editor of the *CamRing* journal, which aims at keeping ex-members of the Cambridge University Mathematical Laboratory in touch with those working at its successor, the William Gates Computing Laboratory.

Q What's going to be the Next Big Thing?

A Liverpool FC's 14th league championship? Think Red, not Black Swan! A boom in property values? Economical energy from fusion? But on the medium-/near-term technological front, you've posed the essentially unanswerable question, in so far as the answer might well vitiate the prediction.

(For those who noticed the error, Liverpool has been awaiting its 19th league championship for 20 years. I evaded blame by saying 14 was written using my favorite base, 15.)

Are you ready to exploit the huge programming opportunities and create the NBT? The 1929 recession saw distressed bankers selling apples on the Wall Street sidewalk (a hard myth to disprove). The current recession could be a distressed you flogging Apple apps at a yard sale. **Q**

REFERENCES

1. Both Euclid's and Beethoven's Fifth are thunderous examples in the ongoing Snowdian two-culture clash. Knowing just one of them marks you as semi-educated. Bill Thompson's extension to 10 cultures will be addressed in another column. John Playfair (1748-1819) published the version of Euclid's Fifth Postulate that bears his name, although he played fair by disclaiming its invention. The appropriateness (or lack) of proper names is a regular source of speculation. The French mathematician Jean Dieudonné, whom I met once in Sonoma County of all places, is a positive God-given example! He was Nicholas Bourbaki's most prolific scribe. To some, that gives Dieudonné a contrary satanic gloss, although, to be fair, he was often critical of the Bourbaki cold formalisms. Does the name Bourbaki have any self-referential resonances? Less familiar but equally self-fulfilling are the BBC Gardening experts: Anne Swithinbank, Bob Flowerdew, and Pippa Greenwood.
2. We must not forget the latest knee-tops!
3. Many users remain dubious about cloud computing. Revamping the ancient dreams of a computing utility under such a nebulous mantra does seem a terminological blunder from a marketing point of view. Cloud defenders, however, point out that the word GRID has even worse connotations. They croon the popular (giving my age away one last time) song: "Don't you know each cloud contains pennies from heaven."

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STAN KELLY-BOOTLE (<http://www.feniks.com/skb/>; <http://www.sarcheck.com>), born in Liverpool, England, read pure mathematics at Cambridge in the 1950s before tackling the impurities of computer science on the pioneering EDSAC I. His many books include *The Devil's DP Dictionary* (McGraw-Hill, 1981), *Understanding Unix* (Sybex, 1994), and the recent e-book *Computer Language—The Stan Kelly-Bootle Reader*. *Software Development Magazine* has named him as the first recipient of the new annual Stan Kelly-Bootle Eclectech Award for his "lifetime achievements in technology and letters." Neither Nobel nor Turing achieved such prized eponymous recognition. Under his nom-de-folk, Stan Kelly, he has enjoyed a parallel career as a singer and songwriter. He can be reached at curmudgeon@acmqueue.com.

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