

Introduction to Entropy

THE FIRST IN A THREE-PART SERIES ON DEALING WITH THE LATEST INNOVATIONS IN HIGH-TECH SORCERY

by Wayne Slater-Lunsford, October 1990

Bill Green was drunk. It was one o'clock of a cold Florida morning, and we had just finished night shift at the Jacksonville Electric Authority yard, and Green was drunk as usual. After shuffling to his black '53 Ford pickup, Green leaned against the dew-lit side of the truck and gave the cold, wet door handle a yank. The door flew open, Green rolled in face-first onto the seat, and the door swung back to whack him soundly on the rump. As Bill scrambled over the running board and behind the wheel, a cloud of steam and curses floated up from the truck, lit by the cold blue-grey streetlamp. The cloud rose in a thin, weaving column as the stubble-faced old clod fumbled with his keys, fuming and muttering. Having finally coaxed his rubbery key into the elusive ignition, Green treadled the accelerator viciously and the truck whinnied like a dying whale, but did not start. The smell of gasoline and battery acid mixed into the rising blue-grey cloud. Green's head flopped forward, and, chin to chest, he growled, "I domplay datshit, inyou knowit." With exaggerated deliberation, he leaned over to the glove compartment and extracted a very large, very chrome-bright revolver. He placed the business end of the barrel against the dead center of the antique round speedometer, and the cylinder gleamed as he pulled the hammer back to full cock. Through clenched teeth, Bill said, "You know me. I'ne too dang pissed ta bluffya, so yabeddah start." The next sound to assault the darkness was a throaty roar, punctuated by clattering valves and a hoot of victory from the grizzled old driver, who threw the gun to the seat and ground first gear mercilessly on the way out into the dark.

Through long years of experience, Bill had learned how to deal with a cantankerous machine. While that pickup truck was instinctually able to sense the opportunity for mischief, it also knew very well that Bill wasn't kidding. It started because Bill Green, drunk as he was, used good operating procedure, and did not flinch in the clinch.

Let us review the process with a more contemporary example. You are late to your first class of the day, remedial epistemic semiotics. So is the entire population of Doldrum State University. Having emerged like Lazarus from your bed sheets only minutes ago, you are in dire need of a cup of coffee. Your pocket clings to the coins you are wresting from it, causing several of them to slip your grasp and roll swiftly out of reach. The fugitives you retrieve are ALMOST sufficient, and the machine is out of change. None of your fellow sufferers have any change, and the money-changer simply ingests your dollar and does nothing else. After cleaning out the dirt and dead insects from under the coffee machine, you emerge triumphant with a fuzzy dime. Having inserted your last few precious coins, and VERY carefully pressed all the buttons in the exact sequence prescribed, you watch with horror as the coffee pours steaming into the compartment where the cup SHOULD be, and down the drain.

Did a demon follow you through the bustle, to thwart your every effort? Or was it waiting on top of the machine, for a vulnerable victim? Not exactly. The "demon" is inside the machine. The technical name for this mephistophelian device is an entropy processor.

EP's (entropy processors) are installed in most modern equipment, to assure the manufacturer of dependable planned obsolescence, and give a whole new meaning to the term "scheduled maintenance". They represent a quantum leap in technology refinement, enabling almost any electronic or electromechanical

device to automatically abuse its operator as effectively as Bill Green's twenty-year-old pickup truck did him. Each EP contains a timing circuit which starts it going shortly after the warranty expires. Thereafter, failures and anomalous operation are virtually guaranteed.

In addition to the warranty/obsolescence timer, the two main subunits are a CRISIS DETECTOR and a MALFUNCTION GENERATOR.

The the heart and soul of the entropy processor is its CRISIS DETECTOR, which senses the emotional state of the operator. Although the exact mode of sensing is secret, the urgency level is measured in units of Vexation Index of Brain-wave Excitation (VexIndex or VIBEs for short). The more you need this machine to work, the stronger your VIBEs will be, and the worse it will break down. The CRISIS DETECTOR integrates this VexIndex over time, and allows stored VIBEs to dissipate through a calibrated bleed-off circuit, known in the business as a "leech". It then outputs a status code, more commonly called the "pucker factor" or "anxiety level", to the MALFUNCTION GENERATOR. In the late-to-class scenario above, your VexIndex would be extremely high, saturating the CRISIS DETECTOR, and generating a prodigious pucker factor. If no bleed-off time is allowed, the MALFUNCTION GENERATOR will receive a tremendous status code.

The MALFUNCTION GENERATOR responds to any status code which exceeds its factory-set sensitivity threshold. It selects a failure severity level proportional to the anxiety level, and generates a malfunction to match. The exact nature of the malfunction is usually selected at random from whatever weaknesses the machine has which would create a problem of the correct intensity. In the example above, the MALFUNCTION GENERATOR arbitrarily selected a cup misfeed from the top level of available malfunctions. It could have just as easily flooded the floor with hot cocoa, or jammed the access door, leaving you clawing away at the glass, smelling the coffee, yet unable to get your hands on it. Some of the more sophisticated units installed in microcomputers, high-end photocopiers, satellite receivers, etc. have a "teaser circuit" which remembers specific operators and selects failure modes particularly likely to cause each user maximum distress. Knowing what the change machine had just done to you, such a unit might have simply ignored the hard-won coins you had inserted. Simple elegance can be so effective... Among the best are the so-called 'chimera' series, which can create a bizarre malfunction not attributable to any rational explanation, and then revert to perfect operation immediately upon sensing the presence of a second operator or technician. Insane asylums and dark alleys swarm with the victims of such peek-a-boo intermittent discombobulations.

The next installment in this series will give a detailed description of the most common entropy processor on the market today: the AFU-69, introduced in 1969 by Edsel-Quisling Industries. The last article in the series gives step-by-step procedures for neutralizing entropy, including the installation of designated kick points, equipment retraining and negotiation, and what to do in case of a resonant general power outage. Remember- the manufacturer's maintenance plan doesn't have to be your maintenance plan. You CAN overcome entropy.