
DIGITAL CATS COME OUT TONIGHT

by Ben Jeapes

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Consider fear. A marvellous thing. It gives wings to our feet, it makes us traitors. It robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning; this is its best feature.

And now consider cats. Take, for example, a farm house. A farm house from the Middle Ages – no, earlier. After all, the ancient Egyptians had cats, so we need to go earlier than that. Picture a Sumerian farm house.

It has a barn, in which food is stored. The farmers are unhappy, because mice keep eating the food. This is not good, as the farmers will starve. Oh, they are very unhappy.

All is not lost! Enter Felix.

Felix kills the mice and eats them. This is his function. The mice hate and fear him. Unfortunately, they are very much smaller than him and tend to freeze up when he approaches. He can swallow them in one bite.

Does Felix eat all the mice? No, because there are too many. The problem is solved, however, because the mice are too afraid to venture into the barn. They are under control. The application of fear is effective.

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I'd never really considered fear per se until we moved into Cinnamon Towers. Once it had been a very well-off apartment block, before the Death of the Yuppy. The architect's pride and joy had been the building's fully integrated computer network, which effectively ran every appliance in every apartment exactly to the taste of the occupier.

Now the apartments were cheap, the building was running down and the management found it a millstone.

Double apartments were cheaper still, which was great for a newly married couple. Sally and I couldn't afford anything fancy – not until Felixware got off the ground. When we first set up the company (not out of any entrepreneurial philosophy, but simply because we had a deep, abiding horror of even the thought of working for anyone else) we had to give it a name like that, based on our common love for the animals. Our actual association with cats didn't come until later.

It was the management's fault, for getting heavy handed. We had a respectable ninety-nine year lease, and we were staying until it suited us to move. We didn't know things would escalate. We were already the proud owners of three cats before things did.

* * *

I trace the start of it to a blustery day in March. I had been out doing the shopping, while Sally stayed in putting the finishing touches to our latest pet. When I got back in to the lobby, I could tell at once that the mice were at play. The lights were dim and the air conditioning was full on (as I say, it was March). The place was a gloomy ice block.

Miracle of miracles, a lift was working. I positioned myself in front of the doors and looked up at the green lights flashing their way down to ground level. The doors opened with a chime and I got in.

It jammed between the third and fourth floors. I gave it a minute, then reluctantly put the bags down to free my hands. I pulled out my portable phone (at least there was no one to see it) and dialled.

‘It’s me.’

‘Hello, dear. Where are you?’

‘In the lift. It’s jammed between three and four. Can you send Alonzo down?’

‘Hang on.’ Pause. ‘Alonzo’s in the basement with the heating. Will Britannicus do?’

‘Have to.’ Britannicus lacked Alonzo’s subtlety, so I sat down.

Ten seconds later the lift jerked itself up violently. I looked up at the ceiling.

‘Oos a booful pussy-pussy?’ I murmured.

* * *

Sally was still busy at the terminal.

‘You’re just in time,’ she greeted me. ‘Meet Napoleon.’

Napoleon lurked on the screen in the form of a mass of code, apparently as un-deadly and as un-Jellicle as ever.

‘Hello, Napoleon,’ I said.

* * *

We released Napoleon into a carefully closed system that covered the apartment. LDs glowed at various points around the main room, some nowhere near any other electrical instrument and others wired up to the coffee maker, the television, the stereo. Many of these LDs flickered red, indicating the presence of the mice – the tiny, mischievous, havoc-causing artificial intelligences that scurried about the system, similar in all respects to the hordes that the management had released into the building’s own system in a final effort to oust those of us, the tenants, who preferred to stay.

‘Releasing Napoleon now,’ Sally reported, and pressed the execute key. The red flashing became more agitated.

The LD on the television glowed green suddenly, and the fuzz cleared to show the latest Antipodean soap opera. I turned the sound down.

The coffee machine spluttered and started to pump out the dark, brown liquid.

The light in the bathroom came on.

‘Let’s diddle the odds,’ Sally murmured, and released some more mice into the television. For a moment the set switched to a different channel and the sound blared out, then the volume returned to its former silence and the picture was again of a quiet Sydney cul-de-sac.

‘He gets about fast,’ I commented.

‘And he’s not complacent. Even Alonzo would have been taken aback to find mice in an area that he’d already cleared.’

The test went very well. Napoleon was the best cat yet, combining cunning with killer instinct, and even a touch of sadism. Almost like the real thing, and a far cry from the crude violence of the very first model, the unsophisticated Britannicus. Napoleon had the right unpredictability, the random element, that made the application of fear so much more effective.

It wasn’t long before the only red LD was on a small memory module next to the terminal. A green one glowed next to it. The mice were holed up in their refuge, and their nemesis waited outside patiently. You could almost see the tail lash and the ears strain forward, waiting for the least movement.

‘You think we can release him into the main system yet?’

‘Perhaps, perhaps.’ Anyone from the management would have cringed at the glee on my spouse’s face. ‘And then maybe we can sell him. It’s about time we put the cats on the market.’

* * *

So, we did the rounds. Several companies expressed a polite interest in our product, if only for the novelty value. I think they had been searching for years for a good way of exposing AIs to the general public, and we were quite optimistic about this one.

Then Sally was asked by Cinnamon’s oldest resident, Miss Anderson, to have a look at her apartment’s controlling software. It was playing up again.

‘Miss Anderson’s got the mice.’

‘They’re reading our mail again.’

We spoke simultaneously as Sally returned to the apartment. My message had the greater news content.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Take a look.’ On the screen was a message from a large software house, expressing an interest in our cats. Nothing in the message showed what kind of cat was being discussed.

‘And next ...’ I said.

A message from the management, apparently unconnected, reminding all tenants of the penalties for having animals in the building.

‘Did Miss Anderson have this message?’

‘Of course not. But we can’t prove anything, all the same. The scumbags! Just for this, Britannicus visits them tonight. The rough, alley cat treatment.’

Then I remembered what she had said.

‘What do you mean, she’s got the mice? Alonzo and Napoleon have both been up there.’

‘I know. But mice she has, love. The cats are being interfered with. Or they’re not as deadly as we thought.’

‘Could they be multiplying faster than we thought?’

‘I really don’t know.’ I squeezed her hand as she looked worried. ‘We’ll have to think about it.’

‘Or take advice.’

‘You mean ...?’

‘AI Agony!’

* * *

‘We have developed three low-level hunter/killer AIs that operate on the fear principle. Their purpose is to restrict the activities of an indefinite number of lesser AIs that are loose in our network. There are too many of these to be completely annihilated, so we have designed our own AIs to inspire ‘fear’ in the enemy. The enemy AIs thus restrict their activities to the minimum and stay out of the main systems.

‘This approach has proved successful until recently. The enemy AIs appear to be gaining in confidence and number, and though our hunter/killers are constantly on the watch, the situation is worsening. We have checked our hunter/killers most carefully, but can see no signs of tampering. Likewise, the enemy AIs are the same as they ever were.

‘Please advise.’

An answer was not long in coming.

‘Forgive any presumptions in this answer. I have to make assumptions because of the lack of detail in your query, presumably meant to avoid clues to your identity. Very commendable.

‘If the principle, as you say, is fear, and the system no longer works, could it not be because the enemy is no longer afraid? Or, there is something else in the system that your hunter/killers are afraid of? I suggest you do a careful check of the network to see if there are any AIs of a higher level than your own ...’

* * *

Whoever the management's man was, he was good. I say this out of all respect to the enemy – someone I felt I could get on well with socially. He had the same approach to computers and AIs as I did. It was an art of the mind.

I don't think Sally saw it that way. The cats were my idea, but they were her creation.

'He is going to suffer, that man,' she ranted, once we had discovered what was going on. We were both seated in front of the terminal, looking at the evidence on screen. 'I will not have my cats being tampered with by an outsider. I'll-'

'Hold it, hold it,' I soothed. 'No one said they've been tampered with.'

'But they're-'

'Yes, yes, yes. Look.' It didn't seem the best time to point out that the designer of our new adversary might feel the same way about our instinctive killers being unleashed on his pets. 'I think I see what's happening. Want my theory?'

'I'll get it anyway.'

'Thank you. Now, you've got the gist of it, but not the specifics. AI Agony helped, but it wasn't entirely on the right track, either.'

'Meaning?'

'Meaning, no, they haven't set dogs on our cats. The new AI in the system is of a higher level than the cats, just like the cats are higher than the mice. But the cats aren't afraid of him. They like him.'

'So-'

'Can't you see it? Britannicus, Alonzo and Napoleon busy chasing mice. Along comes – oh, call it a human. What would a cat do? It stops. It rubs up to the human. It sniffs the carpet. It purrs. And it forgets the mice.'

Sally thought about this.

'So the mice are still afraid of the cats, but the cats aren't afraid of the stranger? And there's nothing about to challenge the stranger?'

'Correct.'

'Hmmm. Interesting. So, logically, we ought to design something to scare the stranger.'

'Makes sense. But that's your department.'

'Y-e-s ... got it.'

'Go on.'

'Remember, Napoleon was built on the shortcomings of Alonzo, and Alonzo on the shortcomings of Britannicus. Until the stranger appeared, Napoleon was the best. And yet, ever since this stranger's come on the scene, Britannicus has been the most

effective.’

‘He doesn’t purr at the stranger? He’s as antisocial as ever?’

‘That’s right. The stranger still gets the better of him eventually, though. Britannicus is the alley cat, but he’s still susceptible to humans.’ She had that light in her eye that anticipates a fight.

‘This doesn’t answer the question,’ I objected.

‘Yes it does. Look, open a new file and call up the specs for Britannicus. I’m going to make some fine adjustments.’

‘Right. What name for the file?’

‘Bagheera.’

* * *

And so it started. Bagheera was, believe me, lethal. We traced his actions on the first night that he was out in the system. We attached him to Napoleon, so he would know his way around. Napoleon headed for a cluster of mice on the roof that were lurking in the cooling towers (the weather was warming up). The mice scattered as he approached and pounced, and before long he was in his element. He really was just like the real thing, with his domesticated veneer swept away by his not-so-vestigial jungle instincts.

Bagheera watched from a distance, as it were, bored. Panthers go for higher game than mice. Then he was distracted.

The stranger – by now we were calling him Clint – sidled up to the scene of the action. Napoleon saw him coming and instantly started to show off, forgetting the mice as he chased his tail, rubbed up against Clint, and generally let his domestic instincts come to the fore again.

Then Bagheera pounced from the subsystem he had been hiding in. It was swift, lethal and messy. What had been a sophisticated structure of code was reduced in a flash to a pile of disconnected, helpless subroutines which Bagheera, calmly and methodically, began to absorb. When he was finished, all that was left were a few random signals in the network that could harm no one. Mentally, I held my hat against my chest in respect for the passing of Clint.

* * *

The system was clear for a very long time, now. The mice continued to run around and the cats continued to deal with them. Bagheera also prowled about, and several times we detected a new Clint in the network which promptly withdrew when Bagheera approached. We gave him a brother, Pink, to help him out and to spread the fear blanket a bit more. Fear, glorious fear. It worked wonders.

Until the management man tried the next approach.

What comes up the fear scale from a panther? Nothing much, we had thought.

Lions, tigers, cheetahs – yes, they may have their own hierarchy out in the wild, but a Big Cat is a Big Cat.

The management took a new approach. They had cottoned onto the fear principle by this time, and we should have guessed they wouldn't be hampered by our own cat-obsession.

There is a creature in the wild that very few creatures will attack, because it is substantially bigger than any of them and capable of defending itself by sheer bulk. It is called an elephant.

The first elephant entered the system six months after Bagheera's first triumph. Bagheera took one look and fled. The elephant shouldered its way casually through all our defences and wreaked havoc in the lighting, the heating and (we still can't work this out) the kitchen units of every even-numbered apartment. We think it was only a combined charge by Bagheera and Pink together, aimed not at the elephant but at one of the Clints controlling it, that turned it back. We had to think, and fast, of a way to beat this one.

* * *

We didn't have the time. We had heard of the Software Riots, but hadn't paid them much attention. Now they were brought home to us.

Apparently, there was contention amongst religious groups concerning AIs. Some maintained that they were the work of the devil and were to be exterminated. Others said they were just as valid as natural intelligences, i.e. us. They should therefore be protected.

The strength of feeling that culminated in the Riots took the government by surprise, and legislation was rushed through. All of a sudden Pink, Bagheera, Napoleon, Alonzo and Britannicus, not to mention the elephants, the Clints and even the mice, were protected species until such time as the government could think of what to do with them. Even to devise a way of bumping off a rival AI was, in the eyes of the law, the same as devising a way of bumping off a bat or a whale. It was considered naughty.

There is now a major ecology flourishing in the network of Cinnamon Towers. The last time we looked, it seemed that some of the Clints were adopting the mice as pets. And some of the cats.

Yes, some of the cats. There's more of everything than there used to be. Yesterday, perusing the system, we saw a cat we've never met before, but which had the characteristics of Napoleon and Britannicus. One of those two apparently wasn't what we thought it was.

Unfortunately, looking at the system is all we can do. All networks containing AIs have had government-imposed guardian AIs slapped on them. We're not sure what they do, but they're pretty horrific. We tried, when we thought no one was looking, to get our cats out of the system again, but our terminal flipped at the thought. It took

one look at the guardian and went catatonic. Perhaps demons would be a good name for these newcomers. I don't know.

We also got a message detailing everything that would happen if we even tried to meddle with the system again, before a ruling can be reached by higher authority, and it was very nasty. So, we don't dare.

Now, that really galls.