

5-1-1996

Gnarly Rantings about the Hacker and the Ants

Rudy Rucker
rudy@rudyrucker.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/switch>



Part of the [Databases and Information Systems Commons](#), [Graphics and Human Computer Interfaces Commons](#), [Information Security Commons](#), [Numerical Analysis and Scientific Computing Commons](#), and the [Theory and Algorithms Commons](#)

Archived from http://switch.sjsu.edu/archive/nextswitch/switch_engine/front/front.php%3Fartc=212.html. Documentation of the preservation processes used for this collection is available at <https://github.com/NickSzydowski/switch>. Metadata for this item was created and augmented by Marc Cordonero, Spring 2022, Art 104

Recommended Citation

Rucker, Rudy (1996) "Gnarly Rantings about the Hacker and the Ants," *SWITCH*: Vol. 3: No. 1, Article 10. Available at: <https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/switch/vol3/iss1/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SJSU ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in SWITCH by an authorized editor of SJSU ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@sjsu.edu.



ARTIFICIAL LIFE.

Gnarly Rantings about the Hacker and the Ants

Rudy Rucker on May 1 1996

issue 03

Adaptation from *Hacker and the Ants*

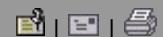
Gnarly Ranting About *The Hacker And The*

[This is adapted from a column which appeared in *BOING BOING* in Fall, 1992, under the name "Zip.1". The column includes quotes from *THE HACKER AND THE ANTS*, Avon, 1994, a science-fiction novel about a computer hacker who works for a company called GoMotion and owns a robot named Studly. Copyright (C) Rudy Rucker 1994.] Every spring when the fruit-trees blossom I think of Swarthmore, of standing with Audrey on the President's lawn shaking a plum tree to make the petals snow down on us. How did it feel to leave Swarthmore? "And if you ask how I regret that parting:/ It is like the flowers falling at Spring's end/ Confused, whirled in a tangle." (Ezra Pound, "Exile's Letter.") It took me about ten years to realize that I really wasn't somehow going to get to go back. Cosmic rays periodically flip random bits of the robots' programs, so there is a kind of mutation. Even more important for genetic diversity however, is the force of sex. Often two robots will pool the scion parts they have amassed and build a shared scion, using parts of each of their software to program the child. [excerpt from the book...] My current job is with GoMotion Unlimited of Santa Clara, California. GoMotion got its start selling kits for a self-guiding dune-buggy called the Iron Camel. The kit is a computer software CD that is like an interactive three-dimensional blueprint along with assembly instructions. GoMotion kit software can use electronic mail to order all the parts you need, and it will guide you step by step through the assembly, calling in registered building helpers if you need them. Once you get the thing built, our kit loads intelligent software into the vehicle's processor board, and you've got a dune-buggy that can drive itself. Various models of the Iron Camel have sold one and a half million units worldwide! It is indeed true that mechanical designs do not always translate effectively from cyberspace to the machine shop. The cyberspace "physics" obeyed by simmies is, after all, only a limited model of Nature's true laws. A more specific problem is that actual materials tend to have small nicks, resonant vibrations, casting strains, thermal noises, transient voltages, and various other sources of unexpected chaoticity. This means that some virtual reality designs fail catastrophically when first incarnated by Marc Pauline. After Marc Pauline fixes the hardware bug, he paints messages on our walls about what we have to do to bring our specs into line with reality. In the Middle Ages, the Great Work of humankind was the erection of the cathedrals. Artisans from all over Europe gathered to, for instance, the Isle de France to work on the Notre Dame. Yesterday Russ Zwerg was showing me a computer game he'd gotten off the Net. I was in a low-ceilinged tunnel. Hideously primitive groany-moany MIDI organ music swelled about. The walls were texture mapped with a rough pixelization which got the bigger the closer you approached. I surged forward, looking for air. But there was no air. In this cyberworld there was nothing but the endless fucking passages and the wood doors with locks and pixelated skulls and bones. Behind one door we found a rat, and a steel sword point popped up in front of our invisible body like a hard-on. The cornered rat reared up and the sword touched him, he turned into a puddle of blood next to the drumstick he'd been gnawing. Zwerg acquired the food. "Are you going to eat food with ratblood on it Russ?" "It goes over here." He

moved it to the mouth part of the body icon. "Come on, Russ, let's get out of here. This is really depressing." "Wait, wait, you haven't seen how they do water."

[excerpt continued...]

Due to computational round-off errors, the geometry of the corner was imperfect: the corner had a pinhole at its center. When we'd finished shrinking, we were small enough to crawl through the hole. There were a lot of pissants on the other side. My ant touched her feelers to the feelers of each of the other ants she met. When the other ants noticed me, they showed their surprise by sharply jerking their gasters upward, which is how an ant chirps. The stiff back edge of the petiole scrapes against a washboard-like membrane on the front of the gaster. The process is called stridulation, and is similar to the way the grasshopper saws his legs against his body to sing a summer song. In Silicon Valley, I soon came to feel that all of us together were working, in one way or another, on the Great Work of bringing truly intelligent robots into existence. Some hackers feel the Great Work is simply the striving towards a perfect human-to-human interface in cyberspace, but I feel that the real payoff has to be something more mechanical and concrete. To me, the Great Work is to create a new form of life, an artificial life that lives in real machines that we can see moving around. Hacking is like building a scale-model cathedral out of toothpicks, except that if one toothpick is out of place the whole cathedral will disappear. And then you have to feel around for the invisible cathedral, trying to figure out which toothpick is wrong. Debuggers make it a little easier, but not much, since a truly screwed-up cutting-edge program is entirely capable of screwing up the debugger as well, so that then it's like you're feeling around for the missing toothpick with a stroke-crippled claw-hand. [But, ah, the dark dream beauty of the hacker grind against the hidden wall that only you can see, the wall that only you wait at, you the programmer, with the brand new tools that you make up as you go along, your special new toothpick lathes and jigs and your realtime scrimshaw shaver, you alone in the dark with your wonderful tools.] "What took you so long to help me, Studly? You stupid piece of shit. Couldn't you hear that I needed help?" "You were not saying help. I am not a stupid piece of shit. In time I convolved seventeen of your incorrect utterances to filter out the correct conclusion that you wished to say help. You are a stupid piece of shit, Jerzy." "You're with the ants now, aren't you Studly?" "The ants mean you no harm," answered Studly.



::CrossReference

last 5 articles posted by Rucker

:: Rucker - May 1 1996

:: How I Got Gnarly - May 1 1996

:: Rudy Rucker's Calife - May 1 1996

:: Rudy Rucker's Spirograph - May 1 1996

:: Rudy Rucker's Julgnarl - May 1 1996

:: The Quest for the Gnarl - May 1 1996

:: Gnarly Rantings about the Hacker and the Ants - May 1 1996

:: Gnarled Defined - May 1 1996

[view all posts made by Rucker](#)

[about](#) | [contact](#) | [credits](#) | [subscribe](#)