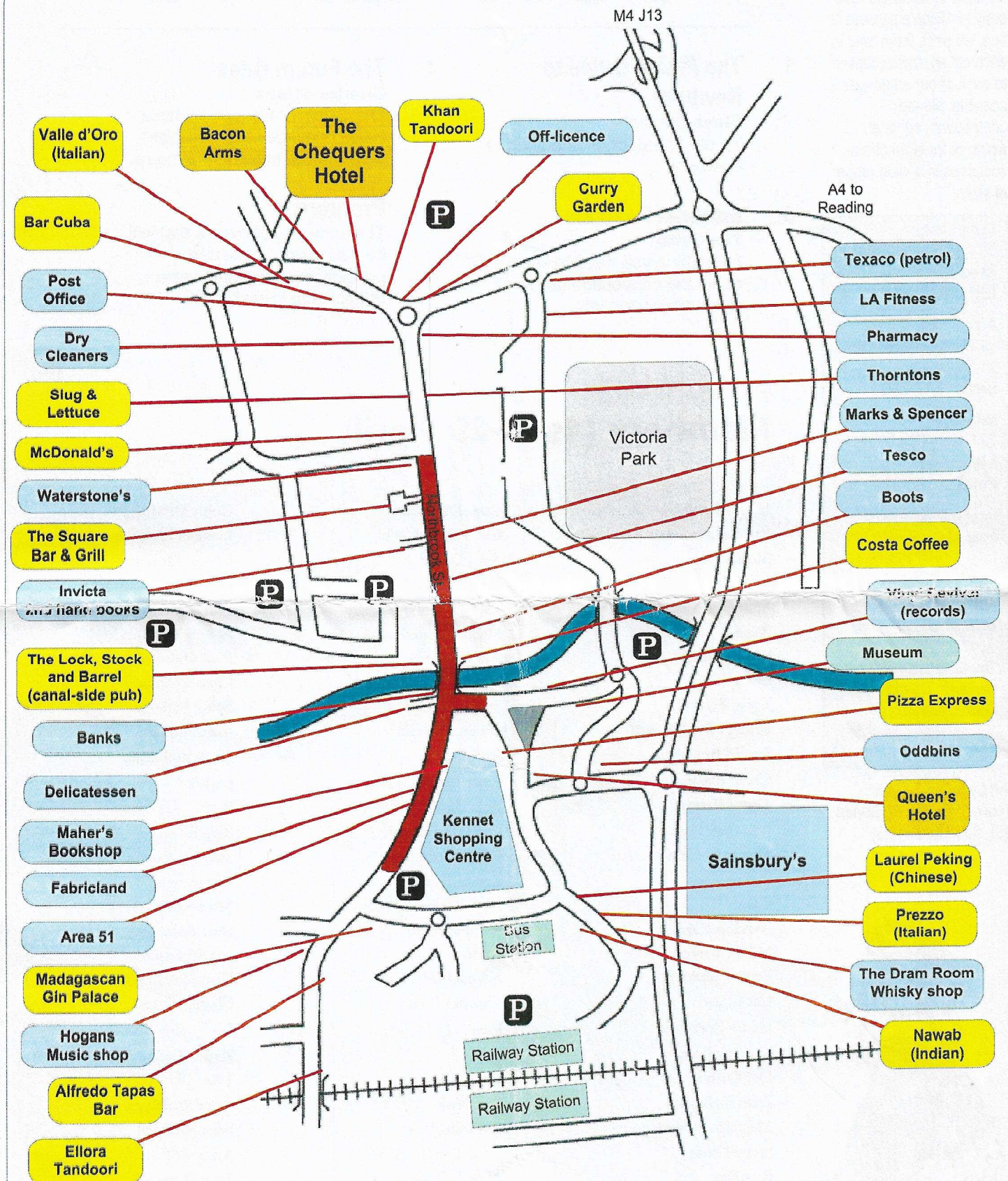


THE PLOKTA GUIDE TO NEWBURY



<plokta.con> Release 3.0, Chequers Hotel Newbury, 1-3 May 2004

This is issue 31.5 of *Plokta*, edited by Steve Davies, Alison Scott and Mike Scott. It is available for letter of comment (one copy to Alison's address is fine, we pass them over to each other), trade (copies to each of our addresses if possible, please), contribution, editorial whim, or for eight pirate costumes in a wide range of sizes.

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The cabal also includes
Giulia De Cesare, Sue
Mason, Steven,
Marianne and Jonathan
Cain.

Art by Steve Davies
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(5), Sue Mason (2,3)



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Members (as at 29 April)

Michael Abbott
Brian Ameringen
Meriol Ameringen
Fiona Anderson
Margaret Austin
Austin
Square Bear
Doug Bell
Tony Berry
Bridget Bradshaw
Simon Bradshaw
Claire Brialey
Tanya Brown
Jonathan Cain
Marianne Cain
Steven Cain
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Avedon Carol
Mike Cheater
Dave Clements
Cat Coast
Eddie Cochrane
Noel Collyer
Del Cotter
John Dallman
Malcolm Davies
Steve Davies
Ros Day
Giulia De Cesare
Vince Docherty

Cory Doctorow
Chris Donaldson
Fran Dowd
John Dowd
Tara Dowling-Hussey
Martin Easterbrook
Sue Edwards
Flick
Susan Francis
Gwen Funnell
Ann Green
Steve Green
Rob Hansen
David A Harvey
Julian Headlong
Zandy Hemsley
Dave Hicks
Judi Hodgkin
Andrew Hogg
Michael Ibbs
Thomas Ibbs
Kari
Kate
Tony Keen
Tim Kirk
Christina Lake
Dave Langford
Alice Lawson
Steve Lawson
Sue Mason

Colm McMurray
Geneva Melzack
Cheryl Morgan
Caroline Mullan
Phil Nanson
Feòrag NicBhrìde
Paul Oldroyd
Chris O'Shea
Spike Parsons
Joan Paterson
Mark Plummer
poppy
Red
Ang Rosin
Yvonne Rowse
Alison Scott
Mike Scott
Kate Solomon
Ian Sorensen
Douglas Spencer
Charles Stross
Ian Taylor
Kathy Taylor
Tibs
Peter Wareham
Jaine Weddell
Anne Wilson
Tom Womack
Pete Young

Editorial Read Me

Hotel Information

Breakfast will be served until 11am each day of the con. Bar snacks will be available throughout the day. The bar will remain open until 2am as long as at least one hotel resident is drinking.

The function space has recently been redecorated, so please be careful of the furnishings.

Newbury

Everything we know about places to eat, shop or whatever in Newbury is shown on the map on the front cover. But please do spread the word if you find anywhere else worth visiting.

Disabled Assistance

We have a member in a wheelchair who is attending the convention without a helper. If you're happy for her to ask you to give her a push when she needs one, please ask a committee member for a sticker to put on your badge.



Smoking Policy

Smoking is only allowed in the bar, and not in the programme or dealers' area.

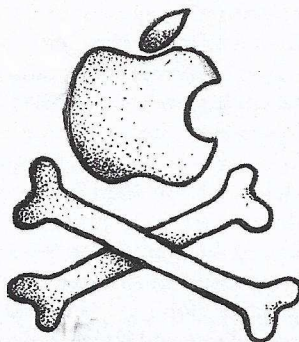
Smofing Policy

Sunday is a Worldcon-Free Zone. Anyone mentioning Interaction on Sunday will be made to walk the plank during Pirate Night. Shop your friends and be rewarded with pirate loot! Have furtive discussions in secret! Watch Vince Docherty remain entirely mute for the day!

Virtual Treasure Hunt

Take Nothing But Photographs, Leave Nothing But Rather Confused Looking Locals

Over the weekend, we want you to provide us with a stock of virtual treasure. These should be funny digital photos taken in the hotel, in the garden, and around Newbury. Extra credit will be given for pirate themed photos, and for photos featuring people who aren't convention members doing stupid things. Moose particularly welcome. We need you to let us have these by midnight on Sunday, and there will be prizes for the best.



Other Photography

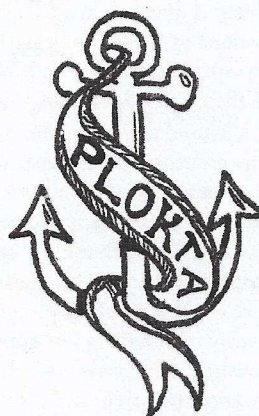
Please let us have your other digital photos of the con—we'll have the equipment to read most electronic media. Unless you specify otherwise, we'd like to be able to use the photos for an end-of-con slideshow, on the *Plokta* website and in the fanzine. If anyone has a digital camcorder, we can do video editing as well.

Pirate Night

Sunday night at <plokta.con> is Pirate Night. Dress appropriately, if you can. Watch the scurvy Worldconlubbers walk the plank. And remember—pirates always talks in the present tense. Arrrr!

Weapons Policy

All members should carry a cutlass and flintlock



BOLLOCKS

The Computers Are Talking To Us

Alison's Macs are set up to announce whenever a friend from the chat buddy list comes on line. Last night, we took a break from the strenuous work of putting the con together to watch *Master And Commander* on DVD. Due to a miracle of timing, we learned that the first thing Lord Nelson said to Jack Aubrey was, "Your buddy Vicki Rosenzweig is available".

Wife Swap

A couple of days after Easter, Alison received a flyer in the post. "Wife Swap! The hit series about family life is back for a third series and Channel 4 would love to hear from you. If you are curious about how other families share chores, spend money and enjoy themselves then give us a call." For those not familiar with UK popular culture, *Wife Swap* is an unexpectedly work-safe television programme where families swap the women and discover, in an astonished way, how other people live. The flyer was on its own, in a hand-written envelope postmarked Blackpool. I considered what amusing television it would make to swap our household for someone else's, and quickly determined that even I might die of embarrassment. OK, so our house probably is more untidy than most, and it certainly has more computers than most.

But this got us thinking. Fandom has not made proper use of the recent spate of reality television. We quickly worked out that what was needed was *Faned Swap*, where co-editors are shipped off to other fanzines for a week to produce hybrid fanzines—making sure to pay attention to the process. We could plan it for Worldcon, and make it transatlantic. We would swap Victor Gonzalez for Jae Leslie Adams, to produce *Wunga* and *Chabe*. Back in the UK, we'd send Dr Plokta out of Croydon and into Addiscombe Actually to put *Banana Wings* online, and we'd import Paul Kincaid to lend *Plokta* some much-needed gravitas. I rang Claire Brialey to suggest the plan to her. "You know," she said thoughtfully. "That's a much better *idea* than it is a *thing*."

The Future Bites

THIS is not the future we were promised, is it?

Jet packs and flying cars: nope, not seen any of them around here recently. Ditto vacations on the moon. Cybernetics killed the first two—would *you* like the local road rage cases and drunk drivers behind the yoke of a flying machine? As for the third idea, it was killed by the laws of motion: space isn't merely vast, it's *unimaginably* vast, so vast that just to claw their way out of Earth's gravity well in order to reach the moon the Apollo astronauts had to travel at a speed that would have sent them across the breadth of the Pacific ocean in under twelve minutes: Mars is, at closest approach, about two hundred times further away than that.

Still, there are compensations. We were promised food pills. Instead, we got conveyor belt sushi bars with cute babes miming karaoke tracks on stages surrounded by wall to wall plasma screens playing anime 24 by 7, and robot drinks trolleys that apologize to you when they nearly run you over on the way to the lavatory. *In Edinburgh, Three years ago*. While sushi rice may have evolved as the original mediaeval Japanese answer to the science fictional food pill, the presentation is infinitely more stylish. And thereon hangs a story.

Trying to understand the future is, in my view, only half the job of a science fiction writer; because we make our own futures, and get to live in them, and understanding what makes us tick is an essential prerequisite of understanding what kind of futures we're going to make for ourselves. (That, and the intersection of our beautiful dreams with the brutal laws of physics. See spaceflight, above—at least until someone comes up with a way to mass-produce ropes of fullerene fibres and raises the venture capital to build a space elevator.)

Complaints that the modern world is unnatural or artificial in some way miss the point; the world we live in is anthropogenic, *we made it*. We didn't have any collective choice in the matter, either: short of discarding tools, clothes, and ultimately language there's no way back to the Garden of Eden from here. (And indeed, the existence of a mythical state of perfection at some time in the historic past is just that—a myth, a consolatory story to explain the imperfections of the

present. Just like the bastardized utopia myth of a perfect future if we'll just agree to work together.)

And this brings me to the question of *why* we produce futures.

A while ago—I don't have the reference to hand, but it was by way of a *Scientific American* article—I ran across a report of a study on the subject of human happiness. We are, it appears, irrationally happy most of the time. There's no direct correlation between human happiness and wealth, other than the crude correlation induced by deprivation—if you become homeless or go hungry you will be unhappy for a while, until you adapt to your new state. Money doesn't buy happiness, at least beyond the first US \$10,000 a year—a figure sufficient to cover good housing, sanitation, food, clothing, and some medical care and travel. Indeed, money means less and less the more of it you have. To someone who's sleeping rough on the pavement outside King's Cross, £20 means a night in a hostel and a full stomach; to Bill Gates, it's not even worth stooping to pick the note off the pavement, for it's less than his average income per second.

Meanwhile, things that make us unhappy aren't always obvious. Physical privation, violence, murder, the death of loved ones—yes, but what about turning 40? The absence of praise by the boss? A blind, unreasoning conviction that your friends are talking about you behind your back? A sense that your options are constrained...?

We humans are a strange species. We get dissatisfied over the strangest things. The Soviet Union, creaky central planning systems and all, could (had it backed off the military spending) have delivered that baseline \$10,000 a year standard of living, or something corresponding to it—with housing, healthcare, food, clothing, and recreation all delivered as part of the package—to all its citizens. Indeed, that was all part of the original Marxist plan: to provide the basics for everyone, by removing obstacles to the sharing of wealth. The carnivorously capitalist West is even more capable of abolishing the kind of poverty that causes unhappiness. But abolishing a negative isn't the same as creating a positive, and it's the search for positives such as happiness that

generates our endless quest for a better tomorrow, a greener field on the other side of the fence.

(I hope you've noticed that this is a purely materialistic look at the situation. I'm a materialist kind of guy: I don't have a lot of time for belief systems that require faith unsupported by evidence that would be admissible in a court of law or a peer-reviewed scientific journal. Faith and fifty pence will buy you a cup of coffee. Sure, religion can bring people a lot of happiness: but it's also frequently used as an excuse for ducking the hard questions, or worse, as a justification for bloodshed and strife. I'll take my coffee neat, thank you very much, and leave the unanswerable questions for later.)

Constructing futures is something we evolved to do—or rather, it's a trait without which we wouldn't be human. It has been pointed out by some evolutionary biologists that the past sixty five million years, since the extinction of the dinosaurs, has seen a rather fascinating arms race driving evolution. Prior to the Pliocene (or indeed the Cenozoic era), predator/prey relationships seem to have been dominated by brute firepower: who has the biggest claws or fangs, wins. But the emergence of mammals and hot-blooded birds provided a compact power source for energy-hungry brains: and the arms race turned smart. Mammals are good at modelling the behaviour of other organisms: they have a *theory of mind*, an internal projection of the intent of the creatures around them. You can see this at work in a pet cat, or a dog, or your manager at the office, as they try to outmanoeuvre a prey species. The model doesn't just predict the behaviour of another organism, it attempts to analyse the intentions of the organism, within the terms of the predictor: we don't *know* that our dogs or cats have intentions, but we can act as if they do, and it comes to much the same thing. Cognitive philosopher Daniel Dennett suggests that human consciousness arises as we apply our theory of mind, laboriously developed for predicting the likely behaviour of predator and prey species, to our own internal mental states: consciousness is the story we tell ourselves to explain our own actions. Consciousness is a side-effect of story-telling: as a writer, I like that explanation.

Since the earliest days, we've ascribed intentionality not only to each other and to the predators that eat us, but to the world we live in. Animistic religions such as Shinto ascribe spirits to places and artefacts, spirits which possess the attribute of intent, among others. Now we have computers we have an even more potent target for the will to anthropomorphize: a machine that seemingly mimics some of the characteristics of mind, and which can masquerade as any other general-purpose machine at the drop of an opcode. From a species that personalizes its tools and its houses, it should be no surprise that we also anthropomorphize our neurological prostheses. (Go on, let your hair down, confess: when did you last harbour the ghastly suspicion that your computer was laughing at you?)

We creature futures. We ascribe intentionality to each other and to inanimate objects. We are dissatisfied at the oddest things, and paradoxically happy. So what happens next?

The future does not look like a 1950's episode of *The Jetsons* from here. To me, it looks more like a place where the *Kami* have exploded out of the undergrowth of folklore and installed themselves in your cars and your television sets and the collar of your shirts. RFID tags, broadband wireless networking, user-centric design: these are big growth areas in technology right now, far bigger than the moribund monolithic personal computer, a revolution that had stalled (and eaten its own children) by 2000. Because we like to imagine that we understand the motivations of the beings around us, we are already beginning to build a world that, if not actually conscious, is at least holds understandable opinions about us. Voice-activated mobile phones. Guns with RFID chip scanners that recognize their owners' implant and won't fire if someone else picks them up. Cameras on the London Underground that recognize loitering behaviour typical of a potential suicide and alert the station staff. Cheap ubiquitous global positioning technology means that in a few years there's going to be a generation that doesn't know what it's like to get lost, because getting lost is something you can only do by deliberately throwing away all your toys. For them, the map is the territory.

Oh, and there'll be six thousand flavours of tooth-paste in the drugstore. And the one you like will yell "buy me!"

at you, if you told your toothbrush to remind you when you ran out.

This is the optimistic picture, of course.

I'm not about to launch into a George Monbiot/Naomi Klein inspired rant about the evils of corporate globalization, friendly fascism, and the demise of democracy. I'm not going to drag your eyeballs to the writings of Professor Rebecca Mercuri about the grotesque gerrymandering of the electronic voting machine manufacturers, or even point despairingly at the way western politicians have taken leave of their electorates to pursue policies most find repugnant. Jonathan Porritt can give the speech about how we're wrecking the environment and haven't yet built a replacement. Bluntly, our politics haven't yet caught up with the twentieth century, never mind the twenty-first. Politics is the art (or science) of extending that intentional stance based model of our fellow organisms to derive a common vector sum that millions of us can pursue in parallel. Our consensus mechanisms are still dismayingly neolithic, forcing us to delegate binding authority to professional politicians who, frankly, *aren't like us*—if they were, they wouldn't have gone into politics in the first place, would they?

The worst-case scenario for our future is that it looks like Iraq, or Afghanistan.... only with no outside world, no aid agencies, no natural resources, and no way out: just CCTV cameras on every doorway, linked to punishment machines that extract retribution for any behaviour that is not explicitly permitted. (The behaviours they punish will be based on a list drawn up by a committee of Osama bin Laden, Pat Robertson, and Miss Manners, or their stand-ins: ape etiquette with added theocratic taboos.) And the worst thing of all is that we'll have helped to build and install them.

When the machines start applying the intentional stance to the naked apes, it's time to watch out.

Eusocial animals like ants, termites, bees, or naked mole rats, exhibit curious behaviour; their societies are stratified by role, with workers, warriors, and reproductive castes that may differ morphologically from one another. Humans aren't so obviously specialized, but if you consider our machines as part of our extended phenotype, it begins to look that way: if our machines become intentionally driven, and they're tailored

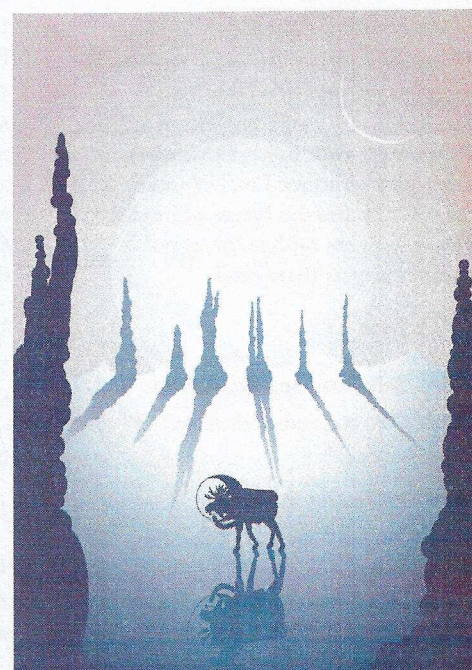
to play different roles in our society, then you could argue that we occupy some kind of privileged position in a hive-relationship with tools that require our continued safety and comfort in order to further their own reproduction. There's nobody here in this hive but us queens, and the living machines we so carelessly manufacture as conveniences for our own comfort. Individual ants or other eusocial insect species all share the same genetic code, but different castes express radically different phenotypic traits, and indeed most ants are sterile workers who can only further their genetic traits by ensuring that their cousin, aunt or mother the hive-queen succeeds. Our machines don't share our genome (yet), but they share parts of the vast haze of information that has gathered around the genome, and they can only reproduce through us.

Which is, after all, why I'm writing this stream-of-consciousness digest. My word processor wants you to know that it wants me to keep writing because that enhances its own reproductive prospects. I told it you didn't need to know that, but it overruled me by building a coalition of highly conservative domestic appliances and subverting the household voting machine. (I was going to ignore it even so, until it began dropping dark hints about the electric blanket.) Welcome to the future: it's a jungle in here.

(Signed)

King of the Gadget-Hive.

—Charles Stross



Programme

SATURDAY

11:00: Opening Ceremony

With Charles Stross, the Plokta Cabal, and a subservient moose.

11:30: In the Beginnings

"His name was Gaal Dornick, and he was just a country boy who had never seen Trantor before"; "He was 170 days dying and not yet dead"; "It was a dark and stormy night". What makes a good (or bad) beginning to a work of fiction? Charles Stross, Michael Abbott and Chris Donaldson open the programme with a discussion of openings, and attempt to come to a conclusion. A panel, moderated by Peter Wareham.

13:00: Lunch

14:00: GoH Interview

Cory Doctorow interviews Charles Stross.

15:00: Mars 3D: The Red (and Green) Planet

Simon Bradshaw reviews the last four months on and around Mars, complete with glorious 3D (Mars pics, not just Simon).

16:00: Why Change History?

Cheryl Morgan, Charles Stross and Tanya Brown discuss the reasons for using an alternative history as a fictional setting.

17:00: Pirates 2 Pirates

These days pirates are more likely to be found at the end of a broadband connection than opening chests of rum on the high seas. Lilian Edwards, Cory Doctorow, Andrew Ducker and Spike Parsons discuss the future of intellectual property rights on-line, or to put it another way, is there one?

18:00: Dinner

20:00: Belly Dancing Workshop

Sue Mason runs another of her popular workshops.

21:30: Fan Fund Auction

In which we bring out all the same old tat in the hope that you're more drunk this time. Donations of anything that you didn't *get* in a fan fund auction are welcome.

23:00: Call My Blush

Sue Mason comperes an item that we have stolen from the Eastercon. Except that *we're* using The Encyclopaedia of Unusual Sex Practices for the definitions. The boys' team includes Brian Ameringen and John Dowd; the girls are Ang Rosin, Krystyna Oborn and Fran Dowd.

SUNDAY

10:30: Dancing Till My Feet Don't Touch The Ground

Alison Scott runs a Dance Dance Revolution / Dancing Stage Euromix workshop, the fitness regime for couch potatoes, assisted by Ang Rosin. Suitable for absolute beginners and people who've been playing forever.

12:00: Twisty Little Interests

Giulia de Cesare runs an audience participation quiz, in the garden if the weather is OK.

13:00: Lunch

14:00: Fannish Eye for the Mundane Guy

Lilian Edwards (style), Giulia de Cesare (fashion), Steve Davies (superfluous technology) and Steve Lawson (general all round truff) advise the almost mundane Andrew Ducker on boosting his fannish street cred.

15:30: What Media Will Be Fannish Next?

Buffy is gone. *Angel* is going. The *Lord of the Rings* movies have finished. What movies and TV shows will be next to absorb the attention of fandom? Margaret Austin, Martin Easterbrook, Geneva Melzack and Eddie Cochrane discuss.

17:00: The Year in SF

Mike Scott, Claire Brialey and Julian Headlong discuss 2003's crop of SF novels, with particular reference to the 2004 Hugo nominees.

18:00: Dinner

19:00: Pirate Night

A movie backdrop to much piratical silliness. Parrots welcome.

21:00: Fanzine Reviews In The Bath

Alison Scott and her bathing companions discuss recent fanzines. As she's not had many fanzines lately, she'll also consider blogs, e-zines and LiveJournal.

22:00: I'm Sorry I Haven't A Leg To Stand On

Two teams compete to see who are the better pirates. We have press-ganged Chris O'Shea and Alice Lawson to compete with Dave Hicks and Tony Keen. Run by the Dread Pirate Scott.

MONDAY

11:00: pohskroW sdrawkcaB

Steven Cain shows you how to live your life in reverse. We nicked this idea from Damn Fine Con

12:00: Fanzines In The Net

"In five years, the printer will be obsolete," said the salesman. Is there still any point in printing 250 copies of your fanzine and putting them in the post (or not putting them in the post, in Alison's case)? Lilian Edwards, Tony Keen, Christina Lake, Mark Plummer and Flick continue a discussion from a LiveJournal comment thread.

13:00: Lunch

14:00: Computer Art

Alison Scott, Feorag and Doug Spencer explain why you shouldn't believe your eyes and show you how it's done.

15:00: Reading

Charles Stross reads from some of his new and forthcoming works. This is also your best chance to get books signed.

16:00: Ploktaing the Worldcon

The Cabal are running the fan room and fan programme at Interaction. What should we be doing? Come along and tell us.

17:00: Closing Ceremony

It's been fun. Now we're going to go away and sleep for a week.

20:00: Jump The Shark Party (in the bar)