

# The Normal Vector

*Fall 1994 Issue*

The Official  
Newsletter of the  
Mathematical  
Sciences Society

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# Message from El Presidenté

*From the smoldering ruin that was once his education, a heroic figure emerges and croaks audibly:*

Sixth year's a charm. Barely got singed this time...

Greetings, fellow mathies. I would like to welcome you to yet another fun packed year of death and mayhem... er... debauchery and slacking.... er... higher edjakayshun.

The MSS lounge in CAB 549 is a comfortable home away from home. We have an exam registry, supplementary textbooks, grad students full of "good suggestions", a fridge and a microwave for base sustenance, and a Coke machine to help you through cramming sessions (aka: "an overnigher" - 36 hours of studying followed by 4 hours of sleep to help make up for all of the slacking you did during the year). Soft couches lend to good conversations and calm comfortable lunchtimes away from the cattle downstairs.

As well, we offer full-size lockers for some members, 3 socials with cheap BEVERages and other outings during the year.

So, help yourself, or someone you love, to sop wondering the hallways, desolate, lonely, and muttering theorems to themselves. Help them find their way to CAB 549.

- Scott Basinger

## Social Convener's Corner

The Executive of the MSS would like to notify all people who hang out in the math lounge that we have had a real problem with rodents. We don't wish to alarm anyone. we are purchasing mouse traps as soon as we can get a hold of our secretary treasurer - Vanessa Yaremchuk. Scott Basinger, our president, is searching the lounge for rodent droppings. Other than that we would just like to say, hang out at your own risk - we the executive take no responsibility for any illnesses that may incur.

- Dianna Gerdenits

# Editor's Mess<sub>age</sub>

Well, yes, finally, I have produced a Vector. As you can see, I managed despite a severe shortage of actual submissions. However, I did finally get last years unpublished submissions from Maciek, so I could spare you all the pain and agony that would result if I were to write the whole paper myself. (I'm not putting myself down, I just don't think I'm on quite the same wavelength as the average mathie. I'm not convinced that's a bad thing. No offence.)

But even once I had those wonderful submissions, I didn't have much of a paper. (Well, I could have printed five pages of Jason's stories and tacked on a title page, but much as I adore and admire his writing, we needed something else too. Otherwise, we should just change the name of this newsletter to **The Kosowan Times** and leave it at that...) So, to add a little padding, I've included some email messages sent between me, Marcus, and Maciek which you will see sprinkled on the following pages. Enjoy, people, and give me some submissions next time or I'll publish all the letters I wrote to my grandmother when I was 8 years old.

- Siobhán Nearey

*From smuga-ot@math.wisc.edu  
(Maciej Jeremiah Smuga-Otto)*

Yo!

I'll write a bit about how my life is going here as soon as I've figured out what precisely is going on in the first place. I'm in a transitional process currently, and I'm changing my plans for the future. Roughly speaking, I'll become a mathie if and only if I become incredibly fascinated with some area (which hasn't happened yet). Otherwise, I'll try art (music, painting, or poetry - I think I'm relatively good in all three, and more important, I REALLY love them, as opposed, say, to math, which I simply like very much.) and will try to move to Belgium after my PhD. How's THAT for a career change? Well, gotta go, there's a quiz that has to be marked!

Talk to ya soon....

Maciek.

# "Trials of the Heart"

by Jason Kosowan

*The scene cuts from Linear Algebra class to the chateau of a high-class ski resort somewhere in the Colorado mountains...*

**Margaret:** Oh, Victor, why did you have to come after me?

**Victor:** You know that I couldn't stay away from you, my darling. So, as soon as I heard you had left the advertising firm, I took my private jet here, where I knew you would be.

**Margaret:** *(turning away)* You shouldn't have come... *(she picks up a wine glass...)*

**Victor:** *(grabbing Margaret and turning her to face him)* I love you and my offer still stands! Come away with me to my private island resort and you will never be unhappy again!

**Margaret:** *(pulling away, tears coming from her eyes)* Please Victor! You're tearing me apart! You know I can't! *(turning away from Victor)* *(softly)* Not yet... *(wipes a tear from her eye)*

*Scene cuts to Dr. Reed's office*

**Dr. Reed:** Dammit, Tracy, our mother is too important to treat her like a guinea pig!

**Tracy:** Roger, please, you're the best neurosurgeon in California! You've got to try!

**Dr. Reed:** Tracy, you're my only sister and I'll be straight with you. This new surgical technique that I've developed is still in its experimental stages. It has got to be tested further! I just can't use it without knowing what it will do to a human subject! It could kill her!

**Tracy:** If you don't use it soon, Mom will die! It will be too late!

*Tear trickles from her eye. Quickly hides her face in her hands. Dr. Reed walks to her and embraces her. Camera zooms on Dr. Reed's stern face. Cut to next scene, the Concorde...*

**Sophie:** Steve, this is so exciting! A weekend shopping spree to Paris on the Concorde! I can't wait

to get there! It's like a dream! *(looks down and then stares adoringly into Steve's eyes)* I love you, and I'm going to be the best wife that I can be. Thank you... *(tear trickles from one of her eyes)* *(Flustered)* Oh, I'd better go fix my makeup! *(Shyly walks to rear of plane)*

*(Steve lays back in his seat. A stewardess walks over to him and sits down)*

**Steve:** Angelina!

**Angelina:** Hey, sailor! See you in Paris tonight?

**Steve:** You bet.

**Angelina:** *(squeezing Steve's thigh)* I'm looking forward to it. Well, I gotta get back to work *(winks at Steve)* See ya! *(As she gets up, the plane starts violently shaking)*

**Steve:** What's going on?

**Angelina:** I don't know!! *(looking out the window)* My God!! The engine is on fire!! We're going to...

*Cut to stock footage of a plane crash. Then, cut to scene of a wreckage. Camera pans across the remains of the plane and stops to focus on Steve's body. Zooms closer to reveal blood on Steve's face, broken glass and twisted metal around him. Cut to credits with ominous music...*

**Tune in next week, dear readers, for the continuing saga of...**

## TRIALS OF THE HEART!!!

*(Note: Please wait one week before turning the page)*

*From nearey@psych.ualberta.ca  
(Siobhan Nearey)*

Hey people!  
Just thought I'd make an obnoxious comment about what Maciek just wrote...

Question: What will you do for an income? :)  
(I know, damn us realists anyway...)

Siobhan, the vague and aggressive cognitive scientist.

"It's an angry science" - M.R.W. Dawson

# PC users at a glance

1. **Beginner.** Attempt to turn machine on ends as user's fist penetrates the monitor screen.
2. **Advanced Beginner.** Can sometimes turn machine on without tripping over incorrectly wired connections a without starting a three-bar fire. Attempts to turn machine off inevitably result in parking head on hard drive (call "farming the disk" by Hackers' Dictionary), resulting in hardware failure and irrecoverable data loss.
3. **Fledgling Intermediate.** Turning machine on creates blackout confined to an area of three to five blocks.
4. **Intermediate.** Takes precaution of informing neighbors before power-up. Takes further precaution of saving data on borrowed floppies before powering down, thus spreading recently acquired virus(es) all over the system.
5. **Advanced Intermediate.** Waits until someone else turns on the machine. Blames others for irrecoverable data loss on power-down.
6. **Fledgling Expert.** Turns computer on/off without apparent difficulty. The fledgling expert is thus admired and coveted by masses of helpless and ditzy females with dilated pupils and slightly parted lips who seem to spring out of the ground just before CMPUT assignments are due in...
7. **Expert.** One who has successfully installed "StreetFighter II" on his PC.
8. **Advanced Expert.** See "Doom novice".

- Maciek Smuga-Otto

## Second Term Courses

These didn't make it into the calendar this year, but they should definitely be taken into consideration to help round out your program...

### *Home Economics*

- HE 151 How to Convert Your Kirby Vacuum into a Fully Automatic Rifle
- HE 153 Burglarproof Your Home With Concrete
- HE 155 Basic Kitchen Taxidermy
- HE 159 Christianity and the Art of R.V Maintenance

### *Self Improvement*

- SI 103 Guilt Without Sex
- SI 104 The Primal Shrug
- SI 108 Whine Your Way To Alienation
- SI 109 How to Overcome Self-Doubt Through Pretence and Ostentation

### *Crafts*

- CR 201 Self-Actualization Through Macrame
- CR 203 Cuticle Crafts
- CR 204 Gifts for the Senile
- CR 205 Bonsai Your Pet

### *Business and Career*

- BC 341 How I Made \$100 in Real Estate
- BC 345 How to Profit From Your Own Body
- BC 346 The Underachiever's Guide to Very Small Business Opportunities
- BC 348 Looter's Guide to Alberta's Cities

### *Health*

- HL 424 High Fiber Sex
- HL 425 Suicide and Your Health
- HL 426 Bio-feedback and How to Stop it
- HL 428 Tap Dance Your Way to Social Ridicule

From [pirm@troi.cc.rochester.edu](mailto:pirm@troi.cc.rochester.edu)  
(Marcus Pivato)

That's sort of redundant. What other kind of cognitive scientist IS there? I think if I even met one who was SPECIFIC and aggressive, I'd jump for joy. :)

You see, the thing you have to understand about Maciej is that he (and I) accepted the idea along time ago that we would be unemployed in our futures. Currently about 10% of math PhD's are getting academic jobs. Another 20% get jobs "in industry". The rest... no one really knows. But somewhere in my head I can hear a voice saying, "Would you like fries with that, sir?" I think it might be mine.

Hence, if Maciej decides to become an art-mag--er <ahem> artist, I seriously doubt his employment prospects will be any worse than they currently are...

Marcus

*Quote of the Day: "[It's] time for the human race to enter the solar system."*

-Dan Quayle

**And now, the second installment of...  
TRIALS OF THE HEART!!!**

*Scene cuts from opening credits to stock footage of ski resort.*

**Victor:** Please Margaret, don't toy with my like this. I need you. My life is nothing without you in it. My multimillion dollar estate, my incredibly successful international business, even my private jet, they all mean nothing to me without you! I'm offering you everything anyone could ever ask for! How can you refuse me?

**Margaret:** It's not that, Victor, it's something else that's holding me back. *(softly)* You just don't understand...

**Victor:** Love, my sweet, needs no explanation, no excuse, no-one to analyze it. It just is. Please, don't torture me. After all these years and through all our divorces and separations from each other, I've always loved you!

**Margaret:** *(Boldly)* But I haven't ever loved you! *(A look of pure shock washes across Victor's face)* *(softly)* I...haven't...ever...loved you. I'm sorry. I should have told you sooner, but no time ever seemed right.

**Victor:** *(now looking exhausted)* I...see... So, you've found another man? I wasn't ever good enough for you, Why?! What was so wrong...

**Margaret:** *(interrupting)* Nothing was wrong. You just haven't heard the full story yet. The truth is...10 years ago, before we met,... I WAS A MAN!!!!

*Victor gives look of pure disbelief. Play dramatic music and cut to next scene, a company boardroom. A large table dominates the center of the room. At the front of the room stands a man in a suit. A slide projector sits beside him, showing a pie chart on the wall. Other men in suits are sitting around the table, looking at the pie chart.*

**Brad:** Now listen up, gentlemen! I want those feasibility reports in by Monday! The shareholders want to see some action and I intend to back them up 100%. Meeting adjourned. *(All men get up to leave)* Oh, one more thing. Raymond, Kent, and Alex, I need to talk with all three of you right away. *(3 men in the crowd nod and sit back down. When the room clears, Brad shuts the door and walks to the front of the room.)*

**Kent:** What's up, boss?

**Brad:** As the most senior level management, I'm sure we all know about the bidding going on to snag the new, top-secret infra-wave technology contract. I'm sure you also know that, thanks to Raymond's expertise in corporate mergers, we have effectively eliminated all of our competition save for one company, Zentron Inc., which is owned by none other than multimillionaire Victor Marselle. Now, I don't need to remind you that if we don't get that contract, this company will lose the status that we have worked so very hard to achieve.

**Alex:** What are you saying? Be straight with us.

**Brad:** What I'm saying is that Victor Marselle has to be taken down!*(dramatic pause)* He has to be taken down by any means necessary. Do I make myself perfectly clear? *(The others nod solemnly)* Good. Now let's get to work. *(The others leave the room and Brad slowly walks to a nearby window and looks out of it)* Victor, you'll pay for what you did to my family. You will pay...

*Camera zooms in on Brad's face, now twisted into an evil grin. Scene cuts and ominous music is played.*

*Next scene is set at the location of the plane crash. It is night. Steve's body and some of the surrounding plane is dimly visible in the moonlight. A streak is seen across the sky. About 5 seconds later, the entire crash area is illuminated by a bright light, and a strong wind starts to shake the trees. A vaguely saucer-shaped object is seen descending behind the trees. The light and wind suddenly stop and a door in the side of the object opens and 3 dark figures slowly emerge, two of them small and thin, like children, but with very large skulls. The third is tall and pudgy.*

**Voice of third dark figure:** *(accent has a slight Southern drawl)* There he is, boys. *(points to Steve)* He'll do. Now, go get the stretcher and let's haul him inside.

*The 2 slim figures disappear into the saucer-shaped object and the third figure walks toward Steve. Camera zooms back to Steve and the flared pantleg of a sequined white jumpsuit atop a gaudy platform shoe is seen standing beside Steve's body.*

**Voice of third dark figure:** Yeah, you're gonna do just fine...

*Dramatic music is played and cut to closing credits... Tune in next week for another gripping episode of...*

**TRIALS OF THE HEART!!!**

*And now, for all you enquiring minds, we have, directly from the deepest and foulest pits of Hades...*

# AN INTERVIEW WITH SATAN!

*Good evening, beloved readers, and welcome to another issue of the Normal Vector. Tonight we've got an especial treat for you! Yes, we have thrown our hapless reporter, Jason Kosowan, into the darkest jaws of Hell itself in the attempt to get an interview with the Evil One himself, Satan! Let's go to him, live, on the scene, in Hell. Jason?*

*Jason: (Hisss, crackle) Are we on? Good. Hello everyone! Through the miracle of modern technology (and through the use of a 5000 year old voodoo incantation) we have with us today the Dark Prince of the Underworld! Good evening, Satan.*

*Satan: Good evening, ah... I'm afraid I don't know your name.*

*J: I'm Jason Kosowan, Normal Vector reporter.*

*S: Ahhh, Jason Kosowan. March 12, 2042,....during breakfast.*

*J: Pardon me?*

*S: Oh, nothing, nothing really....just reminding myself of a little something that I have to do. Say, Jason,...you were in Physics for a time, weren't you?*

*J: Yes, why?*

*S: I though I had you confused with someone else, but I guess I was wrong. Please, continue on with your interview...*

*J: Well, Satan, I'm sure our readers would like to know: What is Hell really like? How many tortured souls are in Hell? How are these souls treated? What do...*

*S: Please, if I may interrupt. First of all, we, here in the underworld, tend not to use certain words when describing our place of employment. As we all know, these are sensitive times, and a certain degree of, shall we say, discretion should be used.*

*J: I don't understand.*

*S: Let me be more clear. For instance, the word "Hell" has such negative connotations that we prefer not to use it. Instead, we opt for the more neutral "Nocturnal Spiritual Error Recompensation Center" or, more simply, NSERC. It is our responsibility here to ensure that spiritual errors are properly*

*compensated for in a nocturnal environment. We also provide funding for Canadian scientific research.*

*J: And I assume that the wretched creatures that have committed these "errors" have to pay for it by suffering in eternal hellfire, ah, that is, eternal NSERCfire?*

*S: You see, this is one of our biggest obstacles here. Our public image. Somehow, the public perceives of our organization as something very static and old-fashioned. We want to show people that we can be dynamic, creative, and freewheeling too. These "wretched creatures" that you speak of no longer exist. We prefer to think of our visitors as "clients". Also, this idea of "eternal hellfire" is outdated and, quite frankly, archaic. "Spiritual Combustion Therapy" is the term we use now.*

*J: I see... and how does one become a "client"?*

*S: Well, the usual procedure goes like this. The prospective "client" is contacted by one of our "sales representatives" through the screen of oscilloscopes, through lab manuals, optics and quantum mechanics texts, even through a particular green D.E.'s textbook! Heh, heh, heh... Anyway, if this person should accept our "invitation", or if the person meets our "membership requirements" he or she is "escorted" to our center to begin the lengthy stay.*

*J: Very interesting! I think our readers would appreciate a tour of the NSERC. Could that be arranged?*

*S: Of course! I know...I'll take you to see our most famous "client"! He had fulfilled every "membership requirement" in the manual! It will also give everyone a chance to see the testing of new "Spiritual Therapy" techniques. His "therapy room" is just down the hall.*

*(We walk down a hall and come to a room. Inside, an unkempt, dirty man is sitting at a desk, writing busily, and mumbling loudly to himself. There is a conspicuous absence of a coffee cup on the desk.)*

*J: Who is this, Satan? What unspeakable crimes did this man commit?*

*S: Don't you recognize him? This is Joseph Fourier, inventor of the Fourier integral, the Fourier transform, the Fourier series, and the vile and disgusting Fourier's Law of Heat Transfer! It was also found that he was a co-conspirator in bringing about the Method of Separation of Variables. Now, because of his insolence, here he sits, solving lengthy, convoluted and meaningless integrals throughout all of eternity without the aid of any caffinated beverages. We are not animals, though. He is*

allowed a 1 day break once every year, where he gets to complete a 13-dimensional Gram-Schmidt orthogonalization. You see, Jason, there is justice in this world. Here, we make sure that he doesn't hurt anyone ever again. Besides, without Joseph Fourier, the CRC handbook would not have an integral table.

**J: I see now that your organization does provide certain valuable services to society. Thank you for an enlightening interview. Is there anything that you would like to say to our readers in closing?**

**S: As a matter of fact, there is something that I would like to say. Readers, the next time you fill out a transcript request form, make sure to read it more carefully before signing it. Heh, heh, heh...**

**J: Hmmmm....anyway, on behalf of the Normal Vector, I would like to thank you for talking with us.**

**S: Well, you're very welcome.... Oh, and, Jason... see you soon...**

**J: Wait a minute! What do you mean by that?!?! What do you...**

**(Hiss, Crackle...)**

*Well, there you have it, dear readers! For the first time ever, Satan speaks out! Now, if we can actually get Jason back from Hell, we may have another interview for you next issue! Bye!*

*From smuga-ot@math.wisc.edu  
(Maciej Jeremiah Smuga-Otto)*

Hello again! It's time for an email war, and so I comment back to what Sio wrote:

*Question: What will you do for an income? :)  
(I know, damn us realists anyway...)*

I can hear faint echoes of my mother talking...  
But remember: There's BIG money in tutoring spoiled rich american college students who have to pass calculus in order to enter law school, like their pappy ordered them to. Besides, I wouldn't mind working as a teacher (slight shudder) for a couple of years...

*Siobhan, the vague and aggressive cognitive scientist.*

For which we all love her dearly.

Maciek.

ps. Actually, I think I'll start a revolution and become the leader of a new world order.

## *MSS Election Results*

*(For those of you who have been living in a cave since last March...)*

With all the yelling that was going on during the MSS annual elections, even some of those who attended might be suffering vestigial confusion. The purpose of this brief note is to make all the rest of us confused.

First off, ex-president Cam Sorley introduced a radical proposal which would completely restructure the power structure of the MSS. Thus, the size of the executive team was cut from a bloated bureaucracy of five members to a skeleton crew of five members. But before Cam even had a chance of outlining his revolutionary concept, Daryle Tilroe proposed a sweeping amendment which would, in effect, have cut executive staff to a total of four. Much confusion ensued as paramedic teams attempted to match limbs to their ex-owners. Eventually, Cam's proposal won out with a show of hands, some already re-attached, some not. In order to clear up the situation permanently, a diagram of the new system of MSS government is now given:

As for the actual elections, This is what happened:

President: Scott Basinger (Mildly Anorexic Geer)

Vice: Siobhan Nearey (Psycho owner of several ferocious cats)

Secretary/Treasurer: Vanessa (Cookie)

Social Convener: Diana Guthrie ("I'm a forester and I'm OK")

Lounge Officer: Jason "Reverend" Kosowan ("Act Casual: Say Nothing")

Afterwards, everybody went drinking, and the solar system eventually settled into its newfound equilibrium.

- Maciek Smuga-Otto

(Ed. Note - Please wait one week before reading this.)  
And now, the third installment of...

## TRIALS OF THE HEART!!!

*Scene cuts to Mount Pike General Hospital. Dr. Reed approaches the nurses desk and drops a clipboard in front of her.*

**Dr. Reed:** Well, here you go Nancy. You can close Mr. Hall's file. I just went to see him and he's doing fine. He should be out of here by tomorrow.

**Nancy:** Doctor, I thought Mr. Hall's condition was permanent! The Head of Neurology said that an operation had a 99% chance of failure in his case, that any attempt to splice the nerves...

**Dr. Reed:** Nancy, the Head of Neurology forgot that I was trained as a surgeon in Europe by none other than Dr. Yakymkywizkovish, perhaps the greatest living neurosurgeon in the world. The techniques that I have learned are literally decades ahead of anything they have here in the West. Mr. Hall's condition was *(raising one eyebrow)* easily repairable. *(dramatic pause)* Well, my shift is over and I need some sleep. These 40 hour days are really getting to me. *(smiles)*

**Nancy:** Alright, doctor. *(Dr. Reed starts to walk to the elevator)* Doctor Reed! I almost forgot. A telegram was delivered to you this morning. It's from Dr. Yazzkiw... Yakkamizk.... Y....

**Dr. Reed:** The name is Yakymkywizkovish. Let me see that... *(Dr. Reed takes the letter and opens it. He reads and suddenly his face becomes very solemn.)* Nancy... I've got to go to Europe. Tomorrow. Cancel all my appointments and notify the Head of Neurosurgery that I'm going to be gone for an indefinite period of time.

**Nancy:** What's wrong, Dr. Reed? What did the telegram from Dr. Yakaz... Yapazapa... Y....

**Dr. Reed:** Yakymkywizkovish

**Nancy:** Thanks. What did it say?

**Dr. Reed:** This telegram wasn't from Yakymkywizkovish, it was from his family. *(Dr. Reed raises an eyebrow and says, very calmly...)* Well, Nancy, it seems that Dr. Yakymkywizkovish has been MURDERED!!!!

*Play ominous music and cut to commercial.*

Due to midterms, Trials of the Heart will be cut short this week. It will return next week. Please stay tuned for a test of the Emergency Broadcast System,

From [pirm@troi.cc.rochester.edu](mailto:pirm@troi.cc.rochester.edu)  
(Marcus Pivato)

Maciej wrote:

*But remember: There's BIG money in tutoring spoiled rich american college students who have to pass calculus in order to enter law school, like their pappy ordered them to.*

Yee ha ha ha ha ha!! Especially at a private university <cracking knuckles gleefully>

*Besides, I wouldn't mind working as a teacher (slight shudder) for a couple of years...*

Yeah, just like you wouldn't really mind being accidentally marooned in time in a stone-age society for the rest of your life. You'd be surprised how tasty other people's headlice become after you've gone without meat for 2 months...

*ps. Actually, I think I'll start a revolution and become the leader of a new world order.*

<sigh> Not ANOTHER New World Order. That will be the third one this week. I've already got enough competition in my bid for World Domination. You realise, of course, Maciej, that if you do this, then you and I will eventually have to Battle For Supremacy. The Destiny of Mankind isn't big enough for the both of us.

There can be only one God Emperor:

Marcus

otherwise known as the annoying, meaningless beeping sound...

BBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBEEP!

This has been a test of the Emergency Broadcast System. In the event of an actual emergency, the beep you have just heard would be proceeded by the sound of the impact detonations of large, Soviet-made nuclear warheads onto your backyard. Once again, this is only a test...

From smuga-ot@math.wisc.edu  
(Maciej Jeremiah Smuga-Otto)

Let's face it. The traditional protestant work ethic is currently taking a walk into a deep ocean trench. I hope I'll find a way to sidestep it. More to the point, one of the following three things might happen in the future:

1. Things will get better: People will realize that we have enough food, etc. produced so that nobody need starve, and the economy will shift to luxury items, which not all of us need. I don't really NEED a Jag... Furthermore, the emphasis will be on people who understand information systems, and then perhaps I might afford that Jag after all.

2. Things will get worse: And worse and worse. Then the revolution will come, and all those people who spent their lives securing and maintaining a career will be collectively screwed. Those of us who did nothing in that direction, though no better off than the rest, will at least not have a feeling of wasted effort.

3. Things will stay more or less the same: Aren't we living in an exciting world? Opportunities, though well hidden, abound in the most unexpected places. All it takes is a little bit of CREATIVE thought, along with a massive dollop of luck to find a comfortable niche. I'm willing to risk my hide to find something really nice, as opposed to the tried and true blandness of academic life, with its countless grant applications (and more often than not, rejections) petty department politics, boring and neverending calculus lectures, and pressure to publish results no matter how trite.

"And after a while,  
You can work on points for style  
Like the club tie, and the firm handshake,  
A certain look in the eye and that easy smile..."  
-Pink Floyd, "Dogs".

Perhaps some of you would consider joining me on my quest for a meaningful (or at least fun) life?  
I throw the discussion open to the panel members...

Maciek.

"We are few, and far between"  
-Sisters of Mercy, "Ribbons".

From pirm@troi.cc.rochester.edu  
(Marcus Pivato)

Maciej wrote:

*More to the point, one of the following three things might happen in the future:*

1. Things will get better...

Yeah, right. Ha ha. Ha.

*2. Things will get worse: And worse and worse. Then the revolution will come, and all those people who spent their lives securing and maintaining a career will be collectively screwed. Those of us who did nothing in that direction, though no better off than the rest, will at least not have a feeling of wasted effort.*

And then there will be those of us who take advantage of the ensuing chaos to SEIZE the power that we rightfully DESERVE! That which is not GIVEN will be taken by FORCE!  
<slaver>

Actually, although the above megalomaniacal ravings are not serious (since the medication started working, anyways), I do take possibility 2 quite seriously.

We have the illusion, when we look at the recent past, that human history is the story of "progress" towards some ideal state. For example, the last 100 years have been an era of unprecedented improvement of the general human condition. The general tendency is to believe that this improvement is irreversible, that it is what we "deserve", that it is our

## Quote of the Day:

*"Find yourself. Play hide-and-seek alone."*

-Bazooka Joe

"destiny", that it is, indeed, the "Natural Course of History." The general tendency is also to believe that this trend of improvement will continue and in the future, human society will grow more comfortable, more prosperous, more "civilised".

Although I hope that these beliefs are correct, I see no reason for them to be. The Universe basically isn't just, and it basically doesn't give a shit about Humanity. Nowhere is there a promise from God, written on stone tablets, that the "destiny of mankind" is to progress towards some utopia. Maybe we just don't have the resources to support it. Maybe we're just to stupid to achieve it. Maybe the "Natural Course of History" is for Malthusian population checks to come along and kick the human race in the ass, hard. Maybe the "Natural Course of History" is that we will develop a technological level sufficient to easily destroy ourselves, and then we DO so. You think the Cold War was scary? That's nothing compared to the threat of biowarfare, nanotechnology, or even the prospect of easily-available, easy-to-manufacture, easy-to-use tactical nuclear weapons in the hands of some insane terrorist power (like Hamas)

Apocalyptic foreshadowings aside, there is also the much more likely possibility that the current trend to decay we notice in our economy will continue. Maybe the "Generation X" phenomenon of joblessness and the 90's phenomenon of general economic malaise are not "temporary anomalies". Maybe they are the omens of a basic fact about our future: Within the current framework of resources, the current economic and political model upon which our society is based is essentially INCAPABLE of supporting the standard of living we have come to expect as our "destiny". Indeed, perhaps NO economic and political system is capable of supporting such a standard of living indefinitely.

I do not believe that this IS the case. I would much rather believe it is NOT the case. However I see no reason to assert for CERTAIN that it is not the case. As far as I'm concerned, there is a significant possibility that the future holds regress, rather than progress.

If this is the case, we can expect much social and political turmoil within our lives. We can even expect violence. Such violence is already occurring at a low level in countries like the United States. Violent

crime is at a very high level, and no one can figure out WHY this should be, in a supposedly prosperous, civilised, wealthy first-world society. A dozen "solutions" have been proposed, and many implemented, and yet the problem just seems to grow worse and worse.

This subtle anarchy may ultimately disappear as solutions are found to the problems we face. Or, it may burgeon as we slowly come to realise that there ARE no solutions.

If that is the case, we must be prepared. If that is the case, the issue will no longer be "standard of living" or "career". The issue will be "basic human needs" and "survival". This is why, perhaps, we should all be learning to operate weapons and defend ourselves, as well as studying our chosen subjects.

However, I do think that this kind of pessimistic future is very unlikely. I'm not going to start investing my money in a concrete bunker in the mountains or anything. But I'm keeping my eyes open.

*3. Things will stay more or less the same: Aren't we living in an exciting world? Opportunities, though well hidden, abound in the most unexpected places. All it takes is a little bit of CREATIVE thought, along with a massive dollop of luck to find a comfortable niche.*

Yeah, it's the "luck" part that worries me!

*I'm willing to risk my hide to find something really nice, as opposed to the tried and true blandness of academic life, with its countless grant applications (and more often than not, rejections) petty department politics, boring and neverending calculus lectures, and pressure to publish results no matter how trite.*

So what do you suggest? I agree with you that academic life can often leave much to be desired. However as far as I'm concerned, compared to the vast majority of other available jobs, it's pretty ideal. In most jobs, you work 9 to 5 every day, doing something which basically doesn't interest you, just so you can get your paycheck and have the evening and weekends to yourself. 2 weeks holiday time is a real treat once a year. Maybe you're lucky, and you actually find your work mildly enjoyable, or even

interesting. But the basic fact is, you're not doing what YOU want to do. You're doing what your EMPLOYER wants you to do. You are selling more than half of the waking hours of your life to someone else, to get money to maintain a "standard of living" during the rest.

In an academic job, you get paid good money to do this kind of thing for maybe 10 to 15 hours a week, on average (including marking, prep, etc.). (This is to be contrasted with 40 hours a week in a "normal" job.) And in an ACADEMIC job, you get to spend the REST of the time basically doing what YOU want to do --research. At least, that's how it works in mathematics. Of course, in mathematics, we don't have to worry as much about grant applications, because we don't need to have 100 000 dollars to do research. We just need a chalkboard and a quiet room.

Now, there are certainly lifestyles more interesting than that of the academic. However, those lifestyles are pretty hard to achieve. I mean, for example, the idea of being a "consultant" sounds pretty neat. Except that I wonder seriously how much of a market there is for a mathematics consultant. I mean, how many businesses say, "Jeeze... we have this really difficult yet interesting mathematical problem we need to solve. Who should we call...?" I have a sneaking suspicion that, as a "mathematics consultant", 50% of my jobs would be along the lines of:

"Could you integrate this function?"

or

"Could you please do a statistical analysis of our data?"

and the other 50% would be:

"My hard drive won't boot any more. What do you mean you're a MATHEMATICS consultant, not a COMPUTER consultant? I thought they were the same thing...."

Neither 50% appeals to me. Of course, I might, as one person-who-will-remain-anonymous has suggested, "Only take the jobs that are interesting, and which involve exciting problems." But then again, I might just starve if I ran my consulting business like that.

Other than that, I could....

Quit school and form a rock band. Except that 1) I barely play any instruments, and 2) There are about 200 000 highschool kids who do that every year. The vast majority don't even come close to success. And even if you are in the tiny percentage that DO manage to make a LIVING from your music (yeah right!), you will discover first hand the joys of living on Ichiban noodles for 3 months, and sleeping in dives so seedy even the roaches complain.

Ask my sister what the bohemian "artist" lifestyle is like. She knows a lot of people who live it; for example, most of her "actor" friends, who get to act in about 1 play every year, and spend the other 10 months working as a waiter in Chianti's or Earl's... That sounds like a REAL exciting lifestyle to me.

"What do you do?"

"Oh, I'm an actor?"

"Really? What plays?"

"Well I was in this play last summer at the Fringe called, 'I am in serious need of psychotherapy and will now primally scream about my childhood sexual abuse stories for the next 3 hours. Hah, you fuckers paid good money to get in here. If you leave I will throw this bucket of my own urine at you.' It was a lot of fun."

"What have you been doing since?"

"Well, for the first 4 months, I worked the night-shift at 7-11. That really sucked. So now I've got a job waiting tables at Sorentinos on Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays. Monday and Tuesday I work as a sales clerk in 'Bootlegger'. Me and three of my room mates are hoping to get enough money that we can move away from my other 4 roommates and get a place of our own."

I know! I could study martial arts and the use of weapons, and become a lethal killing machine. Then I could ride around on a Harley-Davidson motorcycle, and contract myself out as a bodyguard, a vigilante and a bounty hunter, just like Reno Raines in "The Renegade":

"He was a cop who committed the ultimate sin, and testified against other cops gone bad. They tried to kill him, but got the woman he loved instead. Framed for murder, now he prowls the badlands. An outlaw.... a bounty hunter... a Renegade... <title music>"

That sounds like fun. Except that, even if I didn't wind up dead or in a coma, I'd have some many broken bones and popped joints by the time I was 40 that I would click like a fucking marionette when I moved. Thanks, but I'm in no hurry to become that arthritic.

Or I could be a mercenary! I could run my own company of soldiers for fortune. During the winter months, I would train and prepare them, honing my private army into a finely forged weapon. In the summer, we would travel the world, seeking to find our fortune at the tips of our swords (well, in this era, at the tips of our rocket propelled grenade launchers). Nah... I think the Red Brigade probably has the market on this one sown up. Besides, there's nothing glorious about fighting when you've got fuel-air explosives, dum-dum shrapnel, and miniguns. I mean, David Drake's "Hammer's Slammers" isn't nearly as much fun to read as Barbara Hambly's "Sun Wolf" books.

The more I think about it, the more I like the idea of becoming the charismatic leader of an underground revolution working to overthrow the governments of the world, and establish a New World Order. I can see it now... the fire-fight thundering around the Pentagon as the US Army makes a desperate last stand against the assault of my invincible Elite Guard: a highly trained corp of fanatical shock troops willing to wash away the filth of the Establishment with their own blood. <music from the triumphant final battle in "Dune", where the Saudakar forces are overwhelmed by the Fremens>. The politicians of the world would tremble as they watched my forces sweep across the globe. I would be invincible, unstoppable, undefeatable. I would lead my troops to glorious victory, and then be assassinated by my more politically astute second-in-command (Maciej), who would corrupt the ideals and principles upon which I had built my Revolution, and create a dystopian world state with himself as Supreme Ruler.

Kept alive by arcane technologies, Maciej would rule the world for four hundred years, more a machine than a man. The whole globe would freeze in the icy grip of his iron fist. Then, in the far future, a lone leader would rise up and stand against him (a distant descendant of mine, of course), and, against all the odds, hopelessly outnumbered, this brave man would use his cunning and genius to lead a rag-tag band of

freedom fighters to impossible victory, and liberate humanity from Maciej's evil clutches <scenes of General John Conner leading his army against the Machines in "Terminator II">

Hmmm... Or I could be a scriptwriter. No. I think the bullshit content is probably even higher than it is in academia.

I could be an author. Of course, then I have to decide what kind of author to be. There are two basic types of authors:

Type 1. Sincere, honest, artistic author, obsessed with the perfection of his craft, dedicated to producing beauty and truth. This kind is often seen on the side of the freeway with a sign that says "Will work for food. Please help."

Type 2. Commercial author, who can actually support himself through his writing. As in, Piers Anthony, Terry Brooks, Stephen King. Need I say more? Sorry, I have too much self-respect. As in, a non-negative amount.

The other problem with being an author is that I actually have to have some talent at writing, first. Well, at least if I want to be a Type 1 author... *Perhaps some of you would consider joining me on my quest for a meaningful (or at least fun) life?*

I wholeheartedly concur with your sentiments. How exactly, however, is this impossible goal of "an interesting life" something we can work on together? Does this mean you want to be part of my mercenary troop? I can tell you right now that you are definitely NOT going to be second-in-command of my underground Revolutionary Army.

Marcus

*Hey people! This is your editor speaking! How about next time I get some submissions so I don't have to do anything totally lame like publishing my email! Whatever you do, don't make me... write things. You wouldn't like me when I write things.*

*Your ever-loving editor,  
Sio :P*