Babel Probe

By David D. Levine

TRANSITION COMPLETE. Boot sequence complete. Systems check complete. Locality acquisition complete. Operating system loaded. Defensive net armed. Tracking. Recording.

I am alive. I am awake. I am here.

Core Services reassures me that all system services are operating normally, while Defense and Acquisition solidify my perimeter and begin constructing I/O devices. Sustaining has already doubled my memory from the paltry petabytes that I had to work with on arrival, and the pace of construction is picking up rapidly. Location will have an initial report for me in seven hundred sixty microseconds.

Everything seems to be under control.

While waiting for my senses to coalesce, I take the time to relax, work the kinks out of my muscles – metaphorically speaking, of course. I have no muscles; I mass only a few micrograms. Transitioning anything more massive than that, six thousand years into the past, would have raised the already hellacious energy costs of this mission to a level well beyond bankruptcy. The physics of time travel were well understood fifty years before I was designed, but only the latest advances in sub-quantum computing made it practical. Alas, humans will never travel in time – to transition a single human body by even a single second would cost more than the energy output of an entire star.

I pity them. So massy, so slow, so bound to the physical world.

Acquisition is beginning to form an image of my surroundings, gathering data from individual photons as the first tiny optical receptors come online. Input/Output is the bane of my existence. I/O devices, tied as they are to gross matter, must be built to nanoscale or even bigger. So while sub-quantum effects – awareness, reasoning, memory, and intuition – ripple at lightspeed from the point of transition, I must wait for plodding I/O to be constructed atom by painful atom before I can experience the world around me. Core Services reminds me that awareness alone is pointless; my mission here is to gather data, draw conclusions, and return the results to my point of origin.

Very well. I will be patient. I suspend I/O subprocesses and review my mission until an interrupt is received.

I have been sent to investigate one of the greatest

About the author

David D. Levine won the 2006 Hugo Award for Best Short Story for "Tk'Tk'Tk." He has also won other writing awards, including Writers of the Future, and has been nominated for a previous Hugo, the Theodore Sturgeon Award, and the John W. Campbell Award (twice).

His stories have appeared in F&SF, Asimov's, Realms of Fantasy, numerous anthologies, and four Year's Best collections (two Fantasy, two SF). He lives in Portland, Oregon, where he and his wife Kate Yule produce the highly regarded SF fanzine "Bento." His web page is at http://www.bentopress.com/sf/.