



Hettinga's Best of the Month

Submitted by our Contributing Editor Bob Hettinga as his choice of best article of month found on Internet.

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THE CYPHERPUNK ENQUIRER PRESENTS: "Adventures in Alternative Journalism" The Analysis Piece

This article first appeared on the cypherpunks list. The "Cypherpunk Enquirer" is anonymous.

Alice stared at the two strange creatures. She was completely dumbfounded.

"So let me see if I've got this right. You make really good wheels. But if the Queen of Hearts had wheels, her subjects who occasionally raid your borders would be able to get away faster, and you wouldn't catch as many of them. Is that right, Tweedledumb?"

"I'm Tweedledumber. He's Tweedledumb. Yes, that's right. We have a technological lead over the Cards, and we have to maintain it."

"So you won't sell them wheels?"

"Well, it's more complex than that. A large part of our population is engaged in making wheels, and we make a lot of money selling them to the Cards. So we made a compromise. We only sell them SQUARE wheels."

"But of course," Tweedledumb chimed in, "it's very expensive to make both square and round wheels. So most of our people only make square wheels, so they can sell them to both us and the Cards. Of course, our people are allowed to buy round wheels, IF they can find them."

"AND," stated Tweedledumber, "since the wheel is patented here, we get to collect a hefty licensing fee for every wheel sold."

"But the Cards DO have wheels!" Alice could see over the fence, and the Cards were happily zipping around all over the place. "And so do a lot of people over here. What happened?"

"Well, we couldn't stop the Cards from building their OWN wheels ... "

"And people like buying the Card wheels because they're faster than our wheels, and they're cheaper, because they don't have to pay us the licensing fee ..."

"You see, we have a licensing treaty with the Cards for most things, so if they make something we have a patent on, they have to pay us, but the wheel can't be exported, so it can't EXIST over there, so our patents don't apply ... "

"But I don't understand! You said you needed to catch people, but now you can hardly catch anyone!" Alice was totally astounded at what she was hearing.

"It's only a stopgap measure anyway." Tweedledumber clasp his hands behind his back and started pacing. "We need to get an agreement with the Queen of Hearts that both of our people will only use, oh, say, pentagonal and maybe hexagonal wheels. That way, everyone can get around faster, but we'll still be able to catch them."

"But who's WE?"

"Anybody with a TLA on their shirt. WE get round wheels."

"What's a TLA?"

Alice almost felt relieved when she saw the familiar grin materialize. The rest of the Cheshire Cat soon followed.

"A TLA, my dear, is a Three Letter Anachronism. When people start referring to you by your initials, you've overstayed your welcome. If everyone starts calling ME TCC, I'll know it's time to find another job."

The caterpillar spoke up from its perch on the toadstool. "Wrong, tuna breath. TLA's are the only thing standing between society and total chaos."

Alice turned to face the caterpillar, who responded by blowing a lungful of hookah smoke in her face.

"THESE two goons only deal with the dangers of the Queen of Hearts and her soldiers, I have to worry about the domestic situation. So we came up with a solution. There are certain unscrupulous locals who engage in terrible things, terrorism, drug dealing, child molestation, money laundering ... we have to be able to catch them. If they had wheels, they could outrun us. But if we had ACCESS to those wheels when we needed it ... by the way, speaking of drug dealers, we know about that mushroom, and the pills. You might want to think really hard about playing ball with us, the Queen of Hearts is rather fond of cutting off dope addict's heads."

"Access to wheels? Does that have anything to do with those ropes hanging off the back of those carts?"

"Yup. We pull on that rope, the wheels fall off. And since we may have to stop a LOT of people at one time, we could have a riot, or another Butthole Surfers concert, we figure that we should be able to stop about ten percent of the population at once, a little less in the rural areas ... well, they've gotta be REALLY LONG ROPES ... and there have to be A WHOLE LOT of them ... course, the ones with the ropes we let have octagonal wheels ... "

"But can't just anybody pull the rope? You'll have wheels falling off all over the place."

"Price you have to pay for a safe society. Besides, we have trusted third parties holding to to the other end."

"How will you get people to use it, when they can get regular wheels from the Cards?"

"How else? We could pass a law. But it's easier just to threaten all the wheel dealers - put the rope on or we shut you down. Spread the word that only criminals don't use ropes - what are you afraid of? Got something to hide? Eventually we'll have to outlaw the round wheel, of course, but for the time being, some creative social engineering should do the trick." The caterpillar took another long drag on the hookah. "Good shit. Dole was right about this stuff."

"But can't people get real wheels for free?"

"Sure, we've pulled off enough they're lying around all over the place. But then you need an axle, bearings, steering - most people still just go down and buy the whole package. We get them, we're in - guy up in Seattle makes something like 90% of all carts sold here, you should see the shit we've got on HIM! No problemo. And those idiots at Netscape - we've got them doing a complete background check on anybody who wants a round wheel - come back in five days, and maybe you can have it."

"So, Alice, are you learning anything?"

Alice liked the Cheshire Cat, but it did have very sharp teeth, and very long claws, and it did have the habit of appearing out of nothing. Alice felt that it should be treated with respect. "Not really, your cattiness. It doesn't make any sense at all!"

"It isn't supposed to. You have to look at it the right way. From their perspective, it makes perfect sense."

"I'm confused."

"Don't worry about it. It gets worse before it gets better. Come on, we're going to a party. Tim May and John Gilmore are throwing a Mad Tea Party."

"Are they really mad?"

"May's crazy as a loon. You'll like him. Gilmore, he's just still pissed at Shimamura for that stunt in the hot tub ... "