

## Gresham's Law

-by Michael Dnes

The Ishiguro room is the third largest conference suite in the Gillingham Marriott. The hotel website promised gamma level data links, direct satellite telemetry and Turing-7 algorithm technical support. Tea and coffee could be provided for an extra fee. All of the furniture was made out of bacteriophagic grey plastic, and the management assured guests that the room was totally sterile.

The same identical room was available in three hundred and twenty four hotels across west-central Europe, and today would play host to programme boards, flashaholics anonymous meetings, retirement dos and a convention of Calabrian bottle collectors. In Gillingham, however, the room contained thirteen people and a two metre tall kitten, which was playing with a ball of wool.

The first among them, the only one wearing a suit, paced methodically around the kitten, wielding a large pointer. His eyes remained fixed on the holographic image while he addressed the room, watching each twitch of its muscles with the dispassionate interest of a horse breeder.

“You all know how important animals are to our business. Dogs running in their sleep; squirrels jumping onto dinner tables; cats dressed up in party hats.” With a blink, the kitten disappeared and was replaced by another, tortoiseshell in colour and staring quizzically at a point in the middle distance. “Kittens, however, are the motherlode. Bread and butter. Reliable as an Indian watch.”

At the table, Grigor Clarke tried to stop himself from wincing. He had to concentrate. However broken the delivery, Mr Xu was making a good point – kittens were important. Important enough for it to be worth flying an American expert over from Dubai; important enough for Grigor’s livelihood to depend on them.

“You’ll know these kittens. Hendrik-finds-a-friend; June 2103; 1,279 million views within twenty four hours.” The image flicked again. “Kitten-dances-to-70s-pump-dance-classics; August 2101; 1,180 million views.” The new animal was twitching to some unheard rhythm, and a middle aged woman to Grigor’s left began to hum an old tune from a long lost autumn.

“Each of these broke first on Keezo, each of them earned us hundreds of millions of bonus hits. And each of them was found by people like you.” Xu turned his gaze away from the kitten towards the audience. He frowned slightly, less certain of the quality of these components. Returning to the kitten, his pacing continued.

“It’s tubes like these that keep us alive. Keezo is the oldest buzz-site on the internet; and when it comes to the net, oldest is best. But I’ve been in this

business for over twenty years, and I've seen huge buzz-sites disappear in a couple of months. They got boring. No reason to go there, so they died."

The last hologram blinked, and the kitten was replaced by a hovering image of the front page of Keezo.com. Grigor had once tried to imagine life before the first buzz-site. Office workers procrastinating, kids avoiding homework, people sitting in traffic jams – all *searching* the internet for a two minute distraction, always going to the same websites to look at the same things. They must have been like medieval villagers – living in a boundless land and never walking more than five miles from their homes. After Keezo, they were taken on a grand tour of the world's facts and stories, its levity and tragedy; and above all, its youtubes.

"For about 45% of the world population, one thing that is never boring is a tube of a kitten. That's a scientific fact. So *every* time someone posts a tube of a kitten online, we need it assessed. If it's good, we need it on our front page in five, or ten if it has to be edited. And we need an assessment from you, as assistant editors, that's right ten times out of ten."

Grigor liked the term 'assistant editor'. It sounded much more dignified than tosher, which is what everyone else called him. Xu clapped his hands and a flip chart materialised next to him.

"So how do you spot a cute kitten? Lifetimes of research has gone into this, and over the next two days, I'm going to make you all experts."

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The first break was cruelly slow in coming. Sixty minutes without comms, as Xu carefully explained the seven key elements of cuteness. Grigor diligently managed to write down four – the guy next to him had only managed the first one, then spent the next fifty minutes holding his blackberry in one hand and composing a withering status that he would never dare post.

Grigor hadn't wanted to end up as a tosher. At school, that was unusual: up to the age of sixteen or so, most children thought that toshing must be the best job in the world. Sitting all day, looking at everything new coming onto the internet, recommending the things you like and getting paid for it. He remembered the envious looks of disbelief when he announced he'd got the job. But then, each friend had spent a young lifetime sneaking net time in the middle of classes, dodging work with youtubes, scrolling their pad under the dinner table. A tosher's life had an anarchic draw – the freedom to surf as you want for hour after hour, with no parent, regulatory or usage policy to tell you otherwise.

This conference room wasn't quite the liberated utopia they had been imagining, although given Marriott's market share, if there was a utopia it would still have an identical conference room. The window projector would probably be showing the same views.

A flurry of bleeps brought Grigor back to himself. The break had started, and everyone had dived for their pads, blackberrys, holophones and blogamatics. The room was filled with furious purpose; all except Xu, who sat placidly running through the next powerpoint on his personal holoprojector. The break was only 15 minutes, and they had a lot of internet to catch up with. This hour's top buzz was a flash game where you threw balls at soap star Handel Perview. A coffee android was set up at the back of the room, to help them concentrate on the next long hour. One woman was there already, examining the console with the diligence of someone reading an insurance contract.

He recognised her. Before the meeting began, he'd friended everyone, even Mr Xu. Sally Powell was the only one who didn't reply; and with a name as old-fashioned as that, he wasn't about to forget her. Without knowing quite why, Grigor went over to join her at the machine. She looked over her shoulder as he approached, assessing him through an antique pair of glasses.

"Strawberry coffee," she exclaimed. "Why would anyone want strawberry coffee? When did chocolate go out of style?" He looked at her blankly, and she turned away. His gaze followed her back to her seat as the android served him a cup of the vanilla.

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The top clicked story on Keezo that day was a dog pushing a toy car with her nose. 634 million people watched it, predominantly in the Middle East. By midnight Pacific, it was finished.

Mr Xu had finished explaining the difference between cuteness in 2D and 3D. His slide show had turned into a still of a kitten that was 3D at the rear, 2D at the front, revolving slowly. Grigor was reminded of those old Disneys he'd studied in school, where some animal had run into a wall. Xu stared disapprovingly at the mutant kitten as it spun.

"A kitten that's cute in 2D can be pointless in 3D. If you're not sure, make sure you watch it both ways – we can't waste page space on something that doesn't work on two of the five formats. Use the checklist and go through the six steps. Got it?"

With that, Mr Xu reached down into his bag and pulled out an engraved brass iPad. For the first time that day, his look of intense control wavered, replaced with relief. He muttered the customary formula with which to end training sessions – "any questions."

Everyone in the room dived for their devices and pushed their chairs back. A soft North-Country voice was almost lost in the scraping.

"Excuse me, Mr Xu?" Sally was still sitting, hand raised. "I have a question".

The room stopped in mid exit. Xu looked up in confusion. After a moment, he waved his hand uncertainly, asking her to continue.

“Mr Xu, if we’re so scientifically certain about what makes these animals so appealing, why can’t we video the youtubes ourselves? Won’t we be able to do a better job?” The room had divided – half sat silently, appalled at the violation, while the others tapped out mute disapprovals into the wifi.

Xu paused for a moment, then began moving across the room, talking as he went. “There’s no secret about what I’m teaching you today, just science.” He kept his eyes on Sally, with a warm, American smile. “You’re free to go out of here and find the cutest kitten ever, tube it, and watch to see how your colleagues rate it.” His hand was on the door switch. “You have a great evening, now.” With a click, he was out and gone.

Sally, hand still half-up, blinked for a moment. Her arm fell to her lap, and as the rest of the room began to move again, she sank back in her chair. A young girl next to Grigor was tweeting – *omg: crazy cardigan lady – any questions dont mean you ask questions! dont they have email in glasses land? #howembarrassing*. Grigor frowned and looked across to Sally, who had pulled out her pad and was listlessly tracing her way through a dusty website.

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Dinner coincided with the corrected highlights from Diego Chandarvarkar’s latest fashion show in Sao Paolo. The world had been awaiting this event for days – a careful drip-feed of misbehaving models and synthetic scandal had kept it squarely on the front pages of the buzz-sites. In the Marriott’s dining room, people were pushing and shoving to get a good view of the holoprojector. Grigor, who had no interest in fashion, sat alone at a wall table checking the politics blogs. Sally, he suddenly realised, was sitting at the next table staring fiercely at something.

She still hadn’t replied to his friending, eight hours late. He’d even sent a reminder.

It wasn’t as if people hadn’t returned his friending before. Somehow, though, this time seemed to matter. He looked up; Sally was still studying her tablet with the same intense glare. As if to compensate, her spare hand wandered up and down her cardigan, counting the button holes and probing them, one by one. A strand of straight, black hair fell in front of her glasses, silhouetted by the light above. Grigor felt his palms begin to sweat. Summoning his courage, he decided to act.

Scrolling his blackberry, he opened chattaprox and found Sally’s name. The blank box looked at him expectantly. The white space always scared him, especially in a conversation like this. He remembered nights out at university, trying to message a girl at the bar. There was no alcohol here to make things easier. The only thing he could think to say was *What did you want to ask Xu?*

After five minutes consideration, he had nothing better; and for want of anything else he typed it in. He changed the font, changed it back. Then he hit 'send'.

Twenty years earlier, the great blogger Xanwen had written movingly about the ten second wait for a conversation to start; the gap when you don't know whether you are actually talking to someone, or just to yourself. Grigor remembered that from university as well, and cursed its accuracy. He stared at the screen for ten long seconds, soul exposed to the elements and fearing that nothing would come. Another five, and however hard he willed the screen to move, it didn't. Fifteen became twenty.

"You know, you could try actually talking to me. Would it hurt?" Grigor looked up from the screen with a start. Sally stood at the other side of the table, pad held in one hand like five commandments.

"Sorry – that was ruder than it should have been." She lowered her shoulders, and her voice softened. "What I meant was, there's no reason not to just talk to me."

Grigor twisted the end of his t-shirt. "I've been toshing at home for five years now," he explained simply. "It's been a while since I first met someone in person."

Sally pulled over her chair. "It must be nice to be used to it. It's been six months since I started, and I swear that madness is waiting for me in my inbox." She picked up an empty glass from the table and began turning it, slowly, in her hands.

"What was your question about?" Grigor still didn't quite understand, although in the past five minutes he'd approached the question from every angle he could in his search for a better chatline.

"That?" Sally's voice had a far-off quality as she examined a slight imperfection in the glassware's curve. "Do you like history?"

"Knights and castles and stuff? I used to be in a World of Warcraft re-enactment forum." She smiled at the joke.

"More modern than that. You know what Hollywood was?" Seeing Grigor's puzzled look, she pushed on. "Back in the petrol age, there used to be a place in America where they used to make these things called films. Back before there were youtubes, you couldn't watch any moving pictures in your home. You had to go out and sit in a darkened room and just watch for hours." Somewhere in the glass, her eyes fixed on a facet in the light.

"Who'd want to watch something that long?" She smiled.

"People queued up for hours; then they came back the next day to see the same thing. They got dreams in black and white and 2D." Her voice went soft,

so soft it almost choked. "You know, an hour and a half isn't forever. Sometimes, you just hope it will be."

She set the glass down and looked at him, and the device in his hands. Something about the sight of it made her stiffen, and brought her eyes back in focus.

"Even a hundred years ago, people got paid to make these films. Hundreds of them. Sometimes, they'd spend five minutes at the end just listing all the names."

Grigor had a sudden moment of clarity. "You want to make the youtubes *instead* of toshing them!"

"Of course that's what I mean," she replied dismissively. "I spend all day staring at four simultaneous videos, to find some idiot animal or some teenager making a fool of themselves. If I'm lucky, I find two worth showing. Why don't we just try making a few videos instead? It's got to be better than staring at a thousand youtubes a day."

To his surprise, Grigor was looking straight into her eyes.

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Later that night, he turned to face her.

"Sally?" The bedroom lights started to glow faintly in response to his voice. The girl next to him mumbled sleepily.

"Sally; about your Hollywood place."

A girlish smile spread below her closed eyes. "Yes, mister director?"

"What happened to it in the end?" She opened her eyes and pushed herself up on the pillow.

"Evil corporations. Back then, there were a lot of websites competing to be like buzz-sites." She ran a hand through his sandy hair. "They didn't want to compete with films, so they bought up all the studios and closed them down." The hand traced his neck and shoulder. "They couldn't handle the heat."

Grigor caught her wrist and began stroking the vein-lines with his thumb. "But why didn't anyone make more of them?"

"All they cared about was money."

Grigor paused. "How many people were watching these films, at the end?"

The smile slipped from her face, and her eyes opened properly. “More than they said. You can’t trust wikipedia here. I can’t believe that Nolan’s *Rorschach* played to empty cinemas just because it was two hours long.”

Grigor tried to imagine something two hours long. The longest tube he’d reviewed had been four minutes twelve seconds. He let go of Sally’s hand and reached for his pad.

“What are you doing?” she asked, as he put the device down between them.

“Just a bit of maths. I want to figure out how many times you could fit 4:12 into that film. 28.57143, it says.” The number hung in the air for a moment. Grigor thought back to that tube – it had felt pointlessly long, and he remembered being astonished how many other tubes had flashed past to extinction on the other three sections of his monitor while it had blundered its way to nowhere.

Sally shuffled in the bed, crooking her body to get away from the cold oleophobic plastic. “It’s not the same thing, you know,” she said.

He looked back at her, growing colder in the night air. The certainty that had radiated from her in the evening had vanished in the blue glow of the nightlight. Now, all the questions seemed to come to him at once.

“Why are people going to pay for films when there are tubes free for everyone?” The question came out level, but her response didn’t.

“They’re not the same thing. You can enjoy one, but you can live the other. The tubes... the youtubes are obviously nowhere near as good. You’d have to be blind not to see it.” She rolled herself up in the sheet and sat up on the side of the bed. He put his hand on her shoulder, and felt her breath shaking.

“Sorry, sorry. But ...” he drew breath and tried again. “It’s hard to compete against free. People have to want something a lot more before they’ll pay for it.”

She pulled away from his hand, and reached for her glasses. As she turned to face him, he realised that the lenses were nothing but window glass. Behind them, her eyes were lost and tinted with fury.

“But they’ve got to. It’s art, and beauty and better than anything they can imagine. If you took all the time people spend watching what Keezo tells them, and made them watch classical film...”

She snatched the pad from the bed and waved it at him as he pulled himself to a sitting position.

“You know what this is? This is the greatest single invention in the history of mankind, everyone tells me. But Plato did without it, and Shakespeare, and Mozart and Welles. All of them found their voice, and the world found them just fine. And today, we upload a thousand ideas a second, and not one of

them is worth hearing. And if they were, they'd get swamped by Xu and his madness of kittens."

On the last word, she hurled the pad at the bathroom door. Grigor watched as it bounced off the frame and dropped, unharmed, onto the floor. When he turned back to Sally, she was putting on her clothes.

"A little fact for you," she warned, snatching her t-shirt off the chair. "Did you ever wonder where the word 'tosher' came from? It's Victorian. It was someone whose job it was to search through muck and filth and human waste, to find cheap trinkets people had flushed away by accident, and that they could sell for half a farthing."

She flicked the door switch, and was gone.

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The next morning, twelve people sat in the Ishiguro Room of the Gillingham Marriott, together with one empty chair. Mr Xu stood up at the front.

"Now – balls of wool."