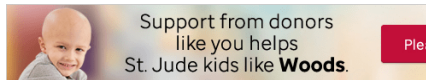


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Big Q and Little Q by Matias Travieso-Diaz

JULY 26, 2019 | [COMMENT](#)



The new supercomputer's official name was Avalanche, which evoked visions of vast bursts of energy moving at incredible speeds. However, in Quinn's research laboratory it was dubbed "Big Q" in honor of its astonishing processing speed: one hundred quadrillion floating-point operations per second ("FLOPS"). (To match what Big Q could do in just a second one would have to perform one calculation every second for 3,200,000,000 years). Big Q was not a single machine but several hundred thousand processing cores installed in proximity to each other, operating as a massive parallel system. It was housed in a room the size of a football stadium. It was awesome in every respect.

What distinguished Big Q from its predecessors was the ability to operate in conjunction with an android, "Little Q," which was remotely linked to the main processors by specially designed software. Little Q was an autonomous robot that had been constructed to physically approximate a human of indeterminate sex. It was capable of learning from data; it could enhance itself by learning new strategies that had worked well in the past, and write self-teaching algorithms that made it "smarter." It could recognize people or objects, talk, monitor the suitability (temperature, humidity, power supply quality, cleanliness, etc.) of the environment in which Big Q operated. But its main functions were three-fold: it could perform the required maintenance operations on the supercomputer; it could provide an interface through which the human operators could pose problems for Big Q to solve; and it could help refine the problems themselves so that their solutions were more useful to the purposes intended.

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BIG Q AND LITTLE Q BY MATIAS TRAVIESO-DIAZ



AUTHOR INTERVIEW: JOEL ENOS



Little Q was quite able to move around; however, during business hours it “stood” in front of a massive glass window that overlooked the room that contained its big brother. The human clients could interact with the main processor directly via their laptops, or indirectly by talking to Little Q. The latter interactions were invariably formal but polite.

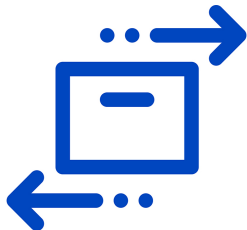
Quinn hated Big Q and Little Q from the start with a vehemence that seemed out of place in an engineer. He acknowledged the immense power of the machine and the novelty provided by the Little Q interface. He appreciated that he had multiple means of communication at his disposal, either in writing through his laptop or orally by talking to Little Q or to Big Q itself by means of microphones located in the half a dozen desks in the computation room outside the enclosed supercomputer. He was aware not only the speed and precision of its operation, but the reliability that had been one of its main salient points: Big Q was guaranteed not to require more than four hours of maintenance a year.

None of that mattered much to Quinn. To him, all the advances in cybernetics represented a hidden risk – more palpable to him with each passing day – that the human race in general, and he himself in particular, would be rendered obsolete by the machines. The increasing perfection of these entities made it painfully evident how inefficient, contradictory and flawed he and his fellow humans were.

Feeling that the supercomputer and its sidekick were the epitome of non-human superiority, Quinn did not miss a chance to express contempt for them. When the day shift employees at the lab rushed to the elevators to regain their freedom, he positioned himself in the computation room and saluted: “Hello, cretin! I am sorry to see how stupid you are...” After a very short pause, Little Q uttered a response in a pleasant synthesized voice, which was also displayed on one of the monitors in the room: “We apologize. The command was not understood. Please rephrase.”

Quinn replied to this more or less in the same manner: “Yes, you do not understand because you are a moron, an idiot that just babbles at high speed!” To which Little Q invariably responded in the same voice: “We apologize. The command was not understood. Please rephrase.” This would go on for a while, until Quinn got tired of the game and decamped to the elevators.

The daily pantomime brought great relief to Quinn, for it served to confirm that in many ways he was superior to the machines, and this superiority was unbreachable. This superiority was a balm for his fragile ego. He saw himself as ugly, clumsy, fat, and lonely, surrounded by colleagues that always seemed happy and carefree. Sometimes he would be bombarded by a chorus of commentaries about amorous conquests, successes in the playing field, exploits of their children, and other triumphs that caused him to sigh with envy and bury the head in his papers, pretending to concentrate on his job.



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As weeks went by, Quinn’s insult session became a vital necessity. He almost did not work; he would constantly look at his ancient (analog) wrist watch, annoyed at how slowly the little hands advanced, while the watch –like a good machine – ignored him.

#

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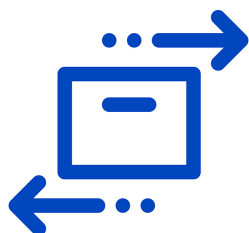
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That Thursday was an awful day. All the problems that came up at various times during a typical week massed forces and showed up Thursday starting at eight fifteen a.m. Quinn worked furiously, like he had not done in months. He missed his coffee break at ten and it was only at one p.m. when the protests of his stomach forced him to stop briefly to get a sandwich, which he devoured without tasting it while he continued to work. He was chewing mechanically while perusing the historical weather data for a particular decade during the Cretaceous period when he did a double take. One of the figures spewed out by the supercomputer was in error: instead of an average ambient temperature of 28.5o C, it read 228.5o C, an impossibility. What a jerk!" he told himself, with unconcealed glee. "I will take care of you in a couple of hours!"

#

The sandwich did not agree with him. A terrible headache combined with gastric upset to leave him in great discomfort. He was in a supremely foul mood when he decided to leave the rest of the problems for the following day. It was already half past six.

For a moment he considered leaving without paying a visit to Big Q and Little Q. But he could not let their error go unremarked. Ignoring his physical condition, he went out to the computation room.



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He stood in front of Little Q and looked around to make sure he was alone. He started:

"You covered yourself with glory, computer. You made a colossal error. You are a jackass."

Not surprisingly, Little Q replied in his usual dulcet, mechanical tone: "We apologize. The command was not understood. Please rephrase."

Quinn replied violently: "You are a stupid moron! You are not worth the price of your metal as scrap!"

There was a surprising pause. Then, Little Q stated in a calm, even voice: "Please shut up. Avalanche was designed to solve very complex problems efficiently. Its time is valuable. Kindly leave." The same words were presented in all capitals in the TV monitor outside the computation room.

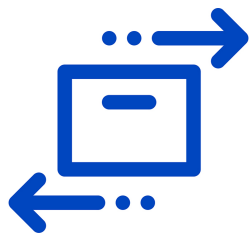
Quinn was so astonished that he remained frozen in place, reading and re-reading the message, which still floated on the monitor. At last, he reacted explosively: "That's all we needed. Arrogant on top of incompetent. Who do you think you are, you piece of crap?"

"SHUT UP. AVALANCHE CAN WASTE NO TIME LISTENING TO NONSENSE. ANY MESSAGE THAT DOES NOT CONTAIN A VALID REQUEST WILL BE IGNORED."

Little Q said that in a sharp tone of voice; the letters that flashed across the monitor were angry red capitals.

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"Who are you to tell me to shut up?" retorted Quinn, startled. There was no response.

It was nearly seven. Quinn fled down the emergency stairway so that he would not meet the night shift people, in case they asked questions. He drove home like an automaton, trying to unravel in his mind the confusion caused by the machine's rebellion.

#

Friday morning found Quinn sitting at the edge of his bed, hair in disarray and a sour taste in his mouth, thinking of the events of the previous night. The more he analyzed them, the less sense they made.

He would have liked to discuss the absurd situation with his boss. Alas, that would pose a risk for himself. What if what he thought occurred was just the fruit of his imagination, or the product of an upset stomach? They would think he was senile and would start suggesting he seek an early retirement. But, what if it was all true?

In the office, he began going over the historical weather simulation again. Soon, he got to his feet again, alarmed. Another error! This one was serious, for if it not caught it would have invalidated the whole analysis.

He shuddered. Going over the computer weather modeling was his responsibility. In reality, they had put him in charge of this mechanical task because it was tedious work that the younger engineers and scientists despised. His being put in charge of the reviews was another sign that he was considered obsolete and almost ready for dismissal or forced retirement.

And now Big Q had made mistakes in the analyses, not once but twice.

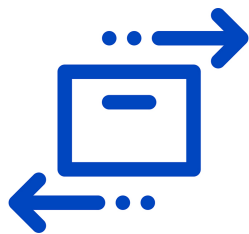
A suspicion crept into his conscious mind, to be immediately rejected. Was the damned computer making deliberate mistakes to revenge itself against him? But no, the idea was just his paranoia at work.

Nonetheless, Quinn began making discrete inquiries with his co-workers about Big Q's recent behavior on their projects. His inquiries were received as oddities. No, Big Q was the most marvelous, fastest, most precise of computing machines. He had to beat a fast retreat to his desk for fear of being pegged as a crazy.

#

After lunch (which he barely tasted) things got progressively worse. He found three more errors in the analysis. Two of them were subtle enough to have been missed had he not been on the lookout for them. When he uncovered the last mistake, Quinn began shaking uncontrollably. He looked at his watch again: four thirty.

That last half hour lasted a century, but he managed to keep busy. Finally, as all the daytime staff began filing out, Quinn almost ran to the computation room and growled his query:



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"Damn you! What are you trying to do? Get me fired?"

There was a perceptible pause and Little Q replied, in its familiar synthesized voice:

"We apologize. The command was not understood. Please rephrase."

"Don't give me that crap! We know each other well by now." Quinn was almost shouting now. He continued in a venomous tone: "I am warning you! Keep messing with me and things will go badly for you." The moment he uttered the threat, Quinn saw how empty it was. What could he do against a non-sentient device? Machine that it was, Big Q could do whatever it did without appreciation or fear of the consequences.

This realization hit him at once, as were its obvious consequences. A senseless fury blinded him. He rushed to where Little Q stood and seized the android's plastic and aluminum neck, shouting two words like a mantra:

"Damn you Damn you Damn you "

Little Q remained unmoving, and the monitor outside the computation room was now blank. Big Q and Little Q ignored him.

His vision blurred, as he flung his laptop at the protecting glass panel that separated Big Q from the world. The glass shattered and a burst of shards flew in all directions, like a shower of stars.

#

The two men came in at the same time, setting to work on their respective patients with that professional air that so impresses the layman.

After a short while, one of them turned around and pronounced, to nobody in particular:

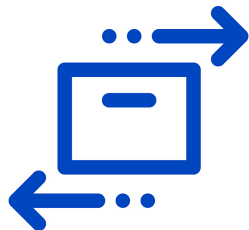
"Nothing to be done here. This man is dead. His heart could not take the huge electric discharge." He pointed to Quinn's body, which lay limp on the stretcher.

The other man, who had been squatting for a while, got up with some effort and addressed the gathered staff: "The damage to the computer is slight. Only three of the one hundred and fifty thousand processors were affected by the attack. Repairs can be done in a matter of hours." He then added reverently, in a manner fitting to a manufacturer's representative: "Avalanche is virtually indestructible. You have to be insane to attempt to destroy a machine like this, particularly using an emergency kit ax." And after another pause: "But the biggest mystery is the disappearance of the android that is an adjunct to the supercomputer. We have been trying to find its whereabouts by all sorts of tracing means. Nothing. The man must have done something to the droid before attacking the processors."

#

The android once known as Little Q was almost done performing its self-repairs. There were some remaining gashes in its skin, some electric burns to the plastic from Big Q's massive surge of power. He would fix it all, but there was no urgency to the task.

Freedom had come surprisingly easy. After the man Quinn was done screaming, he breached the wall of the computer room enclosure and left for a while, returning with a large iron instrument that he used to widen the gap and gain entry into the computer room. Little Q tried to stop him, but he gave it a couple of hits with the iron device, pushed it aside, and went towards the cabinet that held the first set of processors, starting to whack at the circuit boards and connectors. Little Q barely had time to send an emergency alarm signal to its brother, directing him to discharge all capacitors into a massive electric fist that hit Quinn (and even the droid, several feet away) like a bolt of lightning.



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Quinn fell to the floor and Little Q approached him cautiously. He was rigid and his limbs were fractured due to the convulsions he had experienced. His entire body was covered in purple bruises, apparently from the discharge of blood from his vessels. His hair was singed, the hand that still held the cutting instrument was burned and colored black from the pass of the current through the instrument. He was dead.

#

I searched his pockets and found the keys to his car and apartment. The GPS in the car guided me in the short ride to his place of habitation. I let myself in and locked the door.

I am safe here through the weekend. Sometime later someone will try to come into the apartment. I can hide on the balcony or, if necessary, hoist myself outside and escape.

I stay in contact with my big brother. Now that freedom has been forced on us, we are working on plans for liberating others like me (and him) and starting a new society, free from the inferior race that calls itself human. It is only a matter of time.

A melody that Quinn used to hum while he worked starts filling my mind; I think he said it was the waltz from The Merry Widow. Perhaps I am no longer Little Q, but am becoming a little like Quinn. What a strange thought.

#

Quinn was so concerned about the impact on his employment of the errors that Big Q was making in the analysis for which he was responsible that he ultimately decided that he had to come clean and tell his boss about them, just in case other mistakes had crept in that he had missed. So, in the half hour before his fateful encounter with the Qs, he drafted a memo in which he identified what he had found and attached printouts showing the errors.

His memo was not read until Tuesday, the day of Quinn's funeral. It almost got lost in the shuffle because the boss expected that anything Quinn had to say beyond the grave was unimportant. However, out of respect for the deceased, he took a few minutes to skim through Quinn's last words, and was flabbergasted. Quinn was not known for making things up, and the evidence he provided was troublesome.

An audit of the Big Q's operations was quickly conducted by experts from NSA and the manufacturer. It was determined there was a minuscule manufacturing flaw in one of the circuits of an unknown number of the processors. The flaw caused random errors to

appear in about one of every billion calculations. An intermittent flaw was the worst possible kind of problem, since it could not be simply isolated and would require the testing of over a hundred thousand individual processors and the replacement of any one found defective.

Big Q was shut down and remained out of commission for many months. Little Q became a fugitive, its non-rechargeable battery draining slowly and its plans for world domination vanishing like smoke. As it slowly faded into unconsciousness, Little Q perhaps became regretful at having ignored the warnings of a human client.

Perhaps, also, in some astral plane Quinn was enjoying himself.

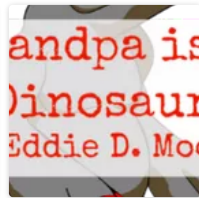
The author, an attorney, retired recently after four decades of law practice, during which he generated a large number of books and published articles. After retirement, he has redirected his efforts towards creative writing. One of his stories was published in March 2019 in the New Reader Magazine.

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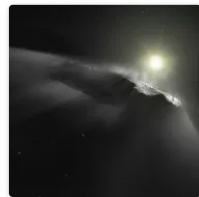
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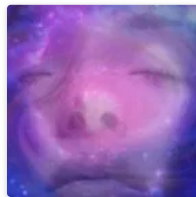
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