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Time Travel for Dunces

by Matias Travieso-Diaz

Einstein's general theory of relativity allows for the possibility that we could warp space-time so much that you could go off in a rocket and return before you set out.
Stephen Hawking

The ad, placed in several high-circulation newspapers throughout the country, indicated that Time Travel, Inc. was seeking tour guides to lead the first ever excursions to locations and times throughout history. Thousands of applications were submitted for the dozen or so jobs available.

Phineas Clopp ("Finn" to his friends) was one of the applicants. What distinguished him from virtually all others was his profound distaste for travel, particularly travel to foreign locations. He was well qualified, was good natured and personable, and hoped to hide what he regarded as a fatal character flaw.

No such luck. The batteries of psychological tests to which he was subjected quickly identified his secret, a matter that came up during his interview at the company headquarters in mid-town Manhattan.

“Mr. Clopp, according to our evaluations, you are averse to traveling and moving to foreign locations. What possessed you to apply for a time travel tour guide engagement with us?” asked condescendingly the interviewer, a man dressed in a suit that must have cost two or three thousand dollars.

“Sir, I am well suited for the needs of the position you advertise and am flat broke. I think I can set aside my personal tastes and give the job my best.”

“Well, as you may have heard, the time travel project is the brainchild of Daniel Abrazos, who has devoted many billions of his own personal fortune to developing the technology and building the required facilities. These have been located away from the prying eyes of the world governments, our competitors, and other parties. The job site is no Paris or San Francisco.”

“Where are we talking about?”

“The location of the project is classified. However, you are a strong candidate and, if selected and once you have signed an NDA, you will be let in on what few people outside Mr. Abrazos’ organization know. Suffice it to say that the chosen site is at one of the remotest places on Earth. You will go there and stay six months of each year. Do you think you can handle that?”

Finn replied with false self-confidence: “I am sure I can.”

Finn was astonished to receive a job offer from Time Travel. He was asked to appear for a post-offer interview, in which his first question was “How did you choose me among thousands of applicants, knowing that I hate traveling?”

The same man who had questioned earlier his fitness for the job had a bizarre explanation. “There are a number of paradoxes to time travel that our scientists are still trying to work through. The most important one is the fear that contamination from interactions with the

past will give rise to unpredictable consequences for the present and future. Until those paradoxes are satisfactorily resolved, travelers will be only passive observers.”

“What does that have to do with my being offered a job as a tour guide?”

The man’s lips parted in an ironic smile. “Guides tend to be curious and prone to exploring. For this job we need to make sure that the guides we hire will keep tour participants from wandering in some point in the past, and won’t do so themselves. You are optimally qualified for that task.”

Another of Finn’s questions was about the location of the job.

“The project is located in Kurchatov, Kazakhstan.”

“Why there?”

“Mr. Abrazos negotiated with the Kazakh government the purchase of the entire Semipalatinsk Test Site, which used to be where the former Soviet Union conducted above ground nuclear tests. The site was abandoned and largely deserted because of lingering fears of radiation exposure, but it meets our requirements. It is in the steppes of Central Asia, it is hard to get to, and it has scientific buildings and other facilities within easy driving distance of the nearest town. And hardly anyone ever visits there.”

“Is it safe to go the site, with all that radiation stuff lying around?”

“The Semipalatinsk site was decontaminated many decades ago by teams of Kazakh, American and Russian scientists, and is safe for such infrequent visits by the public as they occur. In any case, tour participants will not be allowed to leave the main transport facility and will only experience the tour from the safety of their observation panel.”

“Do you mean they would be able to travel to a point in the past but would not be allowed to actually set foot there?”

“Exactly, for the reasons I mentioned earlier.”

“I see. Where in time are we going?”

“From polls of potential tour participants, the attraction that many people would like to see is Christians being fed to the lions in the Roman Colosseum. Go figure. Anyhow, the wormhole endpoints for this year are designed so that its moving end would land at the Colosseum in Rome in July 116 AD. At that time, the Patriarch of Antioch, later known as St. Ignatius, and two dozen other Christians were thrown to the lions because of their perceived role in causing the earthquake that struck Antioch at the end of 115 AD.”

“Wasn’t it Nero who first had Christians thrown to the beasts in the Colosseum?”

“No. The Colosseum was built after Nero’s downfall and the Christian sacrifices there started happening later, during the rule of Emperor Trajan. But you will have three months of intensive training that will enable you to answer that and other relevant questions.”

The following March, Finn and other personnel assigned to the first year of time travel tours went on a twenty-hour flight from JFK to Semey in northern Kazakhstan and – after a day of rest – proceeded by car to Kurchatov, the local headquarters of the time travel project.

Finn hated the Kurchatov facility on sight. It lay on a frozen, windswept steppe, the lumpy ground covered by sickly yellow grass and stunted shrubbery. There were no trees anywhere.

The site was immense, comparably in area (Finn had been told) to the State of New Jersey. It was full of derelicts of a bygone era, decaying metal towers and other ominous structures whose original purpose was no longer evident. There were no signs of life anywhere save for scurrying little animals and low flying scavenging birds.

A narrow road led from the entrance of the site to the Impulse Graphite Reactor complex, where military-related experiments had once been conducted. Halfway down that road, something new had been constructed: a very large structure of blindingly shiny metal that resembled a segmented bug. Its “head” was a cylinder; the “thorax,” a long, narrow tube; the “abdomen,” an ovoid roughly twice the combined size of the other segments. In the pre-departure briefing at Kurchatov’s only hotel, Finn gave a sanitized description of the structure to his wards, the eight men and four women that he would host.

“We’ll spend the next five-plus days in what is known as the Space-Time Translocator or “STT.” You and I will remain at all times in the cylindrical segment of the STT, which will serve as our shuttle bus, five-star hotel and restaurant. We call it the time capsule. It has a huge observation panel through which we can watch the progress of the trip, see what is happening at our destination, and monitor our travel back to home base. The long tube will serve to isolate the time capsule from the goings-on at the end portion, where all the time and space travel processes will be carried out.”

“How is that time travel going to be done, exactly?” demanded a silver-maned man in his sixties who exuded authority.

“I would be lying if I told you that I know how that scientific feat is accomplished. It has been explained to me in a grossly simplified manner as follows. Pretend that our current time and physical location is a batter bubble on the surface of a pancake. Our destination is a similar bubble on another pancake that sits some distance away from ours. The STT creates a hollow tunnel, like a drinking straw, that runs between our bubble and the bubble on the other pancake. The straw will inhale the time capsule out from our bubble and deposit it exactly on the desired spot on the other. So, when the motion stops, we will find ourselves in space and time at the

desired location, which for this trip will be Imperial Rome in the early Second Century AD. We will linger there for a while, observe what happens, and head back.”

“That doesn’t explain very much” grumped the old man.

“Sorry, that’s the best I can do.”

For the next two days, Finn and his wards felt a steady ground tremor, as the capsule appeared to be traveling slowly like a subway train moving underground between stations. They spent their time eating fancy foods automatically delivered to the dining area, drinking themselves silly, and watching through the gigantic glass observation panel as stars appeared, drew nearer, grew to fill the panel, and faded away. The spectacle was awe-inspiring at first, but soon became boring. Conversations became desultory as the tour participants – all multimillionaires or billionaires who could afford Mr. Abrazos’ exorbitant fee – became increasingly tired of the forced inactivity.

Midway the third day of the trip, there was a loud thud followed by a lurch forward that made some people momentarily lose their balance. All eyes were directed towards the observation panel, which no longer displayed a star show. Rather, the time capsule seemed to have landed on an oval space surrounded on all sides by row upon row of stone tiers upon which a crowd of people wearing tunics sat or milled around.

“Aww, my God!!!” shouted a very old lady who was taking this tour as her final vacation destination. Others among their group made similar, though more profane, pronouncements.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we have arrived” declared Finn, adding dramatically: “Let the tour begin!”

As the initial excitement subsided, a few things became evident. It was mid-afternoon on a hot summer day. Half of the four-level structure was shaded by an enormous canvas awning that hung from poles at its top. The ground on which the time capsule lay was covered by a thick layer of red sand, which was soaked with blood in a few places. There was action on the ground: naked dwarves, cripples, and women battled each other with wooden swords, in what appeared to be a mock imitation of the more serious fights among men that occurred at other times. At some sign from a marble box festooned with purple in the front row of seats, attendants entered through a main gateway directly across from the time capsule and proceeded to use whips, poles, and other prods to push the dwarves, cripples, and women back towards the gateway. A couple of dwarves rushed close to the capsule, trying to escape a whip-brandishing attendant.

“Can’t they see us?” wondered someone.

“No” replied Finn. “The outside skin of the time capsule was designed using stealth technology. It’s made of a material that absorbs all light in the visible spectrum, such that anyone staring at it, even right in front of the capsule, sees only a hazy blur like a mirage. Only an accidental touch of the capsule would detect something. And such a touch, I was told, would elicit a mild electric shock that would discourage further contacts.”

Not everyone seemed to buy this explanation, but further questions were stifled by a visible commotion at the main gateway. A host of burly men in armor, wearing purple-colored capes, marched into the arena in full formation. In their midst entered a motley group of men, women, and children, naked or wearing dirty loincloths. The soldiers herded their apparent captives into the arena and forced them to stand opposite from the marble box, in full view of its occupants – presumably the Roman Emperor and his family and guests.

The captives formed a tight knot around a tall bearded man who appeared to be their leader. The man was speaking to his brethren and gesticulating. The capsule's occupants could not hear what was being said, but there were tears and gestures of fear and lamentation, to which the bearded man responded by laying hands consolingly on many of the prisoners.

The silent scene was interrupted by a violent disturbance of the surface of the sand. Two trap doors opened and there was a blur of motion as four lions and four panthers jumped out. At first, the beasts stood dazed amid the light, noise and smells of the arena, but then they were followed by handlers armed with pikes, tridents, whips and nets, who forced the animals to approach the circle of prisoners.

A curious situation then developed. A few of the beasts sniffed at the captives inquisitively, but none made a move to attack them. Finn remarked: "I read that the beasts used at the Colosseum were kept starved for three or four days, to ensure they would be ready to savage their prey. Somehow these Christians don't appear appetizing." Then, one of the handlers struck a vicious blow to the arm of a prisoner, nearly severing the limb. A profusion of dark blood burst out of the wound, and the smell of human blood awoke the animals from their stupor so that they began attacking the defenseless Christians.

"That was vile!" protested one of the passengers. Finn countered quickly: "These handlers were slaves whose livelihood, maybe their survival, depended on their getting the animals to act ferociously. It was certainly cruel and like you I disapprove, but that man was only doing his job."

As the lions and panthers attacked, the Christians knelt on the sand and began praying or singing. Their leader led the chorus and stood upright, eyes turned heavenward. A few seconds

later, a panther jumped on him, dropped him to the ground, and began taking bites of his flesh. Other animals followed the panther's lead.

The carnage was soon in full swing. The Christians did not attempt to defend themselves from the claws of the animals, or even tried to flee, but appeared to pray as they were slain.

There was one exception, though. A woman holding a baby boy was desperately trying to protect the baby from the attack of a lion. The lion pushed her to the ground and wrestled the baby away from her arms, pawing the infant and toying with him as it prepared to devour the child.

"NOOO!!!" screamed the old lady who was on her final vacation. "We can't let this happen!!! Mr. Clopp, DO SOMETHING!!!"

Finn was paralyzed. "Madam, we can't interfere! We are only observers, and this happened two thousand years ago! What can I possibly do?"

The old woman became hysterical. "Be a man!! Go out, kill that lion, rescue the baby, and bring him back to the capsule!!" A murmur of approvals echoed her plea.

Finn had his orders, but was also loath to allow the atrocity to be committed. He wrestled with his conscience and then remembered he had been given a key to a small side door on the bottom of the capsule, together with a stern warning: "Don't open that door except in an overwhelming life-threatening emergency." Finn decided this was as overwhelmingly life-threatening an emergency as he was likely to encounter. He grabbed a pistol from his locker, ran down two flights of stairs, inserted the key on the emergency door, and ran out.

He was met by the darkness of early evening in the accursed steppe. No lions or Christians, no Colosseum. Unable to comprehend the inexplicable change, he stumbled back to the capsule. The emergency door had locked and would not open despite his frantic efforts.

The monotonous sound of a train starting to go in motion broke the evening silence. The time capsule was still there, but sounded as if it was moving away.

Finn sat on the ground, next to the stationary but seemingly moving STT, thinking hard.

It finally dawned on him. There had been no travel in time. The images they saw on the observation panel were movies cleverly projected onto the panel for the benefit of the paying customers, who were being duped into believing that a fictitious trip in time was occurring. Time travel may someday be feasible, but in this incarnation, it is just a confidence game for dunces.

Give it to Mr. Abrazos, reflected Finn. He had found a new fool-proof way of bilking the unknowing public. And, in this remote land away from the reach of justice, he was safe from prosecution even in the event of being discovered.

After banging fruitlessly on the door of the “time capsule,” Finn became aware he was standing outdoors, wearing only a tee shirt and sweat pants, in subzero weather in the steppes of Central Asia. He better find shelter soon or he would catch his death.

Night fell as he began trying to make his way out of the site and back to Kurchatov. Predictably, he got lost.

Time Travel, Inc. made no attempt to find Finn, whose body would not be found for many months. A letter of condolence was sent to his mother, with a check for the wages he earned during the trip, plus a generous bonus.

Several of the passengers had raised questions about Finn's disappearance. A handsome bonus was paid out to all participants in the ill-fated tour for the inconvenience of losing their guide during the return trip, and the payments were accepted without further inquiries.

There would be no complaints from his family, and nobody else would remember Finn. Except, perhaps, for a very old lady who was grateful for Finn's gallant gesture and always wondered whatever had happened to him.

Time Travel tours to the Roman Colosseum in 116 AD continued with great success, but the segment that featured a lion devouring an infant was edited out in response to negative feedback from some travelers.

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