

2018 Week 8: The Week Ending Saturday, February 24th

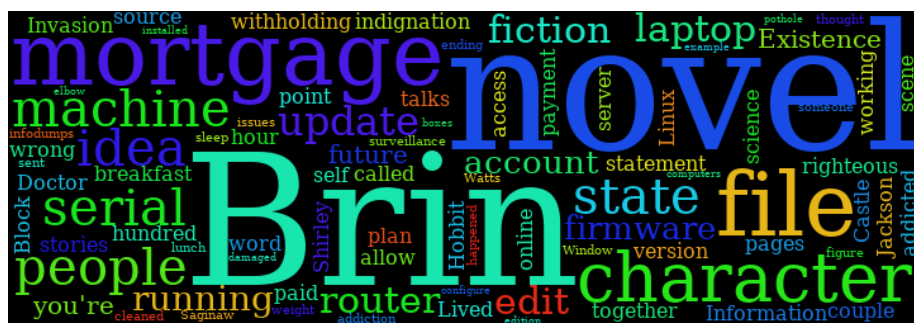


Figure 1: Word Cloud

Sunday

Taxes

Yesterday is a bit of a blur. I made breakfast for the kids. We managed to get to H&R Block and got our taxes done. That was a bit complicated because I realized during the consultation that I had not yet gotten one of three mortgage interest statements in the mail. So we had to go all the way home, find that information, and go all the way back. Wells Fargo's online mortgage account claimed it was down for the whole weekend and customers would not be able to access their accounts until Monday(!) but for some reason I was able to download a PDF file containing my mortgage interest statement. The PDF file it generated was titled something like **ACCOUNT_UNAVAILABLE_something-something.pdf**. And the PDF file was formatted for some oddball paper size, maybe legal, so that printing it on normal paper resulted in the top of the form being clipped off. But I managed to print an ugly, shrunk, though readable, version of the form.

We paid a lot of mortgage interest. It was confusing because we had a statement from Mortgage 1 for the new house, and a statement from Neighborhood Mortgage Solutions (an entity of our Team One Credit Union) for the Saginaw house. But

the Mortgage 1 statement showed only about \$500 paid. I realized that this is because Mortgage 1 held our mortgage for only a week or two before they sold it to Wells Fargo. The Wells Fargo statement shows over \$10,000 of mortgage interest. So with the Saginaw house added in, we paid something like \$15,000 in mortgage interest in 2017. All together, that's a lot we can deduct.

The state tax is still all screwed up, and we under-withheld. But we should get back enough from the Federal return to cover the state bill. The state is charging us penalties because we underpaid so much. I planned last year to adjust my state withholding and I left phone messages for our H&R Block tax person up in Saginaw a couple of times, but I never heard anything back. That person likely only worked for Block during tax season. Then things got very crazy with the move and trying to correct my state withholding slipped my mind. All I know is that if you follow the instructions or run the online calculator, the withholding they advise is very wrong. With six children I think I have the Federal set to 16 withholding allowances and I got a small amount back last year, a couple hundred dollars. That's about how I want it; I won't be penalized and the I. R. S. doesn't get to hold a lot of my money. This year was different because we paid so much mortgage interest we could itemize, so we're getting a lot more back. But setting the state withholding to use 16 allowances results in withholding much too little.

In the evening we recorded the podcast and that went reasonably well with one interruption that I was able to edit out. This afternoon I produced the files and got everything uploaded, which took forever. Now we're trying to figure out which Mass to go to and what else we can possibly get done this evening. I just had to waste some time dealing with T-Mobile. We set up our account with them in person at a store last month. Grace was just getting text messages (that went to her, not me) saying that our payment, from our Team One checking account, did not go through. They have changed the way their web site handles usernames, so I had a lot of difficulty logging in. I finally got my password changed and authenticated with my phone and deleted and re-added the payment source and had it post the payment again, and it seemed to work this time. I should be able to see tomorrow, when the account information updates online, whether it has gone through. My best guess is that the people configuring the payment mis-typed a routing or account number, or my name as it appears on the account, or something like that. I really don't know since it would not allow me to edit the old payment method.

Messing with music files, I realized (again) that I really should clean up my Bandcamp and get rid of everything that I don't think is actually good-sounding, according to my current standards. That will result in deleting a lot of the music tracks up there, but so be it.

Monday

The End of *Existence*

This morning I finished reading David Brin’s *Existence*. As I suspected, the ending was disappointing. Most of the story arcs in the book, amounting to hundreds and hundreds of pages, *do not connect to the ending*. So this pile of pages, almost 900, ultimately doesn’t really even amount to a *novel*. The ending follows a couple of the characters into a future that jumps ahead a few decades, I think, and uses some of the ideas that had been percolating in the main “first contact” storyline, but overall, so many of the chapters just really don’t contribute in a meaningful way towards a unified story.

In his acknowledgments, Brin basically admits that this book doesn’t work very well and takes a kind of apologetic tone when he says:

I promise to write quicker, less exhausting books.

(That was 2012; he hasn’t; it seems like he’s worked mostly on non-fiction and anthology projects; maybe he’s been giving talks at corporate “futurist” events. Probably some TED talks, too.)

(I just had a “ha ha, only serious” moment — I thought I was joking when I wrote that comment above about TED talks, but I just did a quick Google search, and it turns out... yes, TED talks, and he’s even contributed to a collection called *Future Visions: Original Science Fiction Inspired by Microsoft*. I wish this was only a joke. We are *definitely* on the bad timeline. No, I’m not going to link to that anthology.)

And at the *very* end of the acknowledgments, there’s an explanation of *why* this book doesn’t work. Brin notes that some of the story parts appeared elsewhere in different forms. In other words, this book started out as several stories and Brin patched them together, creating a grotesquely inflated “fix-up” novel. According to Wikipedia:

A fix-up (or fixup) is a novel created from several short fiction stories that may or may not have been initially related or previously published. The stories may be edited for consistency, and sometimes new connecting material, such as a frame story or other interstitial narration, is written for the new work.

See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fix-up>.

The Martian Chronicles is technically a fix-up, although Bradbury’s writing is so beautiful that it hardly matters. There are plenty of other examples in the science fiction genre. Many of them are quite good, such as *More Than Human* by Theodore Sturgeon. Some of Philip Jose Farmer’s *Riverworld* books are fixed up from earlier stories. I really enjoyed those books back in the day despite their pulp-ish roots (or maybe because of them). I also really enjoyed reading *Life During Wartime* by Lucius Shepard, *Vacuum Diagrams* by Stephen Baxter,

and *Accelerando* by Charles Stross. Fix-ups can be very entertaining. They can work quite well and make a reasonably convincing novel, although if you look for the seams, you will probably find them. This one... is less good. This is a fix-up inflated into an enormously bloated, padded book, and I'm not even sure why. Maybe the title should be changed to *Contractual Obligation Book*, the way Monty Python entitled their last album *Contractual Obligation Album*.

It took me something like a *month* of my precious reading time to finish this bloated pile of pages. I don't often find myself actually angry at an author. I know that writing is a business and inspiration and brilliance is not always available on a deadline. But I feel like if I ever meet David Brin, I want to give him a wedge and put a "kick me" sign on his back for wasting my time.

The frustrating part is that *Existence* is *suggestive* of a big, complex story spanning hundreds of years and featuring a dozen interesting characters. In other words, it tantalizes a reader like me by masquerading as the kind of novel that I like. But Brin didn't actually write that book. He put together some of his less-good short stories and wrote a framework larded with infodumps to try, and fail, to link them into a larger story.

There are cool scenes. There are cool ideas. Brin could have turned parts of this into an Uplift novel, parts of it into a first contact novel, and parts of it (which remain tantalizingly unfinished) into a story about the future of autistic individuals ("auties"), and the "Basque Chimera," a reconstructed Neanderthal. There are a lot of ideas that really deserved development, such as a hint that aliens ("cobblies") are already among us, hiding out in our visual blind spots. This idea was used to great effect by Peter Watts in *Blindsight*. But Brin just abandoned it, along with many of the plot-lines.

My aggravation comes, in part, from a sense that Brin doesn't seem to trust that his audience will get his "big ideas" unless he spells them out in the form of these endless infodumps, which later in the book take the form of e-mails sent into the void. He couldn't even be bothered to put two characters into a room and have them talk to each other about these ideas, or even send written messages to each other (turning the book partly into an "epistolary novel.") No, hundreds of pages of this book are just Brin expounding, which he decided that was apparently more important than telling a compelling story.

The ideas he's expounding are somewhat interesting — but he's just not the visionary he thinks he is, compared to authors like Watts and Baxter and Egan. And if you're contracted to write a novel, write a damn novel. Much of the dialogue comprises disguised infodumps, in between undisguised infodumps. Even scenes in which characters are interacting are really not memorable; they have no emotional weight.

Brin's Bland Centrist Gaslighting

Brin believes that anger and indignation have created an epidemic of “self-doping,” people who become addicted to their own righteous indignation. He’s written about that here. In yet another plot line that goes nowhere, a character, a politician, is outed as someone who is addicted to his own adrenaline and habitually gets himself high by working himself into a lather on television. He outs himself, when someone slips him a chemical that breaks the cycle, and he goes on television and tries to get his usual hit of indignation-triggered endorphins, and it doesn’t come, so he works himself into a frenzy that out-does all his previous frenzies, to the point where it is obvious that something has gone deeply wrong with the man.

Brin writes, in the article:

I’m talking about the way that countless millions of humans either habitually or volitionally pursue druglike reinforcement cycles — either for pleasure or through cycles of withdrawal and insatiability that mimic addiction — purely as a function of entering an addictive *frame of mind*.

And a little later:

Rage is obviously another of these harmful patterns, that clearly have a chemical-reinforcement component. Many angry people report deriving addictive pleasure from *fury*, and this is one reason why they return to the state, again and again.

And a little later still:

I want to zoom down to a particular emotional and psychological pathology. The phenomenon known as *self-righteous indignation*.

Brin’s actually gaslighting you here, trying to convince you that unhappiness with the *status quo* is a form of mental illness, and that there’s no difference between *righteous* indignation and *self-righteous indignation*. Are you angry about the state of inequality? Poverty? Surveillance? Militarism? You’re wrong. You’re addicted to your own brain chemicals. He asks:

If we could show clearly, publicly, and decisively that self-righteousness is an addiction, might this help empower moderates in every political movement, so that negotiation and pragmatism would become more fashionable than dogmatic purity and outrage?

Sure, there’s no doubt that various media outlets and political groups are built on a sort of outrage addiction, and they combine with the creation of epistemic bubbles to produce whole cadres of people who *aren’t* capable of debating problems and solutions rationally. That’s not new.

But the “both sides are bad; it’s useless to get upset; let’s compromise” view is *also* gaslighting. It’s not a bad thing to have principles, and sometimes it *is* a

terrible thing to compromise. If you're proposing compromises *as your opening offer* when debating issues that represent life or death to vulnerable people — say, issues like health care, guns, war and immigration — you've lost out of the gate and your position is not self-righteous or even *righteous* at all; it's bland acquiescence to that broken *status quo*, perhaps tarted up with some tinkering around the edges and attention to optics. You're not-so-bravely speaking power to truth.

Speaking Power to Truth

Brin talks a good game sometimes on his blog, writing about the middle class and rent-seeking. But he also seems to be full of admiration for silicon valley bazillionaires. And why wouldn't he be? Brin gets paid to give talks to corporations. They eat this kind of optimistic neoliberal shit up, because hiring someone like Brin to make mouth noises on stage about how the dystopian world they are creating will be fine and wonderful makes them look smart and virtuous and not at all evil. Upton Sinclair wrote that "It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends on his not understanding it."

It's also not really a recipe for visionary science fiction.

Just flipping back through the pages randomly and picking out a few real scenes with dialogue, even though I know that I just read this book, I don't actually remember reading most of them. This is because they aren't emotionally memorable. No one is upset, no one is in danger, no one dies, no one is even injured. No one feels much, and if someone does have a feeling, we are told about it, and not shown it.

Normally I would say that these things are just the hallmarks of mediocre writing, but in Brin's case I think it might be a manifestation of his world view — the view that it just *wouldn't do* to have characters that got upset about injustices, because they might become addicted to their own outrage. And of course having characters reacting in a perfectly sane and rational manner, to a dystopian future brought about by the "centrist," "dogma-free," but relentless, march of capitalism, might make his corporate sponsors nervous. And so, maybe, just maybe, this might explain why his portrayal of the "First Estate" — that is, the ultra-wealthy — is, one might say, deliberately "fair and balanced." He tweaks them, but gently.

I'd better stop there; clearly I'm in danger of becoming addicted to my own self-righteous indignation, if indeed I'm not already a hopeless addict, a rat in a cage endlessly pushing a bar to deliver hit after hit. So I should probably stop exploring the idea that this is not just mediocre science fiction, but something actually *pernicious*, produced by a writer who has gotten too comfortable to empathize any longer with people who have genuine problems and perfectly justifiable *fears* about the future.

Existence is going on my give-away pile. Brin has won a lot of awards for some

of his earlier books, so at some point I might try reading *Startide Rising* or even *Sundiver*, although honestly I just am not enthusiastic to read more stories about anthropomorphized animals. In general I'd much rather take my chances with some other writer's first novel, because while a first novel may be rough, you can be pretty confident that the author isn't coasting, or resting on his laurels, or just banging out mediocre ideas without attempting to revise them into shape as part of a compelling story. Or maybe I'll try reading *Star Wars on Trial*, a satirical book in which science fiction writers hold a mock trial of George Lucas for his crimes. That sounds much more fun.

Go read *Blindsight* if you haven't already. And if you have, maybe read it again. And it should probably go without saying, but I'll say it, that Watts is skeptical of some of Brin's optimistic views about the future, especially about Brin's belief that ubiquitous surveillance will lead to a positive "transparent society."

I found myself increasingly skeptical as he spoke out in favor of ubiquitous surveillance: the "Transparent Society," he called it, and It Was Good. The camera would point both ways, cops and politicians just as subject to our scrutiny as we were to theirs. People are primates, Brin reminded us; our leaders are Alphas. Trying to ban government surveillance would be like poking a silverback gorilla with a stick. "But just maybe," he allowed, "they'll let us look back."

Dude, thought I, do you have the first fucking clue how silverbacks react to eye contact?

It wasn't just a bad analogy. It wasn't analogy at all; it was literal, and it was wrong. Alpha primates regard looking back as a challenge. Anyone who's been beaten up for recording video of police beating people up knows this; anyone whose cellphone has been smashed, or returned with the SIM card mysteriously erased. Document animal abuse in any of the US states with so-called "Ag-gag" laws on their books and you're not only breaking the law, you're a "domestic terrorist."

That's something I am still scratching my head over, and need to unpack a bit more. In *Existence*, Brin postulates all kinds of catastrophic collapse scenarios, and through the book we see some characters struggling in various ways with sea level rise and terrorism. But this mostly seems to be *backdrop*, scenery for the real story arc, not the driver of any actual story arcs. It seems to me that perhaps Brin actually believes that this is how the future will play out — that the collapse scenarios will just be window dressing to the march of humanity's progress to the stars, in crystalline solid-state emulation.

It's the kind of thing that Microsoft would pay a futurist to tell them, in reassuring tones. I don't believe it for a hot minute.

Back to Real Existence

Crane Road was icy this morning, although the temperatures were warming, so I expect it to melt as the day progresses. And apparently we're supposed to have rain. A *lot* of rain. It sounds like today and tomorrow could be the biggest test so far of our new house's drainage. There are flood warnings everywhere because frozen ground doesn't soak up inches of rainwater very well. Per the National Weather Service:

Widespread rain will develop across the region today through Wednesday. Rainfall will be moderate in intensity at times. Rainfall amounts between 1 and 3 inches are expected with additional water added to runoff from the complete melting of the snowpack.

So, we've got that going for us.

Tuesday

It was a pretty good day at work, except for the coughing. I could not get anything out but a little white foam, but my throat was irritated all day. The albuterol inhaler didn't seem to do much for me. I made it home just after 7 p.m. It was extremely foggy in the low-lying areas. It rained during the night and this morning and it is currently almost 60 degrees. It's February 20th. It is clear that our gutters are not adequately set up. There is a right-angle join right in front of our porch, and the gutters here are slightly lower than they are at the corners of the house, so water backs up there and overtops the gutters. We need to get this rearranged somehow. Maybe a pillar there, with a separate pair of downspouts that run away from the house. Maybe we can get our rainwater catchment system going this summer, if money allows.

When I got home the dirty pots were still in the sink. I was hoping to have time last night to work on the podcast or maybe practice guitar, but I had to dive in and work on a dinner plan. Grace helped prep chana masala and rice with fried papadams. Elanor ate a lot of the spicy variety of papadams. She clearly was uncomfortable because of the spice but she kept going back for more. I'm not sure that she actually could figure out that the burning sensation in her mouth was a direct effect of the food. But we do want her to get accustomed to slightly spicy food. How do parents in other cultures do it?

The Hobbit by J. R. R. Tolkien, Chapter 12: "Inside Information"

We got the kitchen cleaned up pretty well by 10:00 p.m. Last night's story was *The Hobbit* chapter 12, "Inside Information." The kids love this chapter, because we hear Smaug speak. I read his words trying to imitate the voice of Richard Boone, who played Smaug in the 1977 animated film, which the kids love. In that film, Smaug's lines quote liberally from the book. In its own way, this animated version of *The Hobbit* is much more respectful to Tolkien's source material.

I wanted to finish the chapter, but I could not do it — it was just taking too long, and I was too tired, and my throat was too irritated. So we'll have to finish this chapter another night.

I slept uneasily, as often happens, until the early hours of the morning. It seems like I'm getting my best sleep right before the alarm goes off. I went back to bed for almost an hour and a half. Grace finally nudged me out of bed a bit after 8:00. Oddly, after eating a lot of garlic and ginger in the chana masala, this morning my lungs were not crackling when I inhaled, and I was able to cough out some bright green goo. So clearly there is *still* infection going on*. It seems like the garlic and onions (and maybe other things in the Indian dish?) helped me kill some of it and also seemed to reduce some of the irritation in my chest.

__*Note: I was eventually to learn that, contrary to my long-standing belief, green or yellow mucus is not actually always a sign of infection in the respiratory tract.__

So I didn't get coffee or breakfast at home, and didn't get out the door until about a quarter to 9. I made some tea at work and had crackers and beef jerky for breakfast. I forgot to bring the leftover chana masala for lunch. How sad is that?

The charges for H&R Block tax preparation went through, \$336.00. This just seems like so much money. I could do it with the H&R Block software, but last time I tried that, I screwed it up pretty badly. This way if Block screws it up (and that has happened, too), they will fix it and file an amended return free of charge.

At work, as soon as I walked in, I had some I. T. issues to work on. We had a file server fail in the Ann Arbor office. All the files were accessible from a server at Thorlabs headquarters in Newton, New Jersey, but none of the computers downstairs were configured to connect directly to the server in New Jersey. So I had to run around and chat with the I. T. folks in the New Jersey office and get the computers in Ann Arbor configured to access the server.

Wednesday

When I got home last night (about 8 p.m.) Grace and the kids had already had dinner, and already cleaned up almost everything! So I didn't have hours of cleanup work!

A Pothole in the Dark

On the exit ramp from 23 South to 12 I hit a pothole in the dark. There is no lighting on that exit. I was afraid that I might have really damaged my car. Past the pothole there were four vehicles pulled off on the shoulder, including a truck. They seemed to be other drivers who had either damaged their vehicles or were trying to determine if they had damaged their vehicles.

The potholes are really out of hand. This morning, driving in, I could see that crews had been out putting hot patches down, and that helps some, but it means that there is tarry gravel spread everywhere, which sprays all over the cars.

***We Have Always Lived in the Castle* by Shirley Jackson**

The kids could not get their shit together as far as cleaning up the boys' bedroom and getting ready for bed, so Grace and I had our own story. I read her the first chapter of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* by Shirley Jackson.

This is a book that's been waiting on my shelf for some time. Grace doesn't really like fiction, so she was not impressed. I was impressed with the tone and characterization of the first chapter. The narrator is a disturbed young girl who is also afraid, and keeps imagining everyone in her town dead. She imagines getting through a set of errands (buying groceries, stopping at the coffee shop) as playing her way around a board game, in which rolling the dice can let her move a space or two forward, or might force her to go back, or lose a turn. I thought it was a really effective character study. It might come off as slightly silly because of her over-the-top murderous thoughts, maybe because I've been conditioned by exposure to the Addams family. I don't know a lot about Jackson's work, other than her famous short story "The Lottery," but I've long been curious about it.

I picked up this particular edition because it is one of the Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition trade paperbacks, with deckle-edge pages and great artwork. I have been collecting these editions and I really love reading them as they are comfortable to hold and read and delightful to look at. Here is the edition I'm reading. There's a great review of the novel in the Guardian [here](#).

I got a pretty good night's sleep and Grace reheated some coffee for me, and fried some eggs. Traffic was backed up on I-94.

I got an e-mail from DTE Energy and apparently we have overspent our budget plan for the last year and owe over \$500. So I guess I know where a large chunk of our tax refund is going.

Friday

Whoops, missed a day. So let me try to reconstruct what should have been Thursday's notes.

***The Invasion* (1968 *Doctor Who* Serial Fan Edit)**

Note that the fan edit version is called *Invasion of the Cybermen*.

On Wednesday night we ate our chicken pot pie and watched the first half of the fan edit of *The Invasion*, a *Doctor Who* serial from 1968, another one with Patrick Troughton. This is a partially-missing serial, with two of the eight episodes missing from the BBC archive. So there is some animated reconstruction. The drawings really do a great job of capturing the faces of the actors, so when we

cut from a face we've seen only in animation to a face from the surviving footage, there's no doubt at all who we are looking at.

UNIT is involved, and we see a very young Nicholas Courtney as Lethbridge-Stewart, recently promoted from Colonel to Brigadier. This was only the character's second serial, the first being *The Web of Fear*, which I have not seen. Courtney of course went on to play this character for more than thirty years.

This serial shows an approach to The Doctor that is a little different. He's more *physically* competent. He has a bit of a "British super-spy" feel. The Doctor and Jamie are presented more like action heroes. They escape up an elevator shaft. In one scene they climb a rope ladder into a helicopter while bad guys are shooting at them. In another scene, The Doctor is paddling a boat through a sewer system. The plot elements aren't exactly intellectually demanding at this point, but the action sequences are fun.

Wikipedia says:

According to Frazer Hines in an interview on the audio CD of *The Invasion*, Sally Faulkner's skirt kept getting blown up around her neck whilst climbing up the rope ladder to the helicopter. To avoid the same thing happening to his kilt, he remembered reading somewhere that The Queen had lead weights sewn into the hem of her skirt to stop this from happening to her. It so happened that Frazer's dresser was a keen fisherman, who sewed some lead weights into his kilt.

See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Invasion_\(Doctor_Who\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Invasion_(Doctor_Who))

There are some standout performances in this serial. Kevin Stoney is nice and creepy as Tobias Vaughn. We don't get to see much of Professor Watkins, played by Edward Bunham, in the first part of the fan edit, but I'm hoping he has more to do in the second part.

There's a some hilarious and dated fan service involving the companion Zoe Heriot (Wendy Padbury) and Isobel Watkins (Sally Faulkner). When the young women meet they immediately hit it off and do a little modeling, taking fashion photos of each other. Zoe's feather boa even becomes a significant clue later in the serial. Of course it's sexist, and this treatment objectifies the actresses, but I have to say that I always find it mostly *funny* when old episodes of *Doctor Who* try to portray elements of contemporary "youth culture," going back to the very first episode, *An Unearthly Child* from 1963, in which Susan Foreman has her ear glued to a new-fangled transistor radio listening to new-fangled rock music. It pandered completely to an older audience's sense that the young people among them might as well be aliens. A transistor radio also features prominently in this serial, and I can't help but think this is a deliberate call-back.

I don't have a verdict on the whole serial, but this one is pretty watchable so far, at least the fan edit version.

Tedium

I drove home from work last night with two plans in mind. The first plan was to work with the boys to go through their boxes of books, the ones we brought from Saginaw a year ago, and get them sorted out and set up in their bedroom with bookends, retiring the cardboard boxes.

I had a list of which books were in which boxes, a year ago, so I wanted to update that, adding any new acquisitions to the database and tracking down the whereabouts of all the books.

It didn't go all that well and there is more work to do. But we found most of the books, which remain mostly not too badly damaged. But there are a few missing and their room remains a mess. We found books stuffed into drawers and cupboards. And I need to go through Veronica's inventory, too.

Cleaning Up School Computers

The second plan involved getting the kids' laptops set up with restricted internet access. These laptops were provided by their online charter school. I've never tried to do any administration. The kids have a bad habit of wandering away from their schoolwork onto YouTube and other game sites. So last night I took a first look at what was going on, on one of these laptops.

Wow, it was a hot mess. There were literally dozens of adware, nagware, toolbars, and other pieces of unnecessary garbage running on these machines, plus a lot of needless audio and graphics control panels. I'm not sure how much the kids installed, and how much was there when we got the machine. It is especially painful because all this stuff is running on a Windows 7 box with only 2 gigabytes of RAM, so it was running incredibly slowly. The machine also hadn't gotten any Windows updates installed since 2016.

Running Malwarebytes and un-installing a lot of programs by hand, and removing startup items, I got most of the crap removed, and updates installed, and the machine is running *much* faster. But it took hours and hours.

While Malwarebytes was running, I read the kids the rest of "Inside Information," chapter 12 of *The Hobbit*, then we sent them off to bed.

An Elbow Injury

I got to bed very late last night, after 1:30 a.m. Pippin came back a couple of times, having woken up complaining that his arm hurt around the elbow. He could not explain what happened to it. We palpated his arm. There was no noticeable swelling and so it didn't seem like there was a fracture. There weren't any spots where, when pressed, seemed to cause him pain. But he kept saying that it hurt, and he was unable to bend his elbow with any strength, compared to the other arm.

We did not think it was urgent enough to run him out to the ER at midnight so we tried to comfort him and sent him back to bed. He came back again, maybe an hour later. We examined it again, still couldn't find anything wrong, iced it, gave him some children's Tylenol, and sent him back to bed, intending to examine it more thoroughly this morning and maybe get him to the urgent care clinic. It occurs to me today that maybe it is "nursemaid's elbow," a dislocation. Maybe one of his siblings yanked on it. Grace and I are aware of this common injury and so we try to make a point never to yank the kids by the arms or wrists. They might do this to each other, though. I'm a little baffled.

Update: Grace tells me that today Pippin's arm seems fine; he has normal strength in that arm and reports no pain. So I really don't know what happened to him last night, except that my best guess is now that he slept on that arm, and woke up with it either numb, or tingling. But I don't know for sure, and unless it happens again we may not ever know.

Tonight I'm going to see if I can configure the router so it will limit the children's laptop, identified by MAC address, to access only the web domains they need for their class work. I don't know if that will work, but I'll try it.

I might also try a Linux live CD. If it will do everything they need to do, running Linux, I might just wipe the machine and make it boot Linux. I'm thinking an older laptop with a 32-bit Core Duo processor and only 2 gigabytes of RAM might run a lot faster on one of the lighter-weight Linux distributions. I might try Ubuntu. I think the hardware is commonplace enough that it should be fully supported, but I won't know for sure until I test it.

Saturday

Well, I made it through another week of work and that's about all that I can celebrate. I stayed pretty late last night working on a customized version of the MX family instrument firmware for use at trade shows. This build is supposed to run without errors or warnings on boxes that are missing most of their hardware components and which were put together just for shows. That is a little tricky because the main microcontroller firmware *and* the LCD GUI firmware both go to great lengths to verify that things are working correctly and put up various warnings when, for example, there isn't enough laser power for the attenuator or the modulator to work properly. So there are a number of workarounds to put in place. I was not able to get them all working correctly by the time I left on Friday, although I think I know what still needs to be fixed.

A Grocery Run

I went to Costco after work and managed to get through a relatively modest (for our family of eight) grocery run, 18 items, about \$175.00. Mostly it was our usual items including eggs, fruits, veggies, and meats. They had the good sardines again (Season brand skinless and boneless sardines in olive oil, marked "product of Morocco"). I'll take the sardines to work. They make a pretty

economical, reasonably healthy, high-protein lunch. I need some decent crackers. Usually when I get crackers at Costco, they taste rancid.

I did get one special treat: a cherry pie. Grace went to GFS to pick up a few things there that Costco doesn't stock, and to Kroger for a few things that GFS doesn't stock. She got soy sauce, green onions, and sesame oil, for a dish called "crack slaw" which is basically stir-fried cabbage with ground turkey. We made this in her carbon-steel wok. The kids loved it, somewhat to our surprise (it wasn't bad, but to me it just doesn't seem to have much flavor).

My Cough

My cough has been in a "getting worse" stage after a few days in a "getting better" phase. It's discouraging. I can't figure out what causes it to get worse, except that missing sleep certainly doesn't help. But the illness itself also seems to be making me tired. I got to bed at a reasonable time last night and did not even read the kids a story or watch a movie with them. But despite what should have been plenty of sleep, I felt quite tired this morning and so slept until 9:00, which was about as late as I could manage before the kids pretty much dragged me out of bed. I really needed some moral support from Grace this morning. She helped cook breakfast, which is something I've been doing as part of our weekend routine, and lunch as well. Breakfast was tea and oatmeal and oranges. She also took over from me to finish lunch, which was bacon and egg sandwiches.

More I. T. Work at Home

It's after 9:00 p.m. and I've spent almost all day working on home I. T. issues. I have successfully cleaned out all three of the kids' loaner laptops. That has taken forever; almost 100 Windows updates alone were needed on each machine. I removed a lot of old software, ran Malwarebytes to clean out crap, reconfigured the mouse settings, cleaned up shortcuts and temp files, etc. I even changed the boot configuration so that they start up much faster; they had been configured originally to boot from a network server.

I was not able to configure my Netgear router to do what I wanted, which was to apply a set of web filtering rules to these three machines separately, based on their MAC addresses. So I tried installing open-source firmware from <https://www.myopenrouter.com>. I was afraid of bricking the router. I figured I *could* unbrick it following some complicated HOWTO guides, which might involve a soldering iron, if I had to, but was also prepared to implement plan B, which was "go to Target and buy a new router, preferably one with better parental control options."

Fortunately the firmware installed with no real difficulties at all. It seems to be lacking one feature the Netgear firmware has: after configuring the old router with this laptop connected to a wired Ethernet port, I could connect via WiFi using the **routerlogin.net** address. I'm not quite sure how this was implemented, and I don't really need to know, but it doesn't work on the open-source firmware.

There may be a way to configure it to accept administrator logins via WiFi, but it's not really a high priority for me to figure that out, since for now I can plug in to a wired connection and use **192.168.1.1**.

The new firmware provides some extra options including creating a group of connected machines by specifying a set of MAC addresses, then applying some rules that should be applied to these machines. It doesn't seem *quite* as flexible as I'd like. For example, I'd like to kick them off the network between midnight and 8:00 a.m. to discourage the kids from staying up all night on the computers. I'd also like to be able to set it up to allow connections on a whitelist-only basis during the time period when connections are allowed. It doesn't seem to be flexible enough to allow that, at least not using the web interface to configure the permissions. For a group of machines, you can set a time period, and then specify what to do during that time period, but it seems to only allow you to specify either locking out the machines, or applying filter rules. The filter rules include blocking ports or blacklisting domains. There doesn't seem to be a whitelist option.

The router is running Linux, and so I'm pretty sure there is probably a way to do what I want. But for now it seems like there isn't an easy way to do it using the browser interface. It might require ssh and writing configuration files for router utilities. Maybe I can find a good example somewhere to start with. I have experience doing this kind of administration but I have to remind myself that I really should stay focused on the simplest way to achieve the results I want, because it is so easy to wind up wasting a whole afternoon or even a whole day doing this kind of thing, and really my goal is to *free up* time I can spend with the kids doing more basic things, not writing esoteric configuration files for open-source router utilities.

The third and final laptop is still installing updates, currently on 47 of 62. Grace is making pasta while I babysit this damned thing. After this set of updates goes in, it will need a couple of reboots and a dozen more updates and then, finally, it'll have everything and I can fold the laptop up and get back to the router configuration.

I've got nothing organized for the podcast tomorrow and I don't think Grace has much ready either, so we may have to skip a week. It'll be very disappointing if we can't even finish the second half of *The Invasion* to talk about.

Media Discussed This Week

This list does not include books, chapters of books, or other works that I only mentioned briefly in the text above.

- *The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien, Chapter 12: "Inside Information"
- *Existence* by David Brin
- *Blindsight* by Peter Watts
- *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* by Shirley Jackson

- *The Invasion* (1968 *Doctor Who* serial fan edit retitled *Invasion of the Cybermen*)

Pittsfield Township, Michigan

The Week Ending Saturday, February 24th, 2018

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