Time is a Flat Shiny Disc

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Sunday

Well. This is going to be my weakest newsletter showing yet. Sorry about that. It's been a bad week and a bad weekend for me. The babies have been really, *really* bad at sleeping, and so I've been sleep-deprived most of the week. I think a lot of this is still fallout from the time change. But after spending much of the weekend wrestling with a recalcitrant computer, and mostly just frustrating myself, I have very little time left to work on this tonight; I'm writing it at the church, while Veronica is in her youth group meeting. I've got about an hour and twenty minutes to write it. There was so much more I wanted to get done this weekend.

I got two pieces of very bad news this week. My father called me at work to tell me that my Uncle Aaron had died. Then just a few minutes later he called me back to tell me that my brother's father-in-law had died. In fact, they died the same night, at about the same time.

At work, I spent pretty much the entire week wrestling with a series of bugs, and finishing up a release build for an OEM optical transmitter customer. I actually got everything fixed but it took so long that it didn't feel like a victory.

Along the way I spent a day trying to diagnose a motherboard that our assembler built for us, which doesn't work correctly. The assembler runs test code on the boards using loop-back connectors to verify that all the voltages are working correctly. This one isn't, but the assembler couldn't diagnose the problem, so asked us to look at it. My co-worker Patrick and I could not figure it out. We are going to send it back and have them try replacing the microcontroller. They've already replaced a number of other parts.

This Old PC (Nerdy)

On Friday Grace had a friend come over and help her get through a mountain of laundry, and so when I got home, our bedroom was shockingly clean and tidy. It has been a terrible mess pretty much since Elanor was born. The cleaning-up cleared space for me to get to my old PC, which has been waiting for me to clean it out and get it set up to do something useful. So on Saturday,

after Grace picked up some vacuum cleaner bags, and I got one of our vacuum cleaners working again despite the kids' best efforts to lose all the attachments and destroy it by sucking up fireplaces ashes and baking soda without a bag, I dusted the PC thoroughly both inside and outside and powered it up.

I built this PC from parts in 2010, ordering a very nice Antec case, an Intel server motherboard, Crucial memory, etc., and assembling them. I built it to set up in my home office when we moved to Saginaw and I began working from home. I needed a build server, since building the firmware I was working on and testing required a heavy-duty computer running Linux, and I wasn't going to want to do this many times a day over the network to the build server in Ann Arbor. So it sat in a closet in my upstairs office and worked as a build server, until the day the motherboard capacitors blew up. I took it to a PC repair shop, and they told me that it wasn't a matter of just replacing some capacitors, so they advised me to just get another motherboard. I wound up finding a new old stock motherboard of the same type on eBay, so replaced the motherboard and kept going. I also tried at one point to turn it into a VPN server using OpenBSD, but I was never able to get that working; another employee had figured out how to do this, but flat-out refused to assist me or provide me with any of his configuration files. (That's an example of a sadly common pattern of competition rather than cooperation in engineer-led workplaces, a "me, not us" approach to maintaining power through information hoarding rather than building up the team's skills and knowledge, but that's a topic for a whole separate essay I probably won't ever get around to writing.)

Anyway, now that I didn't need it for my work, I just wanted to get it up and running with some reasonably modern version of Linux, so I could configure accounts for the kids to use to log into Khan Academy, given that three of the four Chromebooks we were using for this purpose had broken. I figured they would have a harder time breaking this PC. I had picked up a wireless keyboard and mouse to use with it.

Getting it working turned out to be not so easy. A couple of months ago the kids got into my bag and took a booklet that had a number of passwords written in it. Among those passwords were the passwords to access this machine. I couldn't log in. So I decided to wipe it and start over. I thought I would try the latest Ubuntu MATE distribution of Linux, which is working well on Grace's laptop. It turns out that Ubuntu MATE simply would not handle the Intel motherboard's built-in video. It wouldn't generate errors or give me any diagnostic information that I could figure out; it would just go into a sort of endless loop of making the screen flicker. So I tried two more Linux distributions: standard Ubuntu, and then Manjaro. Neither one would work, although Manjaro came the closest — it actually displayed error messages in an endless loop rather than just flickering. I tried earlier versions of Ubuntu MATE and standard Ubuntu. They weren't any better. So I went back to Debian. Debian is not my favorite, because it's a bit harder to administer. Getting accounts and permissions set up is more difficult than with Ubuntu. But it at least seems to manage the video card.

What it wouldn't do is bring up the built-in Ethernet. And so I tried an awful lot of things. I tried the previous version of Debian. The result was the same. It's not so easy to work with this PC as it only has two USB ports, and I was booting it up from a USB flash drive in one of the ports, and the keyboard was in the other one, so I didn't have a way to plug in a second flash drive. I think somewhere in a box in the basement I have a couple of old cheap USB hubs, but I'm not sure; I might have tossed them when moving. I tried downloading and building the kernel driver for the Ethernet adapter on Grace's laptop and then burning it to a CD and putting the CD into the old machine's CD drive, and installing it. But the version of the kernel that Grace's machine was running, using the latest long-term support version of Ubnuntu MATE, was different than the version of the kernel supplied by the latest long-term support version of Debian. So that didn't work. So I tried upgrading the kernel on Grace's computer, but there wasn't a later version that matched the kernel version supported by Debian 10.

I'm making it sound like I went through some kind of straightforward diagnostic process, but it actually took hours and hours to try all this, and an awful lot of cursing and reading online forum posts. I must have solved this problem before, but like many traumatic time-wasting experiences I probably blocked it out of my memory. I suspect what I did was to take an old Ethernet card that I had kicking around and put it in the machine temporarily, long enough to bring up Debian and download and build and install the driver for the motherboard's built-in Ethernet port, then take out the card and use the built-in port. But I'm pretty sure I tossed out those vintage Ethernet cards along with half a metric ton of other old PC parts that I thought I wouldn't ever need again.

On top of this, I probably have a limited chance of ever getting the built-in audio working, and so I'd probably find myself trying to install an old Soundblaster card, or something like that, which would probably involve several hours of work, if it would even work at all. And the kids will need working audio output to use Khan Academy.

So, I'm going to give up and give away this PC to someone who is more willing than I am to put time into getting it working.

It always really was a better server than desktop machine. It has a single processor, but it is a four-core Xeon. That worked really well to build software using CentOS and command-line tools only. It has 8 gigabytes of RAM but it uses ECC RAM (error-checking memory designed for servers, expensive and hard to find). Sometimes it comes up giving a lot of memory errors, although I've never been able to get it to fail a memory test. And the built-in video and audio aren't very good. I will offer it as part of the local anarchist gift economy, and make it clear that it needs the attention of someone who knows what it is good at and what it isn't good at, and has the patience to figure out how to get the old hardware working.

My Mac Pro, which I bought two years earlier, is still humming away. But

obsolescence comes for us all, one day.

One Great Thing Which is Really Fifteen Things (Also Pretty Nerdy)

I've got about forty minutes left and I want to talk about one great thing. Last week I ordered a copy of the Criterion Collection's 1,000th video release. I had seen a page describing it and it looked like something I really had to have, and something I'd be able to enjoy with the kids: a set of fifteen Godzilla movies. The set is called *Godzilla: The Showa-era Films, 1954-1975*. I ordered it from Barnes and Noble online, since it wasn't in stock at any of the stores near me. It showed up on Saturday, much sooner than I expected.

Although I had read the description of the release, somehow I had the impression that it was a normal-size Blu-ray boxed set. I figured it would fit on my self alongside *The Complete Jacques Tati*, *Wings of Desire*, and *The Man Who Fell to Earth*. But no — the package is far larger, and far more amazing, than I expected. The package is an oversize book, about 14 inches tall by 10 inches wide, and in addition to an interesting essay, it contains very cool illustrations, with each film illustrated by a different artist. The color palettes of the illustrations are boldly, unabashedly day-glow in nature, featuring a lot of pure magenta, yellow, cyan, and black. They would all make great film posters!

The first Godzilla movie I clearly remember seeing was *Godzilla Vs. Megalon* (1973). I saw that film in a hotel one summer while driving from Pennsylvania to Iowa. I was probably ten or eleven, which would have made it 1977 or 1978. The short essay on that film describes it as "the low point of the Showa Godzilla series," at least from "a production perspective." In fact I remember that it moved very slowly; I wanted it to be better than it was.

There are fifteen films included in this set. This doesn't represent all the Godzilla films ever made by any means; there are over thirty. But this set covers the ones released during the reign of Emperor Hirohito. They vary considerably in style. I have only seen a few of these. If you were a fan of *Mystery Science Theater 3000* in the nineties, like I was, you have probably seen a number of Japanese monster movies, but they featured more Gamera movies than Godzilla movies (probably because it was cheaper to get the rights to use them).

I planned to watch the first one, simply called *Godzilla*, from 1954, with the kids last night, but they screwed around and argued about their chores so much that there wasn't time. But it rained briefly this afternoon (we have a rule that the kids can watch movies on rainy afternoons), and I had a few minutes before I needed to leave for the church, so I put on the shortest one in the set, *All Monsters Attack*.

All Monsters Attack (1969 Film, 2019 Criterion Blu-ray, Japanese with English Subtitles)

Directed by Ishiro Honda, this is one of the sillier films in the set, but its protagonist is a young boy named Ichiro, so it was perfect for Joshua and Benjamin to enjoy. In fact Joshua read the subtitles to Benjamin. It's largely a silly allegory about bullying; the young hero faces a bully, and overcomes him because of a sort of psychic connection to Minilla, the son of Godzilla, and in his dreams and even in his daydreams, Ichiro finds himself on Monster Island talking with Minilla, who is being bullied in a similar manner by a monster called Gabara, who has the same name as Ichiro's bully. There's a subplot involving a couple of incompetent thieves. In this regard, this film reminds me a lot of some of the Disney live-action films from the 1970s such as *The Apple Dumpling Gang* and *The Love Bug* — films I saw in an outdoor drive-through from the back seat of a Dodge Dart.

The film is very low-budget and so borrowed a lot of fight scenes from other films. Some of these are pretty dumb-looking. There's an underwater fight scene which was clearly shot dry-for-wet. But it's still a sweet movie. Formally, I found my impressed with the cinematography, not in the fight scenes shot on a cheesy Monster Island set, but in urban postwar Japan. The transfer is very nice, and the color is beautiful. Ichiro and the adults in his life are living in relative poverty, and so the interiors and industrial settings are gray and ugly, but these settings don't seem to dampen their enthusiasms. The book says:

> With the deceptively simple *All Monsters Attack*, Honda speaks to children on their own level, without the condescending attitude that kids so often encounter in films aimed at them.

I agree with that; for a cheap and cheesy monster movie trying to keep a franchise going and bring in a little money, it's surprisingly un-cynical. I have a feeling I might have seen this one before, when I was very young; some of the psychedelic scenes with young Ichiro on Monster Island look and sound very familiar.

That's all I've got time for this week. I hope to review more movies from the Godzilla set next week. Have a good week!