The Kind of September

Paul R. Potts

01 Sep 2022

Hello, Dear Readers. I hope you are keeping safe and staying well.

Assorted Updates

The Work Situation

There's lots going on, and at the same time, little going on. I'm talking with recruiters and other folks about possible work just about every day. We still have some money in savings from my severance pay, and so we are not able to collect food benefits or unemployment yet. My spreadsheet projections show that, assuming we get no income at all coming in, we'll run out of money for basic expenses (mortgage and utilities) sometime in November. So we still have some "runway," but past experience has taught me that it can take a dismayingly long time to find a job that I can afford to take. If we get to that point, I could cash out a 401K account, but that is something I'd rather not do, if I can possibly avoid it, as my retirement savings are pretty feeble (in part because I've had to do this kind of thing more than once before).

A former co-worker and friend is trying to hire me to do some embedded programming work for his new company, because his team really needs someone to help on some product designs, and I'd love to work with him again, but his boss is skittish about hiring anyone else, and *also* doesn't want to spend money paying anyone on an hourly basis. So I'm scratching my head trying to figure out how to write some proposals for fixed-fee work that they might find acceptable. In other words, how to write a proposal for a project where the bill is low enough that they'll accept it, but high enough that it will cover my expenses. I'm not good at this sort of thing. In the past I've done some consulting work like this, and it's almost always turned into a money-losing proposition, in part because I have to invest a lot in hardware and software, and because estimating software projects is hard, and there are always unknown blockers, I wind up having to put in many more hours than I planned for.

Some of this work is "investigational" — to try to determine if an approach using a given chip is possible. The problem is, to conclusively determine that, I'll have to get pretty far into it. At Thorlabs, I did this several times as part of my routine work and built prototypes that weren't going to be practical for one

reason or the other, but we learned some things and chose a different path for the actual product — that's just basic R&D, part of the cost of innovation. But I was salaried at Thorlabs; I could put half my time into an prototype without risking income. For this contract work, they'll want to pay me at the end of the project, not as I'm working on it, so I have to be cautious or I'll drain all our limited savings only to wind up in an argument over my bill at the end; I've been in this position before, where a vendor delays paying me for months and months (or — true story — never pays me, shuts down the business, and leaves the country).

So, I'm trying to figure out how I can avoid this by breaking the project down into some very small sub-projects, where I'd get paid for those as I complete them, but there's so much overhead to writing these proposals, it will eat up a lot of my job search time for very little money. Patrick would like to work with me but he recognizes this project might not earn me any money to speak of, at least at first. So I'm working on it as a secondary priority. I may just have to tell them that I can't put the time in to put all these proposals together.

Meanwhile, I'm also trying to learn some new skills, and get myself better-prepared to do work from home either as a contractor or employee. To this end I've bought some gear including a bench power supply, a USB oscilloscope/logic analyzer, a new mini-PC running Windows, a webcam for remote meetings (since, after sending my laptop back to Argo AI, I no longer had one), some embedded development boards, and a number of updated books on modern C++, Rust, Embedded Linux, driver development, and algorithms. In fact, I spent almost $600 on books alone, which sounds like a lot, but it's only a dozen books. Some of them, especially a couple that are used as college textbooks, are very expensive. So again I'm in a strange and contradictory position of spending money while I can least afford to spend money, in the hopes that doing so will help enable me to earn more money.

The difficulty is that with a lot of options, it's very hard to determine, on a given day, just what I should be working on.

The Home Situation

I'm continuing the slow process of migrating more of my old writing from Blogger into my personal web site. I'm not doing much in the way of editing, but I have a lot of tedious reformatting work to do, which can't be fully automated; it seems that every exported post is screwed up in its own way. To avoid getting burned out on this I am treating it as a marathon rather than a sprint, working on a few old posts a day.

On many days our air conditioning is not keeping up, and ideally we'd be getting an HVAC company out to look at it, but it's not too bad most days. We've had some intermittent relief from summer heat. Last night it got down into the high fifties. Late this afternoon I will go and see if any more tomatoes, eggplant, and peppers are ready to harvest. Without being able to put a lot of labor into the

garden this year, we've still managed to keep ourselves supplied with plenty of small tomatoes and quite a few eggplant. I've been known to sautée a pan of eggplant slices and tomatoes until they are browned and then turn them out of the pan, and make a lovely over-stuffed, rustic omelet out of them. With some of the peppers and green tomatoes, Grace made a green tomato salsa that is almost gone. We've long finished up our first batch of cayenne pepper hot sauce, but there are another half-dozen large "super cayenne" peppers on the way. Meanwhile, there are lots of Adirondack Blue potatoes popping out of the hügelkultur bed. That variety seems to consistently do well in our garden beds, where other varieties produce almost nothing.

Joshua has been practicing guitar and ukulele almost every day, and following my advice he's working on learning how to sing a song and accompany himself, which is a skill I wasn't able to master until I was well into my forties. So I'm quite impressed with his progress so far. Before much longer he'll be ready to make some videos.

One thing he's got that I didn't have — there are tons and tons of short instructional videos on YouTube, of musicians of various skill levels showing how to finger, strum, and sing many of this favorite songs. He can watch all those for free, over and over again. I started off with chord books, a handful of lessons, pages and pages of scales to practice, and some sheet music arranged for piano. So I had to try early on to train my ear, figuring out chords and melodies from the recordings. I'm not really very good at it; I don't have perfect pitch, and I'm not great at figuring out notes buried in chords. But I can listen to a melody, immediately find the starting note, and hear that it goes "up two and a half steps, down a whole step, back to the root, then down a fourth," etc. Joshua hasn't learned to do that yet. But maybe that will come naturally with time, or maybe we can work through an ear-training course together.

A big change is underway this month, as our auntie Joy moves out. It's a bit of a sad transition, but I hope it will open up her life to new opportunities.

More Summer Films: Non-Blockbusters

We've been digging into our DVD and Blu-ray collection, and ordering some cheap used discs via eBay.

Stargate (1994 Film)

I first saw this at the dollar theater on Jackson Road in Ann Arbor. The kids have been fascinated by the spinoff TV show *Stargate: Atlantis*. Years ago, we slogged through the whole *Stargate: SG-1* series, all ten seasons of it, which is frustratingly uneven and mediocre, and in the last few seasons, just plain bad. Grace and I have watched *Stargate: Universe*, which has some terrific moments, although it was also uneven, and very dark, and so it was canceled after only two seasons. The kids wanted to see the film that started it all, so we showed it

to them. It turns out that this one directed by Roland Emmerich, the same guy that directed *Moonfall*. He's the king of big, dumb spectacle films.

As big, dumb spectacle films go, this one is unfortunately pretty boring. James Spader as Daniel Jackson is fun to watch, and as he is something of a "Mary Sue" character among the military team led by Kurt Russell as Colonel O'Neil, he gives the viewer a character to identify with. Russell is bland as dishwater in this film. The portrayal of the culture on the distant planet of Abydos is full of tedious, bigoted, adorable-Arab stereotypes. Jackson's interest in the young alien woman Sha'uri is unconvincing. So, this film is indispensable as an introduction to the series, but I can't really recommend it.

Stargate: Children of the Gods — The Final Cut (2009 Film)

The pilot episode of *Stargate: SG-1* was called "Children of the Gods," and presented as a full-length TV movie in 1997, although it was later split into two parts. I've seen the original version and it, bizarrely, contains some rather shocking nudity and sexual violence, which is very much out of keeping with the bloodless PG-13 film. It's also out of keeping with the rest of the SG-1 series. It turns out that Showtime executives pushed the producers to make it more soft-core pornographic; Showtime back then had a reputation to uphold as a purveyor of soft-core porn.

In this version of *Children of the Gods*, the producers removed all the nudity and much of the gratuitous violence, keeping just enough to allow the audience to follow the plot. Many scenes were re-cut, re-looped with new voice performances, and restored. Unfortunately, in the process, they introduced some glaring continuity errors. Characters talk about the stargate on Abydos being buried, then later are able to use it, then talk about it being buried again. It might be fun to catalog all these inconsistencies, but I'll leave that to someone younger. I'll also mention that the second half of the DVD looks particularly bad in many of the outdoor scenes. The producers had these scenes restored, and there is a restoration company listed in the credits, but the color is awful in some parts, with everything having a purple tint. I've seen similar deterioration in the initial DVD release of some of the original cast *Star Trek* films. If someone ever releases a Blu-ray version of this pilot film, it could really use more restoration work, but I don't expect anyone will put money into such a project, at least not anytime soon.

How is it? Well, not great. This is an improvement over the original pilot, and in some ways it is better than the original film. It introduces Samantha Carter, played by Amanda Tapping, and Teal'c, played by Christopher Judge. Richard Dean Anderson plays O'Neill (spelled a bit differently now), and Michael Shanks plays Daniel Jackson, performing the character very similar to the way that James Spader did. It's fun to see these characters introduced, as they continued to appear as main characters in all ten seasons of the show (although O'Neill appears only as a guest star in seasons 9 and 10, and two refugees from the

canceled show *Farscape*, Ben Browder and Claudia Black, join the main cast, which is another reason to skip the last couple of seasons).

The story that unfolds in the full-length pilot itself is a bit unfortunate. In the original film, Ra was an alien playing as an Egyptian god, in human form, although his real form is something like a traditional gray humanoid alien. In the series, the producers threw that out, and the bad guys are now a race of alien parasites, the Goa'uld. The Goa'uld add a dissonant, Cronenberg-style, body-horror element to the otherwise pretty kid-friendly show, and I never felt like they were a very imaginative creation. But the show sticks with the Goa'uld as the main antagonist for five seasons, and even after they aren't the main antagonist, the Goa'uld Empire, continues to drive plots until the end of season 8. Fortunately there are some episodes, both standalone episodes and story arc episodes, that do pretty great things despite this fairly unimaginative antagonist.

The first episode after the pilot, called "The Enemy Within," pretty much continues the Goa'uld body horror, as a secondary team member is parasitized, but redeems itself somewhat by setting up the circumstances in which the alien T'ealc, who also hosts an immature Goa'uld parasite, joins the core team.

The Amazing Spider-Man (2012 Film) and *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (2014 Film)

There have been an awful lot of Spider-Man films in the last couple of decades. There was Sam Raimi's series starring Tobey Maguire. There have been several Marvel Cinematic Universe films starring Tom Holland. There was a great animated film, *Spider Man: Into the Spider-Verse*, and a sequel is in the works. Meanwhile, there is this pair of slightly lesser-known films. All these films have slightly different continuities and stories, although most of them stick pretty close to the basic comic book story arc. Last year there was *Spider Man: No Way Home*, which actually brings together the actors from all three live-action film series using a "multiverse" conceit.

These two films are directed by Marc Webb and star Andrew Garfield. The first one does a decent job of introducing the story. In both these films, the tone is quite dark, without a lot of humor to leaven it. In general I like the lighter Marvel films that acknowledge the fundamental silliness of superhero stories, but this one works pretty well because Garfield is an excellent actor, and makes his character extremely convincing. It helps that he has Sally Field as May to play off of, and she's always great. The first film feels pretty fresh, and is pretty exciting visually, although it doesn't really have much of a story, and so it drags for me.

I feel that the second one is actually better, with a more compelling story, although the critics for the most part don't agree. It does get a bit over-complicated, with too many characters, and Jamie Foxx can't really act, but the "A plot" is really quite a good piece of storytelling, in my view. Dane DeHaan plays Harry Osborn and also does a great job.

It's too bad that we never got a *3* — I think this director and core cast had a lot of potential.

Beetle Queen Conquers Tokyo **(2009 Film)**

I don't very often get to pick what we all watch together, but every once in a while I'm able to choose something that I want to watch. *Beetle Queen Conquers Tokyo* is a strange, slow-moving, arty, meditative documentary about the role that insects play in Japanese culture, both in the present and in the past. It features a lot of footage of people collecting beetles, moths, and other insects, including some beautiful outdoor scenes of Japanese forests at night. Keep an eye out for the giant murder hornets! It also features a beautiful soundtrack, sped-up city tours, and intriguing scenes of children buying giant beetles in stores large and small, keeping insects in cages in their tiny apartments, and sometimes making them fight.

There's a lot to enjoy, although in my view the film doesn't really convincingly tie the quotations from ancient Japanese literature together with the portrait of contemporary Japan. It *does* make the case that insects are inextricably interwoven with Japan's present. It's slow, and the kids wandered away or fell asleep, but I'm glad I watched it. It tries to do something interesting, and I found it thought-provoking. In our own yard, when gardening, I am constantly working shoulder-to-shoulder with innumerable small assistants in the form of pollinators, and I'm (usually) very happy to see them.

We watched this film on the Criterion Channel. You can see a trailer here.

About This Newsletter

This content is available for your use under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. If you'd like to help feed my coffee habit, you can leave me a tip via PayPal. Thanks!