

Do It Themselves

Never get your Nat-ID update pic after two weeks sunning yourself on the beach in Brighton. Now it was winter – as far as we get winters these days – and I'd gone a lot paler. At least I think that's why I kept having trouble with street checks. I'd considered a good layer of dark foundation, but it makes my face itch. Worse for blokes of course: certainly puts a stop to experimental facial hair.

This time it was FlowControl where the road went up to the enclave. It called up my wrist mech wanting to know who I was and where I was going. Of course I don't get a fuel allowance, so I was walking the last bit. My rucksack had all my kit in it, and there was sweat dripping down my back. I'm old enough to remember when standing talking to streetlamps would have had you down as off your head, but I suppose I've got used to it. I know I could get myself chipped, but I'd rather answer silly questions at lamp posts than feel tabbed wherever I go. While I've still got the choice anyway.

I waved the Nat-ID and then my job card in the direction of the camera half way up the post. But of course it queried the ID. "UK Nat-ID not confirmed. Please reply with your retina scan," it told me via my wrist mech.

I stared down at the mech and clicked quickly, hoping I hadn't blinked at the wrong moment. Thank Christ for that, looked like a good one. I sent the scan back to FlowControl and my mech beeped twice – it was letting me through. Bit of a relief. Nobody wants to tangle with Homeland Security, and you get the full works - sirens and flashing lights - if you annoy a FlowControl. It was just as well I wasn't in a hurry. I'd told Mr Henderson I'd be there around 8.30 and it was still only ten past, so no problem.

Of course I still had to get through the automatic gate at the enclave. The Concierge was an MS-10DX that must have gone in during the bird flu epidemic because it has the infra-red feature that makes it unwise to try it if you have a bad cold. It also had a whole set of rather cheeky questions. Like was I registered! True, there are lots of cowboys. Some of the kids piling into installation since ubidevs took off can't have done much more than six months on some mickey mouse skills update course. But registered! I started out with Disney Security, who practically invented ubidevs.

The Concierge obviously had one of the new voice processors that picks up your tone of voice. "Kindly reply to my questions politely" it told me sniffily when I pointed out sharply that my job card made it very clear I'd been registered for years. In the end though it opened the gate with a superior smile on its snotty little face. Past the squash courts, past the gym. Eden Gate is a very smart enclave even by the standards of the area: they can afford to water the grass every day so it's always green. At a cost that makes my eyes water too just thinking about it.

The Hendersons have a top floor flat with a great view out over the Common. The BlockGuard sent an announce up and let me straight in, obviously primed. If someone had thought to tell the Concierge too I wouldn't have arrived in nearly such a bad mood. Then maybe it would all have turned out differently, who knows?

Mrs Henderson opened the door herself, all dressed up, obviously about to leave for work. Though when I say work, she does nothing very much at some lifestyle magazine up in central London as far as I know. Mood jewellery all over her – showing 'anxious' I noted - perfume that knocked you flat from five metres, and an ostentatious gold and diamond wrist mech. Naturally she has a fuel allowance. As usual she looked through me rather than at me.

“I’ve told the DoorGuard you’ll be here until about 3 – if that’s not long enough my daughter is in and will be able to extend.”

That showed how little she knew. It was me upgraded their DoorGuard only a few months ago, which means I can do pretty much anything I like with it. It was bad news about the daughter though. Nicole to her mother; Nicky to her friends I expect, but I’m not one of them. She doesn’t look through me: she looks at me as if I’d just crawled out from under some stone specifically to annoy her. If she wore mood jewellery it would probably burn out after a few hours. My misfortune was that because I was upgrading all the interior ubidevs, just avoiding her was impossible.

Mr Henderson liked to keep his ubidevs up with the latest, so I was going to put in the sensitivity upgrade. This was one you couldn’t do remotely because it involved physically replacing the ubidevs rather than just downloading new software. I knew it was going to be tricky but I didn’t know how tricky. That was because it was the first sensitivity upgrade I’d done – well you have to start somewhere. If I’d still been with Disney Security they’d have sent me off on a course, but when you freelance you learn on the job.

I got the Henderson’s ladder out of the big cupboard in the hall and started in the living room. The first stumbling block was that it turned out nobody had turned off the firewall on the ubidevs I was supposed to be replacing. Taking any one of them offline would trigger a general alarm through to the enclave. No point putting them in after all if any idiot can fiddle with them. But though I wasn’t any idiot, neither was I the person who had installed this set, so my biometrics weren’t going to help me disarm the security.

Standing up the top of the ladder glaring at the little red light on one of the ubidevs, I realised with a sinking heart that darling Nicola was probably my only chance of getting the job done that day. I didn’t have work contacts for either of her parents, and even if I did, there was no saying what reception I’d get asking them for a remote bio upload. Nicola’s bios ought to have been registered and that should mean they would do for turning off the security.

The living room PowerWall had some abstract shifting 3D pattern that was probably very arty but was making me feel ill just catching it from the corner of my eye. I tried not to look at it as I went back into the hall and round the corridor to Nicola’s bedroom. I caught some weird discordant electronic noise from inside – no accounting for some people’s taste in music either. I looked up at the ubidev above the door and cleared my throat.

“Sorry to bother you Nicola, but are your bios registered on the house ubis by any chance?”

I hoped she wouldn’t just ignore me or I’d have to do something really rude and knock on the door.

Ah – the electronic noise had stopped. She opened the door and stood there glaring at me in her usual way. I could see at once why she wasn’t at school and probably why Mrs Henderson’s mood jewellery had been radiating anxiety. Nicola had dyed her face in one of the animal patterns that are currently so *in* now the actual animals have gone. At least for people who are chipped and don’t have to do face-rec all the time. Or go to school. Possibly a giraffe-pattern I thought. In a tasteful light purple. No doubt it was paint rather than an actual tattoo and would wear off eventually.

“Nice paint job”, I found myself saying, even though it might have been a bit more tactful to pretend not to notice. Sometimes I’m glad I only had boys.

She didn’t reply, but I thought I detected a slight turning down of the glare.

“It’s just that I’m supposed to replace all the ubidevs”, I went on in what I hoped was a conciliatory tone, “and I need a registered bio to turn the security off. Otherwise the enclave alarms will get triggered as soon as I start.”

“S’pose you want me to do a ret then?” she said, and the glare went back up a few notches.

“That would really help. Have you got a reader in there or can we use the one in the living room?” Lucky looks can’t really kill, at least not in the current state of the art.

I waited, and eventually she moved grudgingly forward, which I assumed meant we were using the living room reader. I noticed that the multicolour ledlights woven into her hair dimmed and brightened as we passed through the hall ubidev fields – very pretty. Bit fashionista though.

Still, her retina scan got me inside the security system. That was the first problem solved, and a lot more easily than I’d feared.

But really only the beginning. If I shut down the all the old ubidevs in one go then I’d lose the stuff they were driving, and that seemed to be just about everything in the flat, down to the power and lighting circuits and the water meter. Not to mention the PowerWall (though shutting that down would be a relief) and Nicola’s weird music (ditto, but she might not be too happy).

So how could I start from scratch the way the sensitivity upgrade notes seemed to assume? I’d need my own generator to rig some lights at least. I thought longingly of Disney Security, who could have laid one on right away if it was needed. Of course I could stop for today, order one up, and do the job when it arrived. But then all today’s agro would have been for nothing. No way!

I thought about it and decided the best thing was to chain all the new ubidevs together, then link through from one of them into the old lot. I reckoned it should be possible to do a share and then take out the old ones leaving the new set in charge.

OK, I should have taken more notice of the bit in the upgrade notes that said ‘violating these ordering constraints may lead to unpredictable behaviour’. But I’ve often found upgrade notes don’t have to be taken literally. And when people are forever telling you what to do it’s much more fun to take your own route once in a while.

There was quite a bit of grunt stuff to get through though, mounting forty ubidevs and connecting each of them into the power circuits. Lots of up and down the ladder - even the flashiest device still has to be fixed into place and powered. I left the set inside Nicola’s room until last, hoping that maybe she’d emerge and go dial up some food or even find something to do elsewhere in the enclave. No such luck: she was still in there when I got round to putting in the new one above her door. The electronic music was different but not any better. Of course the above-door ubi broadcast me into the room, and I was still up the ladder when the door suddenly opened. Inwards, luckily.

“What the fuck are you doing outside my door again?”

“Putting the new ubidevs in like I told you.” Give me patience! “I need to do the ones in your room next if that’s OK.”

“Fucking hell. It’s like living in a railway station.” The purple giraffe pattern morphed in a really interesting way when she scowled. “I’m doing school stuff and I don’t want you pissing around in my room.”

I smiled encouragingly from up the ladder and bit back the obscene retort. “You could transfer your music into the living room and use the PowerWall for the schoolwork. I’ve finished in there for a while. And I’m not interested in your room, only in replacing your

ubis. Three according to my list. The new ones will be much more responsive. I think you'll like them."

Did the trick – she muttered something angry I didn't catch but disappeared inside and came back out with the latest IceGold pointer and a pair of gesture gloves covered with purple sequins that matched her face job. Purple must be her favourite colour. She'd clearly switched environments because her electronic music started blasting out from the living room. Oops, someone had left the speakers on high. She swore, shot off and the volume soon went down a bit. I finished the ubi above the door and moved myself and the ladder into the bedroom.

God, what a mess. Some of the clothes lying in heaps all over the floor had to be moved to get level standing for the ladder. I pushed things up one end, resisting the impulse to pick-up-and-fold. Sure enough, the walls were set to purple except for the tiled section with the mini PowerWall screen. The windows were set to mauve tint, and the light sources were also mauve. It really wasn't very easy to see what I was doing until I found the window controls and set them back to transparent.

When I'd got those last three ubis in place, the next thing was to link them all. I decided to do this from the kitchen, and bridge across to the old ones there too. The kitchen PowerWall had a set of virtual yellow-sticky memos on it, but I gestured them off into minimise right away with my wrist mech. I did the voice-invoke for the master bedroom ubis and they came up ('Ready', 'Here', 'Active', 'Present') each with a different synth-voice. New effect that, part of the sensitivity upgrade. After the pleasant but characterless voice shared by all the old ubis it made a nice change. Useful for diagnostics to be able to hear which ubi was which right away.

I brought the rest of them in room by room. Gradually I noticed something a bit odd. It was as if each new voice had a sort of mood attached to it. Not a good mood either I thought, as I got to the last set in the living-room. Or was I just hearing things? I pushed the upgrade notes off my wrist mech onto the PowerWall and read them again. That was when I came across the bit about ordering constraints.

Hmm, it looked as if I should have invoked the living room ubis before the master bedroom ones, rather than last. But how much difference could it make? And did a tone of voice I might be imagining mean there was a problem? There was a lot of stuff about responsiveness and sensitivity, but nothing specific about tone of voice:

"The new affective model feature includes intentional stance and proactivity, adding responsiveness and sensitivity," I read.

Marketing-speak rather than useful technical information. I had no idea what it really meant, if anything. Anyway, if I tried to undo the invokes and reinvoke with the ordering constraints it could take all afternoon. Once the ubis powered-up it was deliberately hard to power-down again because of the resilience features. Resetting them was not trivial. Gone two o'clock now, and I really wanted this job done. I decided to go ahead with the share. Get the new ubis merged with the old ubis, have the new ubis take over all the functionality, and then close down the old ones. That was the plan.

I put the old kitchen appliances ubi up on the Powerwall. The icon was just a schematic of an appliance. But the new one came up with a small 2D animated face. Not nearly as elaborate as the Concierge face, but a similar idea: and a facial expression. Which was not a smile. Tough – the two ubis had to link. I gestured the icons with my wrist mech. I was avoiding speech at this point because I wasn't sure whether the old ubis or the new ones would do the recognising.

What I got was a sudden uproar from the forty new ubis. They were all verbalising on top of each other through the speakers on the PowerWall and I could only make out odd phrases:

“...likes of these...no way...you must be joking ... brain-dead”.

It sounded as if they were doing what I thought was impossible and rejecting the share. God, what a hideous racket! I couldn't hold back. Out of sheer frustration I yelled at the little bleeders:

“Shut the fuck up, the lot of you!”

To my surprise, it worked: there was a dead silence. But the facial icons that had come up along with the shouting all made an expression that looked a lot like horror – little mouths round like ‘o’s – and promptly vanished off the PowerWall. I gestured like a lunatic with my wrist mech, but no response. I spoke an invoke for every sodding ubi in the set. Nothing. Fucking hell – had I burned them out? I went hot and then very cold at the thought of how much replacing them all would cost. And I'd lose my registration at the very least.

Then just when you think things can't get any worse: the icon for the old kitchen appliances ubi went a dingy colour that I knew indicated a status problem. That calm characterless old-ubi voice started up on the speakers.

“The food you have dialled is not available. The washing machine has completed its cycle. The master bedroom windows have been tinted green. The living room speakers have been muted.” And so on. Random messages from all of the old set – or I hoped they were random.

The kitchen door flung open. Nicola, with an alarmingly intense version of that purple giraffe frown.

“Stop pissing around with my music! And what have you done with my essay? The PowerWall just closed down .”

Oh.

Time seemed to stop – must have been all the adrenaline in my system. Flight out of the question, so fight was the only option. That meant thinking, and quickly.

“Nicola, we've got a problem. The new ubis have conked out and the old ones have a status problem.”

“What do you mean ‘we’?” Ah, she was quick at least.

“I was hoping you might be able to help.” I looked as pleading as I knew how.

“Me? “ A pause. Then: “S'pose. But what do I do?”

“Read this out. Now!”

I thrust my wrist mech under her nose with the invoke for the new ubis. They were sensitive weren't they? Maybe a new voice could bring them back.

She read slowly, stumbling over some of the technical terms. I listened with half an ear to the old-ubis wingeing, hoping we weren't about to lose the power circuits. That would put the lid right on it and I might as well book myself into compulsory community service.

Oh joy! Forty little faces came up on the screen again. Expressions were at least neutral.

“Well done Nicola! You wonderful person!” And I meant it.

The purple giraffe pattern wrapped itself around the beginning of a smile.

But we still had to get them to take over from the old ubis. The share hadn't worked: the very risky alternative was to switch the old ones off at exactly the moment the new ones were given control. Two people might just manage it.

I explained this quickly. It had to be done by gesture of course since we couldn't both speak at once. Nicola rushed off for her gesture gloves – I was relying on her to bring in the new ubis just in case they still had it in for me.

Then I selected the old ubi icons with my wrist mech and she grabbed the new ones with her glove.

“One, two, three, Go!”

All the lights went out and I felt my heart stop. But almost at once they came back on. And the forty little faces all had smiles.