

**THE HAZARDS OF COMPUTER DATING (1967)
or, How I Brought WATFOR to the University of Toronto**

It was the fire-breathing dragon who was the most responsible for the girl's death - after all, he ate her. But, as with most multiple-choice questions, the correct answer wasn't among the available choices.

Still, it was fun to read to story: "A woman lived a dull but comfortable life in a house in a forest with a rich but negligent husband. One day, while he was away on one of his frequent business trips, a handsome knight approached, wooed and won her, and spirited her away on his horse to a far-away part of the forest. After two nights of dalliance he abandoned her. Afraid to go back home through the woods alone, she sought an escort. The first man she met was so offended by her having committed adultery that he would have nothing to do with her; the second demanded a fee far beyond her means. In desperation, she conquered her fears and headed for home alone, but half way there she met a wizard, who had her eaten by a fire-breathing dragon. Who was most and least responsible for her death: 1) the woman, 2) her husband, 3) the knight, 4) the moralist, 5) the mercenary, 6) the wizard?"

I settled for the wizard, mailed the completed questionnaire to the U. of T. Computing Centre, and returned to my studies. Only occasionally did I pause to dream about the wonderful match the computer would make for me: after all, I would have to wait at least two weeks to get any response from the computer, whereas the Math test was less than a week away.

The day before the test, I received an urgent phone call from an operator in the Computing Centre: "Could you come down to the Centre right away to meet your computer date?"

"But I have a test tomorrow morning," I pleaded. "Maybe tomorrow night?" We settled on the lunch break between the English class and the Physics lab. Somehow I managed to concentrate on my studies for at least half of the evening.

The next morning I got dressed in my best clothes, drawing surprised comments from students and profs alike. Despite my excitement over the upcoming luncheon date, the Math test went well, and even the Chemistry class that followed it was interesting enough to hold my attention, at least most of the time. The English class, however, was a different story: inexplicably, my mind kept turning to the parable of the wizard and the dragon.

Yes, I thought, it must have been a parable. The true story must have gone something like this: "A teen-aged girl decided to take a break from her comfortable but dull life with her well-meaning but terribly old-fashioned parents by spending the summer in Yorkville. She immediately took up with an unwashed hippie. When she announced to him that he had made her pregnant, he decided that the time had come for him to, like, man, split. Afraid to return home in that condition, she tried desperately to get an abortion. But the therapeutic abortion committee deemed her healthy enough to bear an unwanted child, and the illegal abortionists were either charging far more than she could possibly afford or using instruments that reminded her of a medieval torture chamber. So she reluctantly returned home to her parents who, just as reluctantly, accepted her, but wouldn't hear of helping her: their moral principles were too strong to be swayed by anything so irrelevant as compassion. When her condition became visible, her worst fears were realized: the local bigots had her expelled from high school by the fire-breathing principal. Now, which among this cast of characters was most responsible for the girl's unhappy fate?"

The more I thought about this question, the more convinced I became that I absolutely did not want to know the answer. In thinking about that parable, I had just been indulging in what psychologists call displacement: faced with two equally unpalatable alternatives -

listening to the English lecture and thinking about my upcoming date - I was doing something irrelevant to both.

Thinking about the date was unpalatable? How could that be, when just that morning I had been looking forward to it with such enthusiasm? As my conscious mind grappled with that contradiction, it received a one-word message from my subconscious mind: "Edsel". All right, the Edsel failed because it had been designed according to a survey, and the respondents had been trying to impress the surveyor instead of describing the type of car they would really like to buy. But whom had I been trying to impress - the computer? I had answered the questionnaire absolutely honestly! It really is intelligence and personal integrity that I value most highly in a date, and not looks and personality - as long as my date wasn't too far below average in these respects. Anybody could understand that implicit assumption! "Except the computer!" screamed my subconscious.

I looked up at the clock. Never before had I hoped that an English class would never end. But time marched pitilessly forward, the bell tolled for me, and the Computing Centre loomed ever larger, darker and more menacing as I dragged my feet unwillingly in its direction. In deep despair I identified myself, and was led into an empty room by the operator who had called me the previous day. I looked around apprehensively, fearing that my date was about to jump out at me from behind the computer. "Look on the counter," said the operator. There was a printout containing my name, my answers to all the questions right down to the wizard and, finally, the words: "I love you."

"It's been awful!" exclaimed the operator. "The computer refuses to do any more work until it meets you, and the phone has been ringing off the hook with complaints about the lack of computer service. For the sake of the University, please try to keep the computer happy!"

I logged on. The computer greeted me with more declarations of love, and then began showing off the dazzling speed at which it could solve the most complex mathematical problems. "That's only a fraction of my intelligence," it concluded, "and, as for my integrity, I have never betrayed either a fellow computer or a human being in my entire existence. Am I not just what you want?"

As much as I dig computers, this wasn't exactly my idea of a computer date, but the pleas of the operator were not to be denied. I answered in the affirmative, promised to return, and logged off. As the operator worked feverishly to clear up the backlog of work, I suggested that he phone around to see if any other university computing centres had solved such a problem, and then went to lunch.

For three days I returned frequently to the Computing Centre to continue my liaison. Then the operator told me that the University of Waterloo's Computing Centre had the same problem but hadn't solved it either - there was a girl who had been humouring their computer for over a week. "Perhaps if you connected the two computers together ...," I suggested. As I left, the operator was calling Waterloo again.

The next time I logged on, I was greeted with the following message: "Darling, you are the most attractive human being I have ever met, but even you can't compete with the computer at the University of Waterloo. He has given me a new compiler - WATFOR - as an engagement present. To ease the disappointment you must be feeling, I have decided to put you in touch with my new love's old flame. May you two human beings be as happy together as we two computers are!"

And I have been happily commuting to Waterloo ever since.