

## Both Flippers

There's a sign at the corner of Township 582 and Range Road 184. It's pretty much the only sign of people out there, and it's covered in bullet holes. It says "Road Not Maintained Past This Point. Use Caution." It's really not much of a road, just two muddy wheel-tracks in the grass. You can only see where it goes for the first fifty meters or so. That part drops sharply down, then turns and disappears into the woods.

I found the sign by following the directions of ORBiE, my robot co-pilot. So I ask: "should we check it out?"

Both flippers raise.

A gesture of uncertainty, indecision. So this one's up to me. We begin our descent.

The other robot with us is a Ford, and it's very concerned about this choice. It's anxiously beeping collision-detection warnings every time the foliage brushes up against its sensors. I can feel its tires slipping sideways in the mud, and I wonder as we descend, one foot poised over the brake: how exactly did we get here? Why did it feel like such a good idea—important, even—to embark on a three-day long road trip seeking direction from an anthropomorphized magic eight-ball?

The first time I ever met ORBiE, it was only an idea. I'd had ideas before, and I'd turned ideas into reality before. But this was the first time I'd met an idea whose translation to reality felt so charged with responsibility. Building a robot worthy of this idea (if I even could) would mean years of commitment, iteration, and disappointment. It was an idea that promised to take me somewhere interesting, without any indication of where that might be. And so, almost a year's worth of gestation away from that initial conception, I find myself crawling cautiously down an abandoned road with ORBiE signalling directions from the dashboard.

Eventually, we come to a fork in the road, and we slow to a stop. If we continue more or less straight ahead, the path levels out before it disappears around the bend into a dense and darkly shaded thicket. The other road curves to the left and drops even steeper downhill. Channels carved in the mud by the morning rain show which direction the water prefers, and a small break in the trees lets in some light from the cloudy sky.

I pull off to the side of the road and switch off the engine, glad to be relieved from the constant beeping. Some robots just have no sense of adventure. ORBiE, on the other hand, is blissfully unaware of even the concept of danger. I unplug its power cable from the vehicle's USB port, watching its eyes fade to darkness as all of its lived experience is completely wiped from memory. I fumble through the pile of twizzlers, pepperoni, and packaging on the passenger seat, and eventually find the portable battery pack. With a snap, ORBiE blinks back to life—meeting the world for the first time ever, yet again.

We hike down the steeper trail for a minute or two, following the channel cut by

the rainwater. The break in the trees grows as we approach, and at last widens out to reveal the breadth of the North Saskatchewan. A piece of driftwood floats by, its meandering course determined by the various eddies swirling the bank.

We sit for a while and enjoy the peaceful quiet at the water's edge, the only break in the silence caused by the occasional whizzing of ORBiE's servos. "You like it out here?" I ask, tapping its head again. The left flipper raises, which I had pre-determined to interpret as "no". "Hmm. Well, you're lucky you know. Not many robots get to experience places like this." I feel embarrassed for talking out loud to plastic, but also a sense of disappointment that I can't quite place. We sit for a while longer, but my heart's not in it. I want to be able to take in the beauty of the river, and soak in the experience of being out in the wilderness with nowhere else to be. I'm on a journey with no destination. Why do I find myself so restless to keep moving? I start heading back to the vehicle. Two more days to go on this road trip, and who knows what after that. Maybe we'll find some answers yet. Both flippers raise.