

The Ghost Standard

William Tenn

Remember the adage of the old English legal system: "Let justice be done though the heavens fall"? Well, *was* justice done in this case?

You have three entities here. An intelligent primate from Sol III—to put it tech-nically, a human. An equally intelligent crustacean from Procyon VII—in other words, a sapient lobstermorph. And a computer of the Malcolm Movis omicron beta design, intelligent enough to plot a course from one stellar system to another and capable of matching most biological minds in games of every sort, from bridge to chess to double zonyak.

Now—add a shipwreck. A leaky old Cascassian freighter comes apart in deep space. I mean quite literally comes apart. Half the engine segment explodes off, the hull develops leaks and begins to collapse, all those who are still alive and manage to make it to lifeboats get away just before the end.

In one such lifeboat you have the human, Juan Kydd, and the lobstermorph, Tuezuzim. And, of course, the Malcolm Movis computer—the resident pilot, navi-gator and general factotum of the craft.

Kydd and Tuezuzim had known each other for more than two years. Computer programmers of roughly the same level of skill, they had met on the job and had been laid off together. Together they had decided to save money by traveling on the sca-brous Cascassian freighter to Sector N-42B5, where there were rumored to be many job opportunities available.

They were in the dining salon, competing in a tough hand of double zonyak, when the disaster occurred. They helped each other scramble into the lifeboat. Activating the computer pilot, they put it into Far Communication Mode to search for rescu-ers. It informed them that rescue was possible no sooner than twenty days hence, and was quite likely before thirty.

Any problems? The lifeboat had air, fuel, more than enough water. But food...

It was a Cascassian freighter, remember. The Cascassians, of course, are a silicon-based life-form. For their passengers, the Cascassians had laid in a supply of organic, or carbon-based, food in the galley. But they had not even thought of restocking the lifeboats. So the two non-Cascassians were now imprisoned for some three to four weeks with nothing to eat but the equivalent of sand and gravel.

Or each other, as they realized immediately and simultaneously.

Humans, on their home planet, consider tinier, less-sapient crustaceans such as lobsters and crawfish great delicacies. And back on Procyon VII, as Tuezuzim put it, "We consider it a sign of warm hospitality to be served a small, succulent primate known as spotted morror."

In other words, each of these programmers could eat the other. And survive. There were cooking and refrigerating facilities aboard the lifeboat. With careful manage-ment and rationing, meals derived from a full-size computer programmer would last till rescue.

But who was to eat whom? And how was a decision to be reached?

By fighting? Hardly. These were two highly intellectual types, neither of them good physical exemplars of their species.

Kydd was round-shouldered, badly nearsighted and slightly anemic. Tuezuzim was somewhat undersized, half deaf and suffering from one crippled chela. The claw had been twisted at birth and had never matured normally. With these disabilities, both had avoided participation in athletic sports all their lives, especially any sport of a belligerent nature.

Yet the realization that there was nothing else available to eat had already made both voyagers very hungry. What was their almost-friendship compared with the grisly prospect of starvation?

For the record, it was the lobstermorph, Tuezuzim, who suggested a trial by game, with the

computer acting as referee and also as executioner of the loser. Again, only for the record and of no importance otherwise, it was the human, Juan Kydd, who suggested that the logical game to decide the issue should be Ghost.

They both liked Ghost and played it whenever they could not play their favorite game—that is, when they lacked zonyak tiles. In the scrambling haste of their emergency exit, they had left both web and tiles in the dining salon. A word game now seemed the sole choice remaining, short of flipping a coin, which—as games-minded programmers—they shrugged off as childishly simplistic. There also was the alter-native of trial by physical combat, but that was something that neither found at all attractive.

Since the computer would function as umpire and dispute-settling dictionary as well as executioner, why not make it a three-cornered contest and include the computer as a participant? This would make the game more interesting by adding an unpredictable factor, like a card shuffle. The computer could not lose, of course—they agreed to ignore any letters of Ghost that it picked up.

They kept the ground rules simple: a ten-minute time limit for each letter; no three-letter words; the usual prohibition against proper nouns; and each round would go in the opposite direction from that of the previous round. Thus, both players would have equal challenging opportunities, and neither would be permanently behind the other in the contest.

Also, challenging was to be allowed across the intervening opponent—the computer, not part of the combat.

Having sent off one last distress signal, they addressed themselves to program-ming the computer for the game (and the instantaneous execution of the loser). Combing through the immense software resources of the computer, they were pleased to discover that its resident dictionaries included *Webster's First* and *Second*, their own joint favorites. They settled on the ancient databases as the supreme arbiters.

The verdict-enforcer took a little more time to organize. Eventually, they decided on what amounted to a pair of electric chairs controlled by the computer. The killing force would be a diverted segment of the lifeboat's Hametz Drive. Each competitor would be fastened to his seat, locked in place by the computer until the game was over. At the crucial moment, when one of them incurred the *t* in Ghost, a single blast of the diverted drive would rip through the loser's brain, and the winner would be released.

"Everything covered?" asked Tuezuzim as they finished their preparations. "A fair contest?"

"Yes, everything's covered," Kydd replied. "All's fair. Let's go."

They went to their respective places: Kydd to a chair, Tuezuzim to the traditional curved bed of the lobstermorph. The computer activated their electronic bonds. They stared at each other and softly said their goodbyes.

We have this last information from the computer. The Malcolm Movis omicron beta is bundled at sale with Al-truix 4.0, a fairly complex ethicist program. It was now recording the proceedings, with a view to the expected judicial inquest.

The lobstermorph drew the first *g*. He had challenged Juan Kydd, who had just added an *e* to *t-w-i-s*. Kydd came up with *twisel*, the Anglo-Saxon noun and verb for fork. To Tuezuzim's bitter protests that *twisel* was archaic, the Malcolm Movis pointed out that there had been no prior agreement to exclude archaisms.

Kydd himself was caught a few minutes later. Arrogant over his initial victory, he was helping to construct *laminectomy* ("surgical removal of the posterior arch of a vertebra") by adding *m* after *l-a-m-i-n-e-c-t-o*. True, this would end on the computer's turn, which could incur no penalty letters, but Kydd was willing to settle for a neutral round. Unfortunately, he had momentarily forgotten the basic escape hatch for any seasoned Ghost player—plurals. The Malcolm Movis indicated *i*, and Tuezuzim added the *e* so fast it sounded like an echo. There was absolutely no escape for Kydd from the

concluding *s* in *laminectomies*.

And so it went, neck and neck, or, rather, neck and cephalothorax. Tuezuzim pulled ahead for a time and seemed on the verge of victory, as Kydd incurred *g-h-o-s* and then was challenged in a dangerous situation with a questionable word.

"*Dirigibloid*?" Tuezuzim demanded. "You just made that one up. There is no such word. You are simply trying to avoid getting stuck with the *e* of *dirigible*."

"It certainly is a word," Kydd maintained, perspiring heavily. "As in 'like a diri-gible, in the form of or resembling a dirigible.' It can be used, probably has been used, in some piece of technical prose."

"But it's not in *Webster's Second*—and that's the test. Computer, is it in your dictionary?"

"As such, no," the Malcolm Movis replied. "But the word *dirigible* is derived from the Latin *dirigere*, to direct. It means steerable, as a dirigible balloon. The suffix *-oid* may be added to many words of classical derivation. As in *spheroid* and *colloid* and *asteroid*, for example—"

"Just consider those examples!" Tuezuzim broke in, arguing desperately. "All three have the Greek suffix *-oid* added to words that were originally Greek, not Latin. *Aster* means 'star' in Greek, so with *asteroid* you have 'starlike or in the form of a star.' And *colloid* comes from the Greek *kolla* for 'glue.' Are you trying to tell me that dictionaries on the level of *Webster's First* or *Second* mix Greek with Latin?"

It seemed to the anxiously listening Kydd that the Malcolm Movis computer almost smiled before continuing. "As a matter of fact, in one of those cases, that's exactly what happens. *Webster's Second* describes *spheroid* as deriving from both Greek and Latin. It provides as etymologies, on the one hand, the Greek *sphairoeides* (*sphaira*, 'sphere,' plus *eidos*, 'form') and, on the other, the Latin *sphaeroides*, 'ball-like' or 'spherical.' Two different words, both of classical origin. *Dirigibloid* is therefore ruled a valid word."

"I protest that ruling!" Tuezuzim waved his claw angrily. "Data are being most selectively used. I am beginning to detect a pro-human, anti-lobstermorph bias in the computer."

Another faint suggestion of an electromechanical smile. "Once more, a matter of fact," the computer noted silkily. "The Malcolm Movis design team was headed by Dr. Hodgodya Hodgodya, the well-known lobstermorph electronicist. Pro-human, anti-lobstermorph bias is therefore most unlikely to have been built in. *Dirigibloid* is ruled valid; the protest is noted and disallowed. Juan Kydd begins the next round."

Since both opponents were now tagged with *g-h-o-s*, the round coming up would be the rubber, or execution, round. This was most definitely *it*.

Kydd and Tuezuzim looked at each other again. One of them would be dead in a few minutes. Then Kydd looked away and began the round with the letter that had always worked best for him in three-cornered Ghost, the letter *l*.

The computer added *i*, and Tuezuzim, a bit rashly, came up with *m*. He was quite willing for the word to be *limit*, and thus to end on the Malcolm Movis. A null round, and he, Tuezuzim, would be starting the next one.

But Kydd was not interested in a null round this time. He added an *o* to the *l-i-m* and, when the computer supplied a *u*, the developing *limousine* that had to end on Tuezuzim became obvious.

The lobstermorph thought desperately. With a hopeless squeak from deep in his cephalothorax, he said *s*.

It must be recognized here, as the computer testified at the subsequent inquest, that the *s* already completed a word, to wit *limous* ("muddy, slimy"). But the Malcolm Movis pointed out that the individual who should have triumphantly called attention to *limous*, Juan Kydd, was so committed to catching his opponent with *limousine* that he didn't notice.

Limousine moved right along, with an *i* from Kydd and an *n* from the computer. And once again it was up to Tuezuzim.

He waited until his ten-minute time limit had almost expired. Then he came up with a letter. But it wasn't *e*.

It was *o*.

Juan Kydd stared at him. "*L-i-m-o-u-s-i-n-o?*" he said in disbelief, yet already sus-pecting what the lobstermorph was up to. "I challenge you."

Again Tuezuzim waited a long time. Then, slowly rotating his crippled left chela at Juan Kydd's face, he said, "The word is *limousinoid*."

"There's no such word! What in hell does it mean?"

"What does it mean? 'Like a limousine, in the form of or resembling a limousine.' It can be used, probably has been used, in some piece of technical prose."

"Referee!" Kydd yelled. "Let's have a ruling. Do you have *limousinoid* in your dic-tionary?"

"Whether or not it's in the dictionary, Computer," Tuezuzim countered, "it has to be acceptable. If *dirigibloid* can exist, so can *limousinoid*. If *limousinoid* exists, Kydd's challenge is invalid and he gets the *t* of Ghost—and loses. If *limousinoid* doesn't exist, neither does *dirigibloid*, and so Kydd would have lost that earlier round and would therefore now be up to the *t* of Ghost. Either way, he has to lose."

Now it was the Malcolm Movis that took its time. Five full minutes it considered. As it testified later, it need not have done so; its conclusion was reached in microsec-onds. "But," it noted in its testimony at the inquest, "an interesting principle was involved here that required the use of this unnecessary time. Justice, it is said, not only must be done, but must *seem* to be done. Only the appearance of lengthy, care-ful consideration would make justice *seem* to be done in this case."

Five minutes—and then, at last, the Malcolm Movis gave its verdict.

"There is no valid equation here between *dirigibloid* and *limousinoid*. Since *diri-gible* is a word derived from the so-called classic languages, it may add the Greek suffix *-oid*. *Limousine*, on the other hand, derives from French, a Romance language. It comes from Limousin, an old province of France. The suffix *-oid* cannot therefore be used properly with it—Romance French and classical Greek may not be mixed."

The Malcolm Movis paused now for three or four musical beats before going on. Juan Kydd and Tuezuzim stared at it, the human's mouth moving silently, the crustacean's antennae beginning to vibrate in frantic disagreement.

"Tuezuzim has incurred *t*, the last letter of Ghost," the computer announced. "He has lost."

"I protest!" Tuezuzim screamed. "Bias! Bias! If no *limousinoid*, then no *dirigibl*—"

"Protest disallowed." And the blast of the Hametz Drive tore through the lobster-morph. "Your meals, Mr. Kydd," the computer said courteously.

The inquest, on Karpis VIII of Sector N-42B5, was a swift affair. The backup tapes of the Malcolm Movis were examined; Juan Kydd was merely asked if he had anything to add (he did not).

But the verdict surprised almost everyone, especially Kydd. He was ordered held for trial. The charge? Aggravated cannibalism in deep space.

Of course, our present definition of interspecies cannibalism derives from this case:

The act of cannibalism is not to be construed as limited to the eating of members of one's own species. In modern terms of widespread travel through deep space, it may be said to occur whenever one highly intelligent individual kills and consumes another highly intelligent individual. Intelligence has always been extremely difficult to define precisely, but it will be here and henceforth understood to involve the capacity to understand and play the terrestrial game of Ghost. It is not to be un-derstood as solely

limited to this capacity, but if an individual, of whatever biological construction, possesses such capacity, the killing, consuming and assimilating of that individual shall be perceived as an act of cannibalism and is to be punished in terms of whatever statutes relate to cannibalism in that time and that place.

—*The Galaxy v. Kidd, Karpis VIII, C17603*

Now, Karpis VIII was pretty much a rough-and-ready frontier planet. It was still a rather wide-open place with a fairly tolerant attitude toward most violent crime. As a result, Juan Kydd was assessed a moderate fine, which he was able to pay after two months of working at his new job in computer programming.

The Malcolm Movis computer did not fare nearly as well.

First, it was held as a crucial party to the crime and an accessory before the fact. It was treated as a responsible and intelligent individual, since it had unquestionably demonstrated the capacity to understand and play the terrestrial game of Ghost. Its plea of nonbiological construction (and therefore noninvolvement in legal proceedings pertaining to living creatures) was disallowed on the ground that the silicon-based Cascassians who had built the ship and lifeboat were now also subject to this definition of cannibalism. If silicon-chemistry intelligence could be considered biological, the court ruled, so inevitably must silicon-electronics.

Furthermore, and perhaps most damaging, the computer was held to have lied in a critical situation—or, at least, to have withheld information by not telling the whole truth. When Tuezuzim had accused it of anti-lobstermorph bias, it had pointed to the fact that the Malcolm Movis omicron beta had been designed by a lobstermorph and that anti-lobstermorph bias was therefore highly unlikely. The *whole* truth, however, was that the designer, Dr. Hodgodya, was living in self-imposed exile at the time because he hated his entire species and, in fact, had expressed this hatred in numerous satirical essays and one long narrative poem. In other words, anti-lobstermorph bias *had* been built in and the computer knew it.

To this the computer protested that it was, after all, only a computer. As such, it had to answer questions as simply and directly as possible. It was the questioner's job to formulate and ask the right questions.

"Not in this case," the court held. "The Malcolm Movis omicron beta was not functioning as a simple question-and-answer machine but as a judge and umpire. Its obligations included total honesty and full information. The possibility of anti-lobstermorph bias had to be openly considered and admitted."

The Malcolm Movis did not give up. "But you had two top-notch programmers in Kydd and Tuezuzim. Could it not be taken for granted that they would already know a good deal about the design history of a computer in such general use? Surely for such knowledgeable individuals not every *i* has to be dotted, not every *t* has to be crossed."

"Software people!" the court responded. "What do they know about fancy hardware?"

The computer was eventually found guilty of being an accessory to the crime of cannibalism and was ordered to pay a fine. Though this was a much smaller fine than the one incurred by Juan Kydd, the Malcolm Movis, unlike Kydd, had no financial resources and no way of acquiring any.

That made for a touchy situation. On a freewheeling planet such as Karpis VIII, judges and statutes might wink a bit at killers and even cannibals. But never at out-and-out deadbeats. The court ruled that if the computer could not pay its fine, it still could not evade appropriate punishment. "Let justice be done!"

The court ordered that the Malcolm Movis omicron beta be wired in perpetuity into the checkout counter of a local supermarket. The computer requested that instead it be disassembled forthwith and its parts scattered. The request was denied.

So.

You decide. Was justice done?

Afterword

The essential plot gimmick here is the variations the characters play on "dirigible" and "limousine"—and the results thereof. It is based on an actual game of Ghost in which Dan Keyes and my brother Mort were participants and used these variations against each other. I won't tell who did which.

But an attempted definition of "humanness" is what precipitated the story. If you believe, as I do, that we will shortly (ten years? fifty? a hundred and fifty?) be encountering alien intelligent life-forms and having to learn to live with them on various moral levels (are they to be considered the equivalent of dogs and cats and chimpanzees, or ants and bees, or sixteenth-century Amerindians—or are we to be considered the equivalent of one of these to them?), you must be thinking also of the necessary distinctions in many areas that we and they will have to make.

So I wrote the story and my agent, Virginia Kidd, sent it to *Playboy*, and Alice K. Turner, the editor there, said she liked it a lot and would pay a lot for it, but—just as an earlier editor at the magazine had said about an earlier story—would I please cut it down some-what, say, by at least a fourth?

One-fourth, I said? One-full-damn-*fourth*? Impossible! I said. I reread the story al-most spluttering.

But, for the hell of it, I tried to do as she had asked. And much to my chagrin, it turned out to be not only possible, but actually fairly easy. Worse yet, the resulting piece now had much more focus.

Alas. This sort of thing may keep a writer humble, but it should really not be allowed to go on.

Written 1994 / Published 1994