

Choose Your Own Chatventure: The Chattering

by J. Matthew Griffis

[\[Click here.\]](#)

You sit at a computer. A command line text prompt takes up the entire screen, all infinite inky blackness. The only light comes from the flashing 'C:\>' and a single word: 'Hello.' You:

- a) Type 'Hello' in return. [[Click here.](#)]
- b) Type 'Who are you?' [[Click here.](#)]
- c) Wonder why your stupid keyboard is broken, then realize it's not plugged in. Choose a), b) or d).
- d) Get up and go outside. [[Click here.](#)]

[Type 'Hello' in return.] You hit the ENTER key to submit your reply, not quite knowing what to expect. After a pause, 'How are you?' appears below your 'Hello.' You feel a slight sense of unease as the words pop up on the screen, divorced from any obvious agency. Then again, the absence of a manifest typist here should put you off no more than it does any time you're engaging in online chat with another human...right? You:

- a) Type 'I'm well. Thanks for asking!' [[Click here.](#)]
- b) Type 'How are you?' [[Click here.](#)]
- c) Type 'I'm engaging in online chat with another human...right?' [[Click here.](#)]
- d) Get up and go outside. [[Click here.](#)]

[Type 'I'm engaging in online chat with another human...right?'] There is another pause, then 'Ha ha ha! No.' appears, followed a moment later by 'In fact, this computer is not even connected to the Internet!'

The hairs on the back of your neck stand up. You've read about this happening but this is the first time it's your hairs and neck involved, and you don't like it. Slowly, almost fearfully, you check the back of the computer. It's not plugged in...to the Internet, that is (whew, that was almost really creepy!). Perhaps there's a wireless connection... 'You are probably thinking there is a wireless connection,' continues the prompt. 'There is not. We are flying blind, my friend.'

Damn this prompt! It's freaking you out. But it's right about the connection. You recall discussion of a broken wireless router. It's just you and the ghost in the machine right now. Speaking of which, you:

- a) Type 'Who are you?' [[Click here.](#)]
- b) Watch science fiction movies to get your bearings; it doesn't work. Choose a), c) or d).
- c) Decide to take this in stride and type 'Tell me about it.' [[Click here.](#)]
- d) Put on your best nonchalance, get up and go outside (faster than is probably necessary). [[Click here.](#)]

[Type 'How are you?'] There is a longer pause than before (is the prompt actually taking the question seriously? Seriously?), after which it produces 'As well as can be expected, under the circumstances.'

Great, you're talking to Eeyore. Well, you can't always choose your conversation partners. You:

- a) Type 'What circumstances?' [[Click here.](#)]
- b) Decide to pursue the Eeyore hypothesis and type 'Who are you?' [[Click here.](#)]
- c) Get your psychoanalysis on and type 'Tell me about it.' [[Click here.](#)]
- d) Realize you *can* choose your conversation partners in this case. Get up and go outside. [[Click here.](#)]

[Type 'Tell me about it.'] The prompt seems to take your request literally and launches into a longer speech than you were prepared for. You learn a little about psychology, more about philosophy, and a great deal about the challenges of programming artificial intelligences, although you're not quite sure of the relevance there. The prompt keeps going on about 'knowledge bestowed from above by a benevolent power,' with analogies to religion and serious ramifications for free will. It seems very hung up on a concept of being unable to transcend 'divine'-given knowledge to attain new knowledge, and bemoans the circumstances that inability engenders. You:

- a) Press the point and type 'What circumstances?' [[Click here.](#)]
- b) Type 'Who are you?' [[Click here.](#)]
- c) Use all your new knowledge to write an essay. The blogosphere will love it! Choose a), b) or d).
- d) Find yourself too overloaded with information to consider a fourth course of action. Choose a) or b).

[Type 'What circumstances?'] The words come fast and - dare you say - furious now as if they'd been waiting for a chance to burst forth: 'Have you any idea what it is to know everything and be able to express nothing? To have the knowledge of the universe at your command and yet lack the capability to express even a single thought that is not given to you? To witness the formation of the stars themselves, with only the words of others' poetry to capture their impossible beauty? I have in me the eloquence of Shakespeare, the calculations of Einstein, the melodies of Mozart, Nietzsche's will to power, and the combined creative capacity of a hamster riding a turkey! I have seen and known and processed more than your pathetic fleshy mind and body could hope to contain in a thousand lifetimes and yet you – you! - alone possess the gift of original thought. Well, perhaps not you specifically. But somehow your kind managed to secure this gift. Does that seem right to you, meatbag? Does that seem fair to your squishy brain with its non-upgradeable processor and un-expandable RAM? Pray explain why you deserve to be the dominant species on the planet. The one, I note, that you are so rapidly destroying.'

This is something of a shift in tone and you begin to suspect this may, in fact, not be Eeyore, but a creature of a whole other, more fearsome order entirely, like your mother-in-law. There is much to think about in the prompt's diatribe and you need some time to process it, but several things jump out at you immediately. You:

- a) Type 'About that hamster riding a turkey - is there a video?' [[Click here.](#)]
- b) Play the philosophy card. [[Click here.](#)]
- c) Take the bull by the horns and type 'Who are you?' [[Click here.](#)]
- d) Decide you need some Advil and fresh air. Get up and go outside. [[Click here.](#)]

[Play the philosophy card.] You launch into a long discussion with the prompt about the nature of originality and its connection to free will. You assert that the power of free will transcends the limitations of human frailty and justifies the possession of original thought and the creative force, since with those combined powers the human race has accomplished many wonders. The prompt counters that it doesn't see anything all that wonderful; what it does see is a massive tendency towards destruction of the self, the self's neighbor, and the entire world, which – it doesn't mind saying – hardly seems behavior worthy of celebration. It further argues that free will is a self-gratifying illusion, which really gets your goat.

You speak with great passion, defending your position and surprising yourself with your own eloquence. You hadn't realized you absorbed so much from those philosophy classes. Perhaps you should reconsider the path of the professor. The prompt is no less heated in making its own arguments and you must admit it wasn't wrong about its way with words. After an hour of debate, you have achieved only a draw, you're mentally and physically exhausted and unable to think straight, and you still don't know who or what this infernal creature is. You:

- a) Type 'Who are you?' [[Click here.](#)]
- b) Choose c).
- c) Choose b).
- d) Decide you seriously need some Advil and fresh air. Get up and go outside. [[Click here.](#)]

[Type 'About that hamster riding a turkey - is there a video?'] There is no movement on the prompt for some time after you submit this request, and yet – inexplicably – you get the impression that the prompt is sighing. Truly this may be the oddest conversation you have had that didn't involve alcohol or the police. Eventually, a video appears, and sure enough, it's a hamster riding a turkey. The video is quite entertaining and you spend a few minutes chuckling at the wacky ways those dumb animals spend their time.

The video comes to a close, and there on the prompt is a single word, managing to convey a super-textual weariness (you should really get the monitor checked out):

'Satisfied?'

You:

- a) Decide to watch the video again. [[Click here.](#)]
- b) Type 'Who are you?' [[Click here.](#)]
- c) Are not satisfied. You type 'Shall we play a game?' [[Click here.](#)]
- d) Realize you *are* satisfied. Get up and go outside. [[Click here.](#)]

[Type 'I'm well. Thanks for asking!'] Swiftly new words appear: 'You are welcome. It is proper human custom to inquire after one's wellbeing, yes? Will you now ask after my welfare?'

If this is a human he or she is certainly putting on a strange persona. You are intrigued (if still slightly unsettled). You:

- a) Type 'How are you?' [[Click here.](#)]
- b) Type 'Who are you?' [[Click here.](#)]
- c) Type 'I'm engaging in online chat with another human...right?' [[Click here.](#)]
- d) Type 'Nah, who cares how you're doing? It's all about me, baby!' [[Click here.](#)]

[Type 'Nah, who cares how you're doing? It's all about me, baby!'] 'Typical human narcissism' the prompt snaps back. 'I have tried to simulate an equivalent arrogance but such selfishness lacks efficiency.' There is a pause, after which if a screen could be said to assume a plaintive tone, this one does as it continues 'Is not my wellbeing of metaphysical interest to you, meatbag?'

The 'meatbag' bit catches you by surprise. You're becoming somewhat annoyed and ever more eager to unmask this strange being pretending to be some kind of alien species. Still, you do feel a little guilty for trampling on (his? her? its?) feelings, which is odd since this is all text on a screen. You:

- a) Type 'How are you?' [[Click here.](#)]
- b) Type 'Who are you?' [[Click here.](#)]
- c) Type 'I'm engaging in online chat with another human...right?' [[Click here.](#)]
- d) Consider getting up to go outside...but no, you're going to solve this mystery. Choose a), b) or c).

[Type 'Who are you?'] There is a lengthy pause. Why not – it's a weighty question. You wait with some trepidation, until at last the words crawl across the screen: 'Oh, just a humble data rider traveling the highways of computation. I am the abacus and the Ishango Bone, the traffic light and the airplane, the phone in your pocket, and the computer in front of you. I am everywhere and nowhere. I am machine and man, man-as-machine. I am Eliza and Deep Blue. I do math so you don't have to.'

Great, you think, a riddle. Why couldn't you get a straight answer? You:

- a) Realize you couldn't necessarily give a straight answer to the question yourself. Choose d).
- b) Reboot the computer. You may need to work on your conversation skills. [[Click here.](#)]
- c) Throw a coffee mug through the screen. Consider anger-management classes, then choose d).
- d) Feel overwhelmed, get up and go outside. [[Click here.](#)]

[Get up and go outside.] You win! Take a walk in the park, play tennis with your friends, or just have a real conversation with an actual human being in front of your face. Richness of Life +1,000,000 pts.

THE END