

BOY IN A WHITE ROOM

KARL OLSBERG

TRANSLATED BY LARISA VILLAR HAUSER

Chicken
House

2 Palmer Street, Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
www.chickenhousebooks.com

First published in Germany
Title of the original German edition: *Boy in a White Room*
© 2017 Loewe Verlag GmbH, Bindlach

First published in Great Britain in 2021
Chicken House
2 Palmer Street
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
United Kingdom
www.chickenhousebooks.com

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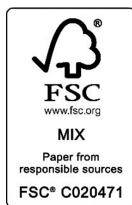
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English translation by Larisa Villar Hauser © Chicken House 2021

The translation of this work was supported by a grant from the Goethe-Institut.



Cover and interior design by Helen Crawford White
Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY



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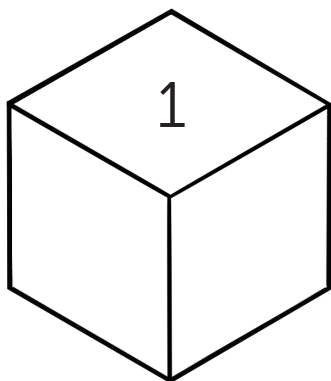
British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available.

ISBN 978-1-912626-22-9
eISBN 978-1-913322-46-5

For Nik

I will suppose then not that God, who is sovereignly good and the fountain of truth, but that some malignant demon, who is at once exceedingly powerful and deceitful, has employed all his artifice to deceive me; I will suppose that the sky, the air, the earth, colours, figures, sounds and all external things, are nothing better than the illusions of dreams by means of which this being has devised to ensnare my judgement. I will consider myself as without hands, eyes, flesh, blood or any of the senses, and as falsely believing that I am possessed of these; I will continue resolutely fixed in this belief, and if indeed by these means it be not in my power to arrive at the knowledge of truth, I shall at least do what is in my power, that is, suspend my judgement and guard with settled purpose against giving my assent to what is false, and being imposed upon by this deceiver, whatever be his power and artifice!

René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 1641



Where am I?

A white cube-shaped room. No lights, but the walls seem to glow and I can make out the faint outline of their edges. No windows or doors, no furniture, no pictures on the walls. Nothing to tell me what there is outside these walls or how I got here. Total silence.

Who am I?

No name springs to mind, no sense of self, only concepts: I know what a dice is, a tree, a dog, a computer. But none of that stuff connects to me. I can't relate it to any of my own experiences. I don't even know where the concepts come from. I remember *nothing*.

I stare at my hands in awe. They look like they're covered in thin plastic gloves that hide the fine lines and ridges of my fingertips. I'm wearing a glossy white overall and stroke the fabric, but feel nothing – my fingertips feel nothing and I can't feel the pressure of my hand against my leg. I hit myself hard but don't feel any pain. I've lost my sense of touch. And I can't smell anything either.

I slowly go to a wall and reach out my hand, touch the flat surface, but again feel nothing. The wall is solid. I search along it for a hidden switch, a crack, anything that might reveal an opening, but there's no way out. I start to panic. What's happening? Who's locked me in and why? Did I do something wrong? I can't remember. My heart must be racing but I don't feel it. What's wrong with me?

I try kicking the wall but can't feel or hear the impact. It's like I don't exist.

Maybe I'm dreaming? But if this is a dream, then it's scarily real. The silence is oppressive, as though nothing exists outside this room. A terrifying thought.

'Hey! Let me out!' I yell. At least, I try to yell, but all that comes out of my mouth is a strange monotone that sounds like it's computer-generated.

'I don't understand the command.' A woman's voice. She sounds just as fake as I do. Her voice seems to come from everywhere. Even so, I look back, half hopeful, half scared, that someone has magically appeared, that there's a way in and therefore a way out. But there's no one.

'What?' I ask.

'I don't understand the question,' she says.

'Who . . . who are you?'

'My name is Alice,' the voice replies. 'It stands for Advanced Language Interpretation Counselling Extension.'

'Where am I?'

'I am not authorized to disclose information about your location or your status.'

'Who am I?'

‘You are the patient.’

The word triggers bleak images. ‘Am I in hospital?’

‘I am not authorized to disclose information about your location or your status.’

‘So what are you authorized to do? What’s happening? Why am I here?’

‘I am here to help you find out about your new environment.’

I don’t understand what’s going on. Is this some kind of sick joke? A scientific experiment? Or some new kind of therapy? Maybe I’m not in a regular hospital but in a mental clinic. Maybe they’ve given me drugs to wipe out my memory, numb my senses and make my voice sound flat. Whatever’s going on, I want out. I have to get out!

‘Please, let me out of here!’

‘I don’t understand the command. Say “help” to hear information about my basic functions.’

‘Help.’

‘Welcome. My name is Alice, which is an acronym for “Advanced Language Interpretation Counselling Extension”. I am here to help you find your way around your new environment. I respond to simple commands or answer questions. I recognize the commands: “show me”, “what is”, “where is”, “open” and “close”.’

‘Open the door.’

‘I don’t understand the command.’

‘What is outside this room?’

‘I don’t understand the question.’

‘Damn it! Just tell me what happened to me!’

‘I don’t understand the command. Say “help” to hear information about my basic functions.’

Frustrated, I hit the wall with my fist. The fact I don’t feel anything just makes things worse.

‘Help!’ I shout, confused. My voice is lifeless, and the computer gives its standard response.

I pace up and down my prison restlessly, like a tiger in a cage. Over time, the space seems to shrink, as though the glowing walls are closing in on me. I measure the room in equal-sized steps, over and over – it’s only five paces from one side to the other. Even though the distance doesn’t change, I still feel like there’s less and less space. The air seems to get thinner.

I can’t afford to freak out! I have to pull myself together, focus and be methodical if I want to find out what’s going on. *Deep breath.* I try to focus on my breathing, but can’t feel my lungs. I can’t breathe! My head spins and for a second I feel like I’m going to pass out, but nothing happens.

Stay calm! Wherever I am, there’s no immediate danger. There has to be an explanation for all this. I feel encouraged by that thought.

‘How did I get here?’ I ask the computer voice.

‘I don’t understand the question.’

‘What is this room?’

‘This room is a computer simulation, what is known as virtual reality.’

Of course. Why didn’t I think of that? I know all about virtual worlds. A list of games springs to mind: *Minecraft*,

World of Warcraft, League of Legends, Team Defence, Assassin's Creed. I've probably played them often, even though I don't remember much about them.

Maybe someone has put a VR headset on me and fed me drugs so that I forget who and where I am. But who would do that? And why?

I touch my face but can't feel anything. I turn my head and see a different section of the room. I walk up and down, even jump on the spot, without creating any disturbances or time lags. And I don't see any pixels. If I am wearing a VR headset it must be really high spec.

'Is this a computer game?'

'A computer game is a software program that enables one or more users to play a game interactively according to set rules. Would you like more information?'

I wonder whose idea it was to call this dumb program 'advanced'. 'Am I in a computer game?'

'I am not authorized to disclose information about your location or your status.'

If this is a game then my task must be to find a way out of this room. But how? There don't seem to be any kind of unlocking mechanisms so my only option is to talk to Alice. Maybe I need to find a code word that opens the door or something.

I try a direct approach. 'Tell me the code word.'

'I don't understand the command.'

Asking questions doesn't seem to get me anywhere. What were the commands Alice understood? 'Show me', 'open', 'close'.

I take a punt and say: ‘Show me elephants!’ Surprisingly, Alice actually understands. Three columns and four lines of elephant videos appear on the walls. Most of them seem to come from webcams inside elephant enclosures at zoos. It’s easy to spot the pixelated structure and streaks that are typical of a video stream downloading via a low bandwidth internet connection. I tap one of the pictures with my index finger and it expands to fill most of the wall while the other pictures shrink and move down to the bottom.

There’s a location name at the top of the picture – the elephant enclosure is in a Dutch zoo – and there’s a time stamp too: 10.15, 27 April 2017. Some of the other cameras show location and time details too, so I can tell the videos are being streamed. I still don’t know where I am but at least I know the date. As though that’s any help.

Still, I seem to have an internet connection. This sheds a whole new light on the other commands Alice understands.

‘Open Google!’

The elephant pictures disappear and the walls turn white. The wall in front of me now shows a web browser with the search engine’s home page. I tap the search field and a cursor blinks. The walls are giant touch screens but there’s no virtual keyboard.

‘Elephant,’ I say loudly. The word immediately shows up in the Google search field. I tap the search button and, as expected, a list of search results, pictures and

information appear.

I'm in a simulated room with virtual touch screens that give me access to the internet. What's the point of all this? And how come I know how Google works but don't remember ever having used the search engine?

'Open Google Earth.'

The wall shows a satellite picture. The dark strip of a river trails across the grey-green surface from top left to bottom right. In the centre of the screen, the river forks then joins up again, forming an onion-shaped island. The image around the river is made of grey pixels, as though someone has sprayed ash everywhere. I know this place, even without the white writing in the middle of the picture – but I don't know why. Google determines a location using an IP address, then shows the corresponding satellite image. I know this too, though I don't know how. But it really helps narrow down my location.

'Am I in Hamburg?' I ask.

'I am not authorized to disclose information about your location or your status,' Alice replies without emotion.

'Show me Hamburg,' I instruct Alice.

The map and search screen disappear and are replaced by dozens of webcams. They show different areas of the city: the Inner Alster with its fountains, the jetties, the Port of Hamburg, the Elbe Philharmonic, the station, the airport, lots of streets that I don't immediately recognize. Cars whizz across the screen, people walk around purposefully. I so badly want to be in their shoes, being

filmed by cameras instead of here in this virtual room watching an image of a world that's out of reach.

Who am I? Where am I? Why am I here? My questions become more urgent by the second.

Maybe one of the camera pictures will trigger a memory. Even though I recognize a lot of the distinctive buildings and places, it feels like I've only ever watched a film about Hamburg without actually having been there myself. My attention is drawn to one of the video streams. There's nothing special to see – a tarmac cycle path in a residential street next to a park – but the camera angle is unusual: the image moves down the street, more or less at eye level, turning sometimes left, sometimes right, as though filmed by a drunk cameraman whizzing past trees, pedestrians and parked cars. In the top right-hand corner of the video there's a logo for an internet company: Eyestream.

The image suddenly veers downwards and I see the tip of a skateboard racing along the cycle path. The camera must be attached to a skateboarder's head.

'Alice, open Eyestream!'

The webcam pictures disappear and a sleek website opens. It shows a number of videos with a similar sort of perspective, except they're moving a lot more slowly – they must come from cameras being carried by people walking. The streamers' names and locations are shown: Carol in Amsterdam, George in Trondheim, Ralf in Pisa, Maria in Regensburg.

A short description explains how Eyestream 'lets the

world share your life by live streaming everything you see'. But only if you want to, of course – and strictly in compliance with data protection regulation. The service already has over 300,000 members but only a little over 1,000 cameras are currently active. I was just watching one.

I enter 'Hamburg' into the search field and get four more matches. When I click the top one, the site asks me to register. Great. User name? I have no idea what my name is. I enter 'Boy in a White Room'. My email address? I can't remember. So I open Google and get myself a new one: boyinawhiteroom@gmail.com.

Once I've completed registration, I pick a stream and it fills the screen. It belongs to Mike, a twenty-one-year-old student who is strolling down Mönckeberg Street towards City Hall. I can hear muffled street sounds through his microphone: voices, a busker.

Just as I'm about to click to another stream, I hear loud, harsh voices. Mike turns his head and I see an elderly man wearing shabby clothes sitting in a doorway with his decrepit-looking dog. Two young men wearing leather jackets stand in front of him. I can't make out what they're saying but it's obvious they're swearing and giving the man a hard time.

He covers his head with his hands. Only now do I realize the camera isn't moving. Mike has stopped to watch.

People appear at the edge of the picture. A crowd of spectators has gathered but nobody steps in to help the man.

‘Do something!’ I shout.

‘I don’t understand the command,’ says Alice.

‘Alice, call the police!’

‘I don’t understand the command.’

At that moment one of the thugs throws a beer bottle at the homeless man. It smashes: there’s glass everywhere, a cut trailing blood down the homeless man’s face. The scraggy dog barks loudly but the man holds it back as the attackers howl with laughter. The dog jumps up and snaps at the assailant’s arm. He stumbles back, screaming in pain. The animal is biting down on his leather jacket and won’t let go. In a swift move, the second man kills the dog with a switchblade.

Nobody helps. People just stand and stare. I have to do something. Anything!

I can send messages to Eyestream users by accessing a chat function. But it’s already too late: the old man is sobbing over his dead dog while the assailants run off and the crowd of gawkers disperses. Mike moves away too and just keeps on walking. I hear his voice:

‘Man, that was gross. Did you see? A couple of guys just beat up a tramp and stabbed his dog. I reckon I’ll be right up there for Stream of the Month. So, thumbs up – vote for me, OK?’

I feel like puking and type into the chat window: Phone the police, you asshole!

Mike doesn’t react. Disgusted, I ask Alice to close Eyestream.

For a while, I just stare at the white walls. I feel sick. I’m

not sure whether it's from staring at the moving pictures, the gory scene I've just witnessed or my sense of utter helplessness. I shake off my stupor and pace around the white room again – agitated, helpless, frustrated – until my thoughts settle.

What do I know so far? I'm in a virtual room with no way out. I've lost my memory and don't know where my body is. I can see into the outside world through a thousand pairs of eyes, but it's pointless unless I know where to look. Then there's Alice, the artificial wannabe-intelligence. She is most likely my best lead.

'Open Google!'

I click the search box and enter 'Alice'. The search results show references to Lewis Carroll's book *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. I know the book even though I don't remember ever having read it. Other than that, a singer and a suffragette appear on the first page. There's no mention of a software program by that name. But that would have been way too easy.

Next, I enter 'Advanced Language Interpretation Counselling Extension'.

Google finds various matches for 'Advanced Counselling' or 'Language Interpretation', but nothing for a software program that understands simple voice commands. So that's no use either.

I try 'Artificial Intelligence Hamburg'.

The top match is the website for a company called Mycrologic, which deals with the development of algorithms for something called data mining, whatever that is.

There's nothing on the home page to suggest the company designed Alice. But that doesn't necessarily mean a thing.

'Who is Mycrologic?' I ask Alice.

'Mycrologic is a leading service provider in the analysis and processing of big data by means of neural networks,' she answers helpfully. 'Mycrologic's clients include internationally renowned companies such as Philips, Siemens, Deutsche Telekom, Commerzbank, DKV, BMW and Vattenfall. Mycrologic – we'll find any needle in your data haystack.'

Interesting: Alice, who doesn't seem to know much about anything, knows a whole lot about Mycrologic. Maybe it's worth taking a closer look at the company website.

At first glance I don't see anything interesting – no systems like Alice, no computer simulations or virtual worlds. The company seems to develop software that makes it possible to search large amounts of data for patterns and links in order to better predict user behaviour. So that's what data mining is. When I enter 'Mycrologic' into Google, an article appears that was published in a business magazine in 2013. It reports how millionaire Henning Jaspers bought a 'double-digit' million euro stake in the company.

Something about the name feels familiar, as though I've heard it before, but it doesn't come with any specific knowledge, and definitely no memories. On the other hand, Google and Wikipedia know a lot about Henning

Jaspers. He founded the company Dark Star with his partner Marten Raffay, and they achieved worldwide success with the mega-hit game *Team Defence*. Maybe that's why I know his name.

I stumble across an eight-month old newspaper report:

WIFE OF HAMBURG MILLIONAIRE SHOT BY INTRUDERS

Hamburg. On Saturday night, unidentified intruders broke into the mansion of internet entrepreneur Henning Jaspers. The millionaire's wife, Maria Jaspers, was shot during the break-in. His fifteen-year-old son was injured and is in a critical condition. He has been transferred to a specialist clinic. According to investigating officers, evidence suggests that the perpetrators intended to abduct the young man but were interrupted by his mother, who used pepper spray to fight them off. At least two people were involved. Speaking on behalf of the family, Henning Jaspers' solicitor stated that the entrepreneur will not be available for comment at this time. He will, however, do everything he can to support the police in their efforts to solve this appalling crime. If you have any information please report it to your local police station.

The article shows a photograph of a luxury villa. It's impossible to make out the faces of the people in the

picture. I click to enlarge it. Have I been there before? I don't remember.

'Who is Henning Jaspers?' I ask.

'Henning Jaspers is your father,' says Alice.