Travel by numbers

A step-by-step guide.

Gareth D. Jones

All the other passengers had filed off the shuttle before Basil undid the clasp at his waist and rose from his seat. He loathed the cramped quarters he had been forced to travel in, and couldn't bear the thought of rubbing shoulders with his fellow travellers. It was bad enough feeling the chaotic swirl of so many minds in close proximity — a gift, or more likely a curse, that had left him far too aware of the sordidness of life. Thankfully, when more than a couple of people were nearby it all became a blur and he could ignore individual emotions. He could only tolerate the thought of sharing the air with them because he knew it was sanitized in the recirc.

The smiling stewardess at the front looked at him expectantly as he paced the length of the cabin, counting each footstep as he went. A wave of impatience washed over him as he neared. Eleven paces.

"Have a pleasant day," she said as he edged out of the hatch, careful not to brush against her. Relief, aggravation and weariness bubbled out from her, lapping at his shoulders and diminishing as he moved away. Twenty-seven paces down the boarding tube and seven across the reception bay to the security desk, all the while fingering the ID in his hip pocket. He waded into a sphere of boredom.

An officer who wore only the vaguest smile put out her hand for his ID card. He pulled it out, carefully grasped between thumb and palm, paused and slid it away. Then out again. Then away. A third time, almost handing it over before an impulse made him put it back away. The exposure to too much awareness of others, and the compulsion to stick to his own private routines: Basil was unsure which was cause and which effect.

A sharp wash of annoyance broke over him and the vague smile disappeared. He handed the card over, relieved that the ritual was over. All the other passengers were already through and into Astropolis itself, a mixture of excitement and a dozen other

emotions bursting over each other and dissipating before their full strength could reach him. Another ten paces beyond the desk he passed through a hatch and into a wide, brightly lit corridor. Several people passed in either direction, but thankfully not enough to cause crowding. The ripples of their emotions were easier to ignore as they were carried along past him.

A location map was only six paces along the wall. After wiping the screen gently with a hygiene cloth, Basil tapped his residence number into the touch pad. His room location appeared as a flashing

turn left, fourteen paces to the lift. Up two levels ...

Moustache-man wandered off to look for another map panel, and fading emotions lapped at Basil's back like a receding tide. Basil continued his calculations until finally, at peace with his surroundings, he began pacing. He swerved slightly to avoid people along the way, being careful not to affect the length of his paces.

The lights went out.

There were gasps and stifled screams from people up and down the corridor. Huge breakers of panic and fear assaulted

Basil from every side, beating against his mind in a constant onslaught. Nobody moved. An amplified voice came out of the dark after a few seconds.

"This is Maintenance Chief Algie Bradislaw. The lights have failed on the entire habitat. Please be assured that no other systems are affected and there is no danger." There was a pause. "The emergency lighting should already have kicked in, but there seems to be a delay. Please stay where you are until the lighting is restored to avoid accidents. I'll keep you informed."

There was much moaning and grumbling from the unseen figures in the corridor. The huge waves subsided and lesser fronts of annoyance and concern took their place. These quickly melded into an ignorable sea of choppy waves and clashing foam. Basil smiled to himself as he continued counting out his paces. Bubbles of mixed emotions alerting him to the close presence of other, less hygienic, people allowed him to avoid collisions. In only a few moments he had made his way to the secure environment of his apartment where the layout was practically imprinted on his mind.

An hour later the other, less exacting, inhabitants still sat waiting in the pitch dark corridors, ignorant of their neighbours' feelings. Basil snored softly on his immaculately clean bed, where nobody was close enough to impinge on his mind. ■

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