Picasso's cat

The editor's wavefunction collapses.

Ron Collins

Dear Mr Gee,

Thank you for your recent correspondence in regard to an earlier submission. Some of your comments have gotten me to thinking, and as a result I now understand a few things more fully than I once did. Knowing your fascination with topics as eclectic as quantum theory, art history and, of course, editorial matters, I immediately thought you would want to hear about my recent endeavours, and how I've tied these apparently disparate fields together into a nice little ball.

What I've found is certainly most disturbing, but my results can be verified through simple logic.

In other words, I'm on to you.

It all started, I now understand, with the cubists.

You know, Picasso and the rest of the crowd that took pieces of people and cows and dogs and for all I know anything else and chopped them up, placing a leg here, an arm there, and a breast at the eye level of the average 35-year-old man.

After several hours of research, I am convinced — and I'm certain you are, too — that the cubists knew well something it took Bohr, Heisenberg and Schrödinger another 25 or so years to almost figure out.

That is, of course, the cubists knew a good deal about quantum theory.

I refer to the example of Schrödinger's cat. In this famous thought-experiment a cat is placed in a box and predictions are made as to whether it survives or not. Quantum theorists then proceed to state that until the box is opened, the cat is in the astonishing state of fluctuation between both possibilities — alive half the time and dead the other half (which must be terribly unpleasant for the cat). I'm an engineer, though, not a theoretical physicist, and whether the cat is in oscillation between life and death or merely just sleeping is a philosophical discussion at best. So I'll leave that for our next communication in order to concentrate on hard fact.

So, let's turn back to the world of art. The proof, they say, is in the pudding, and simply by looking at their work, I think it an obvious deduction that the cubists had discovered quantum theory and were experimentally proving Schrödinger's dalianace well before he thought it all out. Only they went a step farther than Schrödinger,

applying the theorem recursively to various parts of the anatomy of their subjects.

To visualize what I mean, think of Schrödinger's cat, but then assign each portion of the cat its own quantum box — one for the left eye, one for the nose, a few for long whiskers, one for the tail. You get the point. Once you get this image, it's simple to understand how the artist could render such visions as the cubists did, for their reality would depend only upon which of the multitudes of boxes they chose to look into and what state each element lay in when it was observed.

The fact that the cubist movement even exists is obvious proof that the uncertainty principle works on the large scale as well as at the subatomic and, in fact, has a recursive principle. Luckily, however, we live in a moderately stable universe where very few people understand how to manipulate the quantum flux like the cubists did. Otherwise, I figure we would all look like Picasso's cat.

Now that I understand it, I'm really quite happy to know that you are one of the very few to be actively employing this principle.

I told you I was on to you.

I hear you, Henry, I really do: how did

I, a simple engineer with limited faculties, figure it all out where so many other really bright folks have failed?

Well, it goes like this.

I was looking in my e-mail the other day, and I thought, as usual, "Is there a message from Henry inside my inbox, or is there no message from Henry inside the inbox?" Schrödinger's post, as it were. Suddenly, it hit me. I've been asking the wrong question.

Instead, I should be asking recursive, Picasso-post questions such as "Assuming there is a message inside, will it be signed Henry, or will it be signed Mr Gee?"; "Will it be type-written or will it be a graphic insert?"; and "Will the salutation be 'Dear Ron' or 'Dear Mr Collins'?" You know — identifying the source of the components of the message, as the cubists did, rather than applying the theory to the whole of the cat, as the physicists did.

As I processed this thought, I suddenly understood what you were doing.

All those rejection letters are merely your way of ferreting out less intelligent authors and general troublemakers in favour of those with such moxie as yours. You've been sending me Picasso's memoranda, quantum correspondence, letters in flux between acceptance and rejection. And while I've enjoyed your commentary, I've rarely looked close enough to open the right reality, the one that resulted in the elusive cheque rather than the dreaded letter of declination.

So I wanted to tell you that I was on to you.

I can't go back, of course. Once an envelope is opened, the rejection cannot be changed. So most of the tales I've sent you so far will certainly have to find resting homes with some other, inferior magazine.

But I promise I'll await your next letter with eager anticipation.

Regards,
Ron Collins

P.S. I've been trying this theory out in preparation for your reply, and I think I've got it about right.

P.P.S. You should see my cat. Ron Collins has contributed nearly 40 stories to professional publications, including *Analog*, *Dragon* and several original anthologies. Later this year, his story 'I is True' will appear in *Asimov's*.

JACEY