

Big Party

An exciting tale of Oleg's adventures, and some of his friends. The greatest stories come from real life, not from science fiction books, you better believe them!

A biweekly newsletter

Issue No^o1, February 1 - 14

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House of Dust

Gorodets Labour Camp: July 20th - 29th

If anything was plenty in Gorodets, it was dust. First, we slept in room #8. When we arrived, it was clean... but after a "sleeping bag" fight, it was dirty again. And to make matters even worse, we got our sleeping bags dirty as well. Then we slept on the "tree house" in the attic. It wasn't really a tree house, because there was no tree - but it reminded me of one. You can call it a jungle gym if you like. Sleeping in the basement was fun as well - it was cold and dirty, but had no flies.

After Konstantinov left, Anton replaced him as our supervisor. Anton made life much easier - he insisted in doing all the cooking and cleaning himself and we quickly became lazy. Konstantinov had two batteries, one of which powered his laptop (craptop by our standards) and the other powered his key-

board (the musical kind). Anton was an expert organ player, and we enjoyed his performances very much. Anton told us that last year a kid wanted to sleep on the water tower, and that the supervisor at that time had to sleep up there with him. Life was fun.

How big are the fish?

I ask a guy how big are his fish? And he says <— this big —> stretching out his arms. All's well, except when you show someone a dimension, you keep your arms still.

Fifty bucks

Janos is afraid to get lost (Its Russia). What will he do? What will he say? Most locals doesn't speak English. So he is thinking: What will they say? "Fifty bucks?" Janos will give them the fifty bucks. They will take it and say "Fifty bucks?" again - because thats probably the only thing they know.

Swim away

We swam in the river. There were no showers, so it was our only source of becoming clean. The current was fast in the middle, so Konstantinov forbid us to

swim there. When Anton came, the first thing we did was to swim across. That colony on the other side had electricity and broadband (Russian edition). Did I say Anton was an expert swimmer as well?

Cooking

Konstantinov had very nice frying pans. He bought them on the cheap - they had defects (the company could not sell them, so employees stole them). They were extremely heavy and almost impossible to clean (but Konstantinov managed to do that anyway). One time, I had nowhere to put the frying pan, so I put it inside a plastic bucket of water. Man, that was ever stupid. The sides of the bucket melted and glued themselves onto the frying pan. This ruined the bucket - but that wasn't the real problem - someone had to clean the plastic off the frying pan. That someone was the ever-helpful Anton.

— Oleg Ivrii

Uh... exponent laws, anyone?

Adrian So

I have, at Cornell, a job. The reason why I have this job is to provide myself with the necessary financial resources to pay the exorbitant cost of education at this "renowned" institute of "higher" education. But I've ranted about money enough before.

So what, then, is my point? Let us begin with a simple mathematics question, which, I would expect, all of you being readers of Oleg's blog (and therefore not losers, though that is totally irrelevant to the problem at hand) to be able to answer.

Now the question goes like this:

Simplify x^2/x^3 . (In case you are a complete nut-job or have a number neurons equal to the largest even prime number, I shall give the answer at the end of my entry.)

Okay. Now we have about enough information to give a short summary of my experiences at my job. Of course, I haven't yet told you what my job is, so maybe you don't really have enough information after all. I help tutor mathematics at a math support center for MATH111: Calculus I (or whatever they call it) Thursday evenings. In case you are curious, the topics start with continuity and limits and end with the integral version of the power rule.

So, as a tutor, you would expect that I would see a lot of people who need help with calculus - fair enough, that sounds reasonable to me. But here lies the great big problem for me. It's pretty difficult to teach calculus when people don't know exponent laws or that when you square a number the result is always positive. When was the last time you saw someone use a TI-89 to factor $(x^2 - 2x + 1)$ or to graph $y = 1/x$? Yes, my friends, this is what I see every time while tutoring. Painful? You bet.

So here is my question, and I raise it rhetorically, though perhaps you may be able to answer it. Even as the reject Ivy (everyone I know at Cornell was rejected at another Ivy League school, with the exception of the engineers, who are all MIT and/or Stanford rejects), you should be able to assume some level of mathematical competency in all the students. Not knowing how to simplify x^2/x^3 is simply pathetic. What are all these 'people' doing here at Cornell, an Ivy League institution? (No Cornell jokes, please - I insult the school myself enough. And besides unless you've come to the hellhole that is Ithaca, you really don't have a right to complain or criticize. Don't get me wrong, Cornell is an awesome place to study and research - more on that at a later time, perhaps.)

Now, I will make a somewhat flimsier assumption that the regular readers of Oleg's Big Party know something about programming. In most languages,

it is common practice that to assign a variable a value, you type something of the following form:

$variable = value$

I am in the Introduction to Computer Programming course (as a requirement for a math major). Several lectures ago, we spent about thirty minutes explaining why

$i = i + 1 \% i$ is a variable

was a valid statement for MatLab (and various other programming languages as well, though you may prefer $i++$). Apparently to most people, the boolean equals operation ($==$) is the same as the assignment equals ($=$). I don't know about you, but I count two characters in the former and one in the latter. Computer Science class would be so much nicer in the afternoon for me; after all, it's pretty hard to take a nap at 9:05 in the morning.

So my point? Standards are low. I must come off as sounding pretentious, stuck up, and intellectually snobby. If you think that, bite me.

(Oh, and as I promised, the answer is x^{-1} or $1/x$)

Student Cards

You cannot believe it! Someone asked me for a student card yesterday for the first time this academic year. They are actually useful, you know. I forgot I even had one - it took me a few seconds to realize that it was in my wallet. The guy really wanted me not to find it there, so I would pay the adult fare. But I did and left him rather disappointed. But still, why enforce something which has never been enforced before?

Now, for some math. If a TTC student card costs \$3.25 and the difference between adult fare and student fare is 75 cents, I would need to get screwed 5 times to make buying the card worthwhile. Except, at the rate this is going, it would be only be 2 times. The card isn't very pretty and takes up space in your wallet. Effectively, its only purpose is to avoid the humiliation of getting screwed and paying the extra fare.

Commentary by Tout Wang

Well, Oleg, that's because you look immature enough to be a high school student => If I tried that trick, I would get busted every time.

I remember at the beginning of this school year, I still had my card from Don Mills (it expires October 31). So I kept using it at the St. George subway station. One time, near the end of October, this ticket collector asks me where is my new one? I tell him I don't have it with me, and insist to use this one, since it CLEARLY is still valid. Anyway, after a long period of haggling, he finally says something lame like "see you next month" and lets me through.

I started buying tokens after that!

Subway Manifolds

Tokyo, Japan - International Mathematical Olympiad

The Japanese subway system gave us hell. The tickets were bought on-site with a pre-marked destination, thus they were required for both entry and exit (the greater the distance, the more you pay). They passed through the machines at an alarmingly fast rate and came out the other side while we walked through. We never looked at which way we put the ticket in, but since it worked, the machines must have had to flip the ticket as well.

One time when we were exiting the subway, the machine crashed on Janos. It made a few loud noises (besides the alarm) and steam came out. Two guards came over took a look. You can't believe what happened: Janos folded the ticket. I mean come on, folding a ticket!?

Commentary by Tout Wang

Wow, so fault intolerant. I wonder whether that has happened before, or was Janos the first person dumb enough to fold his ticket?

Commentary by Adrian So

You would think that an IMOer would be clever enough not to fold the ticket. But everyone does stupid things. I wonder if Janos folds his scantron cards :)

Commentary by Tout Wang

Haha, yes Adrian, luckily the IMO isn't multiple choice.

Commentary by Oleg Ivrii

Actually, last year I bubbled my first physics test in pen. The difference between most people and Janos is that Janos does stupid things all the time.



A tale of three cities

by Tout Wang

Vancouver - IPhO Team Training Camp at UBC

Well, our four days in Vancouver were over. We managed to squeeze in, between many hours of

fooling around, two mock exams - theory and experiment. Here's a sample problem:

Supernova SN1987A produced neutrinos of all flavours with an energy of 15 MeV. They travelled 1000 light-years to Earth and 12 were detected at the Kamiokande water-tank in a burst lasting 12 seconds. What limit can you place on the maximum mass-squared difference between neutrino types in this observation?

(If you can solve this problem, you should try out for the IPhO team! If you can't, try out anyway!)

The team leader calls a taxi (no limo, unfortunately) and we're off to the airport.

Once we got there, we went straight to check-in with Singapore Airlines. The person there was nice, and became even nicer when he found out we were the IPhO team! This didn't help much though, because Ali's Iranian (a.k.a terrorist) passport was apparently flagged for some serious background checking. After ten minutes of hushed words and one superior referring to another, they finally gave Ali his boarding pass. Here comes the cool part - the nice ticket counter guy informs us about the particular perks of flying Singapore. Now, if you have ever flown with this airline, on their sweet new Boeing 777's, you know exactly what I'm talking about. Besides seating us in a very spacious arrangement of alternating occupied and empty seats, he politely informs us of their interactive entertainment system. Needless to say, once we found out we would be able to watch video-on-demand, challenge anyone on the plane to chess, and play everything from Zelda to baseball, we forgot about all those practice problems we planned to do and physics textbooks we planned to read! =)

Before we got on the plane, though, we realized we needed to bring something "Canadian" to Korea to give to our hosts. After perusing through the atrociously priced gift shops, we settled on a beaver and a box of chocolates. Coincidentally enough, we named it Amiral the Beaver.

Anyway, it was time to board. All the stewardesses were dressed in traditional Asian garb, and the seats in economy class were as spacious as Air Canada first class ones. We were flying in style, unlike those American losers (just kidding!), who had only cards for entertainment on their flight. Taking off, not surprisingly, felt just like one of those Vancouver buses. As soon as the seat belt warning lights went off, we went berserk with the touch screens in front of us. I watched *Taking Lives* first. It was pretty good, but not very memorable, so I don't really remember what happened. Just some story with a cop and a murderer... then I watched *The Big Bounce*. It might as well have been called "Big Mistake" because that's exactly what it was. You would think that a movie with Morgan Freeman and Owen Wilson in it would be much better, but as one online reviewer put it: "This movie is a huge, messy abortion." Oh, and Gary Sinise was in it too...

Seoul - IPhO Team En Route

Between those movies, a game of chess with Amir (which I lost), and two meals, most of the flight was up. Our plane lands at Seoul Incheon Airport (and all the stewardesses say an-yong to me thinking I'm Korean), which is the biggest airport I have EVER seen! We disembark, pick up our luggage, and head to border security, or whatever it's called. Now, I don't know whether this is an isolated incident or a trend, but Korean border officials are hilarious. I don't pay attention as the people in front of me passed through, but when it's my turn, I went and presented my passport for inspection. The guy looks it over, and instead of handing it back to me and telling me "Welcome to Korea," he makes this abrupt, loud grunting noise and jerks the passport towards me. I flinched noticeably, and then got scared thinking maybe it was some sort of terrorist checking system - arrest the guys who flinch. Luckily, I was wrong, and later I find out from Peter that the guy was humming some sort of Korean tune. I hope he doesn't try out for Korean Idol.

Our connecting flight to Busan isn't for another 2 hours, so the five of us are set loose in a foreign airport. Here are a couple of odd things we notice about these Koreans...

- 1) Everything is digitized. They even have the digital photograph and license of the janitor that cleans their washrooms at Incheon posted outside the entrance. How degrading...
- 2) Koreans love PlayStation 2. You can play it for free... yes, I said FOR FREE at the airport. There are probably more PS2 consoles scattered around than payphones (ok, maybe I'm exaggerating a bit).

We pass the time with what else but PlayStation 2. Believe me, we tried to find a cyber-cafe that offered Counterstrike, but outrageously, the computers at the airport are coin operated. When it's time to fly again, we board a much smaller and less luxurious Asiana Airlines plane (Yes, I'm an airplane nut and snapped a picture of every single plane we took). In a short 45 minutes, we're at Busan Gimhae airport. We would find out later that the poor team from Iceland took a six-hour bus ride to travel the same route. Losers =).

Busan - IPhO Team En Route

Gimhae is a real backwater place - can you believe we had to get off the airplane using STAIRS??? I have only take planes between major transportation hubs in the past, so there was always a gate that the plane pulled up to. Apparently, according to our two Iranian teammates, that's how all the airports in Iran are. In fact, they say the Tehran airport has been "under construction" for the past few decades. Glad to know they are slower than when we built the Sheppard subway! Regardless, it felt quite cool to get off a plane like George Bush. The five of us are obviously smarter than he is, so why was there no

crowd for us to wave to? One of the many injustices in this world... =)

Disembarking was an adventure in itself. You see, this was the first time we actually breathed "real" air since Vancouver. We were completely sealed inside at Incheon, so that doesn't count. As we start down the stairs towards the tarmac, we are nearly knocked over by this blast of air... and this isn't one of those cool, Sprite commercial blasts... it felt like the Shuttle taking off! You can imagine what it must have been like, since our bodies were still in 15 degree Vancouver mode, while it was easily 30 degrees in Busan.

So, we're quickly whisked inside by those neat low-riding airport buses (no picture available, unfortunately). Inside, we find waiting for us, of all things, an IPhO booth! The Canadians have arrived at the 35th International Physics Olympiad.



This "tale of three cities" is nearly over, but there is one more story to tell. We met the nice people waiting for us at the booth, and they led us away to a trio of idling taxis. What we didn't know was that we would have to pay for those taxis, and that the trip would take an hour and a half. So, we're driving along in what is most likely a Hyundai, and of course, being foreigners, the taxi driver is nice enough to put on some foreign music for us. We restrain ourselves from laughing as Elvis blast out of the speakers behind us. I wish I remembered what song it was... I can only recall that it was really fast, and there were a lot of words like "baby" and "love you" in it... which doesn't help much in narrowing down the title. Meanwhile, the taxi driver appears to be very happy and is singing along with a terrible Korean accent.

This wasn't the only incident during the trip. Another time, we were on an empty city street, and this other taxi was sitting in the middle of the street, either broken down or something. Our driver pulls to a stop, rolls down the windows and barks out some rapid-fire Korean. This goes on for five minutes, leaving the rest of us quite puzzled, but also quite helpless, since we didn't know how to say "shut up and let's go" in Korean.

At last, our entourage arrives at our destination - the Gyeongju Hilton. The taxi ride cost us a few hundred American dollars, which the team leader

unhappily pays. The whole hotel has been taken over by the IPHO, but we're too exhausted to care. I get to share a room with Peter, and the two of us fall asleep without another word.

This ends The Tale of Three Cities, but the IPHO team's adventures in Korea have just begun...

Compiling Favourites

I have buckets of music. Sorting out the favourites is a hard, difficult task. I do not rate music, it feels a little sad giving two equally good songs different ratings. So, if I like a song, I drop it in the favourites playlist and when I get enough from an album, I move on. Of course, most people want outmost perfection from a best list, spend all their time and energy dealing with frustration... only to be displeased with what with they have chosen.

The more times I read my own essays, the worse they seem. It took a while, but I learned not to care. Changing every word five times loses the original passion and train of thought. And not to care, means not to try. I've got it in shuffle anyways.

Its a whole new semester...

This is a good thing, because my readership is bound to increase. I am going to make some new friends (people seem pretty cool), meet the old friends, learn some new stuff, pick up some new ideas - which are all good things, but most importantly, I have new grounds to advertise the Big Party. I will lure more suckers here (this isn't a very nice thing to say, don't worry, I don't really mean it). Think of it as my grand plan. I think then will the blog achieve the critical limit (every logistic has to settle at one point or another), but in any case, its more money for me.

Last time, I have noted that politics became history, in both senses. But you can extend the transition further: philosophy has replaced chemistry (both teachers talk a lot, non-stop and have no clue what they are talking about) and physics is the new exercise science (but now we are doing the real stuff and the people are still losers). Well, English is still English. Semester 2 feels like semester 1, except the timetable is all screwed up.

Commentary by Konstantin Tyravin

Looks like the big party is all about (the reson d'etre) becoming bigger (and more!). After all, that is your slogan. The manifest destiny of the internet. An under-cover pyramid scheme. What you are doing, Oleg, is known as the exploitation of immigrants.

Google Maps

Google put out a new toy. Google Maps, they called it. Its actually pretty cool. To use it, you would need IE 5.5 or Firefox 0.8 (or Netscape/Mozilla but nobody uses them anymore). Unfortunately, it doesn't work on khtml-type browsers (but looking at Google's record it soon will). You can drag maps to the left, and to the right (on the fly) - zoom in and out, whatever. The interface is very nice - if all, too nice, you should really check it out.



Commentary by Tout Wang

How does it compare with MapQuest?

Commentary by Oleg Ivrii

Bad question, Tout. How does MapQuest compare with it?

Note from Politics

Politics is over, replaced by history - same teacher, just different subject. Well, the class is bigger, and the room is bigger too... but the fun is all the same. One time, I had this thought, not that I agree with it:

I don't feel sorry for a soldier who spends several months in war - they know the risks ahead of time, they know what they are getting into... at least they had the honour to die for their country knowing that thanks to them, others will be saved. I feel sad for the soldiers who died on their first day of fighting, which didn't even fire a single bullet...

Ironically, thats how life goes. Experienced soldiers (with combat experience) know how to keep themselves alive. Those who have just finished field training; however, do get wasted fast.

I have decided...

That I haven't had pizza in a while... so I am going get pizza. Its simple logic. I mean if I want pizza, I get it. And when I get it, I eat it. Eat away! You know, come to think about it, I should have pizza more often. Pizza makes me happy, you know. When I eat pizza, I feel... good. I don't know about your family, but in my family, eating pizza is something special. Repeat argument with cake and cola, and you get a party.

Update: If teachers are willing to take abuse, let them put up with it. After all, you will be the one having the fun, making the best of the semester. If they let you come late, come late. If they let you

hand your homework late, hand it in late. When something becomes tradition, its hard going back.

Toss a ball...

Conversation could not have been less efficient... I am chatting with [some guy] from [the neighbouring school]. If you thought that the average IQ at our school was low (the assumption is that Big Party readers represent the smart part of the school), you would have been wrong (that does not mean that you automatically transfer to the dumb (loser) part of it - after all, even the smart people...)

If that guy transferred to our school, then the average IQs of both schools would decrease. He sounds like a guy who is wrong exactly half the time, but that wouldn't be the complete truth (actually, its a very inaccurate assessment), because he never really says anything (just cycles with non-expert high tech mumbo jumbo) and thus his statements don't have a true-false values. More often then not, his notes are pointless and boring. I mean, who cares? Imagine him talking to a ball: "Yes... okay... yes... and?... the point being... boring!"

New Prospects

The first half of the academic year is over... and the second is about to begin. I face uncertainly - the lack of knowledge. I have yet to meet my classmates, my teachers... the fun is about to begin. Yet the past isn't history: I am to find out my marks, and they might haunt me dearly after. On the other hand, what am I to say? Just as likely, I will forget them the moment I see them - after I ascertain their value or observe them in pattern (just like my exam timetable).

Deep Thought: For some, it is the fear of the unknown - but I think that in the deepest hell, the truth is in the reverse: it is knowledge - of failure, of impossibility - the sharp lines, the dead curves which puzzles us - that break our minds and take over our souls. Bloody thoughts shuffle us in bed, and those who do not sleep, walk dead. But don't blame knowledge, and do not harness the mental resistance (ignorance) to fight it, for it is better to suffer failure, the very worst bit of it. Sometimes it is the weak who are buried in hope that emerge victorious... but in this battle, I grow stronger every hour.

Its a race

So ended my chemistry exam. It was like my data management exam, but squared. Teachers were watching thousands of students in the overcrowded cafeteria (or gymnasium) punching buttons in their calculators. There is nothing to know (its just a bunch of common sense - and if you do not want to know what is happening, use dimensional analysis, and multiply or divide the numbers given. More often then not, you will get the correct answer). The

whole exam becomes one large RSI-development race, and what is supposed to be completely boring suddenly becomes fun.

After you get your answer, if it matches one of the choices, most likely you are correct. Then you go through all that Scantron bubble trouble. Reminds me of a good Ambrosia game. I was lucky to finish early, so I stole a scantron from a neighbouring desk and bubbled it in under the name of Max Fachine. Its like Fax Machine, but only Max Fachine. Unfortunately I was caught having two scantrons on my desk - but luckily, they didn't consider to punish me. Today is my last exam, so wish me luck.

Free Parking

Campers. I tell you who else I hate: "stationary observers" (sobs) or lookers. They just sit in a corner and look. This is one long thought, so take a deep breath before you read on. At lunch, between courses, or in-between them - I like to walk around the school: explore the hidden secrets, look for treasure, talk to people - basically enjoy life while sipping a nice can of cola... or a brisk - walking efficiently, hastily, tilted on a thirty-degree angle like an idiot, walking and talking; talking rapidly just as I am walking, on occasion spilling cola to the right or to the left - or juggling it if its still not open, in essence like a drunk, but not drunk because its cola.

Okay, fine it is two long thoughts. Now, this attracts a lot of attention, allowing the sobs to monitor my activity. But, I don't like that. I mean seriously, they would think I am weird or something (but I can think that they are weird or something, well they most likely aren't weird but they are definitely something).

Don't ask for advice

I lost my exam paper, so I don't know when my exams are. MSN is a nice place to trade information... so out I go ask Kirill. He tells me that he thinks that some other guy, what his face, Roy told him that its at 9. So out I come to school at 9, only to find out that the exam is at 2. That was yesterday. Now today, I ask Eric for the exam. He tells me 9. I come at 9, only to find out that the exam is at 2 again. Why did I come at 9? He tells me that he told me that it was at 2. But I have it logged as 9. Except he has it logged as 2. Forget this, I am not asking anyone anymore. But don't think that I wasted the time in school, I put it to a very good cause. The only reliable source of information left on MSN is Yufei, but what does Yufei know? Lots of things definitely, except that he has no advice to give.

Update: Its all very simple. The reason that I didn't bother to memorize my exam timetable was that all my exams were at 2PM. I sort of knew that one of my exams was at 2PM, and that all my exams were at the same time but I couldn't link the two facts

together in my head. When the time came, panic came out of confidence. Its simply remarkable.

Bashing Away

Some people (the non-experts mainly) tend to think that just throwing money on Tsunami relief is really going to help... that money is the all end-all factor, and that once you put it in a vending machine, you will get humanitarian aid. Reasoning that the night is long... procrastinating, and finishing work over night. Except that it doesn't work. I mean seriously... kicking a wall for hours isn't going to break it (try it). Ok fine, maybe it will break it, but the world is not different, a little worse, but who cares? Bashing algebra won't solve a problem, and just having a crowd of people doesn't make (build) a bridge. Truly, exceptions apply.

Update: Bashing away with exams with no real knowledge is a waste of time. When you have no questions left to actually answer, waste your way through, pack your stuff and go home. But whatever you do, don't leave anything blank (show your teacher that you have at least read the question).