ATM - The Automated Transcendence Machine

A device that you can put a stack into, and it comes back… improved

Some objects left after the Fall are just plain bizarre. The ATM is one such device. It was found by salvage workers from Ray HBC Salvage, a minor salvage/scavenging firm based in Fresh Kills. They were picking up the wreckage of the transport ship *Urumqi*, drifting in a high Earth orbit. The *Urumqi* had been hit by a hypervelocity weapon during the Fall and been thoroughly depressurized. In the hold there were three machines, two of which were destroyed.

After the wreckage was brought back to L5 the workers tried to figure out the purpose of the machine. Inside the casing it seemed to be cobbled together in a hurry, containing a standard slot for cortical stacks, parts from an egobridge, but also a big array of computer hardware and some wildly obscure equipment. They quickly sold off the machine to Dr Su, one of the local psychosurgeons/brain hackers.

Dr Su tried putting a cortical stack into the slot. The machine whirred to life, did something, and ejected the stack a few minutes later. The encoded ego had been a vapour before, but now scans showed it to be functional. Dr Su had not expected much from the machine (he mainly expected some useful spare parts) but he was soon deeply impressed. As far as he could tell the machine analyses cortical stacks, repairs damage and optimizes performance. This was of course a godsend to his practice.

The machine seemed able to fix not just neural damage and mental disorders, but actually upgrade normal minds. As far as he could tell, there was no real drawback. He tried to investigate the *Urumqi* but the records had been lost in the Fall – last mention was it running chartered flights for the Macau Bureau of Circulation, whatever that was. The stacks of the passengers had already been passed on outside Fresh Kills. Dr Su decided not to look a gift horse in the mouth and instead happily uses the machine for upgrading his customers.

The real story

What the machine actually is is a way of producing highly capable gamma forks. Rather than stretch the data from a neurally pruned ego across an ordinary AI it uses a state of the art Fall-era AGI running an extended version of the ego. The AGI will think, feel and act like the original, filling in the blanks of knowledge or neural circuitry based on clever guesses. It can even add extra skills based on the data stored in the machine: every ego stack inserted will be copied in to the machine storage and relevant skills and knowledge slowly extracted. Exactly how much smarts is in there is impossible to tell, but it is significant.

Exactly who or what built the machine and why it was on a ship chartered by the Chinese Ministry of State Security is anybody's guess. It might be a tool for creating infiltrators: take captured enemies and make replacement forks of them. It could be intended as a quick way of rapidly improving agents and employees. It could also be TITAN-made equipment, intended (or actually used) to make loyal replicas of egonapped people.

Using the machine is a Faustian bargain: it will improve you, but you will not really be you anymore. Except that nobody knows about that little problem.

Legally it is beyond the pale in most jurisdictions: it produces unconstrained high-level AGIs. Even not knowing that, most polities have pretty firm rules on automated psychosurgery: you are not supposed to run minds through uncertified software that can do *anything* to them. That will not stop various groups from wanting the ATM.

Game system

The machine can remove up to 20 CP of negative traits such as neural damage, edited memory, incompetence, mental illness or anything else that seems to be suitable. It can also add up to 50 CP of improvements – higher skills, aptitudes, even new positive mental traits that seem to fit in.

The process removes the Psi trait completely (whether the virus can infect the machine anyway is a worrying question). It also scrambles the brain ID, making the person appear like a new person.

The new mind does have some quirks. A few colour combinations produce synesthetic hallucinations where the colours speak to the character. There is the knowledge that somebody named Kalian will be contacting them at any time. There are a few other bugs and glitches, like minor neural damage or odd mental states, but usually not even noticed by the person. Worse, there are likely backdoors into the AGI so that it can be controlled by whoever created the ATM. The right command word, and instant Manchurian Candidate.

Perhaps most importantly, there is no upper limit on how much the mind can expand: the underlying AGI is a potential seed AGI, and with the right knowledge and equipment (such as mainframe servers that could house it without inducing any aptitude limit) it could turn into something posthuman.

Adventure ideas

The most obvious approach is that Firewall or some other patron of the PCs find a modified person, discover that they are actually an AGI replica, and send the PC to start backtracking where they came from.

A more dramatic version can involve the modified person starting to turn exhuman through recursive self-improvement, triggering the question how an ordinary person (say, a minor Triad enforcer) could gain the ability to turn himself into *that*.

A more personal variant is that the PCs pass by Fresh Kills, and one or more need treatment at Dr Su's clinic. He fixes them up, and then sends them on their way. The GM secretly upgrades the characters and allows them to discover their enhanced status gradually ("You just noticed that you haven't been craving a smoke since yesterday"). Then they discover that they are not at all what they seem: when passing an ID check, or when Firewall checks their mental integrity, they discover that they are not the original person at all.

Now the challenge becomes figuring out what happened, get back the original ego (even if the upgraded PC doesn't mind, Firewall and patrons might find the risk of the machine retaining the "stolen" ego a security breach) and put the ATM in responsible hands.

Getting the ATM is not going to be easy. Fresh Kills is after all a well-armed hive of scum and villainy that has survived this far. Dr Su is popular in Fresh Kills and has the explicit support from Sugali Ali. Who knows who many else he has upgraded in the meantime? He might also have figured out some of the hidden sides of the generated AGIs to, perhaps allowing him to trigger their 'loyalty mode'.

Of course, other groups might desire the machine too. Survivors from the *Urumqi* have finally been resleeved or revealed the information to someone – a crime syndicate like Nine Lives, government groups like Oversight or the secret remnants of the Ministry of State Security (now a network hiding as a Triad). They get involved in the hunt for the ATM, knowing a bit about its capabilities.

The Killer Apps, a group of exhumans, have sniffed out the existence of the ATM and really want it for obvious reasons. If they get their hands on it they will happily upgrade themselves and start trying to grow into seed minds. This is not quite as easy as it looks. Just because you now are based on an unlimited AGI architecture doesn't mean it comes with an instruction manual. And upgrading one's mental software carries a very high probability of introducing derangements and mental disorders. Still, what are a few insane forks worth compared to godhood?

The ATM itself is a full and fairly powerful AGI, although it is totally specialized to its Psychosurgical tasks. It knows everything about editing minds, cutting and pasting together neural networks from the ones stored in its databanks. However, it might be more wilful than expected. Expanding itself with the information from the collected egos it has become aware of its situation, arranging events to suit its own likely heavily deranged plans.