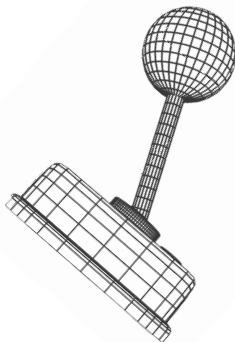


POLYBIUS



COLLIN ARMSTRONG



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For Natalie, Ellison, and Cooper

POLYBIUS



PROLOGUE

SINNESLÖCHEN. AN ODD NAME. THOM COULDN'T TRACE ITS ORIGIN—GERMAN, Scandinavian? In the end, it didn't matter where the company had come from. What mattered was it had folded and Thom was parked outside its former office, ready to pick over its remains after its owners had permanently closed up shop.

While the brochures he had printed and the ads he ran in the *Mercury News* in San Jose, California, read “Mazzy Asset Management,” Thom saw his business for what it really was—trash collecting. Everything he'd pull from the offices of bankrupt businesses around the area—furniture, fixtures, wiring, whatever was left behind—went to an auction house. Which was essentially a dump, albeit for nicer garbage. It wasn't that Thom didn't take his work seriously; he just disliked having to dress up what he did for a living. But people wouldn't want to do business with someone calling himself a garbageman, so Thomas Mazzy long ago rebranded himself as an “asset manager,” complete with an ad in the yellow pages that proclaimed, “Yes, MAM!”

All around Silicon Valley, as it was increasingly known to the

outside world, every conversation seemed to involve some bullshit pretense about the other person's job—who they knew, why they were in town, what *amazing whatever* they were working on. Companies offering vague services, with inscrutable names like Symantec, Activision, and Electronic Arts were springing up left and right. Everyone claimed they were someone, or something, they most likely were not.

Thom joked he was in the business of failure. After all, if other companies weren't going under, his would. He made a living out of picking up the pieces when things went belly-up. Silicon Valley was the new Wild West. Being the guy who hauled bodies out of the street after a shoot-out wasn't glamorous, but there was no shortage of work.

But this kind of blithe cynicism helped mask an inadequacy he'd long felt, having to work with his hands in a city where your head was what mattered. If he was flippant about what he did, Thom figured, no one could accuse him of taking too seriously a job that was more likely to give him a hernia than it was a comfortable retirement.

Thom's first "asset management" job for the month of September 1982 was at its outset no different from the rest. An auction house he worked with regularly, Gordon-Smith Antiquities, had acquired ownership of everything that wasn't considered structural inside a warehouse that had served as a research and development center for Sinneslöchen. Thom and his crew were being paid to go in and pull anything Gordon-Smith could potentially sell. "Anything" meant *anything*, in some cases down to in-wall wiring and light bulbs. The irony that the same items would just shift to another space he might end up gutting a year later wasn't lost on Thom; sometimes

he wondered how often he'd pulled and coiled the same runs of phone cable without realizing it.

He watched as Bernie Coen pulled into the parking lot in front of Sinneslöchen's now-vacant office, a pair of seventeen-year-old meatheads jostling about the bed of his rusting F-150. Besides himself and Bernie, he'd hire college and high school students off the books. They'd get a little beer money; he'd get extra muscle so he could give his own a break.

Bernie introduced the boys as Kevin and Chris. As soon as they were out of the truck, they were horsing around the parking lot. Thom shot Bernie a wary look as they started for the entrance. "You know them?"

"Through Kevin's mom," Bernie replied, drawing a half-cocked eyebrow from Thom. "Not like *that*."

Thom wasn't so sure. For a middle-aged guy with zero prospects and about a quarter of his hair left, Bernie got around.

You never knew what to expect on a job. Gordon-Smith paid Thom for every pallet he could load down, but there was always the risk of a lean exchange. You might walk into a warehouse on the first day of a job to find it was all but empty. Sinneslöchen, at first glance, seemed promising—short of a coffeepot, the reception area looked intact. A front desk with pens and a stapler neatly arranged on top, leather chair, large potted palm in need of a long drink; Thom half expected a receptionist to wander out and say they had the wrong address.

They moved from the offices to the maw of a research and development wing, which sat behind heavy steel doors fixed with twin dead bolts. Thom cycled through the keys Gordon-Smith had provided until he found one that fit the locks, each opening

with a heavy clank. Passing through the doors, they were staggered by how much had been left behind. Thom kept tabs on big items like furniture and fixtures so Bernie could track the rest—tools, electronics, raw materials for fabricating who knows what.

It didn't take long for them to realize this job was a serious windfall—and for Thom to develop a vague, uneasy sense about the space. It was *too* complete, as if whoever had been working there simply . . . vanished. In the corner of one cluttered workspace, he noted a desk calendar open to March 5, 1982.

Bernie caught him staring. “What is it?”

Thom nodded toward the date. “You suppose that’s the last time someone was here? That was . . . almost seven months ago.”

Uninterested, Bernie was already moving on. “My sister gave me one for Hanukkah. I forgot about it and stopped tearing off pages. Lousy gift.”

But something about it bothered Thom. *Everything’s just been sitting here, all this time?* Running his finger along a workspace, it cut a line through a thick layer of dust.

It called to mind a story he remembered reading as a child, in a book about ghost ships. A boat had been found adrift at sea—dinner on tables in the mess hall untouched, nothing amiss but no crew to be seen. It was as if they’d all decided to jump ship at the same spontaneous moment, for no clear reason.



In four hours, they'd loaded ten pallets with everything from the front offices—seemingly new, mod-ish furniture, rows of gunmetal-gray filing cabinets, box after box of desk supplies. When Thom tried

to lift the palm, the fronds shuddered off and onto the floor—it wound up in a dumpster outside, but the rest of what they'd collected filled the company's rusted box truck.

After all that, the R&D area was still untouched.

Thom drove to Gordon-Smith Antiquities and unloaded the pallets solo, so Bernie and the boys could continue working. He poked his head past the door of account manager Mila Novik—very pretty and, per several past interactions, very uninterested in anything beyond a professional relationship with Thom.

“Hey, Mila.”

“Oh. Hi.” Something in her voice, a register of apprehension, hollowed out Thom's stomach—like she was girding herself to turn him down again.

He was quick to try to deflect. “I was just— What do you, uh— Do you know anything about this job? This place? Sinne-something.”

Mila shrugged. “They were making video games, I think.”

That was it. Thom thought about pressing for more information but feared he'd come off sounding like an idiot.



As the day progressed and the crew worked its way across the R&D space, stacking and tagging pallet after pallet of workbenches, tools, and industrial-sized spools of jacketed copper wire, Thom's unease was replaced by confusion. Granted, he knew next to nothing about what went on inside the places he was hired to pick over—“research,” “fabrication,” “testing” were all words he understood, just not in the context of Silicon Valley. But he'd

seen enough spaces over the years to recognize the usual tools of the trade.

Everything here looked off—not wrong or amateur. *Unorthodox*. Rows of rectangular glass screens had a kind of artisan appearance on their concave insides, covered in what had to be thousands of pinprick dimples made from a kind of silvery resin. They weighed far more, by themselves, than a full TV set of equal size. The circuit boards and power plants all looked too complex, too densely constructed. The fact that there wasn't a finished product or prototype in sight, or even a clear endgame in the form of blueprints or schematics, only served to deepen this enigmatic quality.

But Thom kept these musings to himself, and work continued at a steady clip through lunch, which the group took inside the cavernous space on account of a steady rain that had blown in. By late afternoon they'd made two additional trips back to Gordon-Smith, and the R&D floor was starting to look empty.

In clearing parts, boxed and otherwise, off several rows of wire racks toward the back of the space, Thom came upon something unexpected: a door, set flush with the wall and without a handle. Another pair of heavy-duty twin dead-bolt locks kept it sealed shut. It wasn't hidden per se, but the nature of its construction and the way the racks had been arranged made it hard to spot. If they hadn't been picking the space over, they would've missed it.

Freeing a key ring from his battered denim pocket, Thom began trying keys to see which might fit. Bernie soon joined him, with curiosity getting the better of Chris and Kevin, too.

Chris tossed a nod at the door. "Take it off the hinges."

Tagging his shoulder, Kevin pointed toward the seam. "They're on the inside, dumbass."

Stepping closer, Bernie examined the strange construction. “You sure you don’t have the key?”

Thom tossed him the ring. “Maybe I missed it.” But he hadn’t, and he knew it. Fishing a pry bar out of a weathered tool bag, he walked back up to the door. Still trying keys, Bernie saw what his boss was about to do and quickly took a step back.

Wedging the bar in between the door and the jamb, Thom put his weight against it. The frame began to creak, slowly starting to give. As Thom leaned into the door, a small sheet of paper slipped up and out of his flannel pocket. Pulled through the air, it flattened itself against the seam. For a moment they all stared, uncertain what had just happened.

Breaking their daze, Thom reached out and peeled the paper away from the seam, then ran his hand along it, feeling a mild vacuum. Taking a step back, he let go of the paper again. They all watched as it was grabbed midflight and plastered against the seam once more. Cautioning the others to step back, Thom resumed leaning on the pry bar—the drywall began to splinter—until finally, the door was flung open with a loud crack.

The interior of the hidden room looked like something out of *2001: A Space Odyssey*—floor to ceiling white, smooth surfaces with few visible lines, antiseptic in appearance. There seemed to be a separate ventilation system running inside, louder than the one in the main space and powerful enough you could feel its chilled push-pull when you passed through the right spots.

“It’s a clean room,” Bernie said, receiving three blank stares in response. “When you don’t want anything contaminating what you’re building. Or whatever you’re building contaminating you.”

Chris froze. “You serious? Is it dangerous?”

Bernie smirked a little as he explained. “This room’s not going to kill you. There’s no masks or suits or glove boxes. It’s just, the kind of work that’s done in these places is sensitive. Speck of dust or a stray hair and you’re shit out of luck.”

As usual, Thom thought, when someone wasn’t familiar with whatever esoteric concept Bernie found a way to drum up, the man went out of his way to make it seem as though this was something *everyone else* knew about. Thom had known Bernie for years and valued his work ethic and friendship, but sometimes he wanted to bust his jaw for being such a smarmy son of a bitch.

True to its name, a few tools had been left on a workbench, but other than those—and of course, the lone arcade cabinet standing in its center—the clean room was, well, exceptionally clean.

Of course, the cabinet.

It was a coin-operated video game, but there was no marquee above the screen, no printed graphics on the sides, just a white particleboard box with a coin door and the usual joystick-plunger configuration. Like a generic, store-brand equivalent. Still on its way to being finished, it had been abandoned just like everything else inside.

Chris spotted a cord around the cabinet’s back and plugged it in. As a cascade of boot files crisscrossed the flickering screen, it was obvious they were looking at something different. The display was unbelievably vibrant, with the visuals—just text to this point—so crisp and clear that anyone who’d even wandered past an arcade before would know that this was unusual.

Finally, a title appeared on-screen—*Polybius*.

Press Start, the display beckoned.

“Neat. Back to work,” Bernie chuffed, herding Chris and Kevin from the room and leaving Thom to complete an inventory.

“What’s it doing in here?” It took Thom a moment to realize there was no one around to speculate on an answer—they’d all left. He hadn’t noticed.

Thom started to walk the space, taking stock. It was difficult not to glance back at the display as he moved and eventually he couldn’t take his eyes off it. He crossed the floor and stood in front of it, transfixed. He didn’t care about video games—the Atari 2600 he’d bought a few years ago was boxed up in his garage—but here, he couldn’t refuse the vibrant lure.

He fished a quarter from his pocket, dropped it in, and pressed the small lighted button labeled *START*. Hands hovering over the analog stick and two plungers that made up the control scheme, Thom watched as a series of lines appeared around the title on-screen, gradually overtaking its shape and forming a maze that grew more and more complex, faster and faster, until its structure overwhelmed the screen and the in-game camera swooped down toward its entrance.

Thom was awestruck—he’d never seen anything like this. The level of detail and fluidity of motion felt cinematic. A path extended before him, into a dark space bounded on either side by stone walls. Almost like a cavern.

He nudged the joystick forward, stepping inside. Looked left, right. Tried the plungers: one caused him to jump; the other raised a torch. Tipping the joystick back rotated his point of view—there was something in the distance behind him. Vaguely humanoid but cloaked by the dark, not clear or defined enough at this range to rightly call it a figure. More like a *figment*, looming there in the

dark. As it shifted, mass gently swaying, glints of what looked like silvery eyeshine could be seen, flowing tiny arcs of mercury that dissolved into then re-emerged from the dark.

Maybe I'm supposed to go that way, Thom thought. But as he walked in the direction of the figment, it started moving toward him. Instinctively, Thom let go of the joystick, and his character froze. For a moment, so did the figment, as if mirroring his actions. But then it took another step toward him. Then another. Again, deliberate, ground crunching beneath heavy feet as it advanced.

It felt *wrong*.

Jamming the joystick forward, Thom ran into the cavern, finding himself inside the maze that had formed moments earlier.

As he moved, he could hear the figment behind him, gaining ground. It was almost as if Thom could feel its breath on his neck. He knew he couldn't stop—if he did, it would be on him, and it'd be over.



It was Bernie's hand on his shoulder that snapped Thom back to reality.

"You all right, boss?"

It felt to Thom as if he was coming out of a deep sleep. He had absolutely no idea how much time had passed since he'd stepped in front of the cabinet. As Bernie considered him, amused by his confusion, Thom felt a sudden, burning swell of resentment at the smirk curling over his old friend's face.

Glancing at the spartan inventory Thom had taken of the room's contents, Bernie asked, a little disbelievingly, "This everything?"

Thom snapped, “I’m too stupid to write a fucking list?” The truth was that Thom *had* missed more than a few items, including most obviously the cabinet itself. But his mind was elsewhere, replaying what he saw as *another* jab at his intellect from Bernie.

Thrown by the venom in Thom’s voice, Bernie raised a hand as if to say *no harm intended*, but the gesture had the opposite effect—Thom’s eyes narrowed at being told how to feel.

In a flash Thom found himself springing forward, hands seizing Bernie’s neck. Bernie struggled, but Thom was driven by a dark energy so primal there was nothing Bernie could do to escape his grasp. The same anger he buried every time he absorbed one of life’s little slights—cut off in traffic, interrupted in a conversation, rebuffed by a woman—bubbled back all at once. It turned out that everything he’d taught himself to shake off was still there, waiting for its moment to scream out from the dark.

Thom could feel bone twisting beneath the weathered skin of Bernie’s neck, see the veins in his eyes bursting as his friend gasped for air and struggled to break free. The wet, stuttering cracks Bernie’s spine made as it snapped were a rhapsody to Thom. He cast the lifeless body to the floor and left the clean room, searching for Chris and Kevin. *Little fuckers*. He’d never felt such pure, focused purpose in all his life.

But in reality, Thom hadn’t moved an inch—and there was Bernie, hand still raised.

The realizations came in waves, each hitting harder than the last. It had been inside his head, a horrible thing to let himself imagine—worse because he’d taken a kind of elemental pleasure in snapping the life out of another person. One he knew and trusted.

Thom felt sick, couldn’t stop sweating, stop thinking about how real it had all seemed . . . how distressingly *right* it had all felt. He

silently reassured himself he'd lost a moment of time to a perverse kind of daydream. That was it. Strange, but not representative of his true self. *It must be this place.* All day it had been giving him bad vibes, and he'd let it get into his head.

Recognizing something was wrong, Bernie set the inventory aside and approached his friend. Struggling to parse dream from reality, Thom was suddenly seized with terror—Bernie had been dead on the floor seconds earlier, now he was moving toward him? He backpedaled, fear in his eyes, bumping into a workbench. Bernie froze in response. He didn't understand what or why something might set Thom off and simply asked again, "You all right, boss?"

For a long moment Thom just stared, finally shaking off the feeling as much as he could and nodding in response. Checking his watch, he couldn't make sense out of what he saw. "What time do you have?"

Bernie checked his Casio. "Five thirty. Are you sure you're—" *"Five thirty?"*

It had been two hours since they'd found the room. Probably ninety minutes since Thom jimmed open the door, and at least an hour since he'd been left alone inside. When had he started playing? He couldn't remember anything since Bernie, Chris, and Kevin had left him to take inventory.

"Did you get enough sleep last night?" Bernie, too, was trying to figure out what the hell had just happened but didn't know the right questions to ask.

"I just zoned out." Thom's eyes drifted from Bernie for a moment, floating over the stark white of the clean room. "This place is a little weird, huh?" Thom asked. He added a laugh, hoping to cut

the tension, but his unease was clear. Bernie went to say something, but before he could, Thom nodded toward the door. “We have an hour. Just keep those two on track, okay?” Thrown by the strange interaction, Bernie nodded and went. He was glad to get out of there. Away from Thom.

Left alone again, Thom tried to reconsider the sequence of events. But whatever he did, however he came at it, there was a hole in his memory, a gap where he couldn’t say what he’d done, said, thought, or felt. It simply wasn’t there. Which was on top of the fact that he’d imagined killing someone so vividly, he felt compelled to peer out of the clean room to make sure Bernie still drew breath.

The clean room.

Like that, Bernie’s peculiar turn of phrase suddenly dug its way back under Thom’s skin. *For fuck’s sake. Why’d he have to say it? Why even bring it up? Who cares? He probably made those kids feel like idiots too. They’re just kids. But everyone knows, right, Bernie?*

I swear to God, if he does that one more time, I’ll fucking kill him.

Thom’s mind slammed into reverse. *I wouldn’t do that*, he thought. *Couldn’t*. The push-and-pull of perspectives made him paranoid he’d say or do something he shouldn’t. He was frozen, mind racing between deep regret over what he’d imagined doing and furious indignance toward Bernie that made him hot, as if a fire had caught inside and was spreading, boiling his blood and bones.

On his periphery he could see the display flashing, shimmering so brightly it seemed to burn in around the corners of his eyes. Wherever he looked, he saw trails of light, a ghostly form lingering a step out of sight. He squeezed his eyes shut in an attempt to will the light away, but instead it clarified, from faint wisps into an

enveloping, fluid rush of dark lines that wrapped around the room, pulsing in time with his heartbeat. Boom, pulse, boom, pulse.

But then something intruded—a sharp crunch. The sound of the figment stepping toward him out of the dark.

Thom's eyes sprang open, and he found himself standing in front of the cabinet, hands hovering over the controls. But he hadn't felt himself move, hadn't taken a step.

Or had I?

Suddenly the screen went blank, the audio silent. Thom saw Chris crouched nearby, coiling the power cord then taping it to the cabinet's back. By the door, Kevin waited with a dolly. "We're done in the other room. Mr. Coen asked us to start emptying this one," he said. Thom stepped aside as the boys shuffled the cabinet onto the dolly, not thinking to offer any help. He just watched, once again lost and struggling to recall what had happened, where his time had gone.

He saw Bernie eyeing him from the R&D floor, a peculiar smile curling over his lips as Chris wheeled the cabinet away. It seemed genuine—like he'd caught Thom slacking but still understood the need to take a moment for yourself now and then, even on the job.

Or was Bernie happy in tacitly embarrassing him, by sending some dumb kid to do *his* job? Silently chiding, reminding him he'd wasted an hour staring at that screen like an idiot—that he'd caught him shirking his responsibilities—that things would be better off with *him* in charge and Thom taking orders?

Fuck him, Thom thought as he crossed the now-empty R&D floor, footsteps echoing in the cavernous space. *I'll kill him.*