THE ABSURDISTAN CHRONICLES · VOLUME 11

NIKA AND THE BUGS THAT MULTIPLIED!

ONE BUG. TWO BUGS. FOUR BUGS.



Based on a true fictional event.

THE ABSURDISTAN CHRONICLES · VOLUME 11

Nika and the Bugs That Multiplied!

ONE BUG. TWO BUGS. FOUR BUGS.

For every place that is supposedly just around the corner.

A story from Goldhain and the neighbouring possibilities.

Based on a true fictional event.

Prologue - One Tiny Thing



Nika only wanted to fix one bug.

It was not a dangerous bug. It deleted no data, opened no secret portals and did not persuade an egg boiler to take control of the house. In the digital landscape, it was barely larger than a speck of dust.

Whenever Nika clicked "Pause" in her little music program, the icon shifted two pixels to the left.

Two pixels.

Other people would not have noticed. Some would have noticed and decided to live with it. Nika noticed, measured it and regarded the result as a personal insult.

It was 9:14 p.m. Tea stood on her desk. Her headset rested around her neck. Outside, a peaceful moon hung above Goldhain, and no one in the living room was arguing with a printer.

Nika opened the relevant file.

"Five minutes," she said.

The computer received those words like an ancient mountain listening to an inexperienced expedition promise it would be back before nightfall.

Nika changed a single number.

The pause icon jumped into the centre.

The volume slider disappeared.

Nika looked at the empty spot where it had been a moment before.

Then she slowly picked up her cup, placed it beyond reach and said, "Aha."

Thus began the night of multiplication.

I. The First Intervention

The missing volume slider was probably only hidden. Nika checked the display settings, searched for a typo and found a bracket which, after her change, was standing alone in an offended sort of way.

She returned the bracket to its intended place.

The slider came back.

In exchange, the program played every song twice.

Not one after the other. At the same time. The two audio tracks were half a second apart, so even a gentle piano piece sounded as though it were being haunted by its own ghost.

Nika stopped playback. The program kept playing.

She pressed Stop again. A third track started.

Nika removed the headset.

A quiet threefold piano emerged from it, sounding remarkably reproachful in the silent room.

She quit the program completely. The music stopped.

On a sheet of paper, she wrote:

Original fault: icon two pixels left.

Underneath:

New fault one: volume gone.

New fault two: playback multiplies.

The volume problem had already been fixed. Mathematically, this left only one problem. Nika found the balance reassuring.

She opened the program again.

The pause icon was now three pixels too far right.

II. Two Become Four

Nika worked methodically. First she made sure that every change was tested on its own. Then she created a backup. After that, she created a backup of the backup, because experience was essentially distrust with good reasons.

She found the cause of the double playback: one command was being called twice. Nika removed the second call.

The music played only once again.

The progress bar ran backwards.

The time display also claimed every song was exactly ninety-three hours long.

Nika played a two-minute track. The bar began on the right and crept majestically towards the left while the display counted down from 93:00:00.

"You don't even know what time is," she said.

The computer fan sped up.

Nika corrected the time calculation. The display was right again. In exchange, the text became tiny. She corrected the text. The settings window then opened behind the main window and refused to come back out.

Every repair was a clean cut. And from every cut grew two new heads.

Nika drew a bug on her sheet. Then a second. Then four.

By ten p.m., the page was half full.

She pushed up the glasses she sometimes wore while working and studied the list.

"Fine," she said. "Let's make it official."

Above it, she wrote: Incident 11-B: spontaneous bug multiplication.

III. The Map of Calamity

◇

There comes a point when a list is no longer enough. That is when you need a map.



Nika stuck notes to the wall. Each one carried a fault. Blue strings connected faults to the changes that had probably caused them. Purple strings marked theories. One black string led to a point Nika had labelled with a question mark, because by every known rule nothing should have happened there at all.

The original two-pixel bug hung alone in the middle.

The first line ran from it to the missing slider. From there, the web divided: double music, backwards progress bar, incorrect time, tiny text, invisible window, a button that now responded only to every second click.

Nika counted.

She had fixed seven faults.

Eleven hung on the wall.

The mathematical difference was rude.

She tested the program without music. On opening, a small window briefly appeared to announce that no error existed. Then the program crashed.

Nika added another note.

By now, the pattern looked like the route of a deeply confused explorer through a mountain range that rearranged its peaks after every stage.

A message from Lena appeared on her phone: Still awake?

Nika photographed the wall and sent the picture.

Lena replied one minute later.

Let me rephrase: still sane?

Nika looked at the strings.

Undetermined, she wrote back.

IV. Beneath the Desk

The next fault might not have been a software fault. The audio crackled whenever Nika moved the charging cable. It might have been a coincidence. During this night, however, coincidence had already been identified as an accomplice.

Nika took a torch and crawled under the desk.

That was where the cable mountains began.

They consisted of black loops, plugs, adapters and an extension lead that had apparently tied itself around a table leg over the past few months. Dust lay in the valleys. A lost paperclip glittered like the sword of a failed expedition.

Nika followed the audio cable. It vanished behind the computer, crossed the power cable, resurfaced beside a sock and ended correctly in its socket.

She pulled it gently.

On the desk above, the system sound for a newly detected device chimed.

Then it chimed again.

Then twelve times in a row.

Nika paused. The only thing in her hand was the cable. Yet the computer produced the sounds of an entire army of approaching devices.

She shone the torch into the tangle. "Which one of you is doing that?"

The cables offered no information.

Nika reconnected every plug, arranged the lines and secured them with two straps. The crackling was gone.

When she stood up again, the computer recognised the headset as a printer.

Nika closed her eyes.

From the corridor, Mina called, "If it prints, don't wake me."

"It isn't printing."

"Then everything is fine."

V. The Patch of Hope

At 11:27 p.m., Nika wrote a patch intended to eliminate several causes at once. It was an elegant patch. Short, comprehensible, neatly commented. It was the kind of solution found in textbooks before reality drove over it.

Nika launched the program.

The volume slider was there. The time was right. The bar moved forwards. The windows opened in the proper place. The pause icon sat exactly in the centre.

Nika waited.

Nothing broke.

She raised her cup. The tea was cold, but the moment demanded ceremony.

Then she moved the mouse.

The pointer left a trail of little copies. Ten arrows followed it, then twenty. They spread across the screen like a flock of startled birds.

Nika stopped moving the mouse.

The arrows kept moving.

One clicked Settings on its own. Another opened Help. Three selected different songs at the same time. The program began playing a tango, a lullaby and an audiobook about municipal sewer regulations.

Nika unplugged the mouse.

The pointers stopped.

One winked.

Nika was fairly sure it had only been a display glitch. Even so, she wrote a new note and attached it to the very top of the wall.

Mouse pointer may possess free will.

Lena called. Nika answered on speaker because she did not want to entrust the headset with any additional responsibility in its present condition.

"How is it going?" Lena asked.

Nika looked at the frozen pointers. "The patch fixed every previous fault."

"That sounds good."

"In exchange, it created a new user group."

"Which one?"

"Mouse pointers."

Lena was silent long enough for Nika to hear the soft rustle of bedclothes. "Shall I come over?"

"Not yet."

One of the pointers began moving again and drew a small circle around the Save button.

"Maybe you should," said Nika, and ended the call.

VI. The Hydra

Shortly before midnight, Nika had three options.

First: close everything, restore the last stable version and pretend she had never seen the two pixels.

Second: keep working until no bug remained.

Third: leave the house and begin a new life under another name somewhere without computers.



The third option was appealing but impractical. The first was sensible. Nika therefore chose the second.

She put on the headset. Not to listen to music, but because generals in old paintings also wore something on their heads.

The next test revealed sixteen faults. Some were small: a border flickered. Some were baffling: the search function found only titles connected with a Thursday. One was almost philosophical: when she clicked "Back", the program asked where, exactly.

Nika fixed the flickering border. Two icons vanished.

She restored the icons. The volume jumped to three hundred per cent.

She limited the volume. The program played backwards.

She corrected the direction. The screen turned black and displayed a small, perfectly aligned pause button in the centre.

Nika stared at it.

The original fault had been defeated. Everything else lay in ruins.

She made a full tour of the program. The library was empty although every file remained present. The search bar searched only within its own search results and found more of itself every time. The Help menu offered help for the Help menu. When Nika tried to open the language settings, the program greeted her with a pleasant chime and then displayed a drawing of a potato.

Nika could not determine where the potato had come from. There was no image file of a potato anywhere in the project. She checked twice, then a third time, because distrusting the potato did not

reduce its existence.

She photographed the screen as evidence. The potato was absent from the photograph.

Nika added an especially large note to the wall: Unexplained tuber.

Above her desk, the web of string had assumed the shape of a giant bug. Out of defiance, Nika drew it a crown.

VII. The Witness

Lena appeared in the doorway at twelve minutes past midnight. She wore a dressing gown, slippers and the expression of someone who had expected a minor fault and had instead been summoned to a natural disaster.

She looked at the wall.

"How many?"

"Active or historical?"

"That is not a reassuring question."

Nika showed her the stable backup. Lena launched it. Everything worked apart from the pause icon sitting two pixels too far left.

"This is the starting point?"

"Yes."

"And the current version?"

Nika opened it.

The start screen appeared upside down. A sound played as though a very small ship had entered fog somewhere. Then the program asked whether it truly wanted to close itself.

Lena read the question twice. "Is it frightened?"

"Probably a translation error."

"You didn't change any translations."

"Hence probably."

They compared both versions. Nika explained every change. Lena listened, asked practical questions and slowly moved her chair farther away from the screen.

At last she pointed to the first line on the list. "What happens if you reset that one number?"

Nika looked at her. "The pause button goes back to being two pixels left."

"And otherwise?"

"Everything works."

Lena nodded. "I only wanted to make sure we were looking at the same tragedy."

VIII. The Midnight Inquiry

Nika refused to surrender the two pixels without a fight. Lena refused to accept the phrase without a fight in this context.

They formed a committee of inquiry consisting of two people and a cup of freshly brewed tea. The committee was not to repair. It was to understand.

They returned to the first change and examined every consequence. In the process, they discovered that Nika had not changed only one number. When saving, her editor had automatically reformatted an entire file. Invisible spaces had vanished. Two old commands now stood closer together and were being read as a unit.

"So it wasn't the number," said Lena.

"It was the number's surroundings."

"The landscape moved."

Nika looked at her wall map. For the first time, one string ran in a direction that made sense.

She restored the original file, changed only the number and prevented any further automatic adjustment.

The icon moved into the centre.

The volume slider remained.

The music played once.

Nika and Lena waited for five seconds. Ten. Thirty.

Then a notification window appeared in the lower right corner. It was empty.

Lena pointed at it. "Was that there before?"

"No."

The committee reconvened.

IX. The Empty Window

On ordinary nights, an empty notification is harmless. On this night, it was a white banner on the horizon beneath which an unknown army might be marching.

Nika clicked it. It vanished.

She restarted the program. The window returned. Empty, polite and persistent.

Lena wanted to know what message should appear there. Nika checked the logs. The program was reporting that the pause icon had loaded successfully.

"It is congratulating itself," said Lena.

"Without any text."

"Modest."

Nika removed the unnecessary message. On the next launch, the window stayed away. In exchange, the pause button was two pixels left again.

No one spoke.

Nika checked the file. The number was correct. The formatting was unchanged. Everything looked right.

Lena leaned closer. "Could the window be part of the alignment?"

That was absurd. Therefore, on this night, it was probably true.

They reactivated the message. The icon jumped into the centre. They disabled it. It jumped left.

Nika leaned back. "The button is aligning itself to an invisible window."

"Can we make the window visible?"

"Then we have an empty window."

"Can we make it smaller?"

Nika entered a new size: zero by zero pixels.

The program crashed.

X. The Origin

At two in the morning, they found the origin not in the pause button, not in the notification and not in the music controls.

It lay inside an old piece of code named temporary solution.

The solution was four years old.

It had been written to align a different icon provisionally. Later, someone attached a window to it. After that came the volume, then the time display, then playback. For years, the program had been standing on a small temporary support no one noticed anymore.

Nika opened the change history. Her own name stood beside the line.

She remembered vaguely. At the time, she had been in a hurry. The clean solution was supposed to follow the next day.

"The next day lasted four years," said Lena.

"It was busy."

Nika studied the old line. It was not evil. It was not a monster either. It was merely a very small convenience that had been left undisturbed long enough to grow roots.

Now Nika could either build more supports around it or carefully untangle the entire structure.

She took a fresh note and wrote three words on it:

Start over. Properly.

Lena looked at the clock. "I'll make coffee."

XI. The Retreat

A wise retreat is not defeat. It is movement in the direction where less of the landscape is on fire.

Nika restored the last stable version. At once, the ghost pointers, triple music, empty window and the program's question about its own existence disappeared.

The pause button stood two pixels too far left again.

Nika regarded it without anger. It was no longer the enemy. It was a signpost.

She removed the four-year-old support. Almost every gap in the program collapsed, making it look as though someone had tipped all the controls into a drawer.

Lena set down two cups of coffee. "Planned?"

"It is now."

Nika rebuilt the layout. Not quickly. Not all at once. One section after another. After every change, she tested music, volume, time, windows and keyboard. Lena crossed the corresponding notes off the wall.

There was something soothing about the reconstruction. Every button received a place of its own, not because an ancient trick held it there, but because the layout explicitly said so. Spacing was not guessed. Windows did not lean on invisible

neighbours. Even the volume slider seemed relieved to be responsible only for volume again.

At some point, Lena fell asleep on the rolled-up blanket. Nika continued more quietly. When a test succeeded, she did not draw a triumphant tick, only a small dot. Ticks had become too self-confident for her that night.

When Lena woke again, the web of string had become several loose lines. "You dismantled the monster."

"It was never a monster," said Nika. "Just a great deal of history in a very small space."

The number of faults no longer rose.

It fell.

Eleven. Nine. Seven.

At five in the morning, only three notes remained open. One concerned a flickering border. One a button that was too bright. The last was the pause button.

Nika moved it two pixels to the right.

Nothing else moved.

XII. The Final Test

They tested everything.

Nika played a song. Once. She paused it. The icon remained in the centre. She changed the volume. The slider obeyed and did not report itself as a printer. The bar moved forwards. Time consisted of plausible minutes.

Lena opened the settings. The window appeared in front. She closed it. It stayed closed.

Nika moved the mouse in circles. Only one pointer followed.

She unplugged the headset and plugged it in again. The computer recognised a headset. Nobody applauded, but both felt it would have been appropriate.

The penultimate note came down. Then the last.

The web of string remained on the wall, but now it led to crossed-out bugs. Nika had defeated the great crowned creature in the middle with one thick line.

Outside, the sky grew light.

Lena stood up. "How long did the five minutes last?"

Nika looked at the clock. "Eight hours and forty-two minutes."

"Within the usual range."

Nika raised her cup. Lena clinked hers against it.

The patch was finished. The program was more stable than before. The pause button stood exactly where it belonged.

Nika smiled wearily.

A tiny notification appeared on screen announcing that a new operating-system version was available.

She dismissed it without reading.

Finale - One Bug

The following afternoon, Nika opened the program again.

Everything worked.

She listened to a song, paused it, changed the volume and watched the progress bar. No flicker. No multiplication. No philosophical follow-up question.

Mina came in with cocoa and looked at the wall covered in notes.

"Was it bad?"

"One bug."

Mina looked at the web of string, the coffee cups and the rolled-up blanket on which Lena had eventually fallen asleep. "Of course."

Nika removed the notes from the wall. She kept the original. Under it, she wrote: Small bugs are merely adventures that haven't scaled yet.



Then she noticed that the pause icon did not look quite centred.

She measured it.

It was perfect.

The shadow beside it was one pixel wider than on the other side.

Nika tilted her head.

The computer hummed peacefully.

Mina picked up her cup as a precaution. "No."

Nika opened the relevant file.

Lena woke. "What are you doing?"

"Just one tiny thing."

The room fell silent.

Somewhere, deep inside the program, a tiny bug opened its eyes.