SELF-SERVICE PUMPS

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Okay, can we talk about self-service avgas pumps? I can operate the one at my home airport, having come to an almost friendly understanding with it some time ago, and am now actually able to refuel without swearing and throwing things. Well, most of the time, anyway. But what of those self-serve pumps at the outlying airports? Who designed those things? Einstein? Or Frankenstein? Either way, they look like someone took a control panel off the Space Shuttle and added some stuff from Radio Shack. They’re generally not very user-friendly, intimidating even, and sure to implode if you push the wrong button. Dang! Plus, with the card receptacle here, the control panel there, and the pump in the next county, you need three arms and must be able to run the one-hundred yard dash in under ten seconds in order to complete the refueling. But, hey, we’re pilots; we’ll figure it out.

First you have to chock your airplane. The wooden chocks at the pump have been there for seventeen years. They have been thrown back and forth so much that they now look like two toothpicks fastened together by a length of ¾” rope. But, hey, we’re pilots; we’ll figure it out.

Next you have to ground your aircraft. The grounding wire? It’s a rat’s nest that looks like it’s been through three hurricanes and two flash floods…..in the Byzantine era. You tug it toward your airplane. This just serves to further tighten the twenty-seven knots that are already in it. You don’t have the three weeks available that it would take to untangle the line. You surrender and move the airplane closer to where the rat’s nest will reach.

You then confront the control panel. You confront it some more. You then extend your left arm, lean on it and look at the panel real-up-close-and-personal-like, trying to recognize something…...anything. You then take a quick glance to check if anyone is watching your befuddlement. They’re not. That you know of, anyway. The panel is made up of lights, buttons, bells, and whistles. Behind it are pipes, warning signs, tanks and pumps. You hope the thing doesn’t swallow you up and whisk you to Alfa Centauri, where it looks like it came from. You notice a little reader-board above the keypad. It is scrolling a message: “Screw this up and the machine will chew your arm off.” That’s comforting. On the panel you see something that looks like where a credit card might go. You put your credit card in it. The machine pushes it back out. The little reader-board reads “card not accepted.” Okay, you rummage around in your wallet and find another card. You put that card in. The machine pushes it back out. The little reader-board then says “remember what I said about chewing your arm off?” You push the button that says “yes.” You try your Netflix card. The little reader-board asks “have you seen Ghostbusters?” You push the button that says “yes.” The machine now seems happy with this arrangement and begins asking you twenty-questions: “What’s your N-number?” There are only numbers on the keypad, no letters. You have numbers *and* letters in your N-number. It was time to assert yourself: You punch in three bogus numbers and…….wait. Machine’s thinking. But then the machine went on to the next question. You raise your arms high over your head in victory, saying, “Stupid machine! Those numbers are bogus! I outsmarted you!” A small victory but a victory nonetheless. You then look around to see if anyone is watching. No one is, as far as you can tell. Maybe from Alfa Centauri, but not locally. But you still haven’t gotten any fuel so you turn your attention back to The Machine. The Machine asks “have you grounded your aircraft?” There was a button for “yes” and a button for “no.” There was not a button for “are you kidding me? with that wad of Byzantine copper you call a grounding wire?” You punch the “yes” button.

Next question was “which pump?” Which pump??? There’s only one pump!! You push the number “1.” Machine accepts that; machine is toying with you. Then it asks “how much do you want?” You then push “2” and “0.” Machine asks “gallons or dollars? for gallons, multiply the square root of seven-hundred-eighty-nine by three and enter that number. for dollars, divide the national debt by four trillion and enter that number.” Machine was not going to beat you: You pull out your IPhone and Google “The Machine,” which then took you to a website that gave you the answer for gallons (or so you thought). You enter the number. In a few seconds, all manner of pumping and whining noises emanate from The Machine. The reader-board then says “good luck, sucker, and hurry.”

You run to the hose, throw it over one shoulder and start dragging it to the airplane. The further you pull it the more it pulls back. About a foot from the fuel tank you are bent over, both feet and one hand digging into the ground for traction, your chin about one foot off the ground. From this position you attempt to raise the nozzle to put it in the tank. Ten inches to go. Eight inches. Two inches. Then suddenly it gets quiet. Real quiet. The pump had “timed out” and shut off. Silence. Seething. Visions of bad words dancing in your head. But, hey, you’re a pilot; you’ll figure it out.

Back to The Machine. Reader-board says “sorry.” Somehow it didn’t seem very sincere. You start over: twenty questions again. You enter another bogus tail number (thank Heaven for simple pleasures) and The Machine once again springs to life. You get the nozzle in the tank, squeeze the trigger and fuel is flowing. Victory!! Until 4.3 seconds later the pump shuts off again. You run to the pump and the reader-board says “$20.00. thank you very much.” Arrrggghhh!!! You entered the numbers for the “dollars” question, not the “gallons” question. Do you know how long it takes to pump $20.00 of avgas? 4.3 seconds.

It was then that you found a piece of cardboard and a stick to make a sign, after which you headed for the nearest street corner to display it. Sign said, “Will Work for Instructions on How to Operate the Self-service Pump at the Airport.” I saw you there last Tuesday. And the day before that. But I can’t help you: I can’t figure the dang thing out either.