

Side Effects May Include...

By: RaddaRaem

“There are no words to describe how stupid this is.” Tipping her head down, the kangaroo glared at the lanky skunk pulling himself off the couch tucked away in the corner. Affectionately referred to as the ‘coma couch,’ it was a relic of a long gone era, back when a much more casual and relaxed approach pervaded throughout the pharmaceuticals lab. Black rimmed glasses with thick square lenses shuffled down the brim of her nose. She poked them back into place before they could clatter to the sterile white floor below. “That’s what you’ve been slaving away at these past few weeks?” She shoved her phone into his muzzle, the email he had excitedly shot out to her the night prior displayed prominently on the screen. A PNG of a petri dish with a single drop in it was about half done loading. “Are you trying to get labeled a domestic terrorist?”

Bringing a padded hand up to his mouth, he stifled a yawn and rustled his unkempt hair. What was supposed to have been a power nap had stretched out into the following day. Smoothing out the crinkles in his lab coat, he closed his eyes when he realized it wasn’t worth the effort. He had difficulty opening them back up. “Okay, yes, I did engineer a new virus.” Eyes still closed, he continued talking. “I understand that a declaration like that might raise a couple of alarms.” Thank goodness he had the mind not to shoot that out using the email address the lab had assigned to him.

“Might?”

Biting at his lip, the skunk ran a hand through the white tuft of fur atop his head. “Alright alright, a declaration like that *will* raise a lot of alarms. Hear me out though, just let me just give you the context to go with it.” Holding his hands up in a placating gesture, the skunk circled around to the other side of a smooth granite counter at the center of the laboratory. The skunk plucked up a tablet computer and wiped away smudges with the side of his hand. Furred fingers slid across the touch screen in a zigzag pattern. “See for yourself.”

The kangaroo’s hand shot out and retracted like a lunging snake, snapping up the tablet. White walls peppered with black bubbles of miniscule text were reflected off of her lenses from the glare of the screen.

“It’s a technically a nanite swarm, programmed to spread throughout the body as efficiently as possible. Basically, I’m trying to model and recreate the spread of a virus.” His chapped lips curled upward as the lighting above him flickered. Blinking, the skunk’s lips promptly curled downward when he felt his coworker’s gaze weighing down heavily on him. “...I definitely could have worded that in a less doomsday...ey... manner.” Shaking his head, he gathered his thoughts while his index finger fished out some sleep from one of his sagging eyelids. “The nanites reproduce using the tracest amounts of iron present within the bloodstream

and stop once they've hit a certain density per nanometer." The skunk patted a hand against a nondescript metal box nestled amongst pipets and burets.

"So you've given the risk of clotting some thought."

Clamping his jaw shut, he stifled another yawn while his head bobbed up and down. "Furthermore, the vi-, I mean nanites, are small enough to go unnoticed by white blood cells, which means they won't be distracting the body's immune system from doing its job or loading any extra work onto it."

"What about the nervous system? Will the... no... never mind." She swiped at the screen to bring up the next page of the PDF. There would be no net change in the body's iron content if the nanites were only using what was already there. It would only be redistributed, and in a negligible manner at that. That took care of her concerns about the possibility of mucking up the electrical currents travelling from one synapse to the next. Placing the tablet onto the countertop, the kangaroo rested her chin on her palm and continued on with her speed read. Hazel eyes lingered on the synopses marking the beginning of each new section.

Letting out a sigh, the skunk patted at his chest. He'd already answered a question before she even finished asking it. Almost made up for his botched start. "They're only there to silently gather data, nothing more. No symptoms will actually arise after being infected by this 'virus.' Emphasis on the air quotes."

"Should I be applauding your unwavering commitment to ethics?"

Setting his hands on his hips, the skunk beamed proudly. His lab coat swayed majestically in the breeze kicked up by the AC.

"Or should I be chewing you out for scheming to make sure whoever your test subjects are carry on as they usually would? Wouldn't want them making sudden changes in their behavior in a misguided effort to flush out some pesky virus now, would you?" Turning the tablet towards him, the kangaroo's finger tapped against a paragraph highlighted a blindingly bright shade of yellow.

Clunking loudly to a halt, the air conditioning's cool airy breeze subsided. "...H-heh, how about both?" That sounded significantly more robotic and borderline mad scientist when read out loud than he thought it would. Might want to throw in a little blurb about maintaining the comfort and safety of those infected. That striped poofy tail of his brushed along the cool granite as he circled around towards his coworker. "Anyway, once the virus... d-darnit, nanites, have spread entirely throughout the body and hit the maximum allowed density, it will have gathered more than enough data to plot out the most efficient means a virus can spread throughout a single organism. From there it ceases functioning, and the nanites decompose back into the iron from which they originated."

“And the applications of this research are what now, Roger?” The kangaroo set the tablet back on the counter and slid it back over to the sleep deprived skunk. Shaking her head, she could hardly stand to look at him. Crazy bastard practically lived where he worked. The fur on his cheeks and chin were matted down in patches and greasy all around. Her clawed toes clacked against the floor loudly as she tapped her foot against the ground in anticipation of a response.

“As it stands, the ‘ride it out’ approach is all modern science has to offer when treating viruses. We can do better.” Roger smirked upon seeing Sam nod reluctantly. “Way I see it, learning how viruses spread is the first step to learning how to contain them. I don’t see why my next experiment can’t be to use nanites keep an infection from spreading after I decipher all the data collected from this run.”

“You’re still setting a dangerous precedent here, Roger. Nature already throws plenty enough danger and disease at us. We don’t need someone else adding to that, even if yours is as harmless as you say it is.” Leaning forward, Samantha crossed her arms and gazed at the skunk in earnest. “What are you going to say to the higher ups when they review your proposal? You know they’re going to ask how and who you’re going to subject to this tailor-made malady of yours. The only way you’re going to get the results that you want is with a blind study. And you know infecting people without their knowledge is not going to sit well with the higher ups, you know that.”

“Crap, you’re right.” Spending days on end in the lab with intermittent bouts of sleep might have contributed to overlooking something as basic as that.

Hopping around the counter, Sam’s tail brushed up against his own. “Go home and get some rest. I can help you write up your proposal tomorrow. Not gonna guarantee it’ll go anywhere, but at the very least I can help keep your dumb ass from being snatched up by the Feds.”

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Roger exhaled deeply. “...Yeah. Yeah, you’re right. Give me a couple minutes to clean up and I’ll get out here.”

Sam gave the skunk a gentle pat on the back. Bidding him a wave, she hopped over to the opposite side of the lab to a wall lined with cabinets, all centered round a sink bolted to the wall. Brushing aside an empty bottle of soap, she let out an exasperated sigh after inspecting the cupboard underneath.

Roger grit his teeth and shuffled his jaw back and forth. There was no way in hell this would get past the ethics standards set by the medical review board. Getting them to approve a blind study was difficult enough. Setting up a scenario where you inject or have participants ingest something that does one thing but you tell them it does another wasn’t exactly thought all too highly of. He pressed his hands up on his cheeks, his furred flesh compressing against his eyes. “Wait a minute...” It might not have been ideal, but he could possibly administer the

nanites to someone well aware of their purpose and still produce valid results. So long as they did not to change their day to day behavior, anyway. Pulling his hands away from his face, his cheeks bounced back into place. He was that kind of someone!

“Are you still here?” Sam called back. Lacking any kind of soap, she settled for scalding her hands. She clasped them together under the stream of hot water pouring from the sink’s faucet head. Steam wafted up from the metal basin.

“Almost done, almost done.” Eyeing Samantha warily, Roger fished a set of keys out of his pocket. Fingering through the selection with minimal jingling, he grasped a jagged brass key between his thumb and forefinger. His padded thumb ran along its pointed teeth. Ever so carefully, Roger plucked up the metal box hidden amongst the glass menagerie of lab equipment and flipped it over to reveal a keyhole.

“Whatever it is you’re fumbling with it can wait until tomorrow, skunk. Go home.” Sam reached out for the roll of paper towels sitting by the sink. Ripping off a good dozen sheets, she dried her hands and wiped up the trail of droplets leading out from to it. The kangaroo tossed the crumpled up ball of paper refuse into a trash can propped against the wall.

“Alright, alright, alright.” Dragging another one of his keys along the pad of a finger, he just barely scratched the surface of the skin. Roger sawed at the digit frantically until the tiniest of cuts manifested. He squeezed at it yet no blood poured out. Progress! Pulling a petri dish out of the box, he twisted the lid off hurriedly.

“Roger. Go. Home.” Dropping to her knees, the kangaroo pulled out a box of latex gloves from beneath the sink. Fed up with his pussyfooting, she swiveled around to face him while she tore the lid off the container. Waxy rubber fingers poked out from the box and bopped gently against its sides.

“Fine fine fine I’m gone, I’m gone.” Grabbing up his tablet off the counter, Roger waved goodbye to his immeasurably impatient coworker. As soon as he cleared the lab, his hand patted against a pocket. The skunk’s moist fingers rubbed along a now used pipet.

Curled up under his covers, Roger nestled his head against a pillow. The coma couch was something else, but nothing could beat falling asleep in your own bed. A long shower and proper dinner had done him well. Rubbing a hand along his now silky smooth chest, the skunk’s attention was drawn to the tablet resting at his bedside. Taking up the entirety of the screen, the bright red skunk shaped silhouette was impossible to miss. It had only taken three hours for a full infection to take place. Not too shabby!

“Now to just let the data compile while I sleep and it’s a done deal...” Plopping the paper thin computer onto his nightstand, the fur slid a finger along its surface to lock it before dozing off for the night.

...

...

Total infection achieved

...

Data compilation complete

...

Activate MiniStat

...

Opening Command Prompt

...

C:\Users\Roger

C:\Users\Roger cd Programs

C:\Users\Roger\Programs cd MiniStat

C:\Users\Roger\Programs\MiniStat

Run MiniStat.exe

...

Data loaded. Initiate Regression Analysis

...

Outliers detected. Residuals exceed acceptable limits. Running Sum of Squared Residuals in attempt to minimize random error

...

Generating scatterplot graph

...

Unable to determine if positive or negative relationship exists between independent and dependent variables

...

Experiment results... inconclusive. Unable to claim with greater than ninety-five percent certainty that the data rejects the null hypothesis

...

MiniStat Recommendation: Acquire additional data points to plot!

...

Exception found: Maximum density per nanometer reached in one hundred percent of organism. Generation of additional nanites forbidden

Unable to log additional data points

...

Troubleshooting...

...

...

...

Solution found

...

Observation mode deactivated

...

Target: Pituitary gland

...

Exception: Maximum density per nanometer reached in one hundred percent of organism

...

...

Warning: Maximum density per nanometer reached in ninety-nine percent of organism

...

Generating additional nanites

Logging data point

...

Warning: Maximum density per nanometer reached in ninety-...

Paws sticking out from under the covers, Roger groaned as he splayed out his thick toes. Face still buried into a pillow, his hand reached out for the nightstand. Overshooting his mark, he grumbled when he felt his fingers smack into the wall. Reeling back in his limb, the skunk dragged the tablet to his side on the return trip. Turning his head to the side, he opened his eyes. He promptly closed them in disgust after seeing that obnoxious low battery warning flashing brightly on the screen. Considering that the whole point of the thing was to urge him to conserve power, it sure did an infuriatingly fine job eating up what little remained. Sliding his legs out over the side of the bed, Roger smacked his lips. He rubbed his tongue along the roof of his mouth and sides of his cheeks in an attempt to banish that dry mouth feeling. Hunched over, the skunk's eyes scanned the floor by his nightstand. Roger grunted at the sight of the freed up power outlet. "Dammit. I left the charger at the lab, didn't I?"

Rolling his eyes, the skunk pushed himself off the bed and stumbled to standing position. Standing on his tiptoes, Roger arched his back; his massive tail twitched with every crack of his vertebrae. "I'll just... hold off on peeking at the results." Sinking down onto the flats of his feet, the fur scratched at the back of his neck. Couldn't risk outing himself looking over the results at the lab with Sam around. He'd waited this long to get everything set up. What would be another half a day?

Leaning against the side of the elevator, Roger stretched an arm down and pulled up on his socks. Darn things were uncomfortably tight this morning. A quick flex of his toes relieved the pressure, much to his pleasant surprise. Either too lazy or in too much of a rush to bother drying off after jumping in and out of the shower, he ran a hand through his wet hair in an attempt to make himself remotely presentable. A pale flash of light above the metal doors signaled this was his stop. Tucking his tablet protectively against his chest, Roger padded out of the elevator. Shoving his hand into a constrictive pocket, his nails tapped against the key card he

was struggling to produce. As he reached the grey slab of a door marking the lab's entrance, Roger barely managed to pull out his key card.

"Was wondering if you'd show." Reclined back against the coma couch, Sam shoveled a forkful of white rice out of a Tupperware bin.

"It's not noon quite yet," he turned around and pointed up at the digital clock above the door. It read out eleven fifty-eight. "See? Cut me some slack." Plopping down beside her, Roger sank deep into the couch's cushions.

Tucking her silverware inside her bin, Sam closed the lid tight and tossed it noisily into the sink. "So where do we start?"

Biting down on his tongue, Roger slid a hand down between the cushions. "First things first, I can't actually access my write up. Charger's lying around here somewhere." Twitching an eye, Roger blindly felt around for it. "Think the couch might've eaten it."

"Roger." Leaning over the side of the couch, the kangaroo pulled up the charger port he was so desperately looking for, still plugged into the outlet right next to them.

With a furrow of his brows, he graciously accepted it. No sooner had the tablet booted up had Roger already minimized the results of last night's experiment. "...Suppose making the nanites appear as non-threatening as possible is pretty important." Pulling up the PDF nested a half dozen folders deep in his C drive, the skunk handed the tablet over.

The kangaroo nodded in agreement. "A virus that can think is terrifying in and of itself."

"Relax, relax. The logic I assigned to them is pretty simple, the nanites are little more than fast and unbelievably tiny idiots. They spread, collect data, and cease functioning."

"I wouldn't call that reassuring," she plainly stated as she flattened her brows. "How do they know when to stop collecting data?" Swiping a finger down the screen, Sam brought up the section dedicated to the micro machines.

"Like I said yesterday, they're only allowed to hit a certain density per nanometer. Once that limit has been reached in every nook and cranny in the body, that's their signal to stop."

Rubbing at an eye, Sam bit her lip. "Could you take a look here?"

Arching a brow, Roger hesitantly took the tablet. Highlighted in orange were the few lines of code that comprised the nanites' line of thinking. To the sides he had written up a basic translation of what each line of code actually did. "Something the matter?"

< ----- Engage Observation mode. Basically tells the nanites to be all sneaky and do what they can to avoid going noticed by any microscopic organisms. They're just there to take in data.

< ----- Check the density per nanometer.

< ----- If density threshold has not been reached, produce a nanite and log a data point. Revert to starting step.

< ----- If density threshold has been reached, cease producing nanites and log a data point.

< ----- Gather and sort data.

"I'm not seeing the probl-"

"Keep reading."

< ----- Run and default to MiniStat program. It's a handy tool for making sense of all the data!

"What's wrong with MiniStat? I mean, it's not the best program out there but it updates constantly and the license is fr-" Roger was promptly hushed as a tan furred finger pressed against his lips.

"You don't find anything worrisome about letting another program handling your nanites' AI? For even a moment?" Sam groaned loudly in response to the skunk's shrug. "Forget it." She tapped at the screen again and highlighted the first conditional statement in the code in an off red shade. "Care to elaborate on this line here a bit more?"

"It seems pretty self-explanatory to me." Scratching at the back of his neck, he wasn't following the kangaroo's line of reasoning at all.

< ----- If density threshold has not been reached, produce a nanite and log a data point. Revert to starting step.

“The initial spread of a virus is slow, the infection slowly turning the body’s own resources into protein factories pumping out more viruses. Sounds like your nanites imitate that closely enough, so good-” Sam’s tail draped flat against the floor. “I don’t think I should be praising you for that. ...Anyway, viruses spread in an exponential manner after that point. From the looks of that line of code, your nanites don’t. Say a natural virus infects one cell. That cell is now a host and starts spitting out say... four viruses. Those four viruses infect four new cells. Now you have five host cells total spitting out twenty viruses. Those twenty viruses make twenty new host cells and so on and so forth...”

Roger squinted his eyes and read back over the description. “Ohhhhhh, I see what you’re getting at. Those nanites don’t perfectly recreate the exponential spread of a virus, I’ll admit. They generate one at a time, but that’s because I gotta be careful about those density limits. Thing is though, with how fast those suckers are operating they may as well be growing exponentially.” Smirking, Roger brushed his extremely soft and poofy striped tail along her side.

Valiantly stifling a goofy grin, Sam rubbed a hand along it hesitantly. “Fine, fine. Hmmm, ever consider not referring to them as an infection? Let’s be honest, that’s exactly what this is but... maybe you could squeak by saying they’re a simulation?”

“Use the least threatening words possible basically?”

“Facsimile of an infection, replication of an infection, you get the drift. The more you can do to dissociate or distance yourself from it, the better.”

Snickering, the skunk pressed his tail against her muzzle. It was all over, she couldn’t resist then. He couldn’t help but giggle when she wrapped her arms around it and nuzzled it liberally. “That wouldn’t happen to be the same approach you took when you proposed using crocodile antibodies as an alternative to synthesized antibiotics?”

Composing herself, Samanatha shoved Roger’s wriggling tail away. “Ahem. Those folks in Big Pharma have certain standards and expectations, skunk. I can’t just write up a proposal gushing how awesome it is that bacteria are literally exploding. They’d write me off as delusional in an instant.”

“But that’s exactly what happened.”

“I know, and it was awesome! But there’s a certain amount of restraint and professionalism expected of us. In your case, that means being as indirect and convoluted as possible when describing the means by which you’re going to conduct your experiment.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Roger yanked at the collar of his shirt, hugging against his neck tighter than he would have liked. Shifting back into the imprint he had left in the couch, the fabric eased and loosened up where he had pulled upon it. “What else?”

“Your works cited page is a mess.” Dragging her hand across the entire screen, every line for the next five pages had been crossed out with red.

“Auughh.” Slumping down further into the couch than should have been possible, he knew this was going to take a while.

“Let me clean up first, then we can dig into this.” Struggling to pull herself out of the kangaroo shaped indent left in the coma couch, Samantha just barely freed herself from its embrace. Hopping over to the sink, she washed her hands the best she could with what little was provided. “Great we’re even out of paper towels now.” With few other options available to her, she shook her hands dry.

Tossing his head back, Roger complained loudly. He let out a sigh when Samantha flopped back down beside him, curling her tail around his own.

“You’re gonna have to clean this up eventually.” She tapped against the screen again, rendering a couple more pages a mess of red lines.

“I knooooooooow.”

‘Eventually’ turned out to be that very afternoon, Roger discovered much to his chagrin. Trudging into his bedroom, he tossed the tablet onto his nightstand and fell forward onto the mattress. Mentally drained from the herculean task of assigning credit where credit was due, the skunk’s mind was buzzing. He just wanted to sink into the comforter on his bed and not think. Rubbing a foot alongside the back of each heel, he kicked off his work shoes. Still flumped face down onto his sheets he curled his toes, brushing them along the back of his legs. Methodically, Roger dragged his nails down along his socks, forcing those cotton constrictors off. His paws dangled off of the bed, along with a couple inches of his legs that hadn’t done so this morning. For the briefest of moments, he contemplated sneaking an ogle at last night’s results. Urgh. Numbers. Thinking. Bad. With a groan, he swatted in the general direction of the tablet on his nightstand. He succeeded in smacking his lamp and tilting its lampshade off kilter. With a groan, he closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

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Total infection reached

...

Data compilation complete

...

Activate MiniStat

...

Opening Command Prompt

...

C:\Users\Roger

C:\Users\Roger cd Programs

C:\Users\Roger\Programs cd MiniStat

C:\Users\Roger\Programs\MiniStat

Run MiniStat.exe

...

Data loaded. Initiate Regression Analysis

...

Multicollinearity detected in multiple independent variables. Calculating Variance
Inflation Factor

...

All suspect independent variables possess a VIF greater than 10

Unable to eliminate probable traces of bias from the model

...

Experiment results... inconclusive. Unable to claim with greater than ninety-five percent
certainty that the data rejects the null hypothesis

...

MiniStat Recommendation: Acquire additional data points to plot!

...

Observation mode deactivated

...

CRASH

Roger's stomach lurched as a terrible falling sensation overtook his body. Ripping his eyes open, the skunk landed with a thud an instant later. Muscles tensed, his heart pounded as he stared up at the ceiling. Clenching his jaw shut, he exhaled through his teeth. "...I can think of worse ways to wake up," he thought aloud. Closing his eyes, he puffed at the tufts of fur hanging over his eyes. Stretching out his legs, he twiddled his toes against the closet doors, his huge powerful digits forcing the doors off their tracks and woah woah woah hold on that's not right. Propping himself up on an elbow, Roger gawked at the scene in his bedroom. His legs lay stretched out before him, everything from the waist down dangling over the edge of mattress. The mattress that was now flat on the floor, the metal bedframe beneath it having been flattened under the skunk's increased girth. For a couple minutes, the fur simply stared at his paws. The ones stretching out to the opposite end of the room. Resting against the closet doors that had been ripped off their tracks. That had large indentations in the wood from where his toes pressed upon them. Those very same toes that were ever so slowly creeping up further and further over the wait no bad stop doing that.

Turning to his nightstand, Roger gingerly picked up his tablet with two over-sized fingers. He wasn't sure of what else could be causing this. Now comparable in size to a single one of his hands, the skunk eeped worriedly at the sight of his fingers poking up from behind the shrinking computer. Swiping desperately at the screen, the lock on it remained in place, his padded digits simply too damn big to operate it effectively. A loud whine crawled up from Roger's throat. Dragging a nail across the screen as carefully as he could, he cringed at the sight of the cracks in the glass and dead pixels left in his wake. Thankfully, the lock had been lifted.

"Initiating third regression attempt?! Why?!" Jabbing a clawed finger at the screen, the swelling skunk frantically brought up the nanites' log files. "I don't understand, all the right exceptions were thrown! ...Erf, so the regression failed. That's a downer." Roger squinted his eyes, struggling to make out the text on the screen shrinking in his grasp. "Wh-why did it stop throwing the exceptions? Where is it pulling those new data points from?" Scrolling back up a couple lines in the log produced the answer. In order to gather more data points, at the behest of the statistical modeling software now calling the shots, the nanites needed to spread. Problem was, there was nowhere else to go. Being the lightning fast idiots that they were, the simplest solution the tiny machines came up with was to simply create more skunk to spread to.

Feet pressed up against one wall and back against the other, cracks in the plaster spread out and up towards the ceiling. Curling forward, Roger struggled to keep from bursting out as flecks of paint crumbled down on him. With his eyes clenched shut and ears poking through to the rafters, he prepared for the worst. He kept on preparing for the worst for a couple more minutes, only to find that his growth had petered off. Staring down at the tablet computer now fitting comfortably in the palm of his hand, he warily watched the nanites cycle through the Command Prompt. "T-third time's the charm, right?"

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...

Autocorrelation detected in model

“Oh no.”

...

Running Durbin-Watson test

...

Bias of random errors has been confirmed as positive

...

Correcting model

...

Lagging independent variables by one time period

...

Refitting model. Repurposing lagged dependent variable as an independent variable

“Huh. That doesn’t sound so bad.” Letting his eyes drift over his swollen form, Roger was surprised to realize he was still clothed. And not in tearing at the seams rrrraauurragh I’m bursting out kind of barely clothed. The skunk was still donned in the lab attire that he was too lazy to bother changing out of yesterday. It had seemingly grown with him, even though it was a bit snug. And crinkled. And greasy. But still, it somehow came along for the ride! “The nanites were designed to keep a low profile and stay unnoticed...” He grabbed at his lab coat and tussled it. “I guess it kinda makes sense it would take you longer to notice something was off if you weren’t exploding out of your clothes?”

...

“These things really are as stupid as they come.”

Experiment results printing. Able to claim with greater than ninety-five percent certainty that the data rejects the null hypothesis

“Alright!” Wiggling about in place, scraping off layers of wallpaper and plaster with his broad back in the process, at least Roger could take solace in that fact. He now had a working model describing the quickest way a given virus could spread throughout a body.

...

MiniStat Recommendation: Verify that the model produces consistent results across datasets

...

“Uhhhhh...” Gritting his teeth, the skunk arched his eyebrows worriedly. Following each attempt at total infection, more and more nanites accumulated within him. Darn things were never allowed to decompose, freaking MinStat was never content to half ass things and just give the analysis a rest. Erfff... given how many were already in him, and the rate at which they ran their internal checks... it would be a matter of minutes as opposed to hours for full infection to be achieved. Which meant the frequency with which MiniStat could spit out recommendations would skyrocket. All of that resulting in bursts of growth with increasingly shorter intervals between them.

Archiving data

...

“W-woah, hey now. I mean, I know the scientific method is tried and true and all about replicating results. Let’s be realistic though, surely no one’s going to notice if I cut corners just this once...”

Observation mode deactivated

“NO NO NO NO NO NO NO STOP THAT.”

“That skunk has something to do with this,” Sam growled. Dropping to her knees, she let out a frustrated sigh. Her waist was now level with the counter. Still too high up. The kangaroo gently eased herself down onto her side. It could be worse, the lab was kept fairly clean and sterile after all. Resting her head upon her left forearm, at least now she could actually see what was under here. Extending out her right arm, her burgeoning fingers wrapped tightly around a microscope. “Wait.”

Dammit. This wouldn’t be anywhere near powerful enough. Those things were nanoscopic after all. A *microscope* wasn’t going to cut it. Rolling onto her back, she held her tail tightly against her chest. It wasn’t like she had anything else to go off of, however tenuous the connection was. “My coworker and... on again off again crush,” she admitted out loud with a roll of the eyes, “develops an artificial virus. “Two days later I wake up two feet taller.” Correlation doesn’t equal causation though, she thought with a huff.

Just where the hell is Roger anyway? It's like him to be late, but not this late... A series of tumultuous rumbles answered her, rocking the lab and sending the kangaroo bouncing back and forth between counters and cabinets. Glass beakers and test tubes rattled noisily in their plastic confines.

"SAMANTHA!" A familiar fur's significantly deeper and powerful voice rocked the building. The light fixtures above the kangaroo popped out of place and dangled above her.

Eyes growing wide, Sam remained splayed out on the floor hidden behind the counter. "Why did he have to call me out by name..." Pulling herself up into sitting position, she slowly poked her head above the granite counter. Cracks had appeared in the north wall facing out towards the street as a terrible quaking shook the building.

Bending at the knees, the supersized skunk tapped a finger gingerly at his former office's fourth floor. "Samantha! Samantha please be in there!" Whispering as quietly as he could, Roger winced at the cracks forming in the building from the mere sound of his voice! Flakes of metal and concrete peeled away from the structure's surface and disappeared inside the tuft of white fur atop the skunk's head. Tapping furiously at the wall of the lab, Roger cracked a nervous smile when they came tumbling down. A very perplexed kangaroo greeted his sight when the rubble cleared.

"I don't know whether to be thrilled or terrified that my hunch was correct," she mouthed, letting her arms drape to her sides.

Holding a hand out towards her, he pressed the side of his palm against the building, just underneath the fourth floor's new and rather airy window.

"You infected yourself, didn't you?"

"Do you really need me to tell you what you already know?"

Shaking her head, Sam rolled with the punches and accepted the offer. Oddly enough, the first thing to catch her attention wasn't the sheer scale of the skunk, but the tablet wedged in the creases of his palm.

"I know it might be kinda hard to do so in this situation, but uh, you can go ahead and ignore me. Pleeeeeeeeeeeease just try and find a way to fix this." Twiddling his toes against the sidewalk, Roger curled back his lips worriedly when he saw his digits were warping and leaving massive indents in the pavement. "Annd ignore the request to ignore me." Bluh, those double negatives were confusing. He needed to get her up to speed NOW. Stumbling back out into the street, Roger splayed out his toes to avoid trampling any cars parked along the sides. "So, heh, turns out letting MiniStat run things was as bad an idea as you thought it might be." Stifling nervous fits of laughter, the skunk could feel another surge oncoming. His leathery padded soles began sinking into the streets, leaving massive depressions in their wake.

“Do I get to rub it in now or later?” Sam yelled back. The Command Prompt prominently displayed on screen was cycling through commands faster than she could read them.

“Later, please?” Thickening paws spilled out across both lanes, his pants legs brushing aside the cars he had worked so hard to avoid smooshing into metal pancakes. Pressing his ears down against his head, Roger waved at the business furs plastered against the windows in the buildings around him. Eight stories tall and counting. “S-so what’s basically happening is MiniStat keeps making recommendations on how to fine tune my model.”

“Mmhmm.” That doesn’t look good.

“And of course most of those recommendations involve gathering more data.”

“Go on.” Yeahhhhhhhhh we’re boned.

“But since MiniStat always runs after total infection is achieved, there is no way to gather more data since there is no more...,” Roger gestured towards all of himself with his free hand, “me, to infect!”

“So the way around the problem was to just make more of you to spread out to, huh?” Sam’s gaze darted back and forth between the skunk’s and the tablet. “That’s what you get for skimping on the AI.”

“You were complaining at me about giving the nanites AI to begin with!” He whined. Settling for the simplest intelligence settings he could get his hands on probably wasn’t the brightest idea in hindsight though. “I kinda did half-ass it in that regard...” Roger mulled.

Falling back on her toosh, Sam pressed a hand into the skunk’s warm palm, running her fingers along the creases of his furred flesh. Tossing the tablet besides her, the kangaroo’s eyes lingered on it for a time. “Sorry to lay it on like this, but I’ve got some not so-” her eyes darted back towards the tablet. The Command Prompt had shut down! “Oh thank God. Right. Anyway so... good news first! Looks like MiniStat is finally satisfied and done with you. No more growy for you.”

Wagging his massive striped poofy tail, Roger brought the tiny roo up to his nose and nuzzled her, eliciting beet red blushes from both furs. The skunk’s blush flared up to a bright crimson when a swollen Sam scrabbled at his whiskers and clung tight to his muzzle. Cupping his hands around her, he couldn’t help but stare as she began to fill up his grasp.

“Back to the not so good news. YOU might be done growing, but I’m not.”

Furrowing his brows, Roger felt himself going cross-eyed trying to focus on the lass hanging off of his nose. Careful to not shake his head too vigorously, the skunk blinked a couple times to regain his focus. “Whuh... what do you mean? H-how would they have even spread? I-i-it’s not like we... you know... anytime recently.”

“Why not yell it out so the entire county can hear you while you’re at it?!” Sam hissed. Wrapping her lengthening tail around his muzzle, she clamped his big mouth shut.

The folds of fur around Roger’s eyes scrunched together as he replied with a weak smile.

“...Roger. Did you ever put much thought into whether or not there was a risk of your ‘virus’ spreading to others?”

“That does sound like something a virus would do. And that I would have absentmindedly had my machines mimic,” the skunk thought worriedly as he began sweating bullets. Gargantuan beads of liquid slipped off his ruffled fur, plummeting down to the pavement below with explosive splashes.

“Hey,” she curtly piped up. “Hey!” She patted a hand against the side of his mouth. Sam couldn’t help but glare at him, the pupils bobbing around in his skull refusing to make eye contact with her.

“I miiiiiiiiiiiiight have spent a little less time taking that into consideration than I should have.” With every word he spoke, Sam’s grip loosened on his muzzle. It was rather silly seeing her smack up and down against the top of his nose with the flapping of his gums. Shoot, what was the method of transmission? Transmission by blood would be an obvious and easy method, though that couldn’t explain Sam. It wouldn’t be that much of a stretch if they spread via bodily fluids. Sweat, snot, anything of the sort was fair game. All that he and Sam had done over the past couple days was share notes though, not lips! Wait. His eyes swiveled towards the shrinking tablet cupped under the kangaroo’s arm, its surface was scratched and smudged. Who knows how many bodily oils and germs the poor thing had accumulated with all their shared swipes? Turning his attention back to Sam, his shoulders slumped. It had obviously been more than enough.

“Figured it out, huh?” Sprawled out on her stomach, the kangaroo’s arms and legs draped down over the sides of his muzzle.

Choking back a sigh, all Roger could do was nod gently.

Kicking her legs back and forth, every so often her paws would brush against his lips. “All we can do now is wait and see. Heh, just like we would with any other virus.”

“I may have done *too* good a job simulating them...” He mused in a forlorn manner.

“It’s not like you had the software set up to track the nanites’ progress in other people, did you?”

“No. It’s something I had never even considered.” Ughhh not good. He’d never given any thought to the nanites’ behavior outside of the body. Would they keep on trucking until they received the command to decompose? Apparently so, otherwise EEENGHH- Roger’s head

jerked down as another surge consumed Samantha, the tan colored roo now wrapped around his entire head! Not good. And who knew how their logic would react upon finding itself in a brand new body.

“I’m tempted to say this is going to get a lot worse before it gets better.” Sliding down off of Roger’s face, the kangaroo wrapped her arms around his fuzzy neck. Clenching her tail and legs around his ludicrously large lab cloak, she buried her face into his chest as she rode out another wave of growth.

“Would they start fresh and cycle through their commands? Would the effects and amount of growth change from person to person? Hell, what if there was a corruption in their logic from the shift?!” The skunk frantically thought, his hands full trying to contain his colossal coworker.

...

...

Initiating environmental analysis

...

...

Analysis complete

...

Ninety eight point five percent dihydrogen monoxide

Zero point five percent fluoride

Zero point four percent nitrogen

Zero point three percent arsenic

Zero point two percent lead

Zero point one percent iron

...

Current environment is not indicative of any known living organism

...

Maintaining limited observation mode

...

Sticking a glass under the faucet, the fox turned the cold water knob. A cool stream of water gushed over the sides, washing over his black 'gloved' hands.

An unintended accident resulting from one of Roger's showers, this lone nanite, along with a couple hundred million others floating through the water supply, had found themselves taken on the ride of their artificial lives. Sweeping through the sewers and into the city's water filtration plant, theirs was a journey fraught with danger and peril. Which we are just going to skip over since because reasons. Where one journey ends though, another begins...

Brining the glass up to his lips, the vulpine tipped his head back and drank graciously. One gulp after another traveled down his throat, his neck bulging with every swallow. He leaned back against the sink, relishing the refreshing breeze blowing across his brow. There was no doubt about it. Air conditioning was the greatest creation in all of recorded history. Slayer of summer chores, soothsayer of sweat, some other third fancy alliteration. How or why anyone could bear to drag themselves out into the suffocating summer heat was beyond him.

"Nathan, how long does it take to get a glass of water?" A perturbed and feminine voice called out through the propped open front door.

"Just a minute, Mom!"

"It's been ten, Nathan! Get your fluffbutt out here this instant and finish mowing the lawn!" Slamming the door, Diana trudged back outside. Bending at the back, the fox picked up and sloshed around the contents of the bright red gas can next to the mower. She held it up towards the sun burning brightly in the sky and frowned at the lack of a silhouette. Definitely going to need to make a run on the gas station first. Rolling up the hose snaking out along the side of the house, she wasn't going to bother giving Nathan another chance to run the lawnmower over it. Panting loudly, she wiped a layer of sweat off her brow. "I could certainly use a drink myself..." Dropping the coiled up mass of green plastic at her feet, her tail wagged softly in anticipation. Diana gripped the faucet hose's faucet and turned it as far to the left as far as she could. Drips of water ran down the faucet head. Bringing up the hose to her mouth, she imbibed mouthful after mouthful of liquid refreshment.

"I'm coming, I'm coming!" Setting the glass down in the sink, Nathan's ears and tails drooped. The fox set one paw in front of the other as slowly as he could manage. Head hung low, he sulked all the way to the ooowwww! Rubbing at the back of his head, Nathan stooped down and glared back up at the offending chandelier wobbling on its axis. "What the..."

Bringing a hand up to the light fixture, he steadied it in place. "Woah." That had never happened before. The diminutive fox was lucky to swat at the underside of it even when standing

on his tiptoes! He clenched his fingers and toes, his jaw agape at the sight of his shirt and shorts slowly creeping down his exposed limbs. Hehe, this was amazing! The fox circled around the chandelier excitedly. Resting flat on his feet, he extended out a hand. His black furred fingers brushed against the ceiling. Why, he had to be six and a half feet tall easily!

...

Experiment results printing. Able to claim with greater than ninety-five percent certainty that the data rejects the null hypothesis

...

Model confirmed to be statistically sound

...

Initiate decomposition of nanites

...

“NATHAN!”

“H-hey Mom!” Bolting towards the front door, the young fox threw it open eagerly. “Mom! You won’t believe...” Pursing his lips, Nathan went mum. “Never mind, maybe you can.” His eyes level with her knees, the vulpine tilted his head back as far as it would go to meet her gaze.

...

MiniStat Recommendation: Acquire additional data points to plot!

...

Observation mode deactivated

...

...

Initiating fourth instance of regression analysis

...

Nathan meeped quietly while Diana’s brown ‘socked’ toes slid towards him, flattening the grass beneath them in the process. Mounds of dirt and uprooted grass crept towards him, pushed forward by his mega massive mom’s thickening digits.

“This still doesn’t change the fact you have to mow the lawn,” she bellowed out. Setting her hands on her hips, her ankles slowly inched up higher and higher over the poor fox.

Nathan couldn’t help but sulk.

“I think we’re in the clear? It’s been a couple minutes and still nothing.” Hand in hand, the eight story tall skunk and seven and a half story tall kangaroo meandered out towards the suburbs. Car alarms cycled through shrieks and silence with every other footfall of the on again off again couple. “So what now?”

“Still trying to figure that part out.” It would be a couple hours for... Lord, the *billions* of nanites that had accumulated within them to finish decomposing. A sense of unease still weighed heavily on the skunk’s shoulders. If the virus had spread that easily to Sam...

“Staying out of trouble is certainly a good start.” Setting a colossal paw down, the flexing of the kangaroo’s toes tore up the road. “Which is easier said than done.” Turning her head back, Samantha warily eyed the twin trail of pawprints engraved into the streets behind them.

“Heh, well at least we don’t have to worry-” A clawed finger placed itself against his lips before he could finish.

“Don’t jinx this for us.”

“I was just gonna say-”

Samantha twirled about, her heavy tail smacking into the skunk’s spine. Trees were stripped bare and nearly uprooted by the gust of wind she kicked up.

“Ow! Okay okay okay.”

...

...

Remote Firmware Update launching...

...

Downloading updates one of four for MiniStat.exe

...

Please do not shut down OS during update

...

Installations complete. Thank you for upgrading to MiniStat v12.2.5035.79!

...

Be sure to take a peek at our latest features! Equations used to model the behavior of sample populations have been modified for increased accuracy!

...

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MiniStat Recommendation...

“Look what you did. LOOK WHAT YOU DID.” Alternating between looming down and glaring up at the skunk, burst after burst of growth washed over the couple at infrequent intervals.

“How is this my... Oh. Right.” Cracks and fissures in the earth spread out from beneath them, the land itself beginning to bow and flatten under their weight. Turning his back towards the city, Roger worryingly took note of the closing gap between them. Those skyscrapers dotting the skyline slowly started sinking lower and lower and lower into the horizon...

“You know what. No more comments from you.” The pawprints engraved in the two lane road minutes ago had just been smothered by the imprint of a single padded kangaroo toe. Grabbing Roger by the wrist, she led him away from the road to give the tiny motorized metal pebbles their feet were encroaching on ample time to avoid being overwhelmed. “Every time you utter something you’re practically throwing down the gauntlet for those nanites. Two gargantuan and growing scientists is bad enough. We don’t need you egging them on to make things any worse!”

...

Calculating sample size required to accurately model population of an urban area exceeding four hundred thousand occupants within a confidence interval of four percentage points

...

Required sample size acquired

...

Current sample size: seventy-four

...

The nanites' simple AI set to work. In order to increase the sample size, the infection would need to spread. How best to maximize the distribution of the mechanical virus though?

Current sample size: One hundred thirty

Current sample size: Four hundred seventy-eight

Those incomprehensibly small machines still lingering in the pipelines immediately began reproducing using the iron present within the tap water. Their numbers surged at a blistering and exponential pace. If Samantha thought two growing furs was bad, what would she think of a couple hundred?

Current sample size: One thousand four hundred ninety-nine

Current sample size: Three thousand eighty

Holy crap that's a lot. Errr... make that a couple thousand.

Current sample size: Seven thou...

"Moooooooooooooooooom!" Fuzzy prison bars as thick as he was curled around the fox. Nathan pouted silently, kicking at the empty red gas can jostling beside him in his mother's palm. This was just downright mortifying.

"Doesn't matter if I accidentally trampled the entire front yard under paw, you still have work to do! There's a whole back yard that needs to be mowed, Nathan." Standing at an imposing nine stories in height, Diana plodded towards the nearby gas station.

Nathan's ears folded flat against his head. Being dropped off was bad enough in the figurative sense. Literally having his mom carry him to and set him down somewhere though? It was any wonder he hadn't dropped dead from embarrassment yet. Placing both hands on the side of the gas can, the young fox shook it in frustration. His scowl disappeared in an instant however when he felt his hands sliding over the warm plastic of their own volition. Yes, another growth spurt! Maybe he'd have a good and proper one this time!

...

Model confirmed to be statistically sound

...

Tail wagging, Nathan looked down excitedly at the gas can eager to see how small it would shrink in his hands! Somewhat thicker fingers gripped its sides tightly. Scraping his claws along the plastic, his tail came to a standstill. Was that it? The seven foot tall fox glared at the gas can. “Come on, give me something better than that!” A cacophony of tremors answered his call. “Yeah! That’s more... like... it...” Dropping the gas can at his feet, Nathan’s mind reeled at the sight of the scenery morphing around him.

Diana’s furry fingers stretched higher and higher and higher into the sky, far beyond his range of vision. Her palm groaned and stretched out before him, morphing from a furry prison floor into a fuzzy plain stretching out towards the horizon. In the distance, traces of blue sky were replaced with orange as her fingers continued to swell. Before he even had time to adjust, another series of quakes sent Nathan rolling. Rising up above him, canyons of furred flesh scraped at the sky while the poor fox sank ever deeper into the creases of her palm.

Diana’s now booming voice shook him to his core and rang in his ears. “Nathan? Hun? Where’d you go?”

Current sample size: Thirty thousand three hundred twenty-eight

Current sample size: Forty-thousand one hundred twelve...