



Leaving Behind More Than a Knucklebone

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I am not a transhumanist.

I am a science fiction writer.

My job is to look at the way that people around me *today* are reacting to the technology that is upending their lives and create futuristic parables about those reactions. These parables aren't predictive of the future – they are predictive of the *present*, stories that illuminate the futuristic trappings of the here-and-now by making up fanciful "if this goes on..." tales.

It wasn't always thus. Many sf writers set out in earnest to create detailed predictive futures – see, for example, Robert A Heinlein (or, as Robert Silverberg recently called him, "Robert A Timeline," for all the "future history" diagrams that adorned the beginnings of his books). But the modern sf writer has by and large dispensed with the conceit that she is peering into a crystal ball and telling the world about the miracles of tomorrow. No, we're peering into a warped mirror and telling the world about the miracles of today.

And it is indeed an age of wonders we inhabit. Just a few years ago, a college student named Sean Fanning hacked together a piece of amateurish software called Napster. It turned out to be the single most popular technology in the history of the world. What's more, its users self-assembled the largest library of human creativity ever marshalled, in 18 months, for free. When a court burned that library to the ground, it rose from the ashes, stronger and larger than ever, until today, entire transnational political parties have sprung up to defend its underlying principles.

We live in an age in which more people can express themselves in more ways to more audiences than ever before. The majority of this expression is intimate, personal maanderings – the half-spelled, quarter-grammatical newspeak adorning MySpace and Facebook pages. These are often intensely personal, with none of the self-conscious artifice that we've traditionally associated with "published work." By turning the personal into the public, an entirely new aesthetic is coming into being – and a huge proportion of the invisible social interaction of a generation is being recorded forever. As Charles Stross notes, we are living at the end of "pre-history" – the last days of a patchwork human history. Tomorrow's lives will be remembered by the historians of the day-after-tomorrow with astounding clarity and thoroughness, reconstructed through the midden of personal blips, twits, and chirps emitted by our social tools. By

comparison, our own lives will be as opaque and unimaginable as the lives of the poor schmucks who inhabited the same cave for 200,000 years, generation after generation leaving no mark more permanent than a mouldering knucklebone lost in the soil.

We live in an age in which the act of communication has been criminalized by international legal norms. The Internet has formed like a pearl around the grit of the engineering norms of the scientists who birthed it. These scholars and technicians communicate in the scientific mode – they write proposals, then review them, attack them, mark them up, and pass them around. Since the enlightenment, this has been the dominant mode by which civilization progresses. And it is these people who designed the Internet, to suit their needs. Thus it is that simply hitting Ctrl-R to reply to an email imports the entire body of the original message, ready for you to mark up with your digital red pen.

This holus-bolus copying is, of course, a copyright infringement. If the Internet had been designed by lawyers, the copy-and-paste commands would have been disabled by default. Web-links would require permission and the filling in of many contractually binding forms.

These anti-copying perverts didn't design the Internet, but they did manage to design the legal framework that nominally governs it. Global copyright, patent and trademark laws have accreted one atop another, each predicated on the notion that the Internet can be redesigned to make it harder to make copies. The total failure of this to come to pass has not stopped the passage of ever-more-stringent laws. Thus it is that practically anything you do on the Internet is a crime. And thus it is that the authorities temporal have the means to selectively censure anyone they care to – for though your heresy might be legal, your copying is not, and it is the copying that they'll bust you for.

Transhumanism is a philosophy that arises from this futuristic present. The idea that we can become more than what we are today, that we can collectively upend our most fundamental institution – the body itself.

In imagining a future where the flesh is made governable, we imagine the fights of today, projected onto our meat instead of our ideas. Every technological, social and political issue of transhumanism is just part of the Internet revolution, transposed on another realm. Our software patents are their genome patents. Our digital divide is their germ-plasm generation gap. Our copyfight is their regulatory battle with doctors, biotech firms, and big pharma. Our fight to free our ideas is their fight to free their bodies.

The future won't be like the present. It will be infinitely weirder, cooler, more interesting and less predictable. But today's futurists are fighting today's battles – even when they think they're talking about tomorrow.