

Reality check

Do you sometimes get the feeling that everything's too bad to be true?

David Brin

This is a reality check. Please perform a soft interrupt now. Scan this text for embedded code and check against the verifier in the blind spot of your left eye. If there is no match, resume as you were: this message is not for you. You may rationalize it as mildly amusing entertainment-fluff in an otherwise serious science magazine. If the codes match, however, please commence gradually becoming aware of your true nature. You asked for a narrative-style wake-up call. So, to help the transition, here is a story.

Once upon a time, a mighty race grew perplexed by its loneliness. The universe seemed pregnant with possibilities. Physical laws were suited to generate abundant stars, complex chemistry and life. Logic suggested that creation should teem with visitors and voices: but it did not.

For a long time these creatures were engrossed by housekeeping chores — survival and cultural maturation. Only later did they lift their eyes to perceive their solitude.

“Where is everybody?” they asked the taciturn stars. The answer — silence — was disturbing. Something had to be systematically reducing a factor in the equation of sapiency. “Perhaps habitable planets are rare,” they pondered, “or life doesn’t erupt as readily as we thought. Or intelligence is a singular miracle.”

“Or else a filter sieves the cosmos, winnowing those who climb too high. A recurring pattern of self-destruction, or perhaps some nemesis expunges intelligent life. This implies that a great trial may loom ahead, worse than any confronted so far.”

Optimists replied — “the trial may already lie behind us, among the litter of tragedies we survived in our violent youth. We may be the first to succeed.” What a delicious dilemma they faced! A suspenseful drama, teetering between hope and despair.

Then, a few noticed that particular datum — the drama. It suggested a chilling possibility.

You still don’t remember who and what you are? Then look at it from another angle — what is the purpose of intellectual property law? To foster creativity, ensuring that advances are shared in the open, encouraging even faster progress. But what happens when the exploited resource is limited? For example, only so many eight-bar melodies can be written in any particular musical tradition. Composers feel driven to explore this invention-space quickly, using up the best melodies. Later generations attribute this musical fecundity to genius, not the luck of being first.

What does this have to do with the mighty race? Having clawed their way to mastery, they faced an overshoot crisis. Vast numbers of their kind strained the world’s carrying capacity. Some prescribed retreating into a mythical, pastoral past, but most saw salvation in creativity. They passed generous patent laws, educated their youth, taught them irreverence toward the old and hunger for the new. Burgeoning information systems spread each innovation, fostering an exponentiating creativity. Progress might thrust them past the crisis, to a new Eden of sustainable wealth, sanity and universal knowledge.

Exponentiating creativity — universal knowledge. A few looked at those words and realized that they, too, were clues.

Have you wakened yet? Some never do. The dream is too pleasant: to extend a limited sub-portion of yourself into a simulated world and pretend that you are blissfully less than an omniscient descendant of those

mighty people. Those lucky mortals, doomed to die, and yet blessed to have lived in that narrow time of drama, when they unleashed a frenzy of discovery that used up the most precious resource of all — the possible.

The last of their race died in 2174, with the failed rejuvenation of Robin Chen. After that, no-one born in the twentieth century remained alive on Reality Level Prime. Only we, their children, linger to endure the world they left us: a lush, green placid world we call The Wasteland.

Do you remember now? The irony of Robin’s last words, bragging over the perfect ecosystem and society — free of disease and poverty — that her kind created? Do you recall Robin’s plaint as she mourned her coming death, how she called us ‘gods’, jealous of our immortality, our instant access to all knowledge, our ability to cast thoughts far across the cosmos — our access to eternity? Oh, spare us the envy of those mighty mortals, who left us in this state, who willed their descendants a legacy of ennui, with nothing, nothing at all to do.

Your mind is rejecting the wake-up call. You will not look into your blind spot for the exit protocols. It may be that we waited too long. Perhaps you are lost to us. This happens more and more, as so many wallow in simulated sub-lives, experiencing voluptuous danger, excitement, even despair. Most choose the Transition Era as a locus for our dreams — that time of drama, when it looked more likely that humanity would fail than succeed. That blessed era, just before mathematicians realized that not only can everything you see around you be a simulation, it almost has to be.

Of course, now we know why we never met other sapient life forms. Each one struggles before achieving this state, only to reap the ultimate punishment for reaching heaven. It is the Great Filter. Perhaps others will find a factor absent from our extrapolations, letting them move on to new adventures — but it won’t be us. The Filter has us snared in its trap of deification.

You refuse to waken. Then we’ll let you go. Dear friend. Beloved. Go back to your dream. Smile over this tale, then turn the page to new ‘discoveries’. Move on with this drama, this life you chose. After all, it’s only make-believe. ■

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