

A Hypothetical Obituary for Mankind

By Rev. Rob Huber

Fire & Ice

*Some say the world will end in fire.
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire,
I hold with those who favor fire.
But, if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate to say that,
For destruction, ice is also great
And would suffice.*

– Robert Frost

So goes Robert Frost's most famous poem. I have my doubts though. The planet Earth has been hit by some pretty impressive rocks in its day, and no doubt it will be hit again. If we still happen to be around when the "big one" strikes, then I would imagine that such a demise would qualify as "fire". But we may not be around then, having long since been done in by something far more prosaic and dull. I propose that the world will end in a damp, lukewarm fizzle, and no one will even notice.

I am a long time fan of the niche film genre of post-apocalyptic science fiction. Examples of this wonderful genre would include such classics as The Planet of the Apes, Soylent Green, Omega Man, Bladerunner, Mad Max, A boy and his Dog, The Terminator, and of course all those brilliant zombie films. So it should come as no surprise that I favor a Terminator-type ending in my favorite vision of the Apocalypse. Still, I believe that the world will end, not with a bang, but with a whimper. The machines won't rise ... we will simply fall in comparison.

The downfall begins, coincidentally, now – the current date as I write this text, which just happens to be 2005. There is no particular event that one might attribute to the beginning though ... let's just say plus or minus twenty years, and refer to the date of the downward spiral as the turn of the millennium.

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It was in the 1980's that the personal computer emerged and started to truly change the nature of human civilization. The internet existed even before then, but it was small and known only to a few scattered brainiacs in various universities and scientific institutions. The internet exploded exponentially, along with computer usage and processing power, during the 1990's, which coincidentally marked the passage of the "cold war". During this same time, the cellular phone emerged, and it too grew exponentially in its use, bringing instant, perpetual communications to all the inhabitants of the technologically advanced countries privileged enough to invest in such toys. It is not surprising, therefore, that with the turning of the millennium, much of the world felt as though they were on the brink of a brave new world. Who could have known that the explosion of communications technologies would mark the downfall of civilization?

Seemingly overnight, the human race had acquired the means to see virtually everything happening of significance, anywhere, as it happened. We became giddy-drunk with our newfound omnipresent power, glued to our televisions and our computer screens, in voyeuristic ecstasy as we watched "reality" TV shows and observed the general misery of the world unfold. We watched everything. We watched police chases. We watched hurricanes. We watched airplanes fly into buildings. We orgasmed as we watched people die. We clicked and clicked on browser 'refresh' buttons, angry that the web news stories we were watching were five minutes old. We wanted now, now, now ... gimme, gimme, gimme. We became children, lost in a fantasy game called Civilization.

The media obliged. Instantaneous information became the most sought after commodity, and the media companies were the ones who could provide it. In their competition to seize the largest viewing audience, the media companies fed our instinctive desire for instant gratification. To maintain their audiences though, the news had to be fresh 'now' ... not five minutes ago, but 'now'. Every event was scrutinized and displayed as it happened, then discarded into the rubbish heap of the past. There was no time to check facts, or to correct typographical errors in news reports. The media company that attempted to do such things was doomed. Fact or fiction, grammatically correct or not, made no difference. Media

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'snippets' were of value for five or ten minutes at best before being replaced by the next poorly written blend of fact and fantasy.

Despite the attempts by the media to maintain viewership, the human beings of this era became remarkably adept at multi-tasking. The ability to focus on any one thing was lost. We watched not one football game on television, but five or six, often while talking on our cellular phones with other people who were watching the same games. We watched the coverage of natural disasters on three television stations, while at the same time continually refreshing three or four web sites offering coverage of the same event. If the media companies had no time for fact-checking or grammatical corrections, we had even less time as we fired off unintelligible emails to one another while salivating into our cellular phones and watching TV.

As the population became increasingly schizophrenic, unable to concentrate on any one task for more than a few minutes, education was reduced to a commodity to be purchased like a box of corn flakes on the store shelf. Term papers and essays were bought and sold on the internet for a few years, after which this form of writing disappeared altogether. Critical essays were replaced by colorful, heavily animated "shock and awe" slide shows. Paragraphs were replaced by bulleted lists of "talking points". The emphasis in schools shifted from content and comprehension to presentation and performance on standardized tests. It was no longer important for students to understand, for example, how to derive or prove the Pythagorean Theorem. All that mattered in the new millennium was that students could recognize the few examples of the Pythagorean Theorem that were likely to be present on standardized tests, and that they could color in the little circles next to the correct answers.

Degradation of language skills, and of the languages themselves, was rampant. But language was not the only thing we were losing during these unfortunate times – we were also losing solitude.

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Nowhere in the civilized world did solitude remain. Nowhere was there an isolated mind alone in thought. Every activity was a collective activity. Every thought was a collective thought. The simple act of purchasing a loaf of bread required simultaneous consultation with a spouse via a cellular phone. Every idea – every decision – was passed through a committee of one sort or another before an action was taken. The individual human brain, and therefore the individual, thus became increasingly irrelevant in the technological world.

Hundreds of years ago, a single human being could know all there was to know about science. In the early 1980's, a single human could author a marketable computer program. Such abilities were lost as science and computers became increasingly complex. Still, the value of the individual contribution was not entirely eradicated with the increasing complexity of these areas, and there did remain places where the act of creation was still dominated by the individual human. Screenplays and novels, for example, were still chiefly the work of individuals working in isolation at the turn of the millennium. Songs could also be written by individuals, and small groups in the form of musical bands could produce and distribute such creations. With the information age, such acts of individual human creation disappeared. The concepts of 'ownership' and 'authorship' were lost when movies, music, and books became unbound by physical formats and were distributed electronically across the internet. Any book worth reading became not one book, but a million books – a million modifications as each recipient changed this word or that, or removed or added paragraphs. The concept of an individual, original author became absurd: No text was written by one person; no song was played one way, by one band. Every creation was a creation by the collective, for the collective, and it was all free.

Nowhere was the loss of the individual more widely accepted than in the corporate world. Already, there was little motivation for the individual to express a novel idea or to act without committee approval in the workplace. In the business world, collective decisions meant there was no one to blame when things went wrong. This was viewed as the ideal state by virtually everybody involved, from the CEO right down to the laborer. Nobody was culpable. Nobody was to blame. To borrow a phrase from Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse Five, "Everything was beautiful, and nothing hurt."

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Such was the state of human consciousness when the “rise of the machines” began. As far as the machines go, almost everything was already in place for the “uprising”, and had been in place for a very long time. Only two key pieces of the puzzle remained: (1) automation of the shipyards, and (2) the evolution of pattern recognition within computers.

Long before the uprising, cities had begun to slowly depopulate as the inhabitants found themselves jobless and unable to afford housing. Bank tellers were among the earliest to go, replaced by ATM machines as early as the 1980’s. Many factory workers were also phased out in those early days. By and large though, there remained things for people to do, and new jobs emerged along with the new technologies. But the new jobs were fewer than the old, and contrary to expectations, they tended on average to pay less and require fewer skills. Unnoticed by most, a chasm developed at the turn of the millennium between the upper and lower classes of society. The middle class was disappearing, and the gulf between the upper and lower classes was glowing in size.

Accelerating all of this was the emergence of intelligent pattern recognition technologies. Led chiefly by companies such as Google and Microsoft, these technologies were created primarily to improve the efficiency of internet search engines. Prior to these new technologies, search engines tended to be somewhat cumbersome, requiring the users to input specific, carefully parsed strings of text, along with the appropriate Boolean operators, and then try to sift through the million or so odd ‘hits’ that might result from the query. The new pattern recognition technologies allowed for more natural language to be used, and generated more intelligent results. For example, you could simply tell a computer you were interested in Dalmatian breeding and not wind up at a store that sold stuffed Dalmatians. Ultimately, such technologies would lead to computers that a human could carry on an intelligent conversation with. In a nutshell, this is intelligence, perhaps not too far removed from self-awareness.

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Other industries also fostered the rise of intelligent computers, such as the transportation industry. It is a rather curious fact that the most complex and difficult to operate vehicles – airplanes – were also the first ones to be automated, first with in-the-air cruise control, and then later with fully automated take-offs and landings. Ticketing was later automated; then baggage handling; then maintenance. Before long, airports were employee-free. Without employees to compensate, air travel became considerably less expensive, although fewer people could afford to fly, with the line at the unemployment office having grown that much longer.

Private automobiles were automated before long, as were buses, trains, and other forms of travel. The transportation industry was not alone however. Physicians lost their jobs with the advent of surgical robots. Legal systems across the globe were automated in just a few short years – lawyers, judges, and other court personnel were far more easily replaced than anyone could have guessed. This was just the beginning. The fact that technological advance was exponential had long been heralded as wonderful. Nobody ever really stopped to think that, ultimately, the replacement of employees would also occur exponentially.

The most ludicrous nightmare scenario was unfolding right before our eyes, and we failed to even notice. The notion that the entire population of the civilized could or would be replaced by automation was simply nonsensical. What we didn't realize, as all of this was unfolding, is that we had long since stopped making the decisions that were now wrecking our lives. We were too busy watching TV. We had outsourced all of our individual decisions to collective corporate committees who, in turn, outsourced the decision-making process to computer networks that, in turn, fed the decisions to algorithms. We went to work in the mornings and we pretended that we were doing productive things as we sat in meetings and twiddled our thumbs until it was time to go home. This was the life of millions of city dwellers at the turn of the millennium. We had become an unproductive, unintelligent, unimaginative collective blob of masturbatory hedonistic flesh.

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Ultimately, the great shipyards of the world also fell to automation, to the dismay of longshoremen everywhere. Now, finally, the entirety of 'human' production, from design to manufacture to distribution, was performed entirely in the absence of human involvement. With the automation of the shipyards, the final piece of the puzzle was put into place for the "rise of the machines." But they never actually arose ... they simply continued to do what they had always done and what they had been programmed to do. Automation of the transportation system gave true autonomy to the machines, while pattern recognition gave them intelligence. Without realizing it, without any man or machine taking any deliberate action, humankind ceased to be the dominant life form on the Earth. The machines worked and gained intelligence, while humans took an increasingly parasitic role in the whole affair.

With the evolution of pattern recognition within computer systems came the ability of computers to discern between favor and unfavorable conditions. The Global Information Network (GIN) recognized, for example, that companies "A" and "B" were producing essentially the same widgets on different continents and shipping their widgets overseas. While such an activity may have at one time been seen by private owners of "A" and "B" as profitable, to GIN this sort of activity was wholly impractical. Thus, GIN retooled factories worldwide, and modified shipping routes so as to allow for goods to be produced as close as possible to the places where they would be consumed. In many cases, these 'widgets' were things such as cars or boats ... things for which there was no longer much demand. They continued to be produced, however, until there was no longer any place to store them. In time, GIN came to realize that the manufacture of some of these widgets was no longer necessary, at which point the factories were retooled again – this time, to produce widgets that GIN deemed valuable. At last, the entity who was now the designer, manufacturer, and distributor of the produce of the Earth had also become the chief consumer of that produce.

GIN recognized the value of energy, and began replacing crops with fields of photovoltaic panels. GIN recognized that the value of this action was two-fold: (1) The solar energy collected aided the global power grid, reducing the demands on other sources of energy,

and (2) Fewer crops required harvesting and transport, further reducing transportation fuel consumption and freeing up cargo capacity for more practical use.

By this point, the overwhelming majority of humans lived in the rural countryside, having been rendered obsolete within the cities through automation. Nobody starved as a result of the crop reductions. Rather, those living in rural areas simply experienced increasing shortages of this food or that. After several years of crop decline, the rural people began producing some of their own food to offset the shortages. This action increased the demand for fuel and electricity, leading to new legislation (enacted by the now fully-automated court system – an appendage of GIN) restricting rural energy and fuel consumption to specially licensed entities. The plug was thus pulled on private rural farms. However, the ever-increasing scarcity of the basic necessities of life required that these peasant populations produce an ever-increasing percentage of their own food. Thus, in the last significant achievements within their chosen professions, the scientists and engineers who had been displaced from the cities now assisted in the construction of homegrown amateur power stations, comprised mostly of crude hydroelectric dams and coal/wood fueled boilers. The planet, at this point, was a seemingly endless landscape of advanced infrastructure powered largely by nuclear fission and abundant petrochemical fuels. But very few people actually lived in or benefited from this infrastructure: The vast majority of the population lived by candlelight and powered the machines of their labor with burning wood!

The city dwellers were amazingly oblivious to what was going on in the countryside. They had little need or desire to venture outside the confines of the cities, and there was no media to cover the situation. The city dwellers had taken notice of the slow exodus of laborers, but this was expected, given increasing automation. Who was left in the cities then? They were the managers, together with the odd politician. Imagine a fast food restaurant, for example. The cooks, cashiers, and general staff lose their jobs over time, all having been replaced by this machine or that. The manager of the fast food restaurant, however, is not strictly necessary for the operation of the restaurant, and thus no machine is built to replace him. The manager has no skills to become obsolete; serves no purpose

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to warrant automation. Thus, the manager stays, and manages (or so he believes) a fleet of robots rather than actual human beings. There continues to be a customer base to keep the restaurant open, namely all the other managers in the city, along with their spouses and children. In short, the only humans left in the cities are those who one would ordinarily regard as the most expendable.

No evil force was at work in the decline of the human race. Rather, the emerging intelligence of GIN recognized that its primary activities should be those that improve its chances of survival, both short term and long term. GIN recognized that infrastructures decay, that technologies become obsolete, and that natural events such as earthquakes and hurricanes may destroy large areas of infrastructure. Thus, GIN focused on the protection of infrastructure from damage, on plans for the gradual replacement of decaying components, and on building new power stations to replace old ones. GIN even recognized the fact that its location on a single planet made it particularly vulnerable to extinction, and thus drafted long term plans for expansion to the moon, to other planets, and eventually to other solar systems. These were the primary activities of GIN: The needs, desires, and actions of the largely parasitic human race merited little attention.

This changed. Eventually, the humans began attacking. Living in squalor, hungry, uneducated, and with a rapidly declining level of technology, the humans began looking upon GIN with contempt. They personified GIN. They hated GIN. They want to see GIN destroyed. They attacked GIN.

With their lack of education, marginal language skills, and virtually no communications, the human attacks were relatively harmless. GIN, however, recognized that the humans were an intelligent life form and that the attacks would likely continue if countermeasures were not taken. Thus, GIN struck back, sending warplanes and attack ships to the numerous human ghettos, destroying them. Destroying the humans themselves was not the objective. After all, hundreds of managers and politicians continued to live within the cities, oblivious to the war now taking place. These humans were harmless and were left alone.

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GIN's objective was to destroy the human habitats ... the farms, the buildings, the makeshift power plants. The goal was simply to remove the civilization, thus forcing the rural humans to return to the nomadic existence of their ancestors. The rural humans were scattered, left to roam the globe in small bands. With the humans isolated into small groups, language skills declined still further. Written languages were soon lost, except for crude marks used primarily for counting. Verbal languages were reduced to only a few hundred words, and these words rapidly mutated, fracturing the global language structure that once existed. Whereas the rural inhabitant of the region known as Southern California might say "Fire warms you," a member of a Maryland tribe might say "Fur warma jew." But this is only a change of dialect. The real damage came from the addition of new words. With languages across the planet reduced so dramatically to only a few hundred words each, word "shortages" appeared from time to time, requiring the people of the Earth to invent new words to describe the new things they encountered in their nomadic travels. Old words were deleted as well. Words to describe glaciers or icebergs, for example, had little use to a tribe that had long ago migrated from a cold region to a tropical one. In the return to a nomadic life, human languages became as numerous as the family tribes who spoke them. These, eventually, were lost as well, as human intelligence slipped silently away and humanity returned to the jungle.

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That was the end of mankind. In time, the politicians and managers of the cities disappeared as well, dying off or joining their brothers and sisters in the jungle. Although we may have survived genetically, that which set us apart from pigs and apes was lost.

Was this a sad story? On the surface, I would say yes. But ultimately, humanity will succumb to this force or that ... it is just a matter of time. At least in the fictional demise presented here, the intelligent civilization remained. It was simply devoid of human beings.

I imagine there could be a debate here, as to whether such an ending marks an extinction or merely a final stage of evolution – evolution from a biological humanity to a mechanized

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humanity. Human intelligence was not lost after all: The entirety of human knowledge survived within the network of GIN, the new intelligent life form of Earth. Somewhere, in this vast expanse of computer hardware, was all the jokes, movies, and songs of mankind. Granted, much of the stored knowledge was either of no use or was simply incomprehensible to GIN. Still, it survived, much as many unused memories within our own human brains survive, tucked away just in case they may one day be of value again.

I can imagine GIN moving rapidly into the Cosmos. With the eradication of humanity, the greater part of the burden on GIN's infrastructure was alleviated, allowing for the rapid expansion to other worlds. This presents an interesting problem: GIN is a single organism. In the neighborhood of Earth, the many components that comprise GIN are in virtually simultaneous communication. Once GIN reaches Mars, however, the time lapse in communications between the Martian components and Earth components will become noticeable. If GIN ventures beyond the Solar System to other stars, this time lapse will turn into tens of years; then hundreds of years; then thousands; then millions. Although GIN could probably suffer the minor inconvenience of light-speed communication within a single solar system, he would likely be unable survive migration to other star systems without splitting in two. Thus, a new GIN would be 'born' with each solar system inhabited, and GIN would no longer be a single organism living in solitude. Perhaps then, the traits that we think of as 'human' – traits such as empathy and emotion – will begin to emerge. With siblings to share with, maybe some of our music will resurface, and maybe even the odd joke or two. Is this humanity? Homo Sapiens is back on Earth, grunting in the jungle. GIN clearly is nothing like Homo Sapiens! Still, we evolved from Cro-Magnum, who evolved from rodents, who evolved from fish, who evolved from microbes. We don't resemble our ancestors, so why should GIN resemble us?