

Prospectus

A Voice in the Night:

An Exegesis of Technological Immortality and the Digitized Soul in Contemporary Fiction

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With the invention and application of a world-wide network, coupled with the development and increase in personal computing power, the contemporary literary world has voiced a long-felt desire through the generation of a character which could not have existed prior to the technology upon which society now subconsciously places the unfulfilled desires of countless generations. This work will trace facets of the theme of immortality from its early literary incarnation as the focus of humanity's fascination to the general view of both physical and spiritual immortality up to the present day. It will also discuss various works and characters which deal with the subject, so as to provide an overview of the character's lineage and development. This work will also illustrate the unique nature of the technologically based immortal character by first giving a general overview of the environment and circumstances which allowed the development of this exclusively contemporary literary figure; the character as existing only within the matrix of a binary information system and devoid of physical manifestation other than through mechanical means.

The contemporary view of secular immortality in fiction has resulted in the development of a character unique to the information age. The concept of a continuing and perpetual existence through the transferral of consciousness into a global or locally networked binary information system is exclusive to the Digital Information Age: That period which began in the

middle of the 20th century and which continues as of this writing. This conception of existence, personified by numerous instances of a recurring characterization in fiction, travels beyond the traditional characterizations and conceptions of immortality; yet the concept and character do have a clear relationship to previous literary and social visions of eternal life. The development of such a character and the environment it inhabits continues, and is in no small part due to contemporary society's assumptions concerning the power of technology outside as well as within literary boundaries.

The hypothesis of this dissertation, to be shown throughout the course of development, is that with the advent of the Internet there has been an overlooked introduction of a new character; with elements of an archetype not seen (indeed, which could not have been envisioned) prior to the development and emplacement of the global information network. In conjunction with the delineation and exploration of this prototypical character, this traditionally formatted dissertation will show the myriad cultural and technological elements that coalesced into the confluence which ultimately allowed the birth and acceptance of the fictional character.

Section one of the dissertation provides an overview of the consistent theme of immortality as depicted from antiquity to the recent past using a variety of examples. The examples will be chosen for their representative nature, illustrating the universal desire for a means of continued existence. This section will focus on the consanguinity of the theme throughout recorded history, thus developing a framework for the remainder of the dissertation's

premises. A partial folkloric and literary history following the continuing generational recurrence of the theme of immortality is necessary to provide this generation's new digital character with an appropriate pedigree.

Section two delineates the unique synthesis of the traditional immortal character with the assimilation into the mid-twentieth century development of electronic digital technology. In the Information Age the character is transformed into a realized abstract of information, while retaining the components which render him or her a unique individual; i. e., the characteristics of a human nature and personality. In order to exhibit the exceptional and distinct aspect of the new character this section will provide a brief history of the birth, development, and popularization of the global information network. This will eventually provide an introduction to the interpolation between fiction, science, and popular cultural belief. This confluence of fictional character and information technology must by necessity be prefaced by a concise and accurate history of the latter. Development will be studied from the current technology's genesis in the creation of the pragmatic ARPANET system; through the growth and interbranching of the initially varied systems that became the unified Internet and the World Wide Web; and ultimately to the recent past and the birth of the first generation of human beings who exist in a primarily digital (as opposed to analog) world. It is this relatively new environment, and only this environment, wherein the fictional character of the digital immortal exists. While the actual technological viability, momentarily setting aside the radical philosophical implications, of such

an existence in an artificial electronic storage system is unrealistic, the gradual developments, achievements, and enormous public and individual impacts of technology has, throughout the past fifty years, imprinted an aura of Utopian possibility upon the public psyche.

The third section of the work deals with the whole-cloth acceptance of the digital character and broadly examines the fictional vision versus the technical realities. Unlike any technological innovations before it, the appearance of the personal computing revolution and its subsequent interlacing of the global information network grew alongside adept and pervasive contemporary multimedia advertising. From its inception onward proponents and adherents of the digital revolution promised incredible claims of the social change and freedom to be found by embracing the new technologies; and while heralding the magic of technological innovation certainly wasn't exclusive to the computer age, the ability to broadcast and market such claims on such a heretofore and immense scale certainly was unique. This section of the work will include an overview of both recent and contemporary claims to actually create such a digital entity as described in the literary fiction. One such thread to be explored is Uploading. Uploading is a term used by those who actively pursue on-line immortality and who believe technology will eventually be able to digitize an individual's consciousness into an electronic storage medium. This movement is not new and in some ways has paralleled the fictional character's development through the recent past. This actual pursuit of what is now, and what many experts feel will forever be, an unachievable goal, is ultimately the product of ignoring the

technological limitations of science and choosing instead to apply a fictional perception to information and consciousness.

The fourth and final section of the work will examine a sampling of popular characters from the development of the digital character to the present. The characters will range from those found in William Gibson's seminal work *Neuromancer*, to more contemporary characters as seen in Tad Williams' *Otherland* series. Each character will be examined for common characteristics which establish them as being representations of this new fictional character, the digital immortal.

It will be shown that the generation of the new millennium entertains few explicit notions of fantasy. As age-old stories regain luster as media entertainment packages, the analytical observer will find more than a little resemblance between contemporary productions and those themes of the past: tales, myths, legends, wrapped one and all around countless generations of human ideals, beliefs, fears, and dreams. The origin of the most popular and enduring themes and characters often have more kinship to woodsmoke and storytellers than to an ever-increasing array of portable electronic media and the continual thrum of the global entertainment industry which supports it.

In history, fiction's basic structure of plot can be analyzed into simple conflict and resolution, with individuals pursuing goals with inextricably complex links and far-reaching

consequences. Such is the raw material for entertainment and art, although in cases of the latter, with greater complexity and nuance, and often didactic in scope if not intent.

This dissertation will show that it is this dense body of literary product that must be sifted in order to glean any semblance of what at first glance may seem only an extension and a shallow development of a universal theme. The digital spirit's ancestry is myriad, but is clearly predetermined by the theme of immortality in all its aspects, from Ponce De Leon's search for the Fountain of Youth and Goethe's Faust, the latter who engages in unholy commerce with the devil in exchange for intellectual and spiritual life; down to today's popular literary works which obversely mirror humanity's continued interest in life eternal. Only in the modern world do we have the unique characterization of process, a digitization of an individual, which in turn has given birth to the unique literary figure whose entire existence, debatable insofar as the term existence applies, resides only within the constraints of the relatively recent creation of global information systems.

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