

Optional reading

From "Axiomatic" by Greg Egan.

For a more technical treatment of this topic, with similar (but not identical) conclusions, see pp. 105-108 of "Time's Arrow & Archimedes' Point" by Huw Price, Clarendon Press, Oxford: OUP, 1996. Jason

Greg Egan

THE HUNDRED-LIGHT-YEAR DIARY

Martin Place was packed with the usual frantic lunch-time crowds. I scanned the faces nervously; the moment had almost arrived, and I still hadn't even caught sight of Alison. *One twenty-seven and fourteen seconds.* Would I be mistaken about something so important? With the knowledge of the mistake still fresh in my mind? But that knowledge could make no difference. Of course it would affect my state of mind, of course it would influence my actions – but I already knew exactly what the net result of that, and every other, influence would be: I'd write what I'd read.

I needn't have worried. I looked down at my watch, and as 1:27:13 became 1:27:14, someone tapped me on the shoulder. I turned; it was Alison, of course. I'd never seen her before, in the flesh, but I'd soon devote a month's bandwidth allocation to sending back a Barnsley-compressed snapshot. I hesitated, then spoke my lines, awful as they were:

Fancy meeting you here.

She smiled, and suddenly I was overwhelmed, giddy with happiness – exactly as I'd read in my diary a thousand times, since I'd first come across the day's entry at the age of nine, exactly as I would, necessarily, describe it at the terminal that night. But – foreknowledge aside – how could I have felt anything but

euphoria? I'd finally met the woman I'd spend my life with. We had fifty-eight years together ahead of us, and we'd love each other to the end.

'So, where are we going for lunch?'

I frowned slightly, wondering if she was joking – and wondering why I'd left myself in any doubt. I said, hesitantly, 'Fulvio's. Didn't you . . . ?' But of course she had no idea of the petty details of the meal; on 14 December, 2074, I'd write admiringly: *A. concentrates on the things that matter; she never lets herself be distracted by trivia.*

I said, 'Well, the food won't be ready on time; they'll have screwed up their schedule, but—'

She put a finger to her lips, then leant forward and kissed me. For a moment, I was too shocked to do anything but stand there like a statue, but after a second or two, I started kissing back.

When we parted, I said stupidly, 'I didn't know . . . I thought we just . . . I—'

'James, you're blushing.'

She was right. I laughed, embarrassed. It was absurd: in a week's time, we'd make love, and I already knew every detail – yet that single unexpected kiss left me flustered and confused.

She said, 'Come on. Maybe the food won't be ready, but we have a lot to talk about while we're waiting. I just hope you haven't read it all in advance, or you're going to have a very boring time.'

She took my hand and started leading the way. I followed, still shaken. Halfway to the restaurant, I finally managed to say, 'Back then – did you know that would happen?'

She laughed. 'No. But I don't tell myself everything. I like to be surprised now and then. Don't you?'

Her casual attitude stung me. *Never lets herself be distracted by trivia.* I struggled for words; this whole conversation was unknown to me, and I never was

much good at improvising anything but small talk.

I said, 'Today is important to me. I always thought I'd write the most careful – the most *complete* – account of it possible. I mean, I'm going to record the time we met, to the second. I can't imagine sitting down tonight and *not even mentioning* the first time we kissed.'

She squeezed my hand, then moved close to me and whispered, mock-conspiratorially: 'But you will. You know you will. And so will I. You know exactly what you're going to write, and exactly what you're going to leave out – and the fact is, that kiss is going to remain our little secret.'

Francis Chen wasn't the first astronomer to hunt for time-reversed galaxies, but he was the first to do so from space. He swept the sky with a small instrument in a junk-scattered near-Earth orbit, long after all serious work had shifted to the (relatively) unpolluted vacuum on the far side of the moon. For decades, certain – highly speculative – cosmological theories had suggested that it might be possible to catch glimpses of the universe's future phase of re-contraction, during which – perhaps – all the arrows of time would be reversed.

Chen charged up a light detector to saturation, and searched for a region of the sky which would *unexpose* it – discharging the pixels in the form of a recognisable image. The photons from ordinary galaxies, collected by ordinary telescopes, left their mark as patterns of charge on arrays of electro-optical polymer; a time-reversed galaxy would require instead that the detector lose charge, emitting photons which would leave the telescope on a long journey into the future universe, to be absorbed by stars tens of billions of years hence, contributing an infinitesimal nudge to drive their nuclear processes from extinction back towards birth.

Chen's announcement of success was met with

virtually unanimous scepticism – and rightly so, since he refused to divulge the coordinates of his discovery. I've seen the recording of his one and only press conference.

'What would happen if you pointed an *uncharged* detector at this thing?' asked one puzzled journalist.

'You can't.'

'What do you mean, you *can't*?'

'Suppose you point a detector at an ordinary light source. Unless the detector's not working, it *will* end up charged. It's no use declaring: *I am going to expose this detector to light, and it will end up uncharged*. That's ludicrous; it simply won't happen.'

'Yes, but –'

'Now time-reverse the whole situation. If you're going to point a detector at a time-reversed light source, it *will* be charged beforehand.'

'But if you discharge the whole thing thoroughly, before exposing it, and then . . .'

'I'm sorry. You won't. *You can't*.'

Shortly afterwards, Chen retired into self-imposed obscurity – but his work had been government funded, and he'd complied with the rigorous auditing requirements, so copies of all his notes existed in various archives. It was almost five years before anyone bothered to exhumate them – new theoretical work having made his claims more fashionable – but once the coordinates were finally made public, it took only days for a dozen groups to confirm the original results.

Most of the astronomers involved dropped the matter there and then – but three people pressed on, to the logical conclusion:

Suppose an asteroid, a few hundred billion kilometres away, happened to block the line of sight between Earth and Chen's galaxy. In the galaxy's time frame, there'd be a delay of half an hour or so before this occultation could be seen in near-Earth orbit – before

the last photons to make it past the asteroid arrived. Our time frame runs the other way, though; for us, the 'delay' would be *negative*. We might think of the detector, not the galaxy, as the source of the photons – but it would still have to stop emitting them half an hour *before* the asteroid crossed the line of sight, in order to emit them only when they'd have a clear path all the way to their destination. Cause and effect; the detector has to have a reason to lose charge and emit photons – even if that reason lies in the future.

Replace the uncontrollable – and unlikely – asteroid with a simple electronic shutter. Fold up the line of sight with mirrors, shrinking the experiment down to more manageable dimensions – and allowing you to place the shutter and detector virtually side by side. Flash a torch at yourself in a mirror, and you get a signal from the past; do the same with the light from Chen's galaxy, and the signal comes from the future.

Hazzard, Capaldi and Wu arranged a pair of space-borne mirrors, a few thousand kilometres apart. With multiple reflections, they achieved an optical path length of over two light seconds. At one end of this 'delay' they placed a telescope, aimed at Chen's galaxy; at the other end they placed a detector. ('The other end' optically speaking – physically, it was housed in the very same satellite as the telescope.) In their first experiments, the telescope was fitted with a shutter triggered by the 'unpredictable' decay of a small sample of a radioactive isotope.

The sequence of the shutter's opening and closing and the detector's rate of discharge were logged by a computer. The two sets of data were compared – and the patterns, unsurprisingly, matched. Except, of course, that the detector began discharging two seconds before the shutter opened, and ceased discharging two seconds before it closed.

So, they replaced the isotope trigger with a manual

control, and took turns trying to change the immutable future.

Hazard said, in an interview several months later: 'At first, it seemed like some kind of perverse reaction-time test: instead of having to hit the green button when the green light came on, you had to try to hit the red button, and vice versa. And at first, I really believed I was "obeying" the signal only because I couldn't discipline my reflexes to do anything so "difficult" as contradicting it. In retrospect, I know that was a rationalisation, but I was quite convinced at the time. So I had the computer swap the conventions – and of course, that didn't help. Whenever the display said I was going to open the shutter – however it expressed that fact – I opened it.'

'And how did that make you feel? *Soulless? Robotic? A prisoner to fate?*'

'No. At first, just . . . clumsy. Uncoordinated. So clumsy I couldn't hit the wrong button, no matter how hard I tried. And then, after a while, the whole thing began to seem perfectly . . . normal. I wasn't being "forced" to open the shutter; I was opening it precisely when I felt like opening it, and observing the consequences – observing them before the event, yes, but that hardly seemed important any more. Wanting to "not open" it when I already knew that I would seem as absurd as wanting to change something in the past that I already knew had happened. Does not being able to rewrite history make you feel "soulless"?'

'No.'

'This was exactly the same.'

Extending the device's range was easy; by having the detector itself trigger the shutter in a feedback loop, two seconds could become four seconds, four hours, or four days. Or four centuries – in theory. The real problem was bandwidth; simply blocking off the view of Chen's galaxy, or not, coded only a single bit of

information, and the shutter couldn't be strobed at too high a rate, since the detector took almost half a second to lose enough charge to unequivocally signal a future exposure.

Bandwidth is still a problem, although the current generation of Hazard Machines have path lengths of a hundred light years, and detectors made up of millions of pixels, each one sensitive enough to be modulated at megabaud rates. Governments and large corporations use most of this vast capacity, for purposes that remain obscure – and still they're desperate for more.

As a birthright, though, everyone on the planet is granted one hundred and twenty-eight bytes a day. With the most efficient data-compression schemes, this can code about a hundred words of text; not enough to describe the future in microscopic detail, but enough for a summary of the day's events.

A hundred words a day; three million words in a lifetime. The last entry in my own diary was received in 2032, eighteen years before my birth, one hundred years before my death. The history of the next millennium is taught in schools: the end of famine and disease, the end of nationalism and genocide, the end of poverty, bigotry and superstition. There are glorious times ahead.

If our descendants are telling the truth.

The wedding was, mostly, just as I'd known it would be. The best man, Pria, had his arm in a sling from a mugging in the early hours of the morning – we'd laughed over that when we'd first met, in high school, a decade before.

'But what if I stay out of that alley?' he'd joked.

'Then I'll have to break it for you, won't I? You're not shunting my wedding day!'

Shunting was a fantasy for children, the subject of juvenile schlock-ROMs. *Shunting* was what happened

when you grimaced and sweated and gritted your teeth and *absolutely refused* to participate in something unpleasant that you knew was going to happen. In the ROMs, the offending future was magicked away into a parallel universe, by sheer mental discipline and the force of plot convenience. Drinking the right brand of cola also seemed to help.

In real life, with the advent of the Hazzard Machines, the rates of death and injury through crime, natural disaster, industrial and transport accidents, and many kinds of disease, had certainly plummeted – but such events weren't forecast and then paradoxically 'avoided'; they simply, consistently, became increasingly rare in reports from the future – reports which proved to be as reliable as those from the past.

A residue of 'seemingly avoidable' tragedies remains, though, and the people who know that they're going to be involved react in different ways: some swallow their fate cheerfully; some seek comfort (or anaesthesia) in somnambulist religions; a few succumb to the wish-fulfilment fantasies of the ROMs, and go kicking and screaming all the way.

When I met up with Pria, on schedule, in the Casualty Department of St Vincent's, he was a bloody, shivering mess. His arm was broken, as expected. He'd also been sodomised with a bottle and slashed on the arms and chest. I stood beside him in a daze, choking on the sour taste of all the stupid jokes I'd made, unable to shake the feeling that I was to blame. *I'd lie to him, lie to myself—*

As they pumped him full of painkillers and tranquilisers, he said, 'Fuck it, James, I'm not letting on. I'm not going to say how bad it was; I'm not frightening that kid to death. And *you'd* better not, either.' I nodded earnestly and swore that I wouldn't; redundantly, of course, but the poor man was delicious.

And when it was time to write up the day's events, I

dutifully regurgitated the light-hearted treatment of my friend's assault that I'd memorised long before I even knew him.

Dutifully? Or simply because the cycle was closed, because I had no choice but to write what I'd already read? Or . . . both? Ascribing motives is a strange business, but I'm sure it always has been. Knowing the future doesn't mean we've been subtracted out of the equations that shape it. Some philosophers still ramble on about 'the loss of free will' (I suppose they can't help themselves), but I've never been able to find a meaningful definition of what they think this magical thing ever was. The future has always been determined. What else could affect human actions, other than each individual's – unique and complex – inheritance and past experience? – unique and complex – inheritance and past experience? *Who we are* decides *what we do* – and what greater 'freedom' could anyone demand? If 'choice' wasn't grounded absolutely in cause and effect, what would decide its outcome? Meaningless random glitches from quantum noise in the brain? (A popular theory – before quantum indeterminism was shown to be nothing but an artefact of the old time-asymmetric world-view.) Or some mystical invention called *the soul* . . . but then what, precisely, would govern its behaviour? Laws of metaphysics every bit as problematical as those of neurophysiology.

I believe we've lost nothing; rather, we've gained the only freedom we ever lacked: *who we are* is now shaped by the future, as well as the past. Our lives resonate like plucked strings, standing waves formed by the collision of information flowing back and forth in time.

Information – and disinformation.

Alison looked over my shoulder at what I'd typed.

'You've got to be kidding,' she said.

I replied by hitting the **check** key – a totally unnecessary facility, but that's never stopped anyone using it. The text I'd just typed matched the received

version precisely. (People have talked about automating the whole process – transmitting what *must* be transmitted, without any human intervention whatsoever – but nobody's ever done it, so perhaps it's impossible.)

I hit SAVE, burning the day's entry on to the chip that would be transmitted shortly after my death, then said – numbly, idiotically (and inevitably) – 'What if I'd warned him?'

She shook her head. 'Then you'd have warned him. It still would have happened.'

'Maybe not. Why couldn't life turn out better than the diary, not worse? Why couldn't it turn out that we'd made the whole thing up – that he hadn't been attacked at all?'

'Because it didn't.'

I sat at the desk for a moment longer, staring at the words that I couldn't take back, *that I never could have taken back*. But my lies were the lies I'd promised to tell; I'd done the right thing, hadn't I? I'd known for years exactly what I'd 'choose' to write – but that didn't change the fact that the words had been determined, not by 'fate', not by 'destiny', but by *who I was*.

I switched off the terminal, stood up and began undressing. Alison headed for the bathroom. I called out after her, 'Do we have sex tonight, or not? I never say.'

She laughed. 'Don't ask me, James. You're the one who insisted on keeping track of these things.'

I sat down on the bed, disconcerted. It was our wedding night, after all; surely I could read between the lines.

But I never was much good at improvising.

The Australian federal election of 2077 was the closest for fifty years, and would remain so for almost another century. A dozen independents – including three mem-

bers of a new ignorance cult, called God Averts His Gaze – held the balance of power, but deals to ensure stable government had been stitched together well in advance, and would survive the four-year term.

Consistently, I suppose, the campaign was also among the most heated in recent memory, or short-term anticipation. The soon-to-be Opposition Leader never tired of listing the promises the new Prime Minister would break; she in turn countered with statistics of the mess he'd create as Treasurer, in the mid-eighties. (The causes of that impending recession were still being debated by economists; most claimed it was an 'essential precursor' of the prosperity of the nineties, and that The Market, in its infinite, time-spanning wisdom, would choose/had chosen the best of all possible futures. Personally, I suspect it simply proved that even foresight was no cure for incompetence.)

I often wondered how the politicians felt, mouthing the words they'd known they'd utter ever since their parents first showed them the future-history ROMs, and explained what lay ahead. No ordinary person could afford the bandwidth to send back moving pictures; only the newsworthy were forced to confront such detailed records of their lives; with no room for ambiguity or euphemism. The caméras, of course, *could* lie – digital video fraud was the easiest thing in the world – but mostly they didn't. I wasn't surprised that people made (seemingly) impassioned election speeches which they knew would get them nowhere; I'd read enough past history to realise that that had always been the case. But I'd like to have discovered what went on in their heads as they lip-synched their way through interviews and debates, parliamentary question time and party conferences, all captured in high-resolution holographic perfection for eternity. With every syllable, every gesture, known in advance, did they feel like

they'd been reduced to twitching puppets? (If so, maybe that, too, had always been the case.) Or was the smooth flow of rationalisation as efficient as ever? After all, when I filled in my diary each night, I was just as tightly constrained, but I could – almost always – find a good reason to write what I knew I'd write.

Lisa was on the staff of a local candidate who was due to be voted into office. I met her a fortnight before the election, at a fund-raising dinner. To date, I'd had nothing to do with the candidate, but at the turn of the century – by which time, the man's party would be back in office yet again, with a substantial majority – I'd head an engineering firm which would gain several large contracts from state governments of the same political favour. I'd be coy in my own description of the antecedents of this good fortune – but my bank statement included transactions six months in advance, and I duly made the generous donation that the records implied. In fact, I'd been a little shocked when I'd first seen the print-out, but I'd had time to accustom myself to the idea, and the *de facto* bribe no longer seemed so grossly out of character.

The evening was dull beyond redemption (I'd later describe it as 'tolerable'), but as the guests dispersed into the night, Lisa appeared beside me and said matter-of-factly, 'I believe you and I are going to share a taxi.'

I sat beside her in silence, while the robot vehicle carried us smoothly towards her apartment. Alison was spending the weekend with an old schoolfriend, whose mother would die that night. I *knew* I wouldn't be unfaithful. I loved my wife, I always would. *Or at least, I'd always claim to.* But if that wasn't proof enough, I couldn't believe I'd keep such a secret from myself for the rest of my life.

When the taxi stopped, I said, 'What now? You ask me in for coffee? And I politely decline?'

She said, 'I have no idea. The whole weekend's a

mystery to me.'

The elevator was broken; a sticker from Building Maintenance read: OUT OF ORDER UNTIL 11:06 a.m., 3/2/78. I followed Lisa up twelve flights of stairs, inventing excuses all the way: *I was proving my freedom, my spontaneity – proving that my life was more than a fossilised pattern of events in time.* But the truth was, I'd never felt trapped by my knowledge of the future, never felt any need to delude myself that I had the power to live any life but one. The whole idea of an unknown liaison filled me with panic and vertigo. The bland white lies that I'd already written were unsettling enough – but if *anything at all* could happen in the spaces between the words, then I no longer knew who I was, or who I might become. My whole life would dissolve into quicksand.

I was shaking as we undressed each other.

'Why are we doing this?'

'Because we can.'

'Do you know me? Will you write about me? About us?'

She shook her head. 'No.'

'But . . . how long will this last? I *have to know*. One night? A month? A year? How will it end? I was losing my mind: how could I start something like this, *when I didn't even know how it would end?*'

She laughed. 'Don't ask me. Look it up in your own diary, if it's so important to you.'

I couldn't leave it alone, I couldn't shut up. 'You must have written something. You knew we'd share that taxi.'

'No. I just said that.'

'You –' I stared at her.

'It came true, though, didn't it? How about that? She sighed, slid her hands down my spine, pulled me on to the bed. Down into the quicksand.

'Will we –'

She clamped her hand over my mouth.

'No more questions. I don't keep a diary. I don't know anything at all.'

Lying to Alison was easy; I was almost certain that I'd get away with it. Lying to myself was easier still. Filling out my diary became a formality, a meaningless ritual; I scarcely glanced at the words I wrote. When I did pay attention, I could barely keep a straight face: amidst the merely lazy and deceitful elision and euphemism were passages of deliberate irony which had been invisible to me for years, but which I could finally appreciate for what they were. Some of my paeans to marital bliss seemed 'dangerously' heavy-handed; I could scarcely believe that I'd never picked up the subtext before. *But I hadn't*. There was no 'risk' of tipping myself off – I was 'free' to be every bit as sarcastic as I 'chose' to be.

No more, no less.

The ignorance cults say that knowing the future robs us of our souls; by losing the power to choose between right and wrong, we cease to be human. To them, ordinary people are literally the walking dead: meat puppets, zombies. The somnambulists believe much the same thing, but – rather than seeing this as a tragedy of apocalyptic dimensions – embrace the idea with dreamy enthusiasm. They see a merciful end to responsibility, guilt and anxiety, striving and failing; a descent into inanimacy, the leaching of our souls into a great cosmic spiritual blanchmange, while our bodies hang around, going through the motions.

For me, though, knowing the future – or believing that I did – never made me feel like a sleepwalker, a zombie in a senseless, amoral trance. It made me feel I was in control of my life. *One person* held sway across the decades, tying the disparate threads together, making sense of it all. How could that unity make me less than human? Everything I did grew out of who I

was: who I had been, and who I would be.

I only started feeling like a soulless automaton when I tore it all apart with lies.

After school, few people pay much attention to history, past or future – let alone that grey zone between the two which used to be known as 'current affairs'. Journalists continue to collect information and scatter it across time, but there's no doubt that they now do a very different job than they did in pre-Hazard days, when the live broadcast, the latest dispatch, had a real, if fleeting, significance. The profession hasn't died out completely; it's as if a kind of equilibrium has been reached between apathy and curiosity, and if we had any less news flowing from the future, there 'would be' a greater effort made to gather it and send it back. How valid such arguments can be – with their implications of dynamism, of hypothetical alternative worlds cancelled out by their own inconsistencies – I don't know, but the balance is undeniable. We learn precisely enough to keep us from wanting to know any more.

On 8 July, 2079, when Chinese troops moved into Kashmir to 'stabilise the region' – by wiping out the supply lines to the separatists within their own borders – I hardly gave it a second thought. I knew the UN would sort out the whole mess with remarkable dexterity; historians had praised the Secretary-General's diplomatic resolution of the crisis for decades, and, in a rare move for the conservative Academy, she'd been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize three years in advance of the efforts which would earn it. My memory of the details was sketchy, so I called up *The Global Yearbook*. The troops would be out by 3 August; casualties would be few. Duty comforted, I got on with my life.

I heard the first rumours from Pria, who'd taken to sampling the countless underground communications

ners. Gossip and slander for computer freaks: a harmless enough pastime, but I'd always been amused by the participants' conceit that they were 'plugged in' to the global village, that they had their fingers on the pulse of the planet. Who needed to be wired to *the moment*, when the past and the future could be examined at leisure? Who needed the latest unsubstantiated static, when a sober, considered version of events which had stood the test of time could be had just as soon – or sooner?

So when Pria told me solemnly that a full-scale war had broken out in Kashmir, and that people were being slaughtered in the thousands, I said, 'Sure. And Maura got the Nobel Prize for genocide.'

He shrugged. 'You ever heard of a man called Henry Kissinger?'

I had to admit that I hadn't.

I mentioned the story to Lisa, disparagingly, confident that she'd laugh along with me. She rolled over to face me and said, 'He's right.'

I didn't know whether to take the bait; she had a strange sense of humour, she might have been teasing. Finally, I said, 'He can't be. I've checked. All the histories agree—'

She looked genuinely surprised before her expression turned to pity; she'd never thought much of me, but I don't think she'd ever believed I was quite so naïve.

'The victors have always written the "history", James. Why should the future be any different? Believe me. It's happening.'

'How do you know?' It was a stupid question; her boss was on all the foreign affairs committees, and would be Minister next time the party was in power. If he didn't have access to the intelligence in his present job, he would in the long term.

She said, 'We're helping to fund it, of course. Along with Europe, Japan, and the States. Thanks to the

embargo after the Hong Kong riots, the Chinese have no war drones; they're pitting human soldiers with obsolete equipment against the best Vietnamese robots. Four hundred thousand troops and a hundred thousand civilians will die – while the Allies sit in Berlin playing their solipsist video games.'

I stared past her, into the darkness, numb and disbelieving. 'Why? Why couldn't things have been worked out, defused in time?'

She scowled. 'How? You mean, *shunted*? Known about, then avoided?'

'No, but . . . if everyone knew the truth, if this hadn't been covered up—'

'What? If people had known it would happen, it *wouldn't have*? Grow up. It *is* happening, it will go on happening, there's nothing else to say.'

I climbed out of bed and started dressing, although I had no reason to hurry home. Alison knew all about us; apparently, she'd known since childhood that her husband would turn out to be a piece of shit.

Half a million people slaughtered. It wasn't fate, it wasn't destiny – there was no Will of God, no Force of History to absolve us. It grew out of *who we were*: the lies we'd told, and would keep on telling. Half a million people slaughtered in the spaces between the words.

I vomited on the carpet, then stumbled about dizzily, cleaning it up. Lisa watched me sadly.

'You're not coming back, are you?'

I laughed weakly. 'How the fuck should I know?'

'You're not.'

'I thought you didn't keep a diary.'

'I don't.'

And I finally understood why.

Alison woke when I switched on the terminal, and said sleepily, without rancour, 'What's the hurry, James? If you've masturbated about tonight since you were

twelve years old, surely you'll still remember it all in the morning.'

I ignored her. After a while, she got out of bed and came and looked over my shoulder.

'Is this true?'

I nodded.

'And you knew all along? You're going to send this?' I shrugged and hit the CHECK key. A message box popped up on the screen: 95 WORDS; 95 ERRORS.

I sat and stared at this verdict for a long time. What did I think? I had the power to change history? My puny outrage could *shunt* the war? Reality would dissolve around me, and another – better – world would take its place?

No. History, past and future, was determined, and I couldn't help being part of the equations that shaped it – but I didn't have to be part of the lies.

I hit the SAVE key, and burned those 95 words on to the chip, irreversibly.

(I'm sure I had no choice.)

That was my last diary entry – and I can only assume that the same computers that will filter it out of my posthumous transmission will also fill in the unwritten remainder, extrapolating an innocuous life for me, fit for a child to read.

I tap into the nets at random, listening to the whole spectrum of conflicting rumours, hardly knowing what to believe. I've left my wife, I've left my job, parting ways entirely with my rosy, fictitious future. All my certainties have evaporated: I don't know when I'll die; I don't know who I'll love; I don't know if the world is heading for Utopia, or Armageddon.

But I keep my eyes open, and I feed what little of value I can gather back into the nets. There must be corruption and distortion here, too – but I'd rather swim in this cacophony of a million contradictory voices than drown in the smooth and plausible lies of

those genocidal authors of history who control the Hazzard Machines.

Sometimes I wonder how different my life might have been without their intervention – but the question is meaningless. *It couldn't have been any other way.* Everyone is manipulated; everyone is a product of their times. *And vice versa.*

Whatever the unchangeable future holds, I'm sure of one thing: *who I am* is still a part of what always has, and always will, decide it.

I can ask for no greater freedom than that.

And no greater responsibility.

AXIOMATIC

Greg Egan



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