

How Generative AI and Smart Toys™ Enabled Deschooling: Excerpts From the Memoirs of a Cyberpunk Time Traveler

NOEL GOUGH

La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia

Prologue: Bistro Marineris, Czarina-Kluster, 15-12-2291

I EXPECT THAT YOU MIGHT BE WONDERING how a prologue to an academic essay (albeit one that simultaneously functions as a work of speculative fiction) can be dated in a distant future (more than two centuries hence), but I hope that the anecdote that follows will help to orient you to the multiple temporal dimensions of the story I tell here. I realise that its temporal ambiguities might also *disorient* you, but I contend that tolerance of such ambiguities will prove to be an adaptive trait in the futures we share, as Maxine Hong Kingston (1977) foreshadowed in her inspirational memoirs of a “girlhood among ghosts,” in which she recalled that “I learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes” (p. 34).

In Bruce Sterling’s (1986a) acclaimed future history of trans/posthuman development, evolution, and circumsolar expansion¹, *Schismatrix Plus*, he recounts a bistro server’s apparent frustration as he struggles to comprehend the words of the “ancient terran philosopher Ilya Prigogine” (p. 274):

...listen to this! He pulled a notebook from inside his willow-printed coat. He read loudly, desperately. “A dissipative self-organizing system evolves along a coherent sequence of space-time structures. We may distinguish between four different dimensional frameworks: autopoiesis, ontogeny, phylogeny, anagenesis... And this is from my *poetry* class! (p. 200)

I can testify to the accuracy of Sterling’s account because I am, in fact, the bistro server to whom he refers (during an incident that occurred when/where I was traveling incognito in the circumsolar space/time continuum). However, I fear that he misinterprets the reasons for my frustration, by insinuating that I found something anomalous about Nobel laureate Ilya Prigogine’s (1980) understandings of change and evolution being represented in a “poetry class” in the twenty-third century, rather than, say, a science curriculum in the late twentieth century (although that might be wishful thinking on my part given that much school science education in the late twentieth century remained focused on the material structures of simple systems, rather than the informational structures of complex systems).

On the contrary, I was simply dismayed that, in the trans/posthuman milieu that Sterling describes, it must have taken more than two centuries for the fundamentals of complexity to be so suffused into the culture that they would be taught in a “poetry class,” in much the same way that evolution and relativity might (or should) have been taught in a “science class” in Sterling’s day. As long ago as the 1990s, complexity was widely recognized to be a characteristic of many networked systems and had become a focus for inquiry and speculation in most branches of the sciences, humanities, and arts; although it was still largely ignored by education bureaucrats, curriculum decision makers, and even—dare I say—professors of curriculum.

Nevertheless, Sterling is an unreliable narrator² For example, he implies that my “notebook” was a paper-based technology, rather than the pocket-sized e-tablet descended from the 21st century Apple iPad mini that I was using in the 2290s. I should also point out that the reference to “my *poetry* class” did not refer to a group of students with whom I was meeting regularly to study the same subject (as the term was understood on Earth in 1995, when physical structures quaintly known as “classrooms” actually existed) but, rather, to a category in a complex taxonomy of shared generative AI³ semiotic resources that I have routinely accessed for more than two centuries (in which poetry is distinguished, among many other modes of expression, from prose, drama, *currere*, netspeak, digispeak, chatspeak, psychography, paratextual mediation, hieroglyphics, polydirectional syllabaries, graffiti and technobabble).

Introducing Myself, 30-07-2024

I trust that as a reader of this esteemed scholarly journal you are sufficiently cosmopolitan⁴ to have some familiarity with the adventures of an extraterrestrial humanoid known simply as “the Doctor” (whose adventures in time and space have been comprehensively chronicled in the British Broadcasting Corporation’s documentary television series, *Doctor Who*, since 1963⁵). Somewhat like a space-age, technology-assisted Robin Hood, the Doctor works to save lives, liberate oppressed peoples, and combat various evildoers (such as the Daleks, an extremely violent race of xenophobic mutants bent on the conquest of the universe and the extermination of other forms of life). The Doctors travel in the universe and in time in a TARDIS⁶ and are effectively immortal: when Time Lords are fatally injured, their cells regenerate, and they are reincarnated. Most Doctors to date have been portrayed as British upper- or middle-class White males⁷.

I admit to being a middle-class White male of British descent, but I am not a Time Lord and I am not immortal. I am a cyberpunk dropout from the Time Lord Academy. After I surreptitiously hacked into the Untempered Schism⁸, gap in space/time that causes some onlookers to go mad, I involuntarily acquired a nonlinear perception of time, an extended (but finite) lifespan, and stole a decommissioned TARDIS. Perhaps I did go mad (I will leave that for others to judge), but I am on the public record as retaining a respectable parallel identity as an emeritus phildickian⁹ professor of posthumanist curriculum and pedagogy (see Gough, 2009; Gough, 2015).

Interlude: Is Time Travel Possible?

I am aware that many (perhaps most) readers of this story are likely to be sceptical of my (or anyone’s) accounts of time travel, so it might be useful to reflect briefly on the various ways in which such travel can be (and has been) effected:

- **machines:** the TARDIS has legendary predecessors in H.G. Wells' (1895) novella, *The Time Machine*, and its adaptations in George Pal's (1960) and Simon Wells' (2002) films of the same title and Nicholas Meyer's (1979) *Time After Time* (in which Wells uses his machine to pursue Jack the Ripper into the 20th century). Another example is the DeLorean motor car depicted in Robert Zemeckis' (1985) *Back to the Future* film trilogy. The representations of the machine in Pal's and Meyer's films reflected their 19th century roots (for example, the 1960s model resembled a horse-drawn sleigh). I found both of these aesthetically pleasing (they reminded me of early 20th century vintage cars) and would have enjoyed using them, but prefer the TARDIS because it actually *worked*.
- **empathy:** in 2137, during one of my travels in the early days of the circumsolar expansion, I encountered Luciente, an androgynous young woman located in Mattapoisett, Massachusetts, who was then empathically communicating with Consuelo "Connie" Ramos in 1970s New York City (as chronicled by Marge Piercy, 1976). Luciente showed me (like she had shown Connie) how the Mattapoisett community had achieved many of the counter-cultural socio-political goals of the late 1960s and early 1970s, including the near elimination of patriarchy, sexism, racism, classism, phallogocentrism, homophobia, homelessness, food injustice and environmental despoliation.
- **interplanetary travel:** Ursula Le Guin (2004) introduces this method as follows:
The airport is not a prelude to travel, not a place of transition; it is a stop. A blockage. A constipation. The airport is where you can't go anywhere else. A nonplace in which time does not pass and there is no hope of any meaningful existence. A terminus: the end. The airport offers nothing to any human being except access to the interval between planes. It was Sita Dulip of Cincinnati who first realised this, and so discovered the interplanar technique most of us now use. (p. 2)

Sita Dulip realized that the tedious experience of waiting in airports for delayed and/or cancelled flights—"a specific combination of tense misery, indigestion, and boredom" (p. 5)—facilitates "interplanetary travel": "by a mere kind of twist and a slipping bend, easier to do than to describe, she could go anywhere—be anywhere—because she was *already between planes*" (p. 3, emphasis in original). Interplanetary travel can also involve time slippages due to the different flows of time in other planes.

Globe-trotting academics welcomed interplanetary travel as a relief from the occupational hazard of airport tedium but, as Le Guin (2004) observes, Sita Dulap's method "is not entirely reliable. You sometimes find yourself on a plane that isn't the one you meant to go to. If whenever you travel you carry with you a copy of Roman's *Handy Planary Guide*, you can read up on wherever it is you get to when you get there..." (p. 6).

Becoming Cyberpunk, 1970-2291

Despite my (presently) somewhat privileged position as a superannuated academic, I became an early adopter of cyberpunk values and sensibilities in the late 1960s, partly as a result of my long-standing acceptance of, empathy with, and support for what Sterling, (1986b), in this case accurately, calls the synthesis of "lowlife and high tech" (p. 12). In the twentieth century Anglosphere the term "cyberpunk" was coined by Bruce Bethke (1983) as a portmanteau word combining cybernetics with the punk sensibility that emerged in the 1970s as a rejection of mainstream, corporate mass culture in areas such as music and fashion. The term was appropriated by editors and publishers to name a subgenre of science fiction depicting

a world in which information is the main industry, the most significant commodity and the strongest currency: it is what people steal, trade, live (and die) for. In Sterling's day, cyberpunks typically were characterized as marginalized, alienated loners who lived on the edges of societies wherein daily life was impacted by rapid technological change, an ubiquitous datasphere (cyberspace) of computerized information, drug culture, and invasive modifications of human bodies.

Evolution: A Technobabble Digression, Circa 2024

I make no apology for being somewhat obsessive about evolutionary biology. It was the focus of one of my first academic journal articles (Gough, 1978) and has continued to be an active research interest in my explorations of phildickian curriculum scholarship (see Adsit-Morris & Gough, 2021).

I digress because understanding recent advances in evolutionary biology is crucial to appreciating how cyberpunks, during the late 21st century, began to evolve from a distinctive social movement towards catalysing a new subspecies of the human race. Among evolutionary biologists, the so-called “modern synthesis” of Darwin's theory of natural selection with Mendelian genetics was called into question and eventually abandoned as it became obvious that understandings of hereditary variation based solely on randomly varying genes unaffected by developmental conditions were untenable. As Eva Jablonka and Marion Lamb (2005) explain, compelling evidence from disciplines ranging from molecular biology to cultural studies, demonstrate that the genome is much more responsive to the environment than previously thought, and that not all transmissible variations are underlain by genetic differences. Jablonka and Lamb's (2007) summary of this research identifies four types of inheritance (genetic, epigenetic, behavioral, and symbol-based), each of which produce variations on which natural selection can act. They note that some of these variations are acquired characteristics that arise in response to developmental conditions (i.e., there are once-refuted Lamarckian aspects to evolution) and argue that understanding evolutionary processes requires that we acknowledge that many transmitted variations are not based on DNA differences. This is particularly true for understanding the evolution of human behavior, in which all four dimensions of heredity have been important.

From Cyberpunks to Cybermechanists, 1970-2291

Although my prologue to this story disputes some of Sterling's (1986a) interpretations of selected incidents in our shared future history, he correctly refutes the myth that humankind reached its evolutionary zenith sometime during the twentieth century in a form that was essentially finite and static. Rather, *Schismatrix Plus* accurately documents (and dramatizes with much poetic license) the results of an ongoing process of human evolution that (at the time of writing) has resulted in two new trans/posthuman configurations, including us cybermechanists (clearly descended from cyberpunks) who augment the human form by merging flesh with machine technology¹⁰. I would not and could not have existed in the Bistro Marineris in 2291 were it not for the medical interventions and body modifications that we cyberpunks had willingly embraced, which eventually included transmissible behavioral traits enabled by nanotechnology. For example, much of our neuralware consists of miniscule co-processing chips and nerve amplifiers that produce transmissible behavioral traits. However, Sterling (again in unreliable narrator mode) glosses over the role that cyberpunks played in initiating and sustaining the cybermechanist variant of *Homo sapiens*.

More Technobabble, 2291

My current neural processor is a “switch-box” implanted in my lower spine, and is used to route signals from external cyberwear to my central nervous system. It is the main system for any type of neural interface, including reflex boosters, interface plugs, inspection space which allows secondary co-processors to be inserted into the basic processor module. This makes upgrading a process of opening the inspection space in a sterile environment and inserting the new co-processors. Implanting a neural processor is far easier than one might expect, thanks to nanotechnology. The basic module is surgically affixed to the spine, where it releases a flood of nanosurgical units into the spinal column. These microscopic machines thread tiny linkages through the central nervous system, hooking nerve endings to the neural processor. This process takes some time (6 or 7 days) before the nanosurgeons have worked their way through the entire body and all the connections are hooked up to the neural processor.

School’s Out Forever, 2024-2291

When I embarked on a career in academia in the early 1970s, I was pleased to find that the most astute observers and philosophers of education were denizens of popular culture, especially singers and songwriters. For example, although I was underwhelmed by Alice Cooper et al.’s (1972) perverse interpretation of “glam rock” (I’ll cede that subgenre’s crown to David Bowie), his anticipation of deschooling was prescient:

Well, we got no choice
All the girls and boys
Making all that noise
'Cause they found new toys...
School's out for summer
School's out forever

At the time, I recall that cyberpunks were aware of “all that noise” but did not then recognise the significance of the “new toys” Cooper’s song anticipates (see Exhibit 1).

Memorandum

To: All staff and shareholders
 From: William B. Ricken, CEO Smart Toys™
 Re: Smart Toys™ Manifesto (draft)
 Date: January 01, 1987

The future of AI is in toys. Not automated generals or automated doctors or automated teachers, but intelligent playthings.

As a company, we need diversification; we are dabbling with the commercial marketplace; we are gearing up to productize. The place to focus our skills is in teddy bear-robots, in trivia-wizard-systems, strategic-command and-control-boardgames, hypothesis-generating-kaleidoscopes, image-understanding-doormats, and signal detecting-dress-up-clothes. The perfect marriage: national defense and pleasure from our subsidiary company Advanced Decision & Frivolity Systems.

What we know from our research is that:

- Yuppies have free cash and what their kids don't spend, they spend on adult toys. The kids spend their share on toys.
- Americans are bored, bored, bored.
- Megabucks ride on every fad. Fads capture imagination. Imagination is the slave of entertainment. Toys entertain. Responsive toys like Teddy Rumble-something-or-another and Petsters™ are Christmas hits.
- Saturday morning kids shows are experimenting with toy control via television broadcast signals. We can port code to intelligent toys over the internet...
- Nothing is more delightful than an inanimate object that acts human. It reminds us of our superiority. And it's our corporate field of expertise.
- Programmers do their best work coding something they want in their own library.
- Transients and people living in apartments can't own pets. They can own toys.
- Educational institutions are in disarray. Learning is moving into the electronic home. People learn through play.
- AI works in toy domains. AI technology grew up on games.
- We are all trying to find play in work.
- So, what this country needs is an intelligent plaything.
- Imagine the Santa's Helper Division of our company. Cheerful elves cleverly hiding planning programs in the Mega-Transformatron so that it traverses the living-room more efficiently next time.
- Imagine placing image-recognition programs as listeners to the airwaves and controllers of the VCR, so that they recognize your favorite shows and record without setting the time.
- Imagine fractal color TV images that dance whenever your favorite music is played, learn the tune, and then elaborate a visual harmonic.
- Imagine the secret and intricate delights of the Erotorobote that can model your personal preferences and arbitrary desires.
- Imagine the joys of parallel, distributed, autonomous checkers who can make their own moves.
- Imagine sending the Autonomous Land-and-Bathtub Vehicle on a soap hunt, having the Pilot's Associate-and-Buddy guide you through the complexities of navigating your home entertainment unit, and letting the Battle Management and-Making-Up Expert System advise you on strategic and tactical plans to have your way.
- All doable. All fun. All within our expertise.
- The challenging problems are in toys. The national contribution is in toys.

(Exhibit 1: a Smart Toys™ Manifesto – via Wikileaks, 1987)

Ricken's Smart Toys™ Manifesto (exhibit 1) demonstrates that some pioneers/entrepreneurs of Generative AI were well aware of its educative potential, although I do not fully understand all of Ricken's somewhat cryptic (or colloquial) references to what I assume might be familiar to American readers. For example, what is a "Teddy Rumble-something-or-another"? What are Petsters™?

With respect to cyberpunks' recognition of the pertinence of popular media, I confirm that one of my earliest and most influential publications (Gough, 1993)¹¹ was in part inspired by Bruce Springsteen (1984):

Well, we busted out of class
 Had to get away from those fools
 We learned more from a three-minute record...
 Than we ever learned in school

My generation of cyberpunks did not only find wisdom in three-minute records, but also in many other exemplars of popular media that were then seen by a conservative populace as ephemeral and/or inconsequential. But as J. G. Ballard (1984) observes, “pop artists deal with the lowly trivia of possessions and equipment that the present generation is lugging along with it on its safari into the future” (p. 155). As a science teacher educator, I encouraged my students to ignore conventional school science textbooks (which were still fossilised archival remnants of a Newtonian universe) and school science laboratories (parodic theatres of pseudoscientific activity; see Gough, 1998), and recommended that they focus on what children were learning in their engagements with popular media, which at that time included the children’s animated TV series, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (Wolf et al., 1987-1996), a favorite of my then young son.

Generative AI and Deschooling

In the late twentieth century, cyberpunks and emergent cybermechanists like me welcomed the advent of what became known initially as Generative AI¹², such as ChatGPT and Apple Intelligence, because it provided the crucial mechanisms through which we could work towards achieving purposes of an education system that we had long cherished, as these had been articulated by the late Ivan Illich (1972):

A good educational system should have three purposes: it should provide all who want to learn with access to available resources at any time in their lives; empower all who want to share what they know to find those who want to learn it from them; and, finally, furnish all who want to present an issue to the public with the opportunity to make their challenge known. Such a system would require the application of constitutional guarantees to education. Learners should not be forced to submit to an obligatory curriculum, or to discrimination based on whether they possess a certificate or a diploma. Nor should the public be forced to support, through a regressive taxation, a huge professional apparatus of educators and buildings which in fact restricts the public's chances for learning to the services the profession is willing to put on the market. It should use modern technology to make free speech, free assembly, and a free press truly universal and, therefore, fully educational. (p. 33)

Illich (1972) called for the use of advanced technology to support “learning webs” which incorporate “peer-matching networks” where descriptions of a person’s activities and skills are mutually exchanged for the education that they would benefit from. However, the “modern technology” he envisaged did not then exist; although its progenitors in what has become known as “social media” began to be influential in all aspects of our lives.

Once young people realised that they could use Generative AI to create learning webs and peer-matching networks, it became clear to all of us that schools as we knew them were redundant. AI *per se* did not *replace* education, but it certainly enabled deschooling. I hope that it is not too hubristic to claim that us cyberpunks were catalytic in this achievement.

Notes

1. “circumsolar expansion” refers to the expansion of human settlement from Earth to other habitable locations within the solar system (including Earth’s moon and some asteroids).
2. I do not use the term “unreliable” pejoratively. I also consider myself, unapologetically and proudly, to be an unreliable narrator.
3. AI = Artificial Intelligence
4. I hesitate to assume readers’ cosmopolitanism because, although I would prefer to avoid stereotypes, my personal experience is that many Americans display a degree of cultural insularity, by appearing to lack interest in, and/or ignorance of, other people’s cultures, ideas, beliefs etc. For example, when I was on sabbatical in Canada in 1995 (see Gough, 1997), I compared broadcasts by Canadian and American weather channels. Given that weather maps are daily reminders of the physical shape and dimensions of whichever nation-state we are inhabiting at the time, and within which we tacitly register our own specific geopolitical locations and national identities, I noted that US weather maps at the time showed state boundaries and significant topographical features—such as mountain ranges, major lakes and rivers—but Canada and Central America were shown as graphically empty, if depicted at all; Canadian weather mappers were more generous in acknowledging that the North American continent and its weather systems are shared by a number of other countries.
5. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doctor_Who
6. Time And Relative Dimension In Space—a hybrid of a time machine and a spacecraft, which externally resembles a British police box.
7. Of the 15 Doctors to date there has been only one female and one person of color.
8. https://tardis.fandom.com/wiki/Untempered_Schism
9. The Urban Dictionary defines phildickian as “having the qualities of a story by Philip K. Dick, a 20th century writer who regularly asked readers to consider the nature of reality and humanity” (<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=phildickian>).
10. The other branch of human evolution relies on genetic engineering. The divide between us was widened by our divergent habitat requirements and is now irrelevant because we do not (and cannot) interbreed.
11. I am not bragging; this is the judgment of my peers; see, for example, Peter Appelbaum (2019, p. 2) who writes: “Noel Gough exploded onto the scene of curriculum studies, SF-studies, public pedagogy, and environmental education with his early publication, *Laboratories in Fiction* (1993)”; see also John Weaver (1999, 2010).
12. See <https://www.synthesia.io/post/generative-ai-examples>

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