

Futures

Mindcasters

A reality shock. By Jack Dann and George Zebrowski



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

The truth still seems as impossible as our plan to pull them down from their high place and recover what had been stolen from us.

“We’re less likely to be detected out here,” said my friend of a lifetime.

We had camped in the desert, ready to free our world from the prison of their virtual reality, and finally learn our origins.

“Why did they do this to us?” I had asked. Our world should belong only to us, unfolding into the unknown.

Our anger had grown as we found the tell-tale intervals that suggested our histories had been set down by others. Make the most of it, some of us said, for what else could there be? What else had there ever been? What did the question even mean?

Jake and I imagined that their wave had taken us long ago, standing from some future, past or parallel, a vice holding our unchanging present, a successor to a culture that had preceded us.

It seemed that we stood where we had no

right to stand, an arbitrary oasis of regularly flickering uncertainty. Some of us imagined a struggle we might make; a few considered that ‘made’ worlds were the only kind that ever existed, their origins long forgotten. There was nothing outside. I still struggled against the idea. If we could think of them, then why could there not be uncreated, unmade universes, which had always existed, which might well be the prime existent, from which lesser creations were made by discontented beings.

Our war against this tyranny began when we discovered that we could craft virtuals within our own, that our world was perhaps only one such, nesting in a greater framework. Our kind had always ‘rewritten’ realities in our arts, to brighten our needs for novelty.

Jake and I gave our lives to the insurgency.

“Let’s see now,” he said on that final day, hoping that our fight was not a piece of ingenious fiction. Even Nick Bostrom was part of our call to arms.

As we sat armed with the vanity of our disrupter apparatus under a hot desert sun,

I reminded myself that reality was merely what we expect to see. Long ago, we had been adjusted to what their wave had been sent to do. Seeing is believing any familiar banality.

“Who are they?” I asked, suddenly appalled as if for the first time.

“Just intelligences who discovered ... possibilities,” Jake said reassuringly, “by way of physics, neuroscience and the like. Here we go.”

I fell back on the sand as if struck.

“Hold still, open your eyes slowly,” Jake’s voice said, as if I had eyes.

They were no longer mine. I sat up and looked around a naked landscape – no stars, sand or horizon. No flickering intervals.

“There!” Jake cried. “There they are.”

They sat nearby, yet distant. Faceless shadows on the sand.

“The bastards!” I shouted. “Why dared they!”

A thought found me, searching me.

“Welcome!” they shouted at us. “This is it. Every reality nests within others. You’re here, among the few who navigate the truth.”

Futures

“What truth?” I asked wordlessly.

“The infinite regress, free of explaining a beginning, never to end.”

Our silence stood around this insult to reason.

The shadows spoke as one, pressing more deeply into me.

“Conscious beings start by stumbling into dreaming, storytelling, dramas of every sort, ever more mimetic of beginners’ realities given to them, until creations become places to live in, their origins forgotten. This way is passed on, ad infinitum ...”

“An informational disease,” Jake said.

The pressing shadows sounded a benign parental tone, saying: “Minds came out of the evolutionary cauldron not fully conscious of themselves, with rational praxis only a distant ideal beyond a poorly understood physical existence, able to do so much with only incomplete understanding ...”

“Madness!” I shouted, looking up as if I expected the stars to blink into being, and I knew that my anger had grown from a distant past with no hope of ever dying. Revelations threatened all happiness; concealment was necessary.

“Madness,” Jake said pityingly.

Calmly, the shadows said: “Mind is a vast power in the Existent, unknowing of itself and its origins in every grain of dust. Smallness spies direction, dreaming until it creates and cares. Many minds exist, unknown to each other, blind to how many alternate Existents have always persisted.”

“And how many nesting ones?” I demanded. “Is there a prime uncreated one?” I seized on the thought that it had to be, if only as a region of uncreated, independent chaos, the original madness from which we all derived, freedom’s last redoubt, from which we had been exiled, which I now had to believe had never existed.

The shadows told us that we could make our own worlds, according to our hearts’ desire.

“Well, I guess this is goodbye,” Jake said to me, and I knew that we would never meet again. He was going to craft a universe to suit himself, even though I realized at once that none of us would ever succeed. “This is how intelligence scatters throughout the apeiron, the Existent Sevagram,” he added.

“And there’s nothing outside?” I asked.

“Nothing there,” he said. “Get used to it.”

Jack Dann’s *The Memory Cathedral* is an international bestseller and his new novel is *Shadows in the Stone*. His website is at jackdann.com. **George Zebrowski** is the award-winning author of *Brute Orbits*, *Macrolife* and many other novels and stories. His complete works may be found at Open Road Media (www.openroadmedia.com).