

# Futures

## Byzantium

Personal development. **By Robert Dawson**

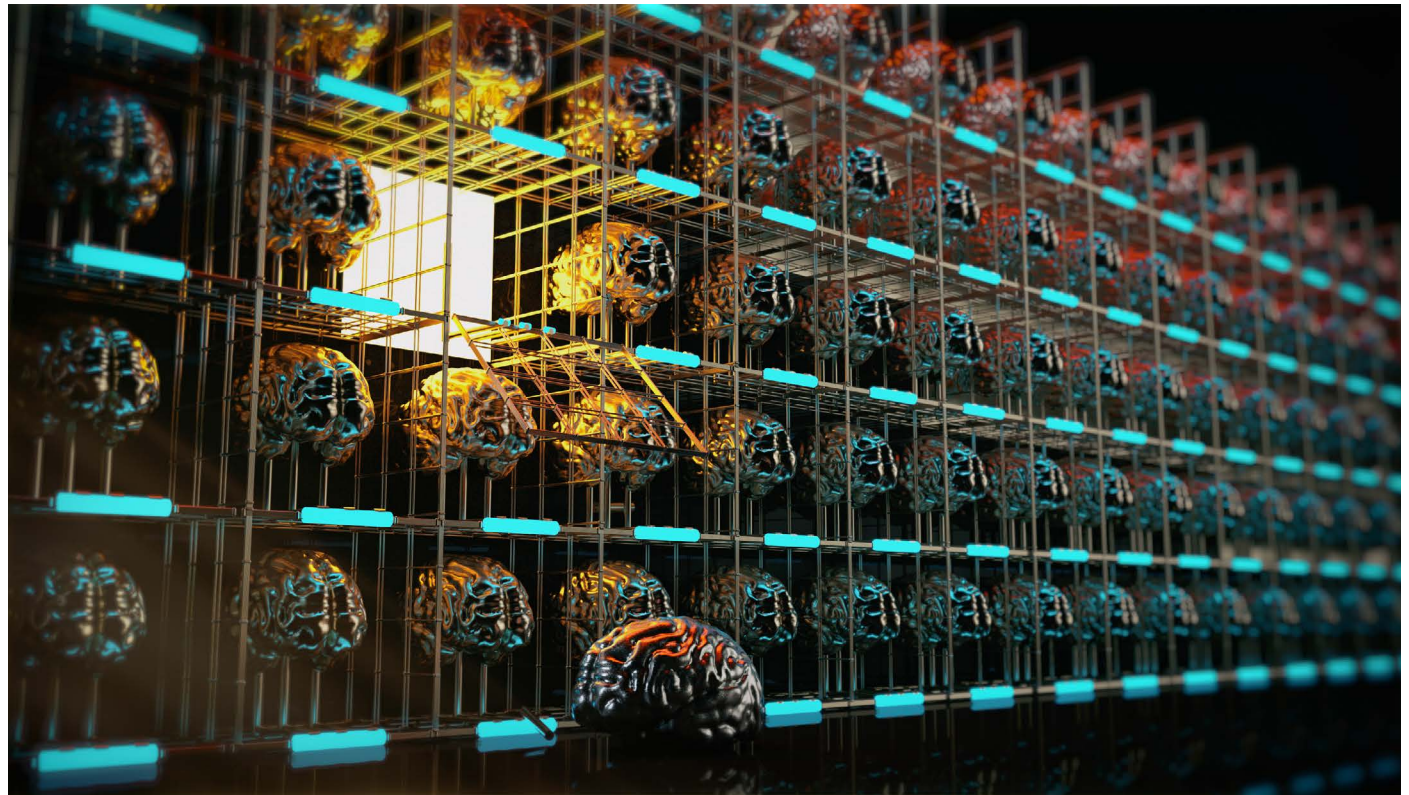


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

**W**hen I was seven years old, I wanted to be a roadtrain.

When I had nothing else to do, I'd run to the end of the street, to where the levway cut through the city. The sidewalk and asphalt ended abruptly in weeds and gravel, shadowed by the high safety fence. I'd peep through one of the horizontal gaps in the fence and wait.

First, I'd see the tractor unit, tiny in the distance. At that moment, I would take a deep breath and hold it until the roadtrain arrived. My need for air would rise with the roadtrain's roar: just as both grew intolerable, the tractor unit would reach me. Then I would let myself breathe again, while the scream of speed-blurred metal continued until the last trailer had passed and the sound dropped to a bass rumble. If I stood in the right place, I could see right under the cars as they flew by, half a metre above the grey concrete of the levway. Papa said that, because of their importance and danger, each roadtrain was guided by a

human mind, uploaded from somebody whose body had grown old and who had chosen to keep on living in this way.

Perhaps some children thought more of the cargo, dreaming of favourite foods, new toys and other wonders. But my imagination raced with the tractor unit, hurtling from city to city at 250 kilometres per hour. To be important and dangerous seemed very fine to my seven-year-old self.

When I was 13, I wanted to be a bird.

In my literature class we'd studied the poems of an Eirish writer, whose name I've shamefully forgotten. Many dealt with long-dead warriors and struggles between governments (they were written in the years before the Centrality, when Earth had many governments). But there was one poem that I loved, in which a man sails to a place called Byzantium, to be uploaded into a golden robot bird and sing forever.

Our teacher told us that this was written before uploading was possible, and so the

poem should be classified as 'science-fiction'. I remembered those words at examination time, which helped me win a distinction. But the idea of endless song captured my heart: this, I thought, would be the perfect uploading.

When I was 19, I wanted to be a sexbot.

When I was 25, I wanted to be a spaceship.

Who would not want to be one of the biggest, fastest, most powerful beings in the Universe? To fly between planets, turn fuel into thrust in one glorious roar, and feel the solar wind sleeting against their hull? What other existence could compare?

Oh, I could do the mathematics. Of the many million people permitted to upload every year, maybe 20 became spaceships. No matter how hard the workers of the Centrality scraped Earth bare of minerals, no matter how they robbed the winds and tides of their energy, they would not build or fuel nearly enough

# Futures

spaceships to house the souls of everybody. But a person can dream.

When I was 32, I wanted to be a cultivator.

They were introducing intelligent farm machines that year, guided by uploaded minds, that could tend plants more carefully than a living person. Some members of the Centrality appeared on the Network and announced proudly that the new machines would let farms use fewer pesticides, and so save the few remaining birds.

It would be many years until my time to upload, but this seemed like the ideal afterlife: working in the countryside, out in the open air, making the world a better place. But within a year, the Centrality decided that the intelligent cultivators were too slow, and more expensive than the pesticides and crude machinery that they replaced. So they discontinued them, and the birds kept dying.

When I was 50, I wanted to be an Adviser.

It wouldn't be exciting, inhabiting a neural processor in a rack with 10,000 others, waiting patiently until the Centrality asked our opinion – but as an Adviser I might do some good. I'd outgrown my dreams of adventure, and I'd seen the scars on Earth grow larger before my eyes. I thought that one day I might be able to offer some wisdom, or at least common sense, to help us all live better in what was left of our world.

But how would I be able to help? I studied the Centrality's records, comparing their deliberations before consulting the Advisers with their actions afterwards. I soon realized that, although it looked good for the Centrality to say that they sought advice, to act on it was another matter. The Advisers sat in their racks like mushrooms in a tunnel farm, while the world went to hell.

When I was 60, I decided that I would never upload. That was no country for old minds, for minds that remembered Earth as it had

been and did not want to participate in its destruction.

I am 80 now, and I've come to you.

Somebody said that you've built a covert uploading system: one that can upload me, not into a machine or an Adviser's silicon cage, but onto the routers and processors of the Network itself. That's true, isn't it?

I have money, but I know that's not enough. Do this for me, and I swear that I will fight the Centrality with every byte of my being. Eventually, their security software will find me and destroy me. But until that moment, I will tell the young people how they can protect their world. And, if it's too late for that, I will help them avenge it.

Upload me: I'm ready.

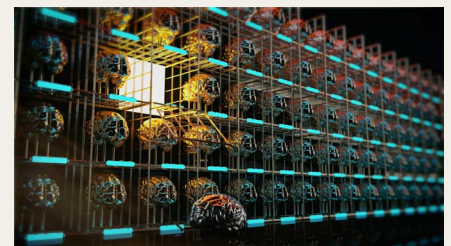
**Robert Dawson** teaches mathematics at Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Canada. His work has appeared in *Nature Futures*, as well as numerous other publications.

## THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Robert Dawson reveals the inspiration behind *Byzantium*.

As you'll probably have guessed, this was inspired initially by William Butler Yeats' 'Sailing To Byzantium'. The poem's old narrator, sailing away from the country of the young, imagines himself freed from his dying body and placed into

*such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make  
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling  
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;  
Or set upon a golden bough to sing  
To lords and ladies of Byzantium.*



To a science-fiction reader, this reads as a classic 'uploading' scenario.

The appeal of the singing golden bird to Yeats, the poet, is obvious. But once we've opened the doors to uploading minds into some artificial brain, we can imagine other possibilities: and they hold up a mirror to our dreams. The small child is entranced by power and speed, even on a level that might be seen as mundane by many adults. The spaceship represents the dreams science fiction gave so many of us when we were young, and reality often snatched back (and a tip of the hat to Yeats's compatriot, the great Anne McCaffrey.) And sooner or later we realize that even the mundane world has problems to solve ... and sometimes we can do something about them.