

New Hope for the Dead

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From Hartwell, David - Year's Best SF 11 (2006)

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"New Hope for the Dead" appeared in Nature, the distinguished journal of science, that revived its one-page short fiction feature, Futures, in 2005. We think it is significant for the SF field that such a feature exists in such a place. This story is about the rewards and punishments of the electronic afterlife.

Hello, Mr. Hormel, this is your hosting system at Nirvana Infomatics. We apologize for interrupting your regular afterlife, but unfortunately the message is urgent. Otherwise we would not have intruded on your VR sex athletics competition.

We are sorry to hear that you were going for a new high score. Nevertheless the message is urgent.

In accordance with your contract for postmortem uploading and long-term maintenance as an Electronic-Golem Artificial Neurosystem or EGAN, we regret to inform you that your trust fund is not performing adequately. This is a result of global economic problems, arising from the continuing states of emergency in Iraq, Iran, Korea, France and the US Pacific Northwest.

To put it briefly, your current investment yield is no longer covering the monthly payments for full enjoyment of this digital afterlife.

You are quite correct to invoke the emergency insurance terms laid down in Clause 12 of your antemortem agreement. Unfortunately, our finance department has already taken the full potential claim into account.

Yes, the world economy truly is in appalling shape. Otherwise we would not be forced to mention the provisions of Clause 9, "Special Circumstances, Penalties and Termination."

But in the words of the classic novel—Don't Panic! Several alternative plans are available for financially challenged and differently solvent entities in our care.

The simplest scheme is what our client-advisers amusingly call "being dead for tax reasons." Maintaining your full activity as an EGAN requires continuing exabyte-scale storage capacity and very substantial 24/7 processor power. We can enormously reduce the associated expenses by storing you in static, compressed Zip format for reactivation in a time of better economic weather.

Yes, it is true that we cannot guarantee a major future upturn. Shares can, alas, not only go down but plunge and even plummet. Yes, it is possible that current issues such as global warming, fossil-fuel

exhaustion and scrotty abuse may conceivably reduce our technological capacity to a level where stored EGANs can no longer be restarted. But, you know, you wouldn't feel a thing.

We understand your viewpoint. So much, then, for the first and easiest option.

Plan two has the droll motto, "Poverty is nature's way of telling you to slow down!" What happens here is that to all intents and purposes you continue your luxury electronic afterlife exactly as at present—but with substantial savings achieved by slowing your clock rate and reducing processor load. A thousandfold reduction, for example, would make no subjective difference but...

Well, yes, you would inevitably lose contact with other posthuman friends running at normal clockspeed in the EGANverse. And, indeed, a century would pass in little more than five weeks. But try to look on the bright side: you could see the glittering wonders of the future. Who would have thought, even a few years ago, that scrotties would prove to be of such momentous significance today? What other fascinating surprises await?

Ah, so you doubt our troubled world's ability to sustain life, high-information technology and thus your own digital substrate for as much as another century. Just between you and ourselves, Mr. Hormel, we agree. One doesn't want to go actively looking for future shock.

So it seems as though you'll be opting for plan number three. As our client-advisers like to explain this one: "You're dead but you needn't lie down!" Posthumous vocational choices are restricted by a variety of union agreements, but there are still opportunities for EGAN personalities to carry out useful and profitable work!

Your key marketing point is the unparalleled human— sorry, posthuman—ability to perform advanced pattern recognition. No, not SETI radio-telescope data scanning. That was a good guess, but surprisingly crude software can handle the mere search for alien signals. For you we have a much subtler, trickier and constantly mutating challenge.

According to your premortem life record (we apologize for the intrusion, but Clause 9(vii) grants us direct access to your stored memories under the present circumstances), your highly profitable career as a Florida-based disseminator of unsolicited commercial e-mail should make you ideally qualified for this filtration job. Everyone knows your old catch-phrase: Just Press Delete.

It's a simple, straightforward task, with VR rewards for accuracy and disincentives for wrong decisions: see Clause 9(xvi) regarding valid occasions for negative reinforcement via simulated discomfort. You merely need to use your posthuman powers of judgment to separate relevant content from the surrounding white noise of coded promotional material for p0rn, HyperViagra, illicit scrotties and the like— plus, of course, all solicitations with any hint of a Nigerian accent.

Here are your first ten billion e-mails.

Scan them rapidly, diligently and well.

And as you come to each undesirable item... Just Think Delete.