

# The Present is Eternal and I Could Have Known It (When I Was a Space Ship Captain)

*Till Wittwer*

This story unfolds simultaneously and in between the years 1992 and 2364. It will be quite a ride, but it will start out slow. So, let's begin with the past and let me recall the situation of 1992 for you – good news first: The Cold War was over and after the initial disbelief and some euphoric but confused celebrations, enough time had passed for a strange and playful optimism to take hold of the world. Finally, there wouldn't have to be any struggle over political systems anymore, the paralyzing threat of nuclear holocaust was banned and the world was unified under a Western idea of democracy which brought the people closer together. The skies were blue and the sun was shining bright across an undivided sky. Everything was one now and it should stay like that. A grumpy political scientist called the situation "The End of History", and mainly, the optimism which this „End of History“ had brought along articulated itself in the ecstatic frenzies of countless techno parties that never seemed to end.

Now, the last remaining frontier was outer space and the party of opportunities – at least in Western societies – would be as endless as the galaxies which waited to be explored as soon as technical innovation would have managed to step up to the progress of global politics. And why shouldn't space become a valid new objective? All the leftover energy that had been absorbed and neutralized in East-Western hostilities was now finally set free and could be best invested in the development of new technologies to move mankind forward. In the late 1950s, the first satellite had been shot into space – by the Russians, mind you – and by 1992, there were myriads of these things orbiting the earth, number growing steadily. A tight web of telecommunication networks had quickly been woven across the planet and the steadily throbbing information stream which these networks provided built the "Global Village". All in all, the

decade was drenched in sunny optimism.

But all the satellite-dishes that had been installed in every corner of the world to receive signals from outer space, all these dishes that were directed towards the sky, towards the future, strangely enough were not able to detect the heavy clouds that formed on the far horizon of every cardinal direction: East, West, North, South. If anything, the clouds were read as special effects produced by the smoke machines in the ongoing rave that had everybody on their feet and dancing in pure joy. The party was simply too good to worry.

None of this concerned me at this point. In 1992 I was 7 years old. I had neither heard about the Cold War, nor had I ever been to a rave and for me, history hadn't even begun – so, how could I possibly fathom an “End of History“?! What appealed to me though, was the idea of space being the final frontier – and that was because I was not only living in 1992, but simultaneously, I was captain aboard a spaceship in the year 2364.

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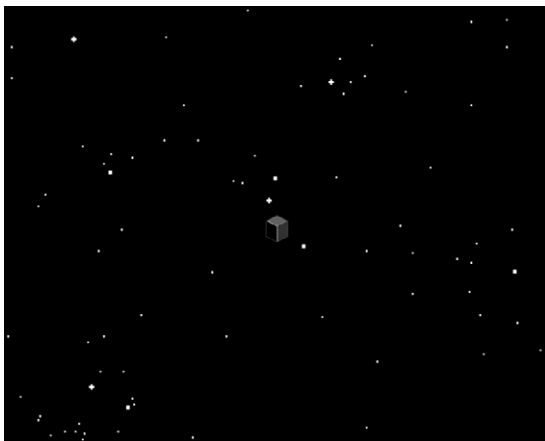
On Fridays, school ended early. That was great, as I always went to visit my friend Tobias on Friday. We had crafted little cardboard badges and glued them to the chests of what we regarded to be our uniforms – oversized blue jumpsuits, whose legs and sleeves we had to roll up almost all the way so we wouldn't trip on our time travel to the year 2364, that is on our way to the big leather couch in the command center bridge of the USS Enterprise, where we were taking part in outer space adventures alongside Captain Jean-Luc Picard, Commander William T. Riker, and my personal favorite: Lieutenant Worf, the Klingon. Of course, OUR command center bridge didn't look any like the Enterprise's. It much more resembled an average Western German living room, complete with cheap sand-colored floor tiles and a wall unit hosting decorative plates and kitschy blown-glass collectibles instead of elaborate control panels. We didn't care. The command bridge was our safe haven and the intimacy of the family living room served us just well for our countless confusing adventures alongside the

Enterprise's crew.

You already understood: Apart from being a captain of the same rank as me, Tobias was the only kid I knew who had a time machine to teleport us to the year 2364; when I write "time machine", I really mean "satellite tv". So, I often came around to Tobias' place after school to watch Star Trek. At the time – 1992, that is – I of course had no idea how dreadfully ironic it actually was that we were watching a tv show about space travel adventures that was transmitted via a network of satellites orbiting somewhere in outer space. Would I have been able to grasp this setup, I might also have been able to see the dark clouds of the thunderstorm gathering above our time. But just like everyone else, I didn't. And so, sitting in our middle-class command center, we were as happy and careless as the decade we were immersed in, and although the Enterprise space endeavors were way beyond our understanding, they never were beyond our fantasy.

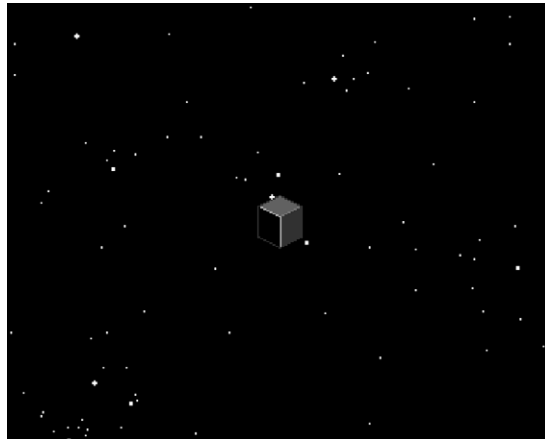
And then, one Friday, the dark thunder that had rumbled in the distance for a while arrived at our door and as it struck, I was suddenly able to grasp what it had been all about – I was able to grasp all its magnitude, its ubiquity and its horror. The thunder creeping up from afar had been the steadily building prelude to my shocking realization of what the world was going to be like in the future of my growing up – of what it had already become, actually. And now, as it was here, my realization was accompanied by rhythmic, stomping growls that probed my gut like an invasive species. No – it was an invasive species.

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The thunderstorm had been gathering the whole morning. The air was unusually humid, the swallows were buzzing about almost on street level and in the sky enormous black clouds had begun to pile up. Now, on my way from school to Tobias' house, the wind was picking up; loose leafs, old newspapers and sand swirled about my head. The sky had turned pitch black and so had the streets. Then, the wind suddenly stopped. There was a moment of calm before the first lightning bolt set the street ablaze and an ear-splitting

crack of thunder followed not more than a second later. The storm was here. I started to run and made it to the spaceship command center where Tobias already awaited me just before all hell broke loose. Heavy rain began whipping the roof tiles and quickly turned the streets into rivers. The rhythmic flashes of lightning and the beat of the rolling thunder merged with distant party sounds but in our command center we felt safe. We turned on the tv and flew off to outer space. Patrick Stewart's voice was our voice and so all we chanted in unison: "Space: the final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship Enterprise. Its continuing mission: to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no one has gone before." The rain became even stronger and hissing gusts of wind rattled the windows. We turned up the volume.



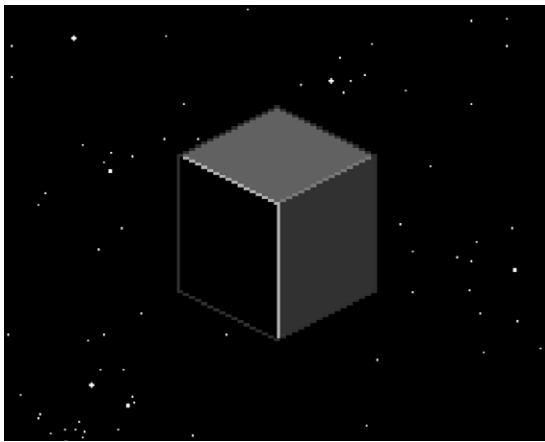
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It was on this particular Friday that we encountered an extraordinarily frightening new species on our exploration mission. Well, actually the species encountered us and there was nothing we could do about it: It was the Borg. From Captain Picard we learned that the Borg were an invasive creed of cybernetic organisms that operated without a central command, but instead they were interconnected through a neuronal network – they were a hive-mind. The Borg constantly expanded and improved their technocratic society by incorporating more species into their collective – “assimilation“, they called this process of conquest. Their way to ‘assimilate’ foreign species was by injecting nano machines into their circulatory systems and thus transforming them into cyborgs as well, plugging them into the monotonous beat of the decentralized network. Whomm, Whomm, Whomm. Their mechanically uttered phrase „resistance is futile“ – one word per beat – made our blood run cold.

Cruising about our merry way, we had crossed paths with the Borg, their ship seemingly materializing from nowhere in the clear galactic sky. Our radar hadn't picked up their signal; they had disabled our protective shields before we even realized what was

going on and now they were about to step aboard the Enterprise to fully assimilate its crew into their collective. Terrified I looked over to my co-commander Captain Tobias only to find that he had retreated under a woolen blanket and was curled into a small whimpering ball on the command center's leather couch.

At that moment, a lightning bolt hit the house. For a second the flash blinded me, the roaring crack of the impact deafened me and when I came back to my senses I saw that the power had gone out. The tv had turned off but there was something else: The noise of a thudding beat, that sounded different from rolling thunder. Whomm, Whomm, Whomm.



They were here. The Borg had arrived. These techno-cyborgs from a distant galaxy were standing right in front of me inside our command center which had shed its fantasy adornments and all of a sudden looked a lot like the square Western-German living room that it actually was. With the looming figures of these creatures towering in this space, the leather couch and the wall unit with the decorative plates and kitschy blown glass-collectibles unfolded some surreal realism as these overtly mundane and earthly objects revealed themselves to be connected to outer space. The Borg must have used the power cut to transgress the tv screen. They had used the infrastructure of global communication technology – the satellite network – to stream themselves into the command center bridge living room where I was now face to face with them. The thudding beat that had been there in the distance forever and that was now here, making the room shake and the plates in the wall unit rattle, wasn't coming from a techno party – it had never come from a techno party. All along it had been the Borg's heartbeat.

In pure, dull terror I now realized it: The future had arrived and it stood right there in front of us; no, not in front of us: it had already invaded every fiber of us, it had melted into the innermost private and intimate sanctuary, into the last resort of petty bourgeois integrity – the family living room. The Borg were Reality with a

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capital R that had stepped out from behind the tv screen and was suddenly there, right there, in our lives that had been so carelessly fictionalized in the course of the great happy rave. With every thud, the incessant beat that had commenced right when the Cold War ended had shot the nano-machines into our systems and we already were part of the hive mind. It was Empire, the post Cold War-New World Order of neoliberal capitalism that had conquered us, that had used the new outer space telecommunication technologies of satellite networks to creep into our living rooms, into our bodies and into our minds, and it had turned the petty bourgeois home, the place that above all was supposed to be heimlich, into something that was genuinely unheimlich. We were interconnected; our connectivity, brought about by the satellite network was ubiquitous, the private really had turned public and the world came closer together in the Global Village indeed, as even the most intimate desires were mined from us, bundled up in fiber optic cables and fed back into the hive mind which pulled the strangling web of interconnectedness ever more tightly around our necks. Empire had taken over in the reckless optimism following the years of battle between two antagonistic systems and it had enslaved us instantly – work and leisure, pleasure and pain, fact and fiction had become indistinguishable. Resistance indeed was futile as every fiber of our being was infiltrated, assimilated and violated. I could feel the nano machines' rhythmic tingle below my skin. The Borg were here; Empire was here. We were Empire and Empire was us. And the techno-beat was really the beat of the light pulses of international telecommunication and above all, it was the beat to orchestrate and facilitate our subservience.

Empire had devoured us and we were caught in the heart of its everlasting thunderstorm emanating electronic pulses like lightning bolts. Finally, the real "End of History" had occurred. Time had stopped. This was the present. The future and the past, the year 2364 and the year 1992 had collapsed in the cyber-organism of the eternal Now. The monotonous beat of Borg biopower had coopted us into the regime of a postmodern, total, neoliberal Empire. Things would be the same, just a little bit different, I thought. Then, the future in my veins sprang into action.