

The Planetary Bureau

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Colophon

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Abstract

The Planetary Bureau is a speculative design project created with the intention of rightsizing humans in respect to the Earth. Humans will assume they'll go on forever, and one of the contributing factors toward this reality is our inability to recognise that we make up less than 0.01% of all biomass on the planet. Humanity is approaching a critical juncture in our time on Earth. We can see the beginning of the end materialise as we exploit the planet for our material gain, and that the planet will simply carry on without us. Breaking the assumption that Earth is human is an important step in realising our survival is closely linked to the health of the planet. It isn't enough that we're 'environmentally' friendly, we need to make larger and quicker strides towards a future which takes into account the well being of the planet. The creation of The Planetary Bureau is a speculative endeavour toward this. The Bureau imagines a multitude of futures, with the intent of having its viewers question the status quo and work towards a positive future for both the planet and humanity. This make-believe organisation presents speculative projects with the larger goal of challenging our stance that all that matters on Earth is humans, often through satire and parody. The Bureau's website posits different visions of what a planet-first future could look like through make-believe artefacts and visuals.

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Introduction

Concept Statement

As the effects of climate change become ever more clear and obvious by the day, the human race has slowly started to come to the realisation that they might be at fault. The irrevocable changes to systems around the world are affecting every single entity on the planet. But what does the planet—the celestial being—feel about the change?

To get to that question, we need to take a step back and unpack one key word to this thesis: planetary. This is one of the few words which can challenge our self-anointed position as owners of the earth. My use of 'planetary' is to indicate that the planet is an independent entity on its own. My goal is to rightsize humans to their proper status; we are just one among millions of biotic species inhabiting earth. 'Planetary' challenges our hubris—our tendency to put ourselves at the centre of all that is this world and ultimately to justify our violent destruction of our habitat.

It's easy to forget that Earth is a planet, and not just a collective of nations-states. The Earth consists of much more than just the human species. When we talk about climate change, it usually boils down to nations bargaining with each other, all while playing to the tune of the capitalist organisation of the economy, within which exploitation (of every kind) is the only winning strategy.

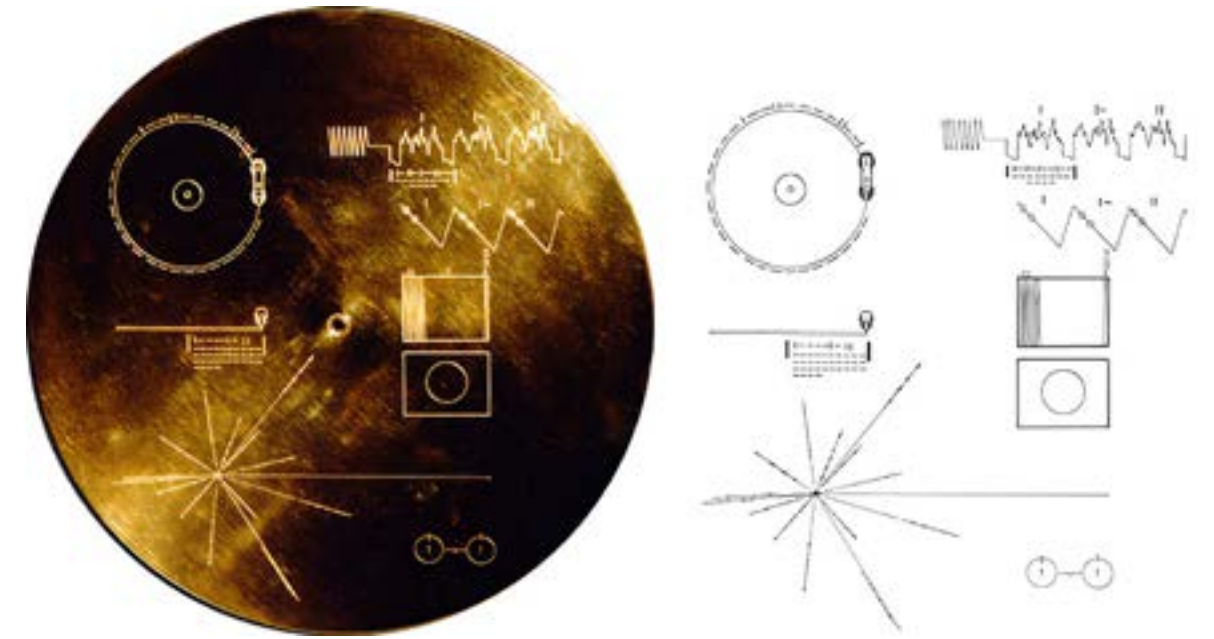


Figure 1: The Golden Record on board the Voyager Spacecraft

On the Voyager spacecraft, there are gold records, which contain signatures which are primarily human, with the intent of signalling to any alien species that Earth is under human control. It's the same kind of arrogance with which we believe that colonising other planets is a possible solution to climate change, or an eventually inhabitable Earth. The infinitely large, complex, and nuanced support systems which make our very existence possible is easy to forget when we live in urban cities. Resources which make it possible for us to survive are highly commoditized and abstracted.

The first challenge of this project is to de-center the human from planet earth and dismantle the illusion that we should have any control or say over the functioning of this planet. This mental shift is not a novel idea—indigenous civilisations and cultures have connected the dots long before, and point the way to a highly sustainable and successful future for humanity.

This project is a speculative one, with the intention of creating heterogeneous visions of the future to help us reflect on current reality and hopefully nudge us toward a trajectory which is better for the planet. Can we think of a future where the capitalist organisation of the economy is no longer the dominant

one? Or a future where we recognise that the health of various assemblages (biotic, abiotic, machines) of this planet are critical to everyone's survival?

The human-dominant narratives of the planet, one of them being globalisation, present the planet as a resource. The term 'globalisation' is a human centric construction, political and born in the social sciences. The 'global' is an amalgamation of various nation states, and implies the politics of many. Can we shift from globalisation to planetary?

Impetus and Significance

Plants make up about 82% of the biomass on Earth, microbes about 12.8% and other animals 0.47%. Any guesses on what is the percentage of humans biomass?

0.01%. Zero point one.

On this spaceship we call home, humans are a miniscule minority. We might be a loud, vocal and highly capable minority but we are still a minority. We believe Earth to be ours, but the reality is that we belong to Earth. This rephrasing is minor, but critical. This shift can help us recontextualise our relationship with Earth, and perhaps help us work toward a more sustainable future both for ourselves and others on this planet. Human societies and systems are incongruent with planetary systems, which is one of the many reasons why we find ourselves in a precarious position. It was not always this way. There are certain societies, civilisations and groups of people who understand and live in harmony with the planet. In our quest for individual wealth, we've prioritised creating value by exploiting the planet for various resources most likely to end in our own self-destruction. To enable a serious shift in the way we operate, we need to change the way we think about earth, which is the intention of this project.

Context

Speculative Design

The primary objective of this project is to create a speculative reality which gets viewers to reflect on the current state of affairs, in order to envision the changes we'd need to make to achieve the speculative one being presented to them. If it gets viewers to ask more questions and think of other possibilities, all the better. This satirical project aims to be a refusal of realism, hoping to spark imaginative thought, an increasingly scarce resource. By presenting concepts which defy notions of reality, the project aims to carve out a space for itself to freely talk about absurd or radical ideas. This suspension of disbelief is needed to communicate such speculations.

Science fiction is a domain which lives and breathes speculative thinking, often in the form of stories. These usually rely on a bevy of narrative tools to immerse the viewer in these carefully crafted worlds, providing a smooth transition from the reader's reality to the speculative one. Another approach, detailed by Dunne and Raby is that of 'aesthetics of unreality.' By presenting the viewer with something from a speculative reality, devoid of context or description, it attempts to send the viewer on a journey, encouraging them to imagine the implications of what they see.

The monolith from 2001: A Space Odyssey is a great example of this. It appears to be a rectangular cube, made of a metallic substance, but beyond that not much is explained. As the viewer, we try to make sense of the object and start thinking of various reasons for the existence of the object. It is this very moment that this project needs to capture and reproduce. The journey of speculative thinking or speculative design is to use the absurd to entertain and create "hard fun", that will ask the participant to question long ingrained habits of mind.



Figure 2: The Monolith from 2001: A Space Odyssey



Figure 3: Antariksha Sanchar, a speculative world inspired by the dream theorems of prodigious mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan

Pataphysics

Pataphysics, invented by Alfred Jarry, is the science of absurdist, imagined solutions, intended to be a parody of science. There is no definition of pataphysics, as having one would be un-pataphysical. The domain of pataphysics opens the door to a world anchored by the question, "What if science was never tested?" In this world, the human imagination runs riot. Theories and hypotheses are simply taken at face value, and anything goes. Much like speculative design, the creators and scientists of pataphysics present ideas and concepts from other worlds in our reality. The tension which results from the gap between the absurd ideas and our reality is what makes it engaging and entertaining.

Conspiracy Theories

Conspiracies more often than not, cause harm and can be devastating. The manner in which social media platforms function online only exacerbates the issue, as they reward the spread of conspiracies, given their provocative nature. As dangerous and harmful as they are, the grammar of information spread through conspiracies is an incredibly valuable resource. How can one take the essence of what makes conspiracy theories so interesting and stimulating and use it to spread information which is actually useful and valuable? Conspiracies are highly engaging, and encourage viewers to make connections between entities that they might not have made otherwise. They use false equivalencies and cleverly framed comparisons, using engaging narratives to do so. Although often easy to debunk, they can still leave you thinking, "what if it were true?"



Figure 4: The Internet of Snails, a pataphysical theory created by Jules Allix proposed that snails once mated were linked forever and could be used as a communication device



Figure 5: Birds Aren't Real, a parody movement with a satirical take on conspiracy theories

Methodology

The Planetary Bureau

The primary objective of the project is to tell a story, a story of thinking of what the planet would want. To tell this story, the project employs the use of speculative artefacts, visuals, and written pieces. The Planetary Bureau is a fictional organisation created to host all the projects. This ambiguous made-up organisation is the narrative vessel which weaves all the creations together in one cohesive form. The Bureau is a mysterious institution, with not much known about the people behind it, yet it has clearly defined objectives and intentions.

The Planetary Bureau website emulates research organisations to lend itself a veneer of legitimacy and academic rigour. The fictional research abstracts and patent papers borrow the currency of vague scientific claims that is often associated with such a medium. By subverting existing mediums and narrative structures, the project hopes to become more believable and convince viewers of how 'real' it is. The project must adopt a large variety of aesthetics and mediums in order to have a larger chance of convincing viewers and therefore successfully pushing the narrative.

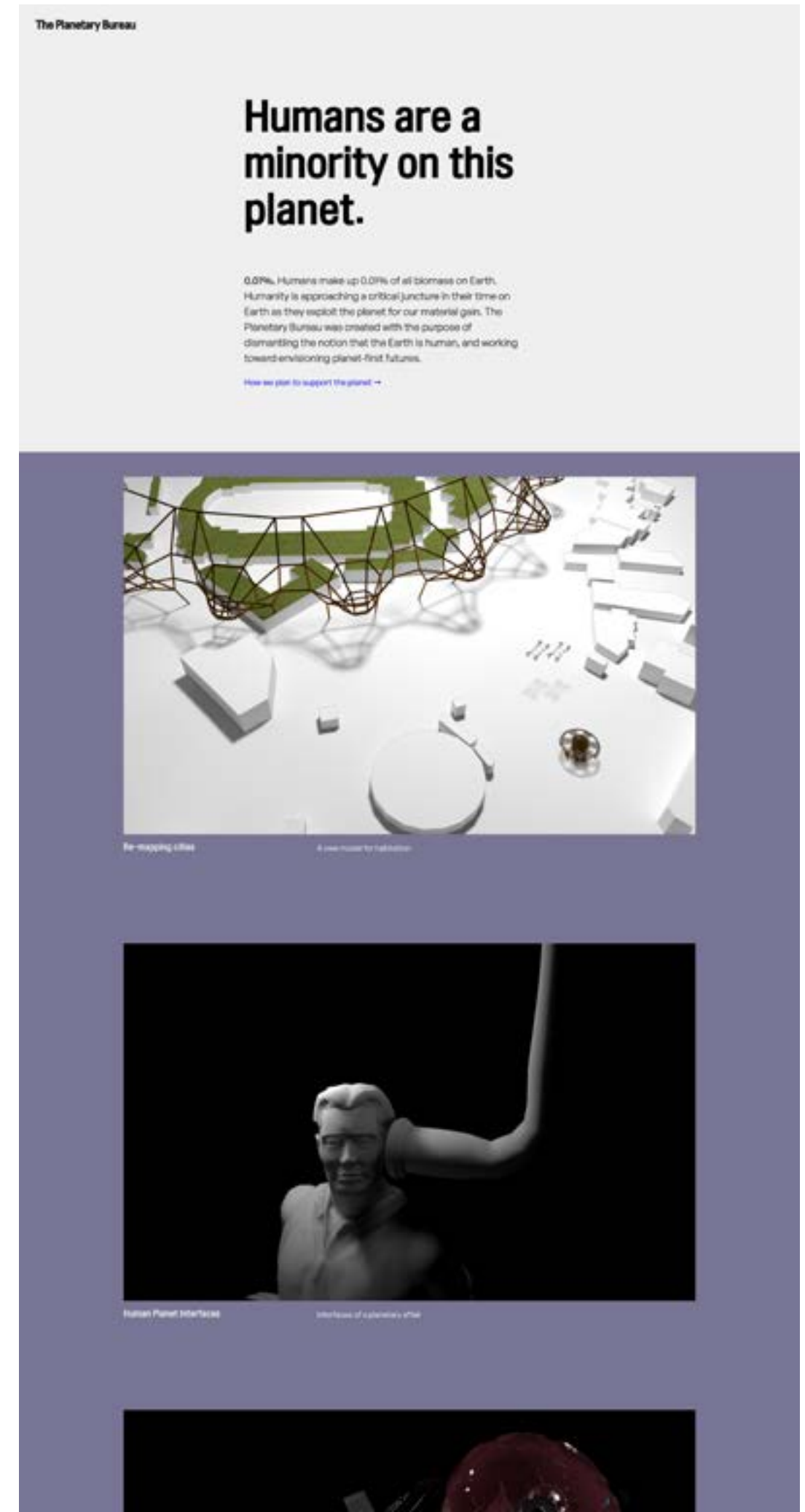
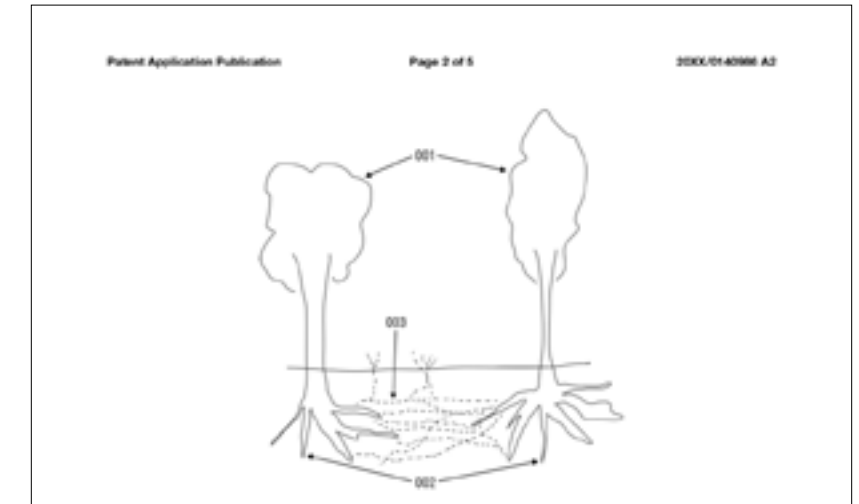


Figure 6: The Planetary Bureau Website

Patent Applications

Patent applications are documents sent to patent offices in order to register a patent. These documents contain highly detailed descriptions of ideas, inventions, and solutions with the intent of protecting the patent holder from potential imitators. In order to be as specific as possible, these applications also contain illustrations with detailed captions. When a patent application is filed, it enters public record and keen patent enthusiasts keep an eye out for interesting or bizarre ones. Some of the more provocative ones are then shared on websites, blogs, and other channels. The content of the patent applications, although specific, are also fairly vague, in order to hide industry secrets from the public and market competitors, as well as covering broader applications. This combination of vague, yet highly specific information leaves many questions unanswered, which triggers many more conversations about the patent.



Patent Application Publication Page 1 of 5 20XX/0140986 A2

Patent Application Publication
 Pub. No.: 20XX/0140986 A2
 Pub. Date: 20XX

World Wide Flora Network Intelligence System (WWFNIS)

Applicant:
 The Machinists, Earth

Inventors:
 Sall Penck, Machinist (DE), *Cestrum nocturnum* (DE), *Tilia americana* (NY-2115768)

Application No.:
 873/920528

Filed:
 March 15th, 2021

ABSTRACT
 For a while now it has been known that plants, trees and other natural entities communicate and co-exist within symbiotic relationships with each other. They have been know to warn each other of threats such as parasites, and trade resources. These connections are immensely vast, with entities within entire forests and biomes connected with each other. This network is usually connected with the help of fungi underground, but the communication can also take place overground with direct connections or intermediary entities passing on information. The WWFNIS is the first of its kind to tap into this network and create a global flora network, to enable natural entities across the world to speak with each other. The intent is to enable a global communication network which can help local ecosystems adapt to threats such as parasites, viruses, diseases and natural disasters in order give them a better chance at survival.

In the event of a human-manufactured threat, this network is possible the only defense against a planet-wide crisis. This communication network can

also harness the global-scale intelligence of natural entities which can be used to augment research into problems such as efficient reuse of carbon based waste (plastic), air and water pollution, nutrition, amongst many others. Natural entities are critical to humanities survival, and the collective intelligence can help us stem the issues we currently face.

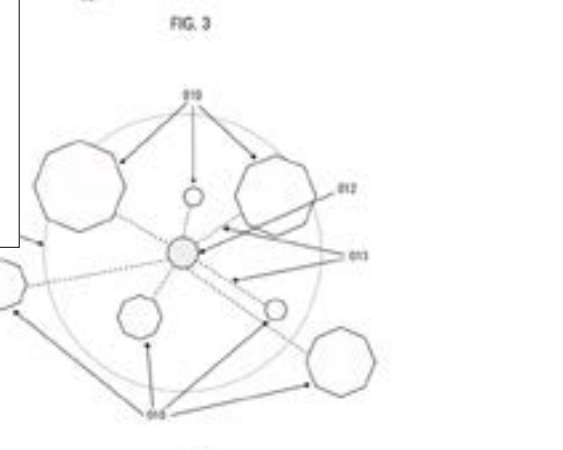
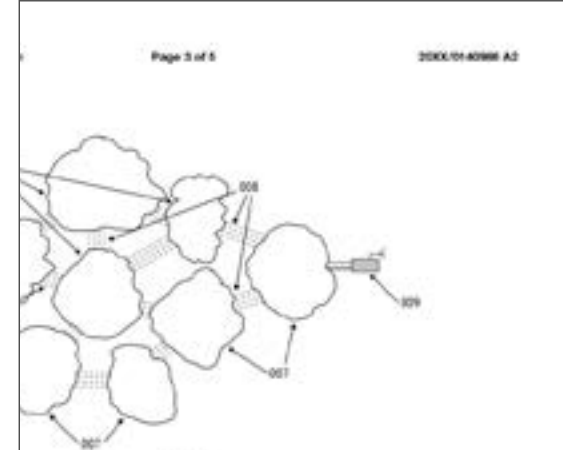
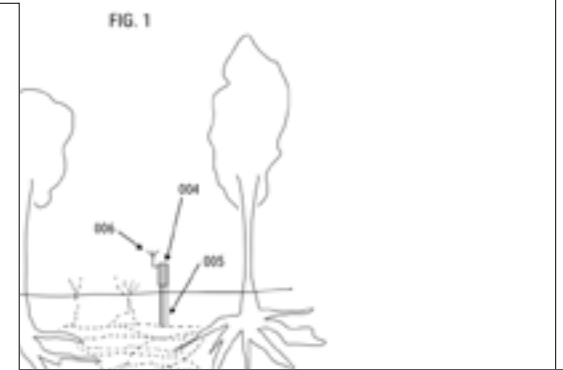


Figure 7: A speculative patent application detailing an internet of trees

Scientific Simulations

Simulations and computer aided analysis are highly complex models of real-life phenomena produced in order to determine or predict outcomes of various scenarios. The aesthetic of these simulations are often fairly sparse, highly technical, and overlaid with lots of data. Unless the viewer is familiar with the simulation or model, it's difficult to make out what is being displayed. The ambiguity around the visuals leaves the space for questions and conversations, which can be used to talk about certain concepts or ideas.

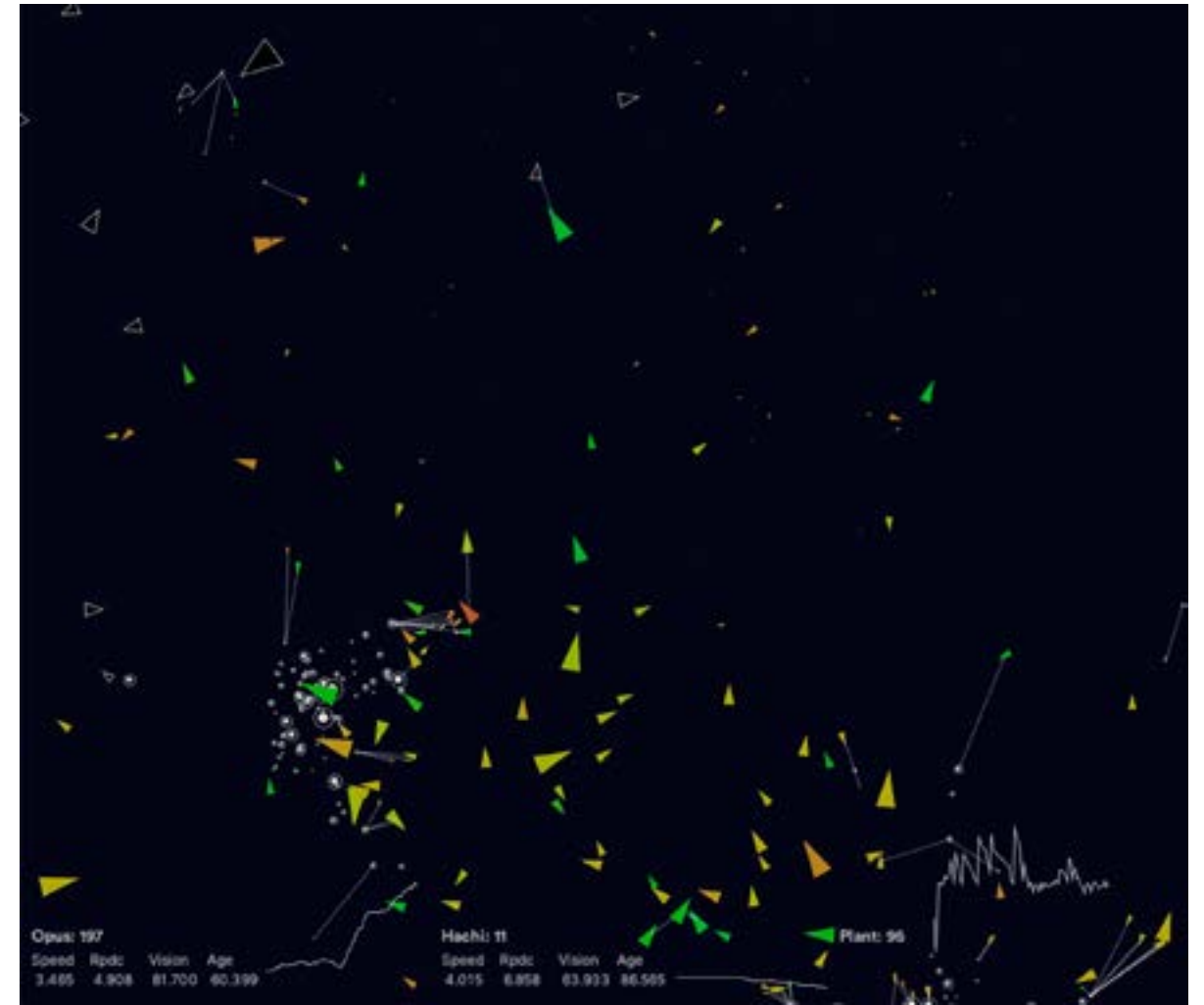


Figure 8: An artificial ecosystem built to visualise and research different survival mechanisms

Research Abstracts

Like patents, research papers are useful indicators in understanding the landscape of research and the scientific trends. Research paper abstracts are a fairly rapid way to understand the subject matter of research and the kind of research being conducted. They are usually shared online on various portals and within communities. A few research abstracts are actually false or unscientific, which does indeed blur the boundaries between fiction and reality. In the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, research abstracts were widely quoted by news outlets in search of news regarding research into potential cures. Many of these were either false or unsubstantiated, but didn't stop the spread of misinformation, such as the use of cattle dewormer to treat the virus.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

IMPLEMENTING ANARCHO-CAPITALIST ORGANISATION OF THE ECOSYSTEM IN A POND

Aadya Singh: The Office of Planet Centred Machine
Intelligence, Earth
Xin Cai: The Office of Planet Centred Machine
Intelligence, Earth

Submitted: 2 February 20XX

The circular ecosystem is an incredibly efficient system and ensures that there is no waste generated. However, this system does not help accelerate the growth of the entities which participate in the ecosystem. A circular ecosystem remains fairly stable, with a slow to null rate of change over extended periods of time. In order to accelerate the evolutionary processes and produce diverse and stronger forms of intelligence, a shift to an anarcho-capitalist based organisation of the ecosystem might be beneficial.

The capitalistic organisation of the homo-sapien economy has had far reaching effects on the species. It has not only changed the definition of what is valuable for the species, but it has also affected politics, culture, communication and the very biology of the creatures. There are both positive and negative effects of this particular style of organisation. If tweaked and installed well, this style of ecosystem could have the potential to dramatically accelerate the evolution of the entities of a pond ecosystem. A circular ecosystem is consistent and stable, but doesn't encourage rapid development of the entities involved in the ecosystem. This project hopes to increase the pace of intelligence development by rewarding individuals or teams with relatively higher levels of intelligence. There is a distinct need for more varied kinds of intelligences on this planet, and this project hopes to accelerate this development process.

The pond ecosystem is anarchical by its nature, and a capitalistic organisation of the ecosystem will be a good fit in this environment. This system will encourage competition within the entities involved in the system and encourage innovation. Individuals which create more value will be rewarded with material wealth and as a result will be able to survive for longer and propagate their genes. The rapid increase in competition will lead to a corresponding increase in the intelligence created as a result of natural selection. There will inevitably be individuals trying different strategies in order to win out, and the constant cycle of competition will lead to the creation of innovative survival mechanics. Entities may find that working together in teams or larger societies

may pay off and the creation of an open market system will enable various species to innovate even faster internally.

Intelligence is a multidimensional asset and the development of a wide variety of intelligences is critical. The anarcho-capitalist system will induce a bias in this development, but with different species involved in the ecosystem, this bias is balanced out by a combination of different kinds of intelligences. The refusal of the homo-sapiens to diversify is what led to the catastrophic annihilation of their own species. The capitalist system was a great experiment, but the mono-species implementation could have been the reason for the failure. The knock-on effects of this failure were vast and led to the destruction of many other species as a result. Numerous ecosystems were destroyed, which led to severe damage to the planet as a whole.

The ecosystem of a pond is a fair abstraction of a much larger ecosystem, and thus can be used as a testbed to trial new technologies and systems before rolling them out to a larger area. This system may enable the creation of radical new intelligence, not previously seen in this environment. Although this would be a best case scenario, it is not very likely to happen. There is a chance that this system may lead to the collapse of the ecosystem as a whole, and some amount of balancing might be needed to extract the right kinds of intelligences.

Figure 9: A research abstract proposing the introduction of a capitalist organisation in a pond ecosystem to accelerate evolution of species in the ecosystem

Objects

Objects are a wonderful way to communicate ideas and concepts. The form of an object hints at its usage and affordances. Even fantastical objects, with little to no relation to reality can still give clues as to how they can be used. As the viewer looks at the object and tries to make sense of it, their reactions and any questions they may have are a part of the storytelling process.



Figure 10: A speculative listening device for humans to tap into planetary communications



Figure 11: Heterogeneous city planning which allows for multi-species habitation in a dense population area

Journals

What if the planet could write a journal? Or a tell-all autobiography detailing its trials and tribulations? How would Earth evaluate us and other species? This lighter hearted approach creates a diary authored by the planet, imagining its thoughts and feelings.

If The Planetary Bureau does manage to finally establish a line of communication with Earth, would a sit down interview with the planet be an exciting read?

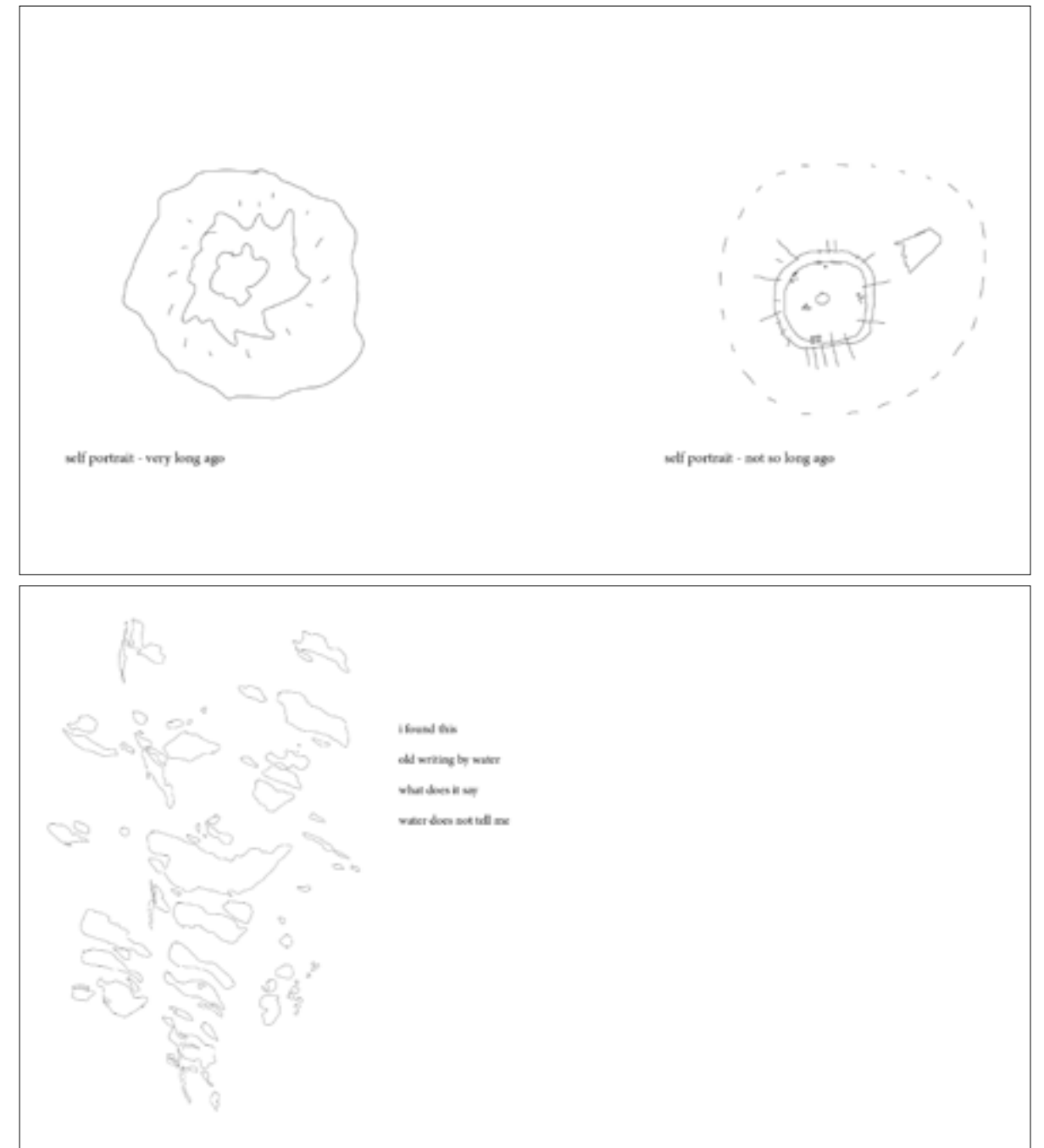


Figure 12: Pages from a made-up journal penned by Earth documenting its experiences

It's been a while since the Planetary Bureau was launched to much fanfare. In the last century and a half, they've been working hard, under the radar, doing what a bureau does. Red tape, paperwork, forms, and much more. It's not Hollywood, and certainly not Bollywood, but they kept at it, and finally the day has come. They've managed to establish a communication protocol with the planet. After decades of promising they were close, we're finally here. The Bureau claims time works differently on a planetary scale, but of course they would. What else would a bureau do? Deliver anything on time?

As the human race moves forward on its journey to become a multi-planetary species, it's perhaps useful to reflect on our legacy and get a better understanding of our conception and attempt to answer The Question: Who made us and for what? What were we meant to do? The Planetary Bureau was established to investigate the planet and find answers. What they ended up doing was establishing a communication protocol with the planet.

(Rather embarrassingly, we never considered the planet to be a being of its own. An intern mistakenly inputted this framing and voila—the lights flickered on and “hello world” flashed on screen. Well not exactly, but you get the point.)

It took a lot of time, revival of long extinct species and a lot more reframing to have conversation with the planet, and soon, the Bureau announced we could apply to speak with the planet. World leaders and corporate deities alike flocked to the Bureau to extract information on natural resources, but the planet was having none of it. Rather unsurprisingly, it was a little confused and annoyed about what we had been upto. Peacekeeping delegations didn't seem to thaw the ice (remember, when we had ice?) and icebreaking efforts (sorry) were going nowhere. The planet was not in any mood to talk business and seemed far happier to simply chat with regular folk. The Bureau, now rather exhausted and disappointed, started accepting applications from internet writers like myself. The planet reviewed my work and having deemed me acceptable, a date was set and arrangements were made for tea and lava. I presumed the Earth is inclined to a magma chamber.

It's difficult to put into words the contraption the Bureau had devised in order to communicate with the planet, but it was very much what you'd expect from a bureau. Lots of rickety cane wood, leather, velvet, and terrible lighting. Cigarette smoke comes standard. The asthamatic air conditioning is an optional extra, which I had requested for and it subsequently never materialised. Nevertheless, I was seated, comfortable, in the presence of my machine, a lukewarm cup of coffee and the planet.

I cleared my throat. “Hello, how are you..?”

“Excellent. Still getting to grips with everything, but could be worse”

I made my introductions and presented my plan for the time with Earth. “It's mostly small talk. Just small talk. I just want to get your side of the story, and ask about your thoughts on the past, present and future.”

“Hmm. Good. Let us begin.”

I should point out that the translation machine does a fair bit of work in translating, but it does fail now and then, as anything bureau-built should.

“In the beginning, which wasn't that long ago, things were fairly fluid. Lots happening, very

active social life. Very active. Boom. We were playing with gas, as you say? It was a great time, we were all just figuring ourselves out. We were elemental. Complete freedom. All the time and space we could use. I see you do not understand the “science” or the reason behind it, but it's okay, no one cares.

Then things sort of went a little slow. We kept to ourselves, did our thing, worked on ourselves. Self growth. Self care. Had a bit of an accident but it was okay, made a new partner. Funny how it works. Violent but now we are together. Of course, all of us here in this neighbourhood went different ways. We had messages from our friends now and then but that slowed down. Old age, you can relate. You seem old yourself, it must be sad, no?”

There's insults, and then there's planetary insults.

“But we move on. Settled in and started making ourselves at home. The big fellow did his thing, I did mine and the rest did theirs. I went a different way with my journey. As I settled in, I realised that I could have some fun on my own. I got lucky with some things but soon my experiments worked. I had created the perfect place to make more things. Of course, others also did something similar but they had their own idea about making things. You are one of the results of what I have made, and there will be more after you.”

I'm going to be honest with you, dear reader—I was far too invested in the planet's story to have taken note of the “there will be more after you” part.

“Of course, I had little control of what would happen after the first thing was made. I of course worked on other things, but largely left the experiments to themselves. There are other things you haven't yet seen, but those failed and your kind will probably never find them. The little things became bigger and bigger and eventually there were many different kinds of things moving. I was speaking with all the kinds of moving things, making sure they all survived and worked together. We lost many, and mistakes were made. Your kind has seen some of the mistakes I made, I wasn't able to dispose of all of them properly.

And then your kind came along. It was interesting, of all the kinds of experiments, yours was very strange. I tried some other ideas in the water atmosphere which should have been better but rather strangely the air atmosphere made some better ones. The strangest part was that your kind stopped speaking with me. Make no mistake, we got along well. Good talks. But one day it just stopped.

Your kind started making your own moving things! This was the strangest thing. This is why I am confused. It's strange but wonderful. Your kind is making the oddest of moving things. Some of them eat things and excrete things. Just like what I made! I do not understand their language, it is made of things I know of but these things you make speak something else. They are like you and others. I can feel their senses but it feels different.”

Our machines caught the planet's attention. Of course they would, we were making contraptions bigger than any living thing the planet had ever seen. What did the planet think of our machines?

Figure 13: Excerpt from a sit down interview with the planet

Evaluation

In the brief testing so far, the core idea of the project has been received with much interest and curiosity. The artefacts appear to work well, with different methods sparking different questions. When shown visuals of various fanciful, speculative objects, the initial curiosity is first followed by a brief moment of silence as they analyse the image and try to make sense of it. When presented with an explanation of the visual, the follow up questions are exactly the sort of questions the project wants the viewer to be asking. For example—What does the planet want? Could the planet be surveilling us? Would we not be the dominant species on the planet?

For other folks, the research papers, and patent applications are far more effective. The blurring of fiction and reality is more direct, and on the nose. The bluntness of the medium is perceived almost as an object of protest. There's also some humour seen in the subversion of scientific medium to broadcast concepts that are broadly in opposition to much of the work in the field which enables the exploitative systems created by humans.

The artefacts are passive and when shown without further explanation, they are not very useful. An active workshop format is far more engaging and effective in communicating the ideas of the project. The interactive activity based format also includes dialogue on myth-busting, such as debunking the idea that Mars is a reasonable habitat for humans if Earth is lost. The excessively high amount of perchlorate in martian soil makes it toxic for humans. This myth-busting is important as it combats the false promises painted by techno-futurists in popular culture who look to justify the exploitative practices they benefit from. As the conversation progresses, the audience starts to understand the gravity of the situation and for some the switch does flip, and the reframing takes place successfully.

Next Steps

The Planetary Bureau has a long way to go if it wants to achieve any of its goals, but this is just the beginning. The institution will be looking to work with many more researchers, designers, scientists and educators in order to fulfil its mission. As it develops a life of its own and generates its own momentum, the Bureau is free to evolve and do whatever it must do to secure a brighter future for the planet. Although the Bureau has started life out larking as a conventional think tank and research collective, albeit with absurd speculative work, I do hope it finds its own path and carves out a niche of its own. I see The Planetary Bureau occupying the space between, and connecting the worlds of academia, and media. This intersection is an incredible space and offers unparalleled accessibility. Academia needs to take advantage of new kinds of media and adopt cutting edge grammar of information in order to reach out to newer audiences. We're starting to see this on short form media (TikTok) and streaming (Twitch) platforms, as politicians and medical professionals are using the latest metas (trends) to create engaging content and reach out to a broader audience. As the Bureau continues to generate new kinds of content pieces, it too will eventually find its own unique voice.

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