

# The Design War: Humanish vs. Postbiologicals – game-playing that may affect humanity

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**Abstract.** This paper concerns ideological hegemony and the game of exaggeration. To illustrate, a wild card scenario depicts cultural struggles concerning the design of future humans. The biological conservative "humanish" argue for a narrow, classical physiological style. Postbiologicals, a variety of species derived from *Homo sapiens* and Strong AI, lobby for ingenuity and diversity. The author isolates and draws from four modern ideological campaigns—an advertisement, a fictitious business, a deceptive radio broadcast, and chicanery. These campaigns employ methods of pretence, irony, and adynaton to promote ideological hegemony. Playing off of these agonistic methods, the author builds an ad campaign suggesting morphological freedom to address concerns about the design of sapient life—their substance and structure

**Keywords.** Design, humanish, postbiologicals, one-upmanship, spoilsport, morphological freedom

## Introduction

One hundred thousand years ago, the human species experienced an indisputable improvement in its cognitive architecture. A future evidentiary shift from biological cells to programmable AI may take the processes of intelligence from wet neurons to more resilient and faster performing substrates, one million times over.

Will society of the future be so vain and prejudiced that how we look could cause a design war? Historically, people judged one skin color as better than another, one set of physical characteristics as more attractive than another, one set of emotional behaviors more appropriate than another, and one set of cognitive attributes as superior to another. Eventually universal human rights curtailed such prejudices, and political correctness discouraged conflicts based on ethnicity and race. Nevertheless, in the era of a technological acceleration that might amount to a future technological Singularity—a time when artificial intelligence reaches human-level intelligence and as a result, human enhancements become keenly sophisticated and the idea of identity, agency, and personhood are varied and blurred—it would be ironic if human species

traditionalists censor diversity and feel repugnance to those who do not look expressly human.

This particular set of ideas is a wildcard scenario based on historical consequences of humanity's bias which have resulted in wars. From a distance, humanity's historical and even current biases often appear as ridiculous and agonistic, holding potentially dangerous consequences. As Dutch historian Johan Huizinga wrote in his seminal book *Homo Ludens*, "[w]ar contains [a] ludic element when properly agonistic, when contestants enter as equals on [the] field of battle. ... This extends to international relations: refusing to acknowledge international law goes against the spirit of play, is thus uncivilized." (1955)

The author's intention is to reveal an agonistic element of ideological battle concerning morphological freedom. The tool for this campaign is located in the field of advertising and the method employs the use of exaggeration. Such method may have intended and unintended consequences, as viewers and readers fall prey to such exaggerated stories. When advertising, whose purpose is to inform and influence the public, is produced with wit and machination, even the most sophisticated of audiences might not recognize its legitimacy. The indicator of authenticity in play, therefore, is what Huizinga refers to as the agonistic element of human behavior which when striving to achieve an effect appears contrived or exaggerated. (1955)

## **1. Humanish vs. Postbiologicals**

In setting the stage for this paper, the author defines "humanish", a play on Amish, as human beings who believe nature is a static construct/phenomena of the physical world and that altering human nature is immoral and dangerous. The term "postbiologicals" refer to human beings who are not bound to what is considered natural biology and who value agency over physiology. The term "design" refers to accidental/natural design vs. conscious design. The term "war" refers to struggles for political hegemony, revealing distinct biases concerning what is or is not an acceptable method of design for sapient life. The scenario is depictive of the human social game of one-upmanship. The strategy employs a systematic and conscious act of outperforming the opponent in order to instill a sense of inadequacy in them, and thereby gain social status.

The central issue of this scenario concerns morphological freedom, which principle signifies the right to enhance one's physiological wet-ware with technological add-ons, as well as the right not to be coerced to enhance one's physiological wet-ware. The domains of influence include social, political, ethical, and applied design issues: whether persons, regardless of the form or composition (*i.e.*, avatar, cyborg, transhuman, upload, posthuman), ought to look biological and resemble human physiology when merging with technology. As such, the scenario's game of war is based on "how a person looks," seemingly trite but bona fide social behavior, as individuals and society quickly judge one's appearance and attitude, which are aspects of social discourse and analogous to the game of play.

## **2. Four Agonistic Campaigns**

The author selects four campaigns fostering conspiracy theory and exaggeration as example of tactical maneuvers as proposed advertising methods for the controversy of the humanish vs.

postbiologicals. The first campaign is the highly publicized anti-technology campaign featuring full-page ads in the *New York Times*. This monthly publicity stunt is known as "The Turning Point Project" and lasted from 1999-2000. The second campaign is the "Biotech Projects," an ongoing initiative produced by Critical Art Ensemble, commencing around 1997, wherein exaggeration etches the practice of biotechnology as a mechanistic manipulation of consumerism and capitalism. Third, the Orson Well's 1938 "War of the Worlds" radio broadcast stunt which claimed the Martians invaded Earth. And fourth, the Sokal Affair of 1996, which hoax made a mockery of a respected scientific journal.

### 3. Playing Off Of Campaigns

Playing off these four campaigns, which are utilitarian in purpose and advocate socio-political commentary, becomes equally amusing and poignant when applying similar tactics. For example, the art of taking information out of context and exaggerating facts. Exaggerations contained in the first two campaigns of the aforementioned projects make claims that biotechnology will result in the corruption of human nature, nanotechnology obliterating the earth's flora, genetic engineering manipulating society with capitalistic schemes, and posthumanity maneuvering for the extinction of humanness. Exaggeration in examples from the third and fourth campaigns exemplify the consequences of intended hyperbole and mockery.

The game of ideological battle is often based on bias and such bias is often presented to a society ripe for trusting the surreal or make-believe. Although Huizinga offers principles for social play which fit into a surreal non-serious, self-contained system, its rules are intended to separate the play world from reality. In *Man, Play and Games* (2001) Roger Caillois suggests that play is voluntary and deliberate as an essential element of human development and that there are material consequences, with possibility for the corruption of play. In this paper, the author follows Caillois' dictum that play consists of locating and pursuing a response to the opponent's intended actions and can lead to what Caillois claims to be "disastrous consequences" (Caillois p. 55)

#### 3.1 Exaggeration: One-upmanship and the spoilsport

The ad campaign for the Turning Point Project was fostered by environmentalist political one-upmanship wherein anti-biotech activists are presumed to be more humane than biotech-advocates. Caillois classifies this behavior of one-upmanship as a characteristic of competitive games. The Turning Point Project uses competitive game strategy in its production of advertisements in full-page spreads featured in *The New York Times*. One such ad exhibits an image of a hairless mouse with written claims that "[t]his is an actual photo of a genetically engineered mouse with a human ear on its back." According to the US Center for Consumer Freedom, "[t]he now-famous photograph doesn't show a genetically-engineered mouse at all. The truth is that a template in the shape of an ear (and made of human cartilage cells) was allowed to grow under a mouse's skin. The technique is a great help to burn victims and children born without ears. Furthermore, the mouse's genetic makeup wasn't altered one bit." (2003)

Along similar ideological lines, the Biotech Projects appeal to the social game of so-called leftist

resistance to emerging technologies. Suggesting genohype by biotech companies, these players become a respected spoilsport of 21<sup>st</sup> century technological innovation. Here the spoilsport player interrupts the game of the Biotech Era by refusing to play, and contests the validity of the game. Cleverly, the spoilsport instigates a different game in a new community with its own rules. Perhaps a bit of sophism is at play in its "contest with rivals in public." (Huizinga, 1955)

While there is certainly evidentiary truth to the validity of over-zealous purveyors of technology, the anti-genohype of the Biotech Projects builds its arguments on equal, if not more exaggeration, by intentionally playing the role of spoilsport to ruin the game and as such, the viability of public discourse. Further, it may be "fine and well, but how then do we avoid the absurdist nightmare of undercover agents, unknown to each other, working at cross-purposes?" (Dery) Thus, the trickery can fall back upon itself and rather than providing a good argument against the hype of biotechnology, fall into its very art of trickery and shenanigan.

### 3.2 *Exaggeration: Make it utterly believable*

One way to exaggerate and confuse is make an idea so utterly believable that others will not dare refute it. A notable example is Orson Wells' radio production "War of the Worlds" which was broadcast in 1938. Wells' transmitted an alert to his audience that Martians were invading earth. Stricken, shocked and aghast by this sudden news, "... folks in the New Jersey area actually claimed they could see the fires of the destruction, one man insisted he heard the President order an evacuation over the air, [and] prominent Princeton scientists actually went out in search of the meteor that reportedly fell nearby, ..." (Jolley 2005)

Another public exaggeration was conjured up by theoretical physicist, Alan Sokal and known as the "Sokal Affair of 1996."

[Sokal's essay] "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity," [was submitted] to [the periodical] *Social Text*.... It was riddled with non-sequiturs and unscientific nonsense, but was also riddled with quotations from, and references to, the patron saints of post-modernity and, no doubt in part as a result of those references, it was published in its entirety. The quotations were, in Sokal's words, 'absurd or devoid of meaning'. After publication, Sokal immediately revealed his hoax, sparking off an extraordinary broadside from the cultural theorists. (Cultshock)

The success of these two methods, those of Wells and Sokal, rely on believability and the art of persuasion. In short, to extend what you know to convince others that you know far beyond any realm of what you really do know. Wells thought his broadcast was a playful exaggeration of science fiction, but in actuality, the audience listened in earnest. Sokal's game of mimicry and exaggeration resulted in a public embarrassment of *Social Text*, bringing Sokal fame but ignominy to the magazine. Such practices of play do not inhibit the "safe place" that Huizinga proposed in *Homo Luden*.

#### 4. The Scenario: A design issue

Returning to the crux of this paper, the author pursues the notion concerning the type of argument that might confront humanish and postbiologicals. The fundamental issue concerns the design of sapient bodies—their substance and structure. Hindsight would remind society that deception is a driving principle of war, and foresight would warn us to actively play out various scenarios in anticipation. We know that the art of exaggeration causes the viewing or listening public to be deceived. Further, the clever maneuver of placing the burden of proof on the opponent, along with red herrings, strawman arguments, and slippery slopes, causing the opponent to overturn or derail and possibly become the spoilsport.

In the world of play according to Huizinga, "[t]he player who trespasses against the rules or ignores them is a 'spoil-sport.' The spoil-sport is not the same as the false player, the cheat; for the latter pretends to be playing the game and, on the face of it, still acknowledges the magic circle. It is curious to note how much more lenient society is to the cheat than to the spoil-sport. This is because the spoil-sport shatters the play-world itself." (p. 11) However, in the real world of play wherein the stakes are high, the spoil-sport is not merely one who spoils the pleasure of others, he/she is the ideological trickster who employs exaggeration to influence society, but not so far as the sociopath who derives pleasure from the peril of others.

The humanish could argue that breaking away from human natural attributes would result in a string of mutations that would cause the extinction of the human race. The humanish could argue that greedy capitalistic aims of Second Life and the Metaverse have used electronic methods to influence humans to leave their biology behind in becoming avatars. The humanish could argue an essentialist viewpoint that hereditary biology, containing all the chromosomes, is the true, uncontested human personhood. There are more than enough possible arguments not to change the human form. This is not the point of the issue, but diversions for exaggeration which could very well obfuscate any nuggets of truth. Moreover, the role becomes the ideological trickster whose game is to deliberately confuse information.

At time when human enhancements are keenly sophisticated and the idea of identity, agency, and personhood are varied and blurred, it would be ironic if human traditionalists seek to censor diversity and express repugnance to those who do not look expressly human. One can wonder how and why exaggerations would come about. Ironies of fate are strong purveyors of retribution. Perhaps society is too focused on consumerism, and capitalism's finer, beneficial attributes have been overridden by greed. Perhaps the lust for self-improvement, education, and the opportunity to pursue such notions are elitist. However, are we all not elite in our special circles, groups and affiliations? Certainly an activist who suggests wearing fur is immoral purchases plenty of pleather or plastic. And benefits to fight AIDS need consumers to purchase the paraphernalia which goes to purchasing the supplies and building the industry to develop antibiotics, pharmaceuticals, and care for those dying from this dreaded disease. There are more than two sides to every story and perhaps the activists who expose some important and necessary truths have also benefited from consumerism, capitalism, education, funding, and other opportunities. The point being that there is a semblance of truth in exaggeration and also cosmic irony. PETA, a worldwide organization for the protection of animal rights, adds to consumerism

by using plastics which are not biodegradable. Likewise, Bioart's artists who defend the rights of bacteria in fact may be stepping on and killing innocent biota as they walk from one side of their laboratories while extracting DNA from eukaryotes to the side of the lab to grow newly sequenced clones.

Historical irony and cosmic irony are marvelous sketchpads for professing all sorts of exaggeration, adynaton, irony, exaggerations, hyperbole, obfuscating information, and any other means for confusing the public are similar to the behaviors of "bacilli that keep mutating with every antidote." (Colina) Just as the never-ending battle against hostile bugs continues, so too the battle against error in matters of bias continues.

#### *4.1 Game Goal: Ad Campaign*

With this said, the author turns to the Second Life project Human Right of Morphological Freedom ("HRMF"). This project is a hybrid of strategic methods such as exaggeration, spoilsport, and one-upmanship. Its purpose is to create a market of recognition and penetration to bring attention to age-old biases which bets are hedged on homogenous, nondiverse, and imitative attitudes that keep the loftiness of play at bay. Like the aforementioned campaigns, the HRMF campaign employs the tool of advertisement and the method of exaggeration and adynaton.

The target issue of the campaign is the right of morphological freedom. Morphological freedom is the hook. It means the freedom of choice to enhance or not to enhance. The scenario which may best describe why this right is crucial is in both protecting the rights of people who want to enhance their bodies and the right of others from being coerced into enhancing their bodies. Eugenics is one of the most convincing arguments for promoting morphological freedom. However, it is easily understand the incentives to exaggerate negative circumstances of emerging technologies; however, the concept of morphological freedom protects both the humanish and the postbiologicals.

The promotional ad campaign for HRMF states, "[d]on't let wet matter interfere with hard choices." Here the concept is to exploit the human cognitive zone, or brain, as flimsy wet matter which, when overwrought, seeps out like caramel goo. Making the hard choice about morphological freedom—the freedom of choice to enhance and look different than the conventional human species is too difficult for wet matter to cogitate over. Thus, such a difficult decision requires a cognitive enhancement to determine the pros and cons of such decision. The inference is that the human situation is a loose-loose scenario: simply thinking about morphological freedom is too complex for the neurological wiring of the wet-brain.

The entire ad campaign implies by exaggeration that it is a fundamental right to protect human nature in relation to accidental/natural design and conscious design. If human nature were essentially self-modifying, then it would be beneficial to humans to protect such a natural process. In applying a Mirandolan philosophy concerning man's freedom to change his nature, human enhancement is one way of protecting human nature. (Mirandola 1486) Further, humans may need to enhance in response to exponential growth of computing processing power resulting in Strong AI, and the potential threat of such smarter-than-human machines. "Since all systems,

people and societies have an in-built tendency to try to survive, they will use the technologies ultimately to do just that. (Heylighen 2008)

### **Concluding Remarks**

“Not only can the arts express the divine, they can also express this capacity of human beings to create and transform themselves.” (Hooker)

A war over sapient design may be an exaggeration of facts, or it may be caused by exaggeration of facts. If a cultural divide comes about due to arguments concerning human design—what we look like—then all sapient life ought to be prepared with knowledge rather than puffed-up ideological campaigns that could do more harm than good. Point blank, supercomputing power is accelerating. Super intelligent AIs could evolve. Humans may need to integrate methods of intelligence amplification to our given wet matter. Whether or not this makes us postbiological is secondary. The Humanish vs. postbiologicals scenario may not be so far-fetched an exaggeration or wild card. It makes sense that we as a society and as a species understand consequences of our technologies and plan ahead. In deference to General Sun Tzu who in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC advised that it is not the fight but the strategy that wins, the author suggests that species and ideological hierarchy is not necessarily and distinctly about the type of species, but more about the behavior types within a species.

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