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Pile of Dirt, with Trees (2007)

To a Friend whose Work has come to Nothing

NOW all the truth is out,
Be secret and take defeat
From any brazen throat,
For how can you compete,
Being honour bred, with one
Who, were it proved he lies,
Were neither shamed in his own
Nor in his neighbours' eyes?
Bred to a harder thing
Than Triumph, turn away
And like a laughing string
Whereon mad fingers play
Amid a place of stone,
Be secret and exult,
Because of all things known
That is most difficult.

W.B. Yeats, 1916

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In fall of 2003 I was working as Creative Director in the Mobile Games Division of Comverse, a large telecommunications company.

One day Comverse decided they didn't want to be in the mobile games business anymore, and laid off the entire division.

I had spent most of the previous ten years being blown from one game company to another, riding the Internet bubble all the way up and all the way down.

I hadn't published a decent game under my own name since 1990.

So I decided it was time to change careers.

I left the computer game industry, and took a job in the Massachusetts public school system, working as a producer and educator in the planetarium at Framingham State College.

If you want to get depressed about the future of America, take a job in our public education system.

Having said this, my job in the planetarium was not without its moments.

I could always count on a few gasps of wonder when the house lights went out, and the full glory of the night sky appeared on the dome overhead.

And every now and then, I would see a young face staring up at the star projector with curiosity and delight, the way I did when I was a boy.

I presented about 1400 shows under the dome to over 55,000 students.

But 3½ years of constant repetition and decreasing net pay finally got to me. So last year, I returned to the game business.

This time around, I decided I wanted a low profile. No more interviews. No more conferences. And no more speeches.

Then I got an email from George inviting me to attend last year's Project Horseshoe. I'd been to a couple of his Game Audio Bar-B-Qs, so I knew better than to turn him down.

At that Horseshoe, I ended up in a workgroup that called itself the Legitimate Bastards. Our job was to study what could be done to make computer games more "legitimate" culturally.

We came up with a number of recommendations.

One idea was to encourage the creation of an academic archive that would preserve our history for posterity.

That turned out to be an idea whose time had come. As it happened, some people at the University of Texas Center for American History were thinking about the same thing.

They now have an official video game archive, which actively seeks donations of documents, source code, game packaging and other artifacts related to the history of video games.

You'll know we've achieved legitimacy when the University of Texas starts offering us money for our artifacts, like they do for movie directors.

The idea that we game designers are creating a body of work worth preserving is flattering, I suppose.

It's fun to imagine scholars poring over our old contracts and design documents, writing books about who did what first, and who influenced who.

When I think about this issue of legacy, two books in my library come to mind.

The first is *The Clock of the Long Now: Time and Responsibility*, by Stewart Brand.

It's basically a statement of purpose of a group called the Long Now Foundation, whose members include wealthy technorati like Stewart Brand, Danny Hillis, Brian Eno,

Doug Carlston, Esther Dyson and Mitch Kapor.

The Long Now Foundation is involved in several major archiving initiatives. Their biggest and most ambitious project involves the construction of a gigantic mechanical clock out in the desert.

This clock, which has already been prototyped by Thinking Machines founder and engineer Danny Hillis, is designed to operate continuously for the next 10,000 years.

Its purpose is to serve as a kind of man-made myth for future generations, a somber tourist destination to get people thinking about time and stewardship and long-term responsibility and conservation and all that kind of thing.

If you visit their Web site at longnow.org, you can shop for Clock of the Long Now polo shirts and hats and posters, and look at pictures of the 180-acre mountainside they've bought in eastern Nevada.

The Clock of the Long Now was published in 1999, right at the climax of the Internet bubble. It's just oozing with the wide-eyed techno-optimism and faith in the future that was so prevalent in those crazy, wonderful days.

Nowhere in the entire book will you find the word "terrorism."

Another book, also published in 1999, is called *Deep Time: How Humanity Communicates Across Millennia*, by physics professor and science fiction writer Gregory Benford.

Dr. Benford approaches the subject of legacy from a perspective of hard experience. He's been involved as an advisor in a number of government projects whose purpose is to communicate across generations.

One scheme involved the design of a message marker that was going to be attached to the Huygens space probe that landed on Titan in January 2005.

This 28mm disc, made of artificial diamond, was micro-inscribed with data and diagrams that far-future space explorers, human or otherwise, could read to determine where and when the space probe was made.

It even had a 3-D photograph of humans standing on a beach, in politically correct ethnic groups, dressed in loud bathing suits. Note the elderly lady in the chair, demonstrating her opposable thumb.

Dr. Benford goes on to describe how a minor bureaucrat at NASA tried to take all the credit for the project, and ended up infuriating everyone so much that the marker never flew, even though it was already manufactured and paid for.

It's sitting in a drawer somewhere in Washington.

Another legacy project Dr. Benford worked on had to do with radioactive waste.

The US Government has a test disposal program called the Waste Isolation Pilot Project, a vast storage facility buried 2,000 feet beneath in the salt flats near Carlsbad, New Mexico.

Thousands of barrels of radioactive waste material are being stored here, supposedly to determine the feasibility of long-term nuclear storage.

Nobody seems to know what will happen to these barrels if they decide it isn't feasible.

One of the problems with storage of nuclear waste is that it remains dangerous for a very long time. In some cases, up to 10,000 years or more.

Dr. Benford was invited to join a panel of experts hired by Congress to determine the best way to keep people away from the project site after it is sealed in 2015.

Their job was to create a warning marker that would remain visible, intelligible and effective for the next 400 generations.

You might call it the Achtung of the Long Now.

This is not the first time our government has attempted

this sort of thing.

In 1961, the government exploded a small nuclear warhead a thousand feet beneath the Carlsbad salt flats, not far from the Waste Isolation Pilot Project.

The blast site was duly marked, and then abandoned.

Dr. Benford and his panel of experts decided to go check out this 30-year-old marker.

They scoured the flat scrub desert, shooing away the cattle and dodging the dust devils, until they located the marker.

It's a gravestone-sized slab of granite bearing a copper plate, running green from oxidation.

In big letters it says PROJECT GNOME, followed by the names of the generals and bureaucrats who arranged the blast.

On the back of the slab is a smaller plaque, nearly unreadable with rust.

It says (only in English), "This site will remain dangerous for 24,000 years."

There was evidence that the granite slab had been moved. Dr. Benford speculates that it was done by cattle, using the slab as a rubbing post.

He estimates that if the slab gets pushed one meter in some random direction every thirty years, in 24,000 years it will lie about thirty meters from its original site.

Luckily, the designs proposed for the marker over the Waste Isolation Pilot Project are considerably more elaborate.

They're based on a variety of scenarios about the likelihood of some future civilization trying to dig up the area.

The general conclusion of Dr. Benford's panel of experts was that the best way to mark something for a long time is with a huge pile of dirt.

Anything else is likely to be misunderstood, worn away or stolen.

So on the one hand, we have the Clock of the Long Now, a visionary marvel for the ages, huge, impressive, inviting, vulnerable. Its simple, patient message is: *Think Ahead*.

On the other hand, we have a nuclear waste site, built like a mountain, conspicuously forbidding, with another simple message: *Keep Out*.

Two desert monuments, each designed to last 10,000 years, as long as human civilization has existed on this planet.

So tell me. What is the likelihood that the contents of the

Video Game Archive at the University of Texas will survive for 10,000 years?

Before we all run out and slit our wrists, I'd like to tell you a story.

My mother grew up in a small city in northern Rhode Island with the curious name Woonsocket.

No one remembers where the name Woonsocket comes from. Some historians think the word may have originated with a local Native American tribe.

When I was a kid, my family used to visit my grandparents in Woonsocket every Sunday. They were still living in the same house that my mother grew up in.

I used to pass the afternoons exploring the city neighborhoods with my brothers and sisters.

Remember, this was back in the 1960s, when parents allowed and even encouraged children to wander around freely.

One of our favorite places to visit was a local private high school.

We would walk around the big brick building, across a broad expanse of empty parking lot.

Back there, on a rocky hillside overlooking a hockey arena, was a very strange and special place.

It was sort of like a cemetery.

There were tall arches of stone and cement, topped with statues of angels.

A tree-lined walkway was lined with stone pillars carved with religious scenes.

There was a semicircular wall of stone, twenty feet high, a shadowy grotto enclosing a shallow pool of rainwater, with stairways and statues set into the surrounding stones.

The cement floor of the grotto was inlaid with smooth stones, children's marbles, chips of quartz and bits of colored glass.

Everything in this mysterious statue garden was falling apart. It was overgrown with weeds, littered with broken bottles and candy wrappers. Some of the angels were knocked over, or had missing heads or arms.

The effect of this place was solemn and magnetic.

I spent many hours there with my siblings and cousins, poking among the ruins and throwing pebbles in the pool.

When I was a little older, I would go to the statue garden by myself. Those were the best times.

I would roam alone among the crumbling statues, making up stories about the angels and saints.

Eventually I became an adolescent and stopped going to Grandma's house on Sundays.

I went through high school and college. My grandparents moved away from that neighborhood, and eventually died.

One afternoon, about ten years ago, I happened to be driving past Woonsocket and decided to swing past my grandparents' house to see what it looked like.

It's still there, pretty much as it was in the '60s.

And suddenly, for the first time in over thirty years, I remembered that old statue garden near the high school.

I drove around the corner, parked my car in the parking lot I used to walk across, and stepped over to the rocky hillside overlooking the hockey arena.

It was gone.

The statuary, the arches and the walkway had completely disappeared.

It was just an empty parcel, overgrown with pine needles and bushes.

Several dumptrucks of soil had been dumped into the stone grotto enclosing the pool, burying it completely.

A grove of pines, at least twenty years old, was growing

out of that soil.

Only the top edge of a wall remained to mark the place where the grotto had been.

I turned away from the hillside where I used to play, a little bit sad, and a little bit puzzled.

Who had built that strange collection of walls and statues? Why had it been neglected and then destroyed?

A few weeks later, I was visiting my parents when I remembered that my mother had grown up in that neighborhood.

I asked her if she knew anything about that old statue garden at the high school.

In reply, she disappeared into her bedroom and came out with a family album.

She leafed through the pages and stopped on a small black-and-white photograph.

The photo showed my mother in her early twenties, probably around 1954, dressed in her Sunday best.

Beside her stood an elderly man dressed in the robes of a Catholic priest or monk.

Around and behind them rose the arches and statues I

remembered from my youth.

My mother told me that the man in the photo was “Brother Andre,” and that he was the architect and caretaker of that statue garden.

She had known Brother Andre since she was a little girl. She had often watched him at work around the grotto and statues.

She remembered how she and her sisters had supplied him with marbles and bits of glass to decorate the concrete.

And she recalled hearing that Brother Andre had died some years later, and was laid to rest in the grotto by his fellow brothers.

Now I was thoroughly intrigued.

Over the next few years, I did a bit of research to see what I could learn about “Brother Andre” and the lost statue garden.

The high school where the garden was located is the Mount St. Charles Academy, operated then and now by the Brothers of the Sacred Heart, a Catholic religious order devoted to education.

I politely phoned and emailed the Academy looking for information, but no one ever got back to me.

But in the Woonsocket Public Library, I discovered a incomplete collection of old Mount St. Charles yearbooks.

And there, buried between photos of the hockey teams and class presidents, I found a few photographs of students posing in front of the statues and grotto I remembered from long ago.

And I also found a portrait and some other photos of the man who built them.

My mother's memory was faulty. His name was not Brother Andre. That was the name of another brother who built a famous shrine on a hill in Montreal.

The man my mother knew was named Brother Sergius.

His position at the Academy is listed in the 1962 yearbook as "Care of Grottoes."

A couple of photographs in the same yearbook show the elderly Brother Sergius working on a stone wall and shoveling snow.

The adjacent caption reads, "At 86, good old Brother Sergius finds plenty to do at all times throughout the year, which should be an inspiration for many an idle youngster."

Eventually I hope to learn more about good Brother Sergius.

But I already know enough to recognize his statue garden as a symbol for the way I want to live.

Every October, on a Sunday afternoon when the trees are in full color, I drive down to that hillside in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, and sit for a while on the remains of the wall he built before I was born.

I like to imagine that the grotto of Brother Sergius was a work of simple devotion, made with little hope of fame or recognition, and no reward other than his room and board at the Academy, and the satisfaction of working on it.

The school he served for decades apparently didn't care much for the garden they buried him in.

No one bothered to maintain it after his death. The decaying pile of stone became an eyesore. Probably a hangout for local hippies at night.

A dangerous place for young children to wander.

So, after a respectful period of time had passed, they knocked everything down and bulldozed it over.

Nevertheless, look at what has happened.

A neighborhood girl who pressed marbles into the cement of the grotto grew up, became a mom and had a little boy, who inadvertently discovered the ruins and was so moved that he grew up giving speeches about it decades later, and thousands of miles away.

Sometimes, when I'm depressed or feeling sorry for myself, I forget the subtle legacy of Brother Sergius.

I start saying things like, *I haven't published a decent game under my own name since 1990*.

Let my legacy be buried like the grotto of Brother Sergius.

Because the best way to mark something for a long time is with a huge pile of dirt.

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Three days ago, as I was writing this presentation, I received an unexpected email from Brother Robert Croteau, President of Mount St. Charles Academy.

Months ago, I had obtained his email address and sent him a message asking for permission to search the records in the Academy library for information about Brother Sergius.

In his response, Brother Croteau apologized for taking so long to get back to me, and gave me the contact info needed to access the library.

He also sent me this photograph of Brother Sergius.

A copy now hangs on the wall of my studio at home.

When I look up at it, I think of Mahatma Ghandi, a grand

master of the long view, who once said, “Whatever you do will be insignificant, but it is very important that you do it.”

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