MOST STILL TO COME

(Answer to the 2010 Edge Question "How is the Internet changing the way you think?]

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Perhaps the two most important world events during my thirty-six years are the ending of the Cold War and the beginning of the Internet. Of those two, I think the latter is the more significant.

The Internet has impacted my thinking in several ways. It has put me in touch with people I would not otherwise have met and whose ideas I would never have encountered. It has served as a platform for disseminating my work, helping me get faster and more extensive feedback. And it is of course a powerful research tools, giving instantaneous access to an immense and up-to-date store of knowledge. Rarely do I need to send a research assistant to the library. It saves time and makes it possible to take into account a wider range of research.

I find it hard to imagine how I could have done what I have done without the Internet. On the other hand, people did remarkable things before the Internet; so it cannot be quite as indispensible as it has come to appear.

The Internet shapes my thinking not only instrumentally but also as a subject matter. It is a factor that must be considered when we think about how the world might change.

Some trends are fairly obvious. Virtual reality will become more technically sophisticated and will grow in importance as a medium of social interaction. A marriage between social networking sites and next-generation virtual reality could result in compelling applications. Another trend is towards social transparency. More and more information about more and more people is stored and made globally accessible and searchable. There is also—if not quite a trend, then at least *a hope* that the development of improved tools for collaborative information processing will help increase humanity's effective level of wisdom and rationality.

The history of other wide-purpose technologies, such as writing, engines, electricity, and computers, teaches that it takes a long time—decades, even centuries—for their full range of applications to manifest. Had we evaluated their impact two decades after their initial deployment, we would have missed the ultimate extent of their ramifications. Expect that most of the Internet's impact on the world—including perhaps on me personally—is still to come.