

# Ted Nelson

coined the words "hypertext" and "hypermedia" over 10 years ago, and founded the Xanadu project to link up a worldwide electronic library, a project now being sponsored by Autodesk, Inc.

I'm thinking about fundamental issues in evolutionary theory. It looks like humans aren't a transitional form but a perfectly worked-out species that's incredibly effective overall. So we need to re-analyze human ethology under the assumption that it's one big system. Why does our morale go up and down, and why don't we perform at peak all the time? Why do we seem so fucked up? It must be a system.



I postulate a fundamental mechanism that I call *biostatus*, which feels internally like exhilaration (when high) or depression (when low) and whose function is to steer you toward genetically beneficial activity. We have a *biostat*, something like a thermostat, which holds us at a given level of morale and success all our lives. But I think *biostatus* can be changed, and that's the fundamental way to get people out of trouble and off the welfare rolls.

Status and *biostatus* are corresponding forms of evaluation, external and internal, linked together; and the management of status and *biostatus* are essentially the two governing heuristics of human life.

I'm also thinking about human sex, which is intellectually and otherwise the world's most interesting subject. Humans are crazier sexwise than other animals; our species' sexual strategy is a wild teeming mixed system experienced in part by all, imagined as a whole by few, that we've never understood. But I now discern a third great heuristic, *sexual status*, which explains marital markets, harems, the prohibition of homosexuality, and such sexual looniness as prom queens and groupies.

And I'm thinking about the AIDS plague. People's naivete about the wild human sexworld makes condoms look like an answer, but AIDS will not be tamed by condoms; condoms will slow the epidemic only a little. That's why I propose a strategic disclosure system for HIV test results ("The Checkmate Proposal," WER #59).

And I'm thinking about the other forms of doom that are gathering. The shit may hit the fan this next decade. Nukewar is now unfashionable, but everything else now looms close — the poisoning and overcommitment of the water supply, the Greenhouse effect, pesticides, chemical and nuclear waste in the groundwater and oceans.

And worst, the population bomb will go off. I fear Malthus was right. I have been convinced by Jay Forrester's chilling *World Dynamics* and the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* that we are headed for a hideous, climactic crash from which little we hold dear will escape. The later it hits the worse.

The great starvation begun in Africa will spread, possibly to Europe and North America. What becomes of governments mortgaged to the hilt, assailed by confused masses who thought everything was going to be all right forever? All we esteem as good and right may be swept away in an onrush of destruction, depression and plague. A loss of half the humans may extend the lease for the survivors. We have some time to retrench, but we can't know how long.

And I'm thinking, "Saving the World" has always been a phrase of ridicule, but soon it won't be. We must proceed as if there is just enough time.

And I'm thinking about what it will take. It will take the sharing of more insights and understandings than we've ever shared before, bargaining and global giveback by all parties. So we'll need the world electronic publishing and intercomparison system that I described in my book *Literary Machines*. Considered a crackpot dream scant months ago, suddenly people everywhere realize it's coming.

And I'm thinking about how that will help us fix education fast. The "basics" are more and more obsolete, except for reading and a basic skill that nobody acknowledges, diagrammatics. Any factory that turned out as many rejects as the school system does would be bulldozed, but we give them more money instead. In the new hypertext world, an expanding, explorable tissue of ideas will be the mind's joy.

It's easy to build geniuses — parents generally succeed if they try — so why don't we? The problem is building *happy, effective* geniuses. And that comes around to arranging a peer-group of genius children, so they won't have to be different and miserable. This in turn means organizing a cohort of committed parents to share in that great enterprise. Every child should also have five tutors and a hundred thousand dollars in equipment, like a valuable industrial worker.

This is all about designing societies, including attitudes and feelings. "Social engineering" has dealt only with structures. But some designers, like Moses and John Humphrey Noyes, have known how to do the real thing. My proposals for a world electronic library and the Checkmate system, a genius infant cohort and raising *biostatus* on a society-wide basis, are social design in this sense. ■

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