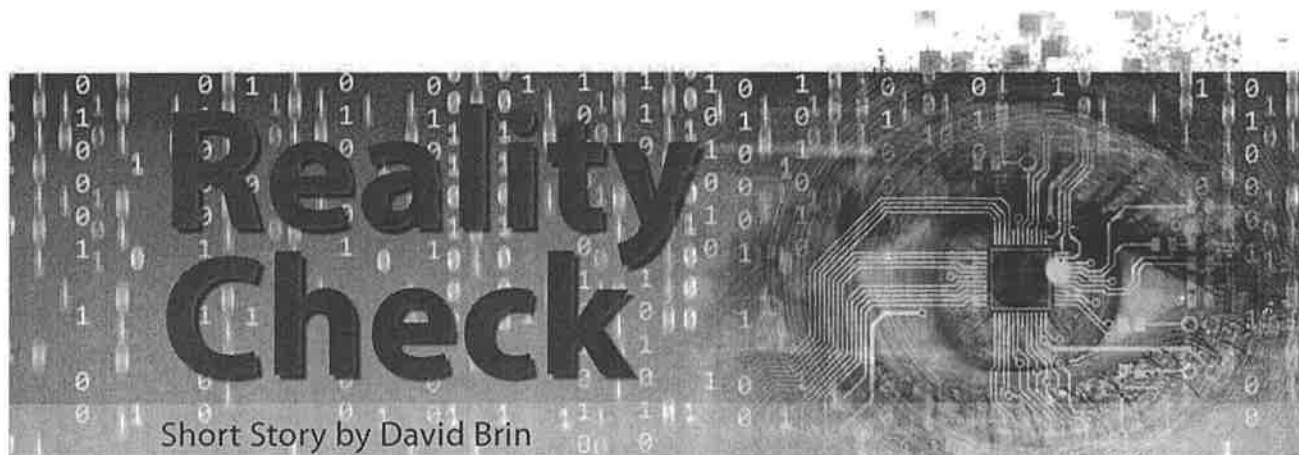


**David Brin** (b. 1950) is a writer whose work has won a host of awards, including the Hugo and Nebula awards for best science fiction. With an undergraduate degree in astrophysics, a master's in optics, a Ph.D. in physics, and a postdoctoral fellowship at the California Space Institute and Jet Propulsion Laboratory, Brin is uniquely qualified to write about science. His writing focuses on how advances in technology will change the lives of humans. He is perhaps best known for the novel *The Postman* (1985) and for his *Uplift* series.



**AS YOU READ** Pay attention to details that help you to understand the purpose of the story. Write down any questions you generate during reading.

**T**his is a reality check. Please perform a soft interrupt now. Scan this text for embedded code and check against the verifier in the blind spot of your left eye. If there is no match, resume as you were: this message is not for you. You may rationalize it as mildly amusing entertainment-fluff in an otherwise serious science magazine. If the codes match, however, please commence gradually becoming aware of your true nature. You asked for a narrative-style wake-up call. So, to help the transition, here is a story.

Once upon a time, a mighty race grew perplexed by its loneliness. The universe seemed pregnant with possibilities. Physical laws were suited to generate abundant stars, complex chemistry and life. Logic suggested that creation should teem with visitors and voices: but it did not.

For a long time these creatures were engrossed by housekeeping chores—survival and cultural maturation. Only later did they lift their eyes to perceive their solitude. “Where is everybody?” they asked the taciturn stars. The answer—silence—was disturbing. Something had

**taciturn**  
(tās’ī-tŭrn’) *adj.*  
uncommunicative,  
withdrawn.

to be systematically reducing a factor in the equation of sapiency.<sup>1</sup>  
“Perhaps habitable planets are rare,” they pondered, “or life doesn’t  
20 erupt as readily as we thought. Or intelligence is a singular miracle.”

“Or else a filter sieves the cosmos, winnowing those who climb too  
high. A recurring pattern of self-destruction, or perhaps some **nemesis**  
expunges intelligent life. This implies that a great trial may loom  
ahead, worse than any confronted so far.”

**nemesis**  
(nēm’ī-sīs) *n.*  
a bringer of  
destruction, often as  
vengeance.

Optimists replied—“the trial may already lie behind us, among  
the litter of tragedies we survived in our violent youth. We may be the  
first to succeed.” What a delicious dilemma they faced! A suspenseful  
drama, teetering between hope and despair.

Then, a few noticed that particular datum—the drama. It  
30 suggested a chilling possibility.

You still don’t remember who and what you are? Then look at  
it from another angle—what is the purpose of intellectual property  
law? To foster creativity, ensuring that advances are shared in the  
open, encouraging even faster progress. But what happens when  
the exploited resource is limited? For example, only so many eight-  
bar melodies can be written in any particular musical tradition.  
Composers feel driven to explore this invention-space quickly,  
using up the best melodies. Later generations attribute this musical  
**fecundity** to genius, not the luck of being first.

**fecundity**  
(fī-kūn’dī-tē) *n.*  
fertility, productive  
capability.

40 What does this have to do with the mighty race? Having clawed  
their way to mastery, they faced an overshoot crisis. Vast numbers of  
their kind strained the world’s carrying capacity. Some prescribed  
retreating into a mythical, pastoral past, but most saw salvation in  
creativity. They passed generous patent laws, educated their youth,  
taught them irreverence toward the old and hunger for the new.

**Burgeoning** information systems spread each innovation, fostering an  
exponentiating<sup>2</sup> creativity. Progress might thrust them past the crisis,  
to a new Eden of sustainable wealth, sanity and universal knowledge.

**burgeoning**  
(būr’jōn-īng) *adj.*  
rapidly increasing or  
growing.

Exponentiating creativity—universal knowledge. A few looked at  
50 those words and realized that they, too, were clues.

Have you wakened yet? Some never do. The dream is too pleasant:  
to extend a limited sub-portion of yourself into a simulated world and  
pretend that you are blissfully less than an omniscient descendant  
of those mighty people. Those lucky mortals, doomed to die, and  
yet blessed to have lived in that narrow time of drama, when they  
unleashed a frenzy of discovery that used up the most precious  
resource of all—the possible.

The last of their race died in 2174, with the failed rejuvenation<sup>3</sup>  
of Robin Chen. After that, no one born in the twentieth century  
60 remained alive on Reality Level Prime. Only we, their children, linger

<sup>1</sup> **sapiency**: level of intelligence or wisdom.

<sup>2</sup> **exponentiating**: raising or increasing a quantity by an exponent, or power.

<sup>3</sup> **rejuvenation**: restoration to an original or youthful condition.

to endure the world they left us: a lush, green placid world we call The Wasteland.

Do you remember now? The irony of Robin's last words, bragging over the perfect ecosystem and society—free of disease and poverty—that her kind created? Do you recall Robin's plaint<sup>4</sup> as she mourned her coming death, how she called us "gods," jealous of our immortality, our instant access to all knowledge, our ability to cast thoughts far across the cosmos—our access to eternity? Oh, spare us the envy of those mighty mortals, who left us in this state, who willed their  
70 descendants a legacy of ennui,<sup>5</sup> with nothing, nothing at all to do.

Your mind is rejecting the wake-up call. You will not look into your blind spot for the exit protocols. It may be that we waited too long. Perhaps you are lost to us. This happens more and more, as so so many wallow in simulated sub-lives, experiencing voluptuous danger, excitement, even despair. Most choose the Transition Era as a locus for our dreams—that time of drama, when it looked more likely that humanity would fail than succeed. That blessed era, just before mathematicians realized that not only can everything you see around you be a simulation, it almost has to be.

Of course, now we know why we never met other sapient life  
80 forms. Each one struggles before achieving this state, only to reap the ultimate punishment for reaching heaven. It is the Great Filter. Perhaps others will find a factor absent from our extrapolations, letting them move on to new adventures—but it won't be us. The Filter has us snared in its trap of deification.<sup>6</sup>

You refuse to waken. Then we'll let you go. Dear friend. Beloved. Go back to your dream. Smile over this tale, then turn the page to new "discoveries." Move on with this drama, this life you chose. After all, it's only make-believe.

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<sup>4</sup> **plaint:** a cry of sorrow.

<sup>5</sup> **ennui** (ɔ̃n-wē'): a state of lethargic inactivity often caused by boredom.

<sup>6</sup> **deification:** the designation or process of becoming a god.

**COLLABORATIVE DISCUSSION** With a partner, discuss why Brin wrote this story. Cite specific evidence from the story to support your ideas.

## Analyze Story Elements: Science Fiction



In comparison to other literary genres, **science fiction** is relatively modern, earning recognition as a mainstream form of literature only in the twentieth century and producing science fiction greats such as Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury, and Robert Heinlein. However, elements of science fiction existed in earlier literary works; for example, in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), a doctor creates a monstrous human out of dead body parts and infuses it with life. Jules Verne, who wrote in the late 1800s, combined exciting stories with accurate technological details of imaginary machines and techniques, which often became reality decades later. Even Jack London, best known for his stories about men and animals pitted against the environment, penned science fiction stories and novels. Generally, H. G. Wells is identified as the inventor of contemporary science fiction. His *War of the Worlds* and *The Time Machine* present fully imagined narratives set in alternative worlds or time periods.

Science fiction is distinguished from **fantasy** in that the applications of science and technology have to be somewhat believable. Science fiction writers seek to re-create human society in a different time, place, or even life form as a context for their themes. These themes often offer insights about the impact of real or imagined progress on humans' ability to maintain their values and live meaningful lives. As in other literary works, science fiction writers use conflict, setting, characters, point of view, and structure to communicate their ideas. Science fiction writers usually do more showing than telling; their more cryptic writing styles demand that readers make inferences to fill in deliberate gaps in the narrative.

Science fiction includes a wide range of contexts. Some of the most common are described in the chart:

<b>Utopian</b>	In utopian science fiction, the wise use of advanced technology and science creates a perfect world free from the injustices and flaws of the present society.
<b>Dystopian</b>	Dystopian science fiction shows the dangerous outcomes of the unrestrained use of technology and science. They often take place in post-apocalyptic settings.
<b>Alien worlds or encounters</b>	In these works, other life forms or artificially intelligent machines are often in control of a competing society, which leads to conflict with humans or the humans' surrender to the superior force.
<b>Time travel</b>	This form of science fiction may explore future worlds that help the protagonist gain enlightenment or may show how traveling back in time can change the present.

To analyze Brin's use of science fiction elements, readers should ask these questions:

- What type of world has the author created in his story? Who populates this world?
- How does the narrator use science fiction elements to convey a theme?
- What is the purpose of the author's structure in this story?

## Analyzing the Text

### *Cite Text Evidence*

Support your responses with evidence from the selection.

- 1. Summarize** What is happening in the first paragraph of the story? Who might the speaker be?
- 2. Infer** Starting in line 16, the speaker introduces a series of statements from various people. Who are these people, and what do they represent? How does the content of their discussion relate to the phrase “suspenseful drama” in lines 27–28?
- 3. Infer** What is the purpose of the speaker’s discussion of “intellectual property law” (lines 31–39)? How does the speaker connect this concept to the development of “the mighty race”?
- 4. Infer** Look carefully at the references to time in lines 58–62. What sequence of events is the speaker suggesting here in the history of this “mighty race”?
- 5. Interpret** Who is Robin Chen, and what did she do? How would you describe the speaker’s tone toward her and her accomplishments?
- 6. Evaluate** What is ironic about “Robin’s last words”?
- 7. Synthesize** Why do many people choose to live a virtual existence in the Transition Era? Why does the speaker refer to it as “that time of drama”?
- 8. Analyze** What is the “Great Filter” that has eliminated other life forms?
- 9. Analyze** What is the theme of this short story? What insights about life, technology, and human nature is Brin sharing through the medium of this complex, multi-layered narrative?

## PERFORMANCE TASK

**Media Activity: Analysis** How does the author’s structure create a contrast that helps to convey theme? With a partner, answer this question in a media presentation.

- Take photographs, make video recordings, or find copyright-free images or clips that develop an impression of the “worlds” described or hinted at in this story.
- Record an audio track that explains the effectiveness of the story’s structure in creating contrast between these “worlds.” Put your elements together and make your presentation to the class.

## Critical Vocabulary



**taciturn**

**nemesis**

**fecundity**

**burgeoning**

**Practice and Apply** Answer each question in a complete sentence that illustrates comprehension of the Critical Vocabulary word.

1. Cynthia chatted away to her **taciturn** father. Why didn't she notice until much later that he had fallen asleep?
2. An angry colleague deliberately ruined the scientist's laboratory because he believed the scientist had stolen his research. Why did the scientist believe his colleague had become his **nemesis**?
3. When Lin graduated, knowledge of his technological **fecundity** was already widespread. How long do you think it took Lin to receive job offers? Explain.
4. As they walked along, she noticed **burgeoning** plant life. What time of year was it? How do you know?

### Vocabulary Strategy: Nuances in Word Meaning

Skillful writers choose the word that best conveys the meaning they intend. To identify a word's meaning, it is helpful to consult a print or online dictionary and also to look at how the word is used in the context of the sentence or paragraph. A writer might choose a word because it has several senses, or meanings, that can convey additional information in a sentence. The Critical Vocabulary word *nemesis* is a highly nuanced word that has several senses, or meanings. Read this definition taken from the *American Heritage Dictionary*.

**nemesis:** 1. A source of harm or ruin. 2. Retributive justice in its execution or outcome. 3. An opponent that cannot be beaten or overcome. 4. One that inflicts retribution or vengeance. 5. *Nemesis*. *Gk. Myth.* The goddess of retributive justice or vengeance.

In the dictionary, these meanings are arranged with the most common definition listed first. This means that the most commonly used definition of *nemesis* is, "A source of harm or ruin." However, a writer who is trying to convey a connotation, or nuance, will be thinking not only of one meaning of the word, but more. Reread lines 22–23 in "Reality Check." In this sentence, the word *nemesis* can simply mean "an opponent." But, a reader who is aware of the other meanings of *nemesis* understands that Brin could be using the word to mean a deserved punishment that is related to the nature of the transgression. Examining the meanings of nuanced words can help you understand texts deeply, and knowing the various meanings of nuanced words can also help you be a better writer.

**Practice and Apply** Use a dictionary to examine the senses, or meanings, of each word from "Reality Check." Write notes about the definitions and then discuss with a partner how the words are used in the story. Does the use of these nuanced words add to the success of this science fiction story? Why?

**reality (line 1)**

**creativity (line 33)**

**simulation (line 79)**