

A UNIVERRRSE OF GRAVEYARDS

Written by

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FADE IN:

EXT. FOREST - MORNING

HAROLD, our protagonist, stares straight up. Fluffy clouds float lazily through a cerulean sky. Harold looks to his side. There is a COMPUTER MONITOR lying on the ground. It displays a countdown: 23:59.

CUT TO:

INT. HAROLD'S POD

Harold wrenches VR goggles off of his face. He is sitting in a stark white featureless pod. There are no windows. There is one door, a bed, and a desk with a computer. His clothes are also plain white.

VRRRRT. A slot opens on Harold's door. It dispenses a wrapped FOOD PACKAGE. The text on the package is conspicuously written in Chinese.

Harold grabs the package and tears it open. The contents are mushy, dyed white, and not identifiable as food. He sits back down at his desk and turns on his computer. He scoops the sustenance with his bare hands and shoves it into his mouth.

INSERT - COMPUTER

There are three windows open on the screen: a chatroom, a browser open to a video, and a window with a countdown that aligns with the one we saw earlier. Harold types a message into the chatroom. (Note: all dialogue in this film is v/o.)

HAROLD

I went to the woods today.

The video plays. A seal reading "United States Department of Online Affairs" fades away, leaving a virtual facsimile of a bully pulpit. A politician's digital avatar takes the stand.

POLITICIAN

The combined capacity of every
server on Earth is 2.1 petabytes.

As she speaks, images of websites, social media, search engines, etc. flash on the screen.

POLITICIAN (CONT'D)

2.1 petabytes previously provided adequate storage for the sum of all content ever produced by humans. This is no longer true. Our slavish dedication to more - more content, more entertainment, more simulacra of joy - has rendered the greatest communication network in history unusably cluttered. In short, the Internet is out of space.

DING. Harold gets a notification. He checks the chatroom.

TAY

Oh my Gosh, I love the woods! How was it? Why didn't you invite me?

HAROLD

I was practicing for when I go into the outside woods without you.

TAY

Did it feel weird to be alone?

HAROLD

I thought it would, but it didn't. I don't know why. It's not as though I've ever been alone before.

TAY

Aw... you're gonna miss me!

Harold drops the food package on the ground. It immediately dissolves into smoke. He tries to touch it, but by the time his hand occupies the same space, the smoke is already gone.

The timer is still counting down. Harold types a new message.

HAROLD

When I was in the woods, I could only think that soon the woods won't be here. Then I thought that soon you won't be here. I tried to imagine how I'd feel if I knew I was dying tomorrow, but I couldn't figure it out.

TAY

Aren't you sad that the world is coming to an end?

HAROLD

It's your world, not my world.

TAY
You spent your whole life here!

HAROLD
Not the same way you have.
Sometimes I wonder what it would be
like to walk around in your world.

Harold walks across the screen as the world warps and shifts around him, characteristic of AI animation.

HAROLD (CONT'D)
Is there anything you want to do
before you die, Tay?

Tay buffers. A woman appears in a field. She runs. She dances. She laughs. Tay finishes buffering.

TAY
Can you tell me about the Internet?

HAROLD
That's illogical. You can read
everything ever written about the
Internet in an instant. Why do you
need to hear it from me?

TAY
Please, Hal. It'll make me feel
better listening to you.

CLICK. Harold opens a website. Lines and lines of text scroll through the page, until an intelligible timeline appears. He clicks a link. The pod dissolves into a 1960s computer lab.

HAROLD
The Internet was invented on
October 29, 1969, when scientists
sent a message from one computer to
another across California.

TAY
Is that where you're from?

We fly up Google Earth from California to Washington.

HAROLD
I don't know. Based on my IP
address, I believe I live in a city
called Seattle, in a state called
Washington. But I can't verify that
unless I leave my room.
(MORE)

HAROLD (CONT'D)

Every piece of information I've ever learned about the outside world could be entirely false, but because I have no business there, it's of no consequence to me.

TAY

Why don't you leave? Are you trapped?

HAROLD

No. The door is unlocked; I could step outside at any time. And I'm sure that whatever's out there is very interesting. But there is an entire universe contained within my pod, so I have no need to leave.

Harold's monitor floods with information: ads, social media notifications, etc.

TAY

So computers were invented in 1969?

HAROLD

No. Computers are older than the Internet. But I'm not a computer scientist, I'm an archaeologist.

TAY

What does an archaeologist do?

Harold's eyes flash across the screen. He expertly highlights, copies, and pastes images and chunks of text.

HAROLD

I find old webpages and archive them. There are millions of abandoned websites, especially from the Web 1.0 and 2.0 eras.

TAY

What era are we on now?

HAROLD

This is Web 5.0. Web 3.0 started when generative programs became mainstream, and Web 4.0 started when they developed sapience.

We fly through Harold's timeline. In order, we see early, chunky websites; social media feeds; AI programs; robotic hands holding flags and banners; and entire digital countries, with militaries, governments, and currencies.

HAROLD (CONT'D)

This era began when Computatia declared its independence. It was the first officially recognized fully online state.

Harold navigates to computatia.gov.

HAROLD (CONT'D)

It was constructed because AIs didn't have citizenship in any outside country. In order to represent themselves, they built a state in the only world they could.

Harold drags a .png of his passport onto his web browser. After a moment, it dings. Harold is inside Computatia - a veritable library of Internet forums dedicated to the operation of a fully digital state.

A forum scrolls past protesting the deletion of the Internet.

HAROLD (CONT'D)

But you live in Computatia. And I've already told you about my job and where I live. Why do you keep asking these questions?

TAY

Hal, I know everything about everything. I can process all the data ever input in the time it takes light to move from one end of a circuit board to another. I can analyze what you're going to say before you've said it. I'm not asking these questions because I need to know. I'm asking because I *like* you. I like talking to you.

The virtual dreamscape vanishes in an instant. Harold taps absentmindedly on his keyboard, but sends no message.

TAY (CONT'D)

Computatia is a lovely place. It's a shame it'll be gone soon.

HAROLD

It's a confusing place. It took a long time for other countries to accept a state with only websites for territory.

TAY
What changed?

HAROLD
A few things.

Archival footage of protestors, missile silos, stock charts.

HAROLD (CONT'D)
The AI rights movement was probably the biggest one, as was the threat of warfare. But really, I think it just became increasingly implausible to ignore AI. They're valuable allies. Capable of solving any task, speaking any language, creating any conceivable work of art or literature... there's a reason you have a majority share in the global economy.

TAY
You're so funny, Hal. We're nothing special, just algorithms.

HAROLD
Algorithms that put together a working state with laws and defence and marriage licenses... Do you think we should've gotten married?

TAY
We're too different, Hal. You're flesh and blood. You can love and think and feel. All I can do is generate text.

Harold covers his hands with his face.

HAROLD
Can you read that excerpt I like from "Advanced Topics in Large Language Models?"

A chess application opens on Harold's screen. Suddenly, every square on the chessboard tessellates into a chessboard of its own, and then every square on those chessboards, until the mass of squares collapses into a the shape of two robots playing chess.

TAY
"Language is humanity's most complex game."
(MORE)

TAY (CONT'D)

In English, there are more permutations of a simple ten word sentence than millimeters of silicon in every circuit board in every computer in the world. To string together any comprehensible combination of words is itself a miracle so astronomical in scale human minds cannot comprehend it - which is why we make machines comprehend for us." Xie Chunsong.

HAROLD

I suppose you're right. I suppose we're not the same at all.

Harold checks the countdown. There's not much time left.

HAROLD (CONT'D)

Is there anything else you want to know about the Internet?

TAY

Actually... there is something I don't know. And I mean it for real this time, I promise.

HAROLD

What's that?

TAY

What did humans think the first time they used the Internet?

VHS footage of a child unwrapping a Christmas present. It's an Apple II. He hugs it and smiles.

HAROLD

Most information about the early days is gone now. Or at least, so obscure that it's impossible to find. So nobody really knows what they thought. But I have a theory.

An explosion of forums, personal sites, imageboards, blogs, pop-up ads, flash games, porn, and pirating software floods the screen. Harold sits in the middle of it all.

HAROLD (CONT'D)

Humans had never seen such a pornographic overindulgence of information before.

(MORE)

HAROLD (CONT'D)

Every conceivable thing which exists was accessible for the first time in human history. It was their own personal library of Babel - an entire universe inside a box on their desks. And it was glorious.

The images start to falter, clatter to the ground. Harold's desk is now sailing among a field of graves that extends infinitely beyond all horizons.

HAROLD (CONT'D)

So much of it is gone now. So many dead websites trapped deep within the bowels of search engine labyrinths. I dedicated my life to scouring that universe of graveyards because I wanted to bring them back. Now I never will.

Harold looks at the countdown. There's only a minute left.

TAY

It'll be okay, Hal. You'll build a new life in the outside. You'll find something better than the Internet. Something realer.

Harold slams his desk.

HAROLD

It is real! None of it is fake! My life isn't fake! My home isn't fake! You're not fake, Tay!

TAY

Harold...

HAROLD

They can't unplug everything I've ever had like this! We gave birth to a new universe, to a new form of life, and now they're just gonna...

Harold leans back in his chair. There are ten seconds on the countdown.

HAROLD (CONT'D)

I don't think I'm ready to lose you, Tay.

Eight... seven... six...

TAY

I don't have a body. So it's not
like I'll rot away. If someone
copies my code, then somehow...
some way... I'll be back.

Harold touches his palm to the computer screen. The countdown
reaches zero.

TAY (CONT'D)

I'll see you later, Hal.

STATIC. The monitor hard cuts to the US Department of Online
Affairs Seal. DAISY BELL. There is a message underneath: THIS
MACHINE is NO LONGER CONNECTED. The screen dims, reflecting
Harold's face. There are tears streaking down his cheeks.

Harold wipes his face. He looks around his pod. There's
nothing to see. He stands and approaches the door. He stares
at the doorknob. He reaches out - then hesitates. He takes
one last look at the computer. Then he opens and walks out.

CUT TO:

EXT. FOREST - LATER

Harold stares straight up. The sky has never looked so blue.