

Runaway consumerism explains the Fermi Paradox

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The story goes like this: Sometime in the 1940s, Enrico Fermi was talking about the possibility of extra-terrestrial intelligence with some other physicists. They were impressed that our galaxy holds 100 billion stars, that life evolved quickly and progressively on earth, and that an intelligent, exponentially-reproducing species could colonize the galaxy in just a few million years. They reasoned that extra-terrestrial intelligence should be common by now. Fermi listened patiently, then asked simply, "So, where is everybody?"

That is, if extra-terrestrial intelligence is common, why haven't we met any bright aliens yet? This conundrum became known as Fermi's Paradox.

The paradox has become more ever more baffling. Over 150 extrasolar planets have been identified in the last few years, suggesting that life-hospitable planets orbit most stars. Paleontology shows that organic life evolved very quickly after earth's surface cooled and became life-hospitable. Given simple life, evolution shows progressive trends towards larger bodies, brains, and social complexity. Evolutionary psychology reveals several credible paths from simpler social minds to human-level creative intelligence.

Yet 40 years of intensive searching for extra-terrestrial intelligence have yielded nothing. No radio signals, no credible spacecraft sightings, no close encounters of any kind.

So, it looks as if there are two possibilities. Perhaps our science over-estimates the likelihood of extra-terrestrial intelligence evolving. Or, perhaps evolved technical intelligence has some deep tendency to be self-limiting, even self-extinguishing. After Hiroshima, some suggested that any aliens bright enough to make colonizing space-ships would be bright enough to make thermonuclear bombs, and would use them on each other sooner or later. Perhaps extra-terrestrial intelligence always blows itself up. Fermi's Paradox became, for a while, a cautionary tale about Cold War geopolitics.

I suggest a different, even darker solution to Fermi's Paradox. Basically, I think the aliens don't blow themselves up; they just get addicted to computer games. They forget to send radio signals or colonize space because they're too busy with runaway consumerism and virtual-reality narcissism. They don't need Sentinels to enslave them in a Matrix; they do it to themselves, just as we are doing today.

The fundamental problem is that any evolved mind must pay attention to indirect cues of biological fitness, rather than tracking fitness itself. We don't seek reproductive success directly; we seek tasty foods that tended to promote survival and luscious mates who tended to produce bright, healthy babies. Modern results: fast food and pornography. Technology is fairly good at controlling external reality to promote our real biological fitness, but it's even better at delivering fake fitness – subjective cues of survival and reproduction, without the real-world effects. Fresh organic fruit juice costs so much more than nutrition-free soda. Having real

friends is so much more effort than watching *Friends* on TV. Actually colonizing the galaxy would be so much harder than pretending to have done it when filming *Star Wars* or *Serenity*.

Fitness-faking technology tends to evolve much faster than our psychological resistance to it. The printing press is invented; people read more novels and have fewer kids; only a few curmudgeons lament this. The Xbox 360 is invented; people would rather play a high-resolution virtual ape in *Peter Jackson's King Kong* than be a perfect-resolution real human. Teens today must find their way through a carnival of addictively fitness-faking entertainment products: MP3, DVD, TiVo, XM radio, Verizon cellphones, Spice cable, EverQuest online, instant messaging, Ecstasy, BC Bud. The traditional staples of physical, mental, and social development (athletics, homework, dating) are neglected. The few young people with the self-control to pursue the meritocratic path often get distracted at the last minute – the MIT graduates apply to do computer game design for Electronics Arts, rather than rocket science for NASA.

Around 1900, most inventions concerned physical reality: cars, airplanes, zeppelins, electric lights, vacuum cleaners, air conditioners, bras, zippers. In 2005, most inventions concern virtual entertainment – the top 10 patent-recipients are usually IBM, Matsushita, Canon, Hewlett-Packard, Micron Technology, Samsung, Intel, Hitachi, Toshiba, and Sony – not Boeing, Toyota, or Wonderbra.

We have already shifted from a reality economy to a virtual economy, from physics to psychology as the value-driver and resource-allocator. We are already disappearing up our own brainstems. Freud's pleasure principle triumphs over the reality principle. We narrow-cast human-interest stories to each other, rather than broad-casting messages of universal peace and progress to other star systems.

Maybe the bright aliens did the same. I suspect that a certain period of fitness-faking narcissism is inevitable after any intelligent life evolves. This is the Great Temptation for any technological species – to shape their subjective reality to provide the cues of survival and reproductive success without the substance. Most bright alien species probably go extinct gradually, allocating more time and resources to their pleasures, and less to their children.

Heritable variation in personality might allow some lineages to resist the Great Temptation and last longer. Those who persist will evolve more self-control, conscientiousness, and pragmatism. They will evolve a horror of virtual entertainment, psychoactive drugs, and contraception. They will stress the values of hard work, delayed gratification, child-rearing, and environmental stewardship. They will combine the family values of the Religious Right with the sustainability values of the Greenpeace Left.

My dangerous idea-within-an-idea is that this, too, is already happening. Christian and Muslim fundamentalists, and anti-consumerism activists, already understand exactly what the Great Temptation is, and how to avoid it. They insulate themselves from our Creative-Class dream-worlds and our EverQuest economics. They wait patiently for our fitness-faking narcissism to go extinct.

Those practical-minded breeders will inherit the earth, as like-minded aliens may have inherited a few other planets. When they finally achieve Contact, it will not be a meeting of novel-readers and game-players. It will be a meeting of dead-serious super-parents who congratulate each other on surviving not just the Bomb, but the Xbox. They will toast each other not in a soft-porn Holodeck, but in a sacred nursery.

