

The Experiment

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I associate a thought experiment with Albert Einstein or maybe it is Schrodinger and his feline companions. Both are wonderful typecasts. These thought experiments, works of the imagination, are clean, concise and controlled. The experiments include only things that are of interest. Nothing disturbs the flow of the experimental objects through time whether gravity, chaos or knotted strings. With careful composition these experiments address the most trite but fascinating conundrums. Having a particular bent for mathematics, where working with the complex, imaginary world is the norm, I am quite taken by thought experiments and often used them to understand things. Sadly, my aspirations at submitting my imagination for rankings and scores led nowhere.

Now I ask you to shift gears and consider how technology drives us to social experiments. Perhaps the antithesis of a thought experiment, the social experiment has no bounds, no constraints and occasionally, no objective. For example, each ubiquitous computer 'app' is a small social experiment. Presumably, its developer wants the app noticed which will hopefully make the developer successful. Maybe they ask, "Can it attract the right demographic who have the appropriate disposable income?" It will have to have just the right parameters in order to succeed against a thousand other apps that are introduced on the very same day. I wonder if this is also the world of the architect. They must dream up a building that addresses all functional capabilities. And the building must make a viewer feel good. And a financier comfortable. Antoni Gaudi how did you do that so successfully? We look on with amazement at the Sagrada Familia, a work brought into being via private donations. Does technology go through the same social experiment? Some might say that the Apple iPod was no great advance over Sony's Walkman. Both were portable music players. Actually both are still available today. So how do all these register as social experiments? Perhaps it is because each was an experiment, a trial, that was thrown to the wolves of the consumer from which it had to survive and prosper or fail an ignominious death (et tu, Beta?). As social experiments go just about anything newly provided to the consumer whether a recipe, a fairground ride or a charitable campaign can fit into the paradigm of the social experiment.

Which brings us to humans in space. On one side, this effort has taken thought experiments to a higher ground than ever before. Whether via Star Trek, Star Wars or any other of the countless science fiction and science fantasy genres we've met aliens, we've had corporeal pleasures with aliens and traded visiting pleasures with a myriad of bugs, triffids and clones. Is this the extent of our desire for space? Is it that all we desire is a clean, concise controlled experiment where, no matter what happens, the good guys and gals reign supreme at the end. Humans in space might be the ultimate in thought experiments. But, is it as far as we will go?

Or, will space travel be a social experiment? A no holds barred, punch drunk, smack down between competing launchers, political schemas and financiers. Each of many or every type striving to be the first to lay claim to regular, common travel beyond the cradle Earth. But what if society doesn't have any proclivity to travel into space? What if society instead says, "Give me more music and videos for my portable entertainment player." What if society says, "The thought experiment is good enough. I only want more of these. Oh, and let's have the imaginary aliens assess the goodness of secularity, the benefits of living under a rainbow and the endurance of environmental conservation." For we know that if a thought experiment goes wrong then no one is the worse off. But when a social experiment goes wrong, perhaps like the supersonic Concorde, then things are much worse than waking up with a bad hangover. To emphasize this simply imagine the internal combustion engines as a social experiment and wonder what happens if it goes off the rails. In the end, as much as for portable entertainment devices, some technology will become a great boon to humanity while others wilt away under the sunset. A solar powered plane may be able to circumnavigate the globe. But will we ever swim in the warm waters of Europa? Is society ready to experiment with living in space, outside the protection of the Earth's magnetic shield? Or are we content with thinking about what might be? What say you?