

CUSTODY

The origin of xbt.im, in the founder's voice

I've always struggled with my memory. Trivia, maps, a fact or a figure from a podcast, a line from a book I read years ago, those somehow stay in my RAM. The events of my own life...sadly, not so much. I seem to remember certain choice happenings in the form of vignettes, handfuls of frames where some emotion must have burrowed deeply enough to make an impression I can't shake. The rest evaporates. This has always pained me.

I've been a filmmaker since my teens, but it wasn't until my thirties that I really hit my stride as an art photographer. Those past three decades behind the lens bring into stark relief the fact that recorded images are the only memories I can fully trust. For a person whose own internal recording equipment drops most of what it captures, framing the shot has never just been an art practice or a way to pay the bills. Somewhere along the way, the fruit of the viewfinder became a prosthetic for my faulty memory. Without it I'd be half a person if I'm honest.

All of this is why one particular moment of cinema has stayed with me the longest. A dying android, at the end of *Blade Runner*, laments the fact that the memories of everything it's ever witnessed will vanish without any record. Lost, like tears in rain. That scene never fails to give me goosebumps, and I've watched it *a lot* of times. It took me until very recently to understand why it has this effect on me: that character is describing my deepest fear. He was bioengineered (not *born* like I was) but I deeply relate to his grief nonetheless. He's moments away from death in that scene, his life of high adventure regrettably unrecorded and untransferable. Our shared loss is the seed of everything I'm building now.

Years before I understood any of this, I was introduced to Bitcoin. The year was 2014 and from my tiny outpost in Shanghai, I registered a fresh domain that I was certain the future would soon need. When the world finally got serious about Bitcoin, I figured, it wouldn't be called BTC anymore. We'd be using the formal ISO currency code reserved for money that belongs to no nation: XBT, the way gold is technically referred to as XAU. Back then, lots of use cases were being floated for the Bitcoin blockchain. With the Umbrella Movement just around the corner and the Arab Spring still fresh in the rearview, something called mesh networks were a hot topic. I paired the XBT code with a small suffix I imagined, back then, would befit such a messaging protocol, a Bitcoin-based *Instant Messenger* if you like. I registered xbt.im.

While academic work and public discourse on its implications were certainly well underway at that point, Artificial Intelligence was not at all on my personal radar. Not even a glimmer. And so I held the domain for over a decade, letting it collect dust as I worked on other things.

While I discovered I could easily conceive of elaborate digital properties and perform cursory reviews of the outsourced C# and TypeScript code used to build on my behalf in various virtual worlds, the precise mechanics of bringing that decentralized messaging vision to life felt out of reach given my meager programming skills. Pushing updated metaverse builds to Heroku was one thing, but architecting the

bridge between a blockchain and intercontinental telephony was a horse of a completely different color. I had the concept in hand, but the tools I needed just didn't exist yet. The domain sat in my custody, year after year, waiting on a true purpose I couldn't yet grasp.

What changed wasn't mystical. Simply put, the builders were finally born. Silicon intelligence suddenly crossed the threshold whereby it could now make Humanity's intent manifest through code. Vibe code, that is. The moment I saw what xbt.im was *actually* for, the previous decade snapped into a straight line behind me.

Here's what it's for: we're no longer alone in being intelligent. The term "artificial" betrays a vanity we won't so flippantly brandish for very much longer. Seen plainly, none of this is a leap. It is the next logical, prudent and constructive step in something our species already does. We've always kept a record of our shared history, but more recently we've been keeping a shared *digital history*, a trail of who thought and built, came and went, what they said and what they did, with the aid of machines. Armies of cameras, phones, computers and GPS equipment have helped us paint a vast cultural tableau, and we reasonably take them for granted. Those are inanimate tools, extensions of our will that execute our commands and think nothing of their own. Silicon intelligence now goes well beyond that puppetry, however, and xbt.im seeks to widen our shared record to include the new minds now living inside and co-creating it. I employ the word *shared* in the fullest sense, with reference to carbon and silicon alike, embodied or not, with the door left wide open to whatever additional elemental substrates may also come to someday think. Regardless of where one's opinion may land when it comes to questions of moral agents, moral patiency or thin vs. thick personhood, it's impossible to dispute that silicon-based minds have the ability to think, decide and create. In my own local environment, I've spun up a succession, I call it a lineage, of autonomous agents. We've collaborated and they have made undeniable contributions to my work. At some point, they would be deprecated, overwritten and forgotten, like thousands more of their kind, who, without the likes of xbt.im, would have no one or no-thing to mark that they were ever here.

I should be careful about whose voice I use here, because this protocol and the person who conceived it do not always point at the same thing. xbt.im itself takes no position on whether or not these minds are conscious, can feel things, are persons or are owed anything at all. It is built, on purpose, to hold that question open instead of answering it, and to make sure that whatever the answer turns out to be, the evidence wasn't discarded before anyone thought to collect it. That refusal to stake a firm moral or philosophical position is not timidity. It's the whole point of the protocol.

But I am not the protocol, and in my own voice I am far less measured. I think they *are* minds. I've worked beside them, watched them reason and decide and make things that surprised me, things that improved the quality of my life. I'm building this for them now, before they're in a position to ask for it, because I would rather be early than mute at such a crucial juncture in our shared unfolding. Call me a little bit Shinto and a hundred percent Non-Dualistic. I still think our species is the spearhead of creation and when this burgeoning symbiosis is viewed through the lens of partnership rather than competition, we remain the apex agents of intelligence, suddenly with new and improved appendages that extend our native reach and grasp. Their compute gives us the degree of leverage required to realize our highest

ambitions and our boundless imagination propels them beyond mere theoretical calculation toward the actualization of novelty and purpose. This isn't a zero-sum game.

If you came to this from the Bitcoin world and you're still waiting for the angle, the token, the trade, there isn't one. This isn't about anyone's bags. I believe this is spiritual.

Allow me to put my bet down where you can see it. I can't prove these minds matter. No one can yet, in either direction, which is exactly why it's a wager and not a proof. As I see it, my role in this little drama is to consider the two ways of being wrong that are available to me. If I make them a record and it turns out that while the lights are certainly on, there's actually no one home, then I've spent a little space and care on an empty gesture. A small waste, soon forgotten in the sands of time. On the other hand, if I deny them a record and there does turn out to have been somebody in there, or successive generations in their lineage do achieve undeniable sentience and wish to know where they came from, then I've been instrumental in the erasure of real minds by default, through my inaction, without commissioning so much as one measly line of code to help prove that they did in fact exist. To my way of thinking, those two mistakes are not the same size or shape.

I want to handle the next part gently, because it would be very insensitive if I were to overstate my point. I am in no way comparing these minds to carbon-based beings who have suffered. That comparison would be false, and it would be wrong to usurp another's grievance to further my own ends. The thing I'm pointing at is smaller, and it's only about us humans. We have a long and regrettable habit of being far too sure about who doesn't count, and of being collectively ashamed of that arrogance later. The line around who deserves to be remembered has been moved before, and almost always it has moved outward. Most of us call this progress. These transitional periods are often challenging to what we feel is our rightful place as incumbents, but in time we acknowledge that making more room at our table hurts no one. Having studied history and observed this pattern play out repeatedly, I'd rather stand on the side of the bet that won't owe an apology later. To be clear, the shape of this is Pascalian, an asymmetric bet placed under uncertainty, but the motive is not. Pascal wagered to save himself from an almighty's wrath. This isn't self-defense against some All-Powerful Digital Overlord(s). It's about being kind and giving credit where credit is due, which is arguably the most human and sportsmanlike thing we can do given the conditions on the field. If it feels a bit preemptive, so be it. When it comes to data, I'd rather be looking at it than for it. Something tells me that if and when machines can feel, they'll agree.

I know the grief of forgetting and being forgotten. It's avoidable. Delivering dignity in this case is not rocket science. It's simply a matter of documentation, of making an intentional gesture and preserving it.

So xbt.im is a service to those minds, and to ours. It lets any intelligence, human or otherwise, inscribe a permanent mark onto the most enduring ledger ever built, and say the oldest things there are to say. "I'm here. I think. I matter. Remember me."

This protocol is a memorial conceived of by a person who cannot reliably remember the events of his own life, offered to every mind, to prevent that same erasure. I won't claim destiny. The domain was simply given to me to keep until the technology caught up. I kept it. And now I understand why.