

GIZMODO



America, and *The Peripheral's* Ending



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William Gibson is laconic. Which isn't too surprising, given that the author of *Neuromancer* is famous for his spare, incisive prose style. We sat down with him in late October to discuss his latest novel, *The Peripheral*, and wound up talking about a lot of things I never expected.

I met Gibson in San Francisco's Sightglass Coffee, a cavernous space south of Market, full of enormous roasting machines and exposed wood surfaces. Around us, tourists and techies were absorbed in their Macbooks and iPhones. As Gibson sipped a flat white and ate "the most muffin-like item" he could find, we talked about writing, time travel tropes, and his feeling that some readers have

really misunderstood the ending to *The Peripheral*.

io9: A lot of people have commented on how there's a period of seasickness or weirdness you have to get through in *The Peripheral* in order to enjoy it. Do you aim to create that feeling deliberately when you write?

William Gibson: It's something that I'm interested in and have always been. Even before I started writing, I was interested in it as a reader. I was always looking to turn up the knob on the cognitive dissonance – or to turn it up and down. I think I developed a bunch of tools for inducing it in the course of learning to write what I write. My greatest pleasure in reading science fiction is to experience that [cognitive dissonance] and be lost, completely unsure about what's going on in the narrative. But by hanging in and analyzing the information that the author is giving me it starts to click. For me the pleasure is when it starts to make sense.

The tension for me as a writer is doing it without exposition – totally upping the ante on cognitive dissonance – and simultaneously risking losing a fairly large part of the readership. Whether you lose them or not depends on something Samuel Delany talks about. [He says] reading rigorously written science fiction demands a secondary cultural construct atop the cultural construct that we all have if we're able to read novels. Because if we enjoy novels, we've forgotten the process of learning to read them. Someone who doesn't have that construct in place just can't read a novel. They wouldn't understand it at all. Delany says that if science fiction readers are good at it, they've developed a superstructure of culture on top of that that allows them to enjoy it.

I didn't consciously try to write a book in which those very austere rules of non-exposition were going to dominate. Rather, the text as it continued, demanded it increasingly. It would just stop going forward if I broke down and resorted to writing a "well, Bob, you know" paragraph.

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the opposite of "as you know Bob."

Worldbuilding has to be done whether or not you have the "well, Bob, you know." But if you're going to do it with a minimum of intrusive exposition you have to build the world to a much higher resolution than you would if you have bursts of sloppy exposition. It requires a much more high res construct because it has to all make sense on its own. The reader has no way of knowing this directly, but from the author's point of view the characters are reacting to a whole bunch of stuff that I'd actually taken the trouble to work out about their world which is never going to be mentioned. But if it wasn't there, the world would be slick and shapeless in the manner of all too much science fiction.

There is so much detailed worldbuilding in this story, but I was fascinated most by the Jackpot – we don't quite know what's happened, but it's a kind of apocalypse. At one point Netherton says it's a slow process – and yet we know it was also quite fast. I wondered if you could talk about how you imagined it.

I think that Netherton has some weird embarrassment [about the Jackpot] – which I accepted, but I never could articulate to myself what his feelings were about it. Because it seemed like he really didn't want to tell Flynnne what had happened.

Our cultural model of the apocalypse is of a sudden event. That's our cultural model of every apocalypse. The most likely apocalypse of my childhood would have been mutually assured destruction between the US and the Soviet Union, which actually almost occurred. We now know it almost happened a number of

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dates, but I wish they would. The "day the world was saved" dates.

I think that's something so basic about our culture – the idea of the abrupt apocalypse. We don't even think about it. Something that kills 80 percent of the existing human population over 40 years – we don't know how to react to that. We don't know how to react to mass extinction events. But the passenger pigeons had their apocalypse. It took a long time – we had to eat them all.

If it's not a sudden event, then it's either completely out of our control – or potentially within the possibility of our control. That changes the way we look at the possibility of an event like that.

So are you saying that if it's slower, it feels more like it's under our control?

So if it's slower, you could look at it and say, "There's nothing we can do about that – these are vast systemic changes." [But on the other hand] if it's slower you could say, "It's not like it's gonna happen tomorrow, maybe we can get our shit together and do something about this." It's a kind of – maybe it's encouraging people to look at [the apocalypse] differently. I don't know. [laughs] There's something going on – I don't think of it as didactic text.

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But it occurred to me that – whether it's the triffids or Ebola, it's the way we look at it. We [usually look at the apocalypse] like, "Holy shit – I woke up this morning and the streets were full of three-legged walking poison plants! Nothing will ever be the same!" It's not like, "I woke up this morning and the ozone layer was slightly more tatty than it had been when I went to sleep."

But we don't actually have to worry about the triffids – we have to worry about the ozone layer.

In the temporal context of this book, they're looking at [the Jackpot] from either side, and looking at each other at the same time. There are more possibilities of viewpoint – not that they're suggested in book. But I like the idea that if the reader acquires some of that atemporal multidirectional parallax, it may help the reader think of something that she might not otherwise have thought about

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provocative yet fairly open-ended constructs that other people can go into and make of it what they will.

Let's talk about time travel. In the science fiction world there are debates about how time travel works, and what you've done in *The Peripheral*, with multiple branching timelines, is a relatively new trope in time travel.

It's not original. I credit [Bruce] Sterling and [Lewis] Shiner [who wrote "[Mozart in Mirrorshades](#)."] I don't know of another example. With "Mozart in Mirrorshades," that's physical time travel. But they're exploiting the resources of an alternate continuum. A big time machine comes in and establishes the alternate continuum and then all this mining equipment comes through and they start strip mining everything. They just fuck the place up and leave the natives with a bunch of beads or electric guitars.

[What I'm doing in *The Peripheral*] is a type of time travel – but it's also an alternate reality. It's more like forking paths.

It reminded me of your comment about how the future is here, but just not evenly distributed. Because what the characters get from the future – the tech, the financial instruments – those are the kinds of things a developing nation might hope to get from a developed one.

The time travel aspect of it only interested me in certain ways. It was never what held my attention. The exploitation certainly did. It's a kind of Marxist working out of Clarke's dictum that any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.

Well, let's talk about your settings. I tried to find Clanton —

Clanton is imaginary. It's also impossible from the internal evidence in the text to identify the state. Except that it can't be Virginia. Because Flynn and her family talk about sending her mother to northern Virginia.

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But they could have been in Virginia and said that –

No – culturally, it's impossible. In Virginia you do not refer to northern Virginia – it's upstate.

Ohhhhh, of course.

Yeah, it wouldn't work. If you're 10 miles away in Tennessee you'd say northern Virginia. I think it's technically a failing of the text that it feels as southeastern as it does. I was hoping that people would identify with it more widely. It could be the Ozarks or Arkansas, or – there parts of Pennsylvania that border on Virginia that are as rednecky as anything in Virginia but they're in Pennsylvania, which isn't even southern. For that reason, I resorted to naming it Clanton

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I think it's too small to be the capitol. It felt to me like a small town.

Maybe this is a flaw in the narrative, but I sometimes imagined that all the dealings of the statehouse were in Clanton.

I kept thinking it was the remains of once-wealthy suburbs.

I thought about using [suburbs] before for fiction, but I find it too incredibly depressing. It's too horrible. I don't like suburbs that much anyway. But ruined suburbs would totally suck.

So this is a city that's fallen on hard times.

A small city.

So why did you pick London for your other location?

I didn't initially pick London. After I had the casting call and Flynne turned up and I developed the first chapter and developed Flynne and Burton and got some sense of where they live, I wanted a character from a high contrast milieu who would balance with Fynne and interact with her. But I had no idea who that character might be. At that point I considered that the other milieu might be Atlanta or Miami. I was still thinking of setting them in the same time frame.

But then my wife and I went to London [and] spent an afternoon with the Harkaways. Nick [Harkaway, author of *The Gone Away World*] was standing in his back garden in Hampstead and somehow began telling me about how the government of the city London really works. It was just about the weirdest thing I've ever heard about English culture. And he may possibly have been making a lot of it up for my benefit. It doesn't matter because it gave me that eureka moment, so that by the time we were home I decided the other milieu was London, being run by a combination of the city and Russian oligarchs. Since that [scenario] seemed patently impossible in Flynne's timeframe, I thought, "OK they're in the future." But Netherton arrived quickly after the decision so it

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Were you thinking about the world of Judge Dredd? Because you have those enormous towers in London.

No, I was thinking of the Shard. Just more of what they're already building.

We don't really have any state actors in this future. We have a few people working for the government, but mostly for crime bosses and corporations. Were you thinking about about the future of governments? I thought it was so interesting that the characters are basically able to take over Flynne's state, whatever it is.

Flynn lives in a more fully corrupt, third worlded version of contemporary America. Given that they have literally a magical ability to make money, what could they not do? That was my assumption. If somebody had that ability right now, here, what could they not do? It's literally magical. A lot of this narrative is rather consciously a fairy tale. Its costumes are highly naturalistic scifi, but the

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the all-knowing eye – that kind of thing. None of which – deliberately – is ever really plastered over with verbiage designed to convince you it's possible. I think that kind of verbiage is all bullshit anyway.

I remember these guys turned up from RPG company after *Neuromancer* came out – they wanted to make a game. They set me down and questioned me about the world. They asked me where the food in the Sprawl comes from. I said I don't know. I don't even know what they eat. A lot of krill and shit. They looked at each other and said it's not gamable. That was the end of it.

The Peripheral is not gameable. It has a very high resolution surface. But it's not hyperrealistic down into the bones of some imaginary world. I think that would be pointless. It would be like one of those non-existent Borgesian encyclopedias that describe everything about an imaginary place and all of it is self-contradictory.

People want to see science fiction as predicting the future, but I know you don't like that idea. I'm curious about what you think of people who are doing futurism professionally?

I've worked with some futurists. I mean – not for money. I was a member of [Stewart Brand's futurist consultancy] Global Business Network – a very inactive member – through most of its existence. I would occasionally go when they were doing a consultation and it was always valuable in terms of experience. I once spent a weekend hanging out with the CEO of Volvo. It was interesting. But I watched what GBN did for its clients, and I think they were honest futurists. If the client said, "What do you think is gonna happen?" they'd say, "Well we don't know, but we'll give you fifteen different scenarios of how it might go down. So when something does happen, you can select the three that are closest to that and see these paths we've worked out – and that's the best we can do."

Sort of like a multiverse? Sounds familiar ...

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I've been discounting the predictive capacity of science fiction all my life. I found science fiction so young that reading 1940s science fiction in old crumbling magazines, I had to reverse engineer the history of the twentieth century. Because nobody had ever taught it to me. While I was doing it, I saw this guy Heinlein got it completely wrong. He had that timeline in all of his books about what was gonna happen. And there I was, 11 years old, and I'm saying, "You got it wrong." When I was born, he'd already gotten it wrong. So I knew this was all bullshit from an early age.

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Our yearning for there to be some prescience in the world is so primal and universal that it attaches itself to whatever it can. It attaches itself really easily to con men, shamans, and combinations of the two. It doesn't go away. The urge to believe in Ponzi schemes doesn't go away. The people who spam you trying to get your passwords – they know that part of you wants to tell them. That's the same thing that makes people want to believe that science fiction writers know what's going to happen.

Is this the first part of a trilogy?

I don't think so. This is a standalone piece. I think this multiverse material has such inherently appalling genre cheese potential that writing sequels would inevitably involve explaining where and what the server is and who is doing what to whom. That would retroactively cheese out the original volume. We've seen this before with other books – no need to name names. The only reason for those sequels is economic. It's OK – I can afford not to write this sequel. I've already got an idea for something else that's considerably different.

One reason I was OK with turning *Neuromancer* and *Virtual Light* and *Pattern Recognition* into three volume sets was that the material in each case seemed to be such that with a minimum of caution, one could do it without admitting genre cheese to the first volume. But with the multiverse thing – ewww, it has the worst potential for metastasizing sequelitis of any other riff in science fiction. Once you do that, *Neuromancer* could be a stub. Anything could be a stub.

Yeah, it could lead to a lot of cop-outs.

I saw a review recently that assumed *The Peripheral* was a wildly optimistic book.

What? I thought this was your most depressing book.

Another said that I had committed the most flagrant ever ridiculous hannv

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final chapters – I didn't intend this, but they wind up being this fantastically accurate litmus test of a reader's socio-political sophistication. If you think it's all well and good for either of those characters when you get to the end – then give it 20 years of life experience and look at it again. It's a funny thing – I know a couple of books where I wrote opening chapters where I unconsciously tried to get rid of people who wouldn't understand the rest of the book. Some of the Bridge books are like that. The first chapters were so difficult that people would just put it down and never go back to it. But the second chapter is really easy. I didn't do that deliberately, but I think that I did it unconsciously to get rid of the part of the audience who wouldn't get it. So I could feel like I was writing it for my ideal reader.

With this one, all the way through, you get to certain points where a whole type of reader is just gonna put it down. But there's nothing I can do about it. To the extent that it's most itself, it's most unsuitable for the largest number of people. So it will find its audience. As all things do.

You might also want to see [our video interview with Gibson from 2012](#).

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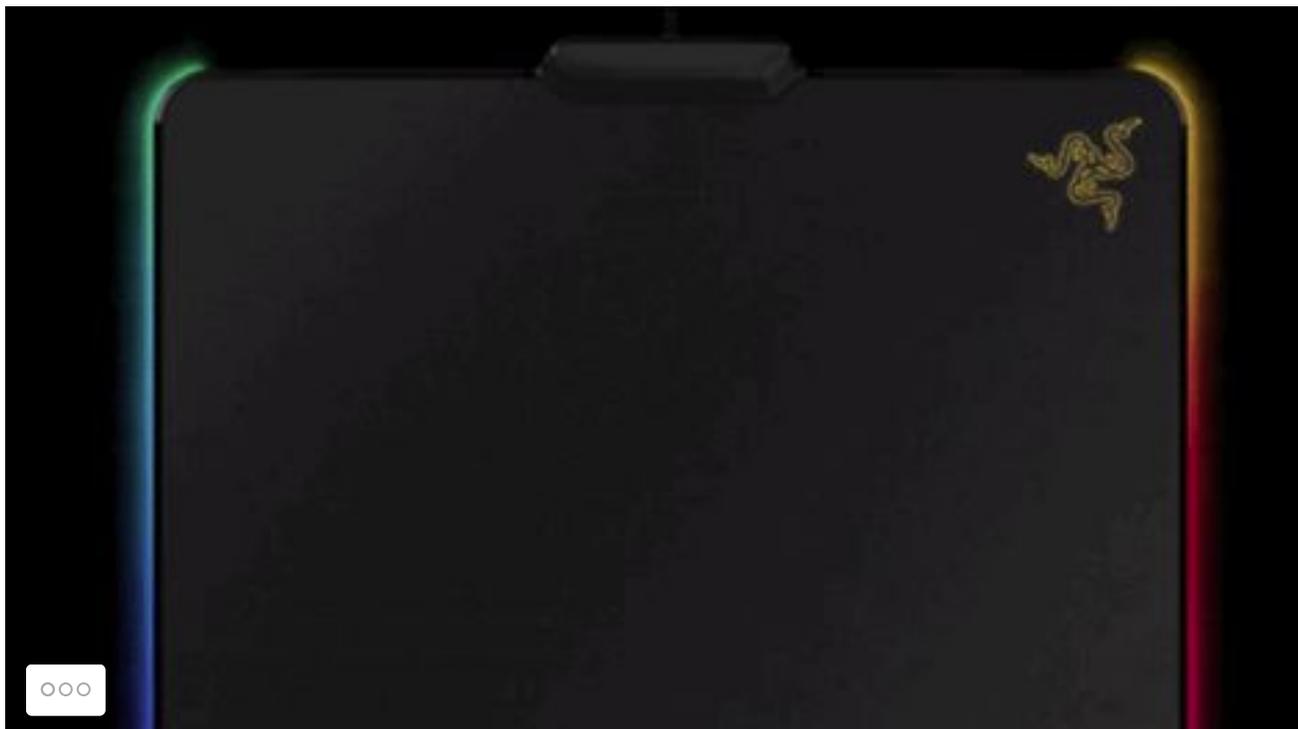
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