

Time Travel... and other matters as may properly come before the board

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I continue to be amazed by the popularity of time-travel related stories, articles, and reference guides printed in science fiction journals. Look folks, I'll take a big load off of your mind. You're never going to get a time-machine. You're never going to invent one, and if you did finally beat the odds and invent one when you were like 85, the last thing you'd ever do was send it back to a younger version of yourself... Maybe your archenemy, but never yourself. So don't hassle it. Use the brainpower you would have devoted to working out the entire time-travel thing on memorizing sport statistics, or the last 3,000 draws of your state's lottery. Trust me, it will be time better spent.

Having said that, I know you won't listen to me. You won't jump ahead to the next story, or put the magazine down for a moment and take a potty break. You probably think you're different, that you're special, and when you're 85 instead of dribbling food down your chin, you're going to be screaming, "Eureka!" at the top of your lungs, which if you've ever been to a nursing home, just sort of sounds like heavy wheezing. But the limited vocal abilities of octogenarians is neither here nor there.

And really, just to show you I'm a good guy, I'm willing to put all of that aside for the moment and just for the heck of it simply assume that you're going to invent a time-machine on your deathbed. And since your life will be almost over at that point, you'll send the device back to a younger version of yourself. The only real question left is: which younger version? When you were eight? Giving a time-machine to an eight-year-old is like making nuclear weapons available to a Republican president or giving fully functioning sexual organs to a fifteen-year-old. It's just a bad idea and no good can come of it. Eighteen-year-olds are no smarter. In fact, it's a safe bet that for you to stand any chance

of inventing a time-machine on your deathbed you would have had to have gotten a lot smarter by then than you are now. And I'm guessing if you wise up that much, you'll be smart enough to know that sending a time-machine back to any younger version of yourself is akin to suicide.

I suppose those of you new to the time-travel game might think I spending too much time on this first point, but this is where all time-machine stories really begin. In fact, when you get right down to it, receiving a fully functioning time-machine from an older version of yourself (or the plans, or whatever) is about the only way to actually get one... Well, that is, unless you want to take the long road, work hard, and invent one.

I suppose we could assume that you have what it takes: that you have the brains, access to a secret government lab with multi-billion dollar equipment in it, or that--you know--you've got that workbench set up in your garage, and well... building a birdhouse, repairing a broken vacuum cleaner, or inventing a time-machine: it's all pretty much the same thing. Isn't it? I mean, they make it look hard in movies, but you know that's just because THEY'RE scared that someday YOU'LL find out how ridiculously easy making a fully functioning time-machine truly is: e.g. fire up the cyclotron, remove any safety shielding, decouple the gauss field inducers, and presto-chango you've got yourself a time-machine. Just don't tell anyone you heard it from me. All I'm asking is that you use that story about how your future self sent you the blueprints. Trust me. They'll buy it. They always do.

So congratulations. You've got a time-machine sitting on your kitchen table. It doesn't look like much, and really, it's just a prototype, so it goes without saying that you'll need a much bigger model. And, I hope it also goes without saying that the type of reckless individual who's going to make a full size cyclotron in their backyard, remove any shielding, decouple the gauss field thingamajigs, and then sit down in the line of fire... well, that's exactly the sort of reckless individual who's going to send a working time-machine back to themselves when they were eight-

years-old. I mean, think of the cool things you could do... and the practical jokes. Which once again brings it all back to: if you don't already have a time-machine, you don't have one coming to you in your future. Sorry. That's just the way it is.

But I have a time-machine, you say. If so, then you are--what we in the time-travel field like to call--a liar.

OK. Maybe you're not a liar. Maybe you work in some top secret division of the government, say the TAI, which I've always been led to believe stands for Temporal Anomaly Investigation, or maybe you work down in Area 51--UFO's, ESP, paranormal investigations, and time-travel: those guys are into it all.

Anyhow. What I'm saying is, even if no one else will, I'm willing to believe that you have a time-machine.

Or... Not!

But on the off chance that I'm wrong, DON'T USE IT! Just assume it's not a working model.

Sigh. This is the place where folks always tell me that they've already used it. Well, if you have already used your time-machine, you're screwed. I've read every time-travel case study I could get my hands on and one thing is clear: using a time-machine is a recipe for disaster. You're going to kill your mother, sleep with your father, rematerialize where your grandfather is standing... kill someone important, start World War III, or see yourself buying chewing gum at some newspaper kiosk and disappear--suddenly and inexplicitly--in a collapsing causality wormhole...

But then... Now that I think about it, maybe I'm being too grim... There's this rumor going around that there is one way of doing it right... I mean, if you... What the heck, I suppose I can trust you...

Just between you and me, here's what you have to do. If you just sit down in that time-machine the very second after you first make it--and this is actually quite a bit harder than it sounds seeing as how you already sent it back to yourself--anyhow if you flick the switch, turn the dial, and just go in one temporal direction as

far--far--away as you possibly can and never--ever--and I mean never--come back, well then you stand a slim chance of avoiding any causality backlash--and/or those TAI enforcement guys--but personally I've never heard of anyone doing this. I'll admit, one time this guy came to my house and insisted he'd spent the last six years hunting dinosaurs and living with a tribe of Amazonian beauties in some utopian neolith proto-prehistoric past. Sure, he was buff, tan, and looked the part, but with a story like that, you just know he was crazy, so I called the cops and they locked him up. If you ask me, we're all lucky he didn't bring back some super deadly plague. You know, one of those horrific viruses that wiped out the dinosaurs a million billion years ago, but which has subsequently morphed into something benign over the years... like the common cold, or something.

Oh, I'm sorry. I got that one backwards. I guess that's why we don't have dinosaurs anymore... or scantily clad Amazonian cave-girls in string bikinis running around on every street corner... and--also perhaps--why the police were so happy to lock that buxomous babe killing troublemaker up. Nice going dude! Thanks for ruining it for the rest of us.

Vindictive retribution aside, the bottom line is: if you use a time-machine once, something bad is going to happen--trust me on this, it will--and then what are you going to do? You'll try to fix it. You'll try to fix whatever went wrong the first time by using the time-machine again. Yeah. Great idea Einstein. No one has ever thought of that before. One time-hopping trip was bad, so two will make things, what? Horrible? Three will bring the problem to the level of a calamity, and four is simply disastrous. If you haven't killed yourself by then, the only thing the rest of us can do is hope that the TAI gets to you before you can make it to five. Trust me. You don't want to know what happens when you get to five. Well, maybe you do, but I don't know. My thesaurus ran out of words, so from four on out it's disastrous... as if that wasn't warning enough.

But it's not. Every year I talk to some joker who thinks that just because I write science fiction and fantasy stories I took some kind of oath to muck up the simplest of things, and they accuse me--like personally--of making reality the way that it is. Like it's somehow my fault that wishes never work out the way they are supposed to. That's just the way the universe is folks. Maybe that will be the name of my next article, Why Do You Always Have to Spend the Third Wish Undoing the First Two? Truth is, I don't know. What I do know is that those lamps aren't hotels folks. They're prison cells, so when you're setting a Djini free, you're releasing a fire elemental who might not be all that terribly ready for polite society--let alone parole--if you know what I mean.

OK. Where was I? This isn't the article on wishes. It's the article on time-travel... but hey, think of what you could do with three wishes. Me, I'd wish for better endings for my stories (and/or articles) that's what I'd do, but I know if I did, I'd probably start doing hard time for plagiarism the next day. So... That would leave me two more wishes. Definitely I would wish for the prison guards to be hot Amazonian babes with a thing for witty plagiarists. Personally, I don't see how that one could go wrong, except, if well, you know...

Let's just say it's an odds on bet that those prison guards are suddenly--for whatever reason--not going to be interested in me. I might be able to do something about that with my third wish... but I probably should hold onto it for a moment and think things through first.

So, anyway, yeah. If I had three wishes, I'd take them, even though I know it would just end up being a... disaster. Listen folks. I've already explained this. The list for That Would Be Bad in my thesaurus ends with disaster. It's as far as That Would Be Bad goes. OK? But I am a writer (creative, witty, and versatile if I do say so myself), and so if you'd like, I could qualify disaster a little and say that it would be a big disaster, a great big megalithic disaster of calamitous proportions. You know, if some sort of cool word-smithing thing like that would make you any happier.

Anyway, let's get back to those time-machines. This is an article on time-machines after all, and both of us know that if you got your grubby little time-traveling hands on a time-machine, you'd use it. And I could go into all sorts of detailed explanations as to why things would go bad involving temporal loops, interference from all the interlacing iterations--kind of sounds impressive doesn't it?--and try to explain why all of this would ultimately lead to the breakdown of causality and the dissolution of the timeline as we know it...

But of course, when I say I could go into some sort of detailed explanation, what I mean is that rhetorically somebody could. But I can't, because I don't understand all that stuff. Never really could wrap my mind around long division, let alone algebra, but you don't need to understand calculus--or know that there is no practical day-to-day use for the tensor transform--to get a sense of how gravity works. Or to know that at some point, no matter how much I was enjoying myself with (and/or watching) those Amazonian prison guard babes, at some point I'd use my third wish to wipe out the first two.

Of course, I have no idea why a third wish--used to cancel out the first two--always works. If you ask me, it would seem like that's when they--the wishing powers that be--have you on the run. As in, "Oh, OK. So, you're wishing that you never got a wishing ring? Never found the Aladdin's Lamp? OK. Sure. No worries," the demon-imp agrees mischievously. But that's when you look around only to find that you're still in jail, the female prison guards are still ignoring you, and your agent still won't return your calls--citing some nonsense about how your articles are starting to make absolutely no sense. But that's not how it works. Your third wish undoes it all and miraculously your life gets better to boot... I know I had a point in there somewhere...

Oh, yeah. Now I remember. I was saying how I know I'd use a pack of wishes if I got them, and damn the laws of causality I'd use a time-machine too, but here's why it won't work. No matter how many times you go back in time and undo the murder,

or the killing of your grandmother; no matter how well you disinfect the time-machine so you don't bring back the plague, or whatever disaster it was that you caused the first time you used the time-machine; at the beginning of it all only one person, you, goes into the time loop, and at the end only one person, still you, comes out. I don't care how many twists, turns, swirls and loop de loops you draw on a piece of paper, or how twisted up you make your TAI trip report so that your supervisors won't know how many regs you broke and/or whether or not to approve your expenses. At the end of the day, when the time-machine blows a fuse and strands you on the front lines at Picket's Charge or you realize that: Ooops! You didn't actually include the cyclotron as part of the time-traveling capsule--amazingly common as it's not really that hard to do--and like it or not, now its just you. Just you! In the middle of nowhere.

With maybe the Cro-Magnons. Or the Neanderthals. But nary a cyclotron manufacturing facility in sight. That's when you have to look on the bright side and take what is essentially a unique opportunity to host impromptu debates between the two groups of mythical men and finally settle the issue of whether they existed at the same time... or not.

Look. Either way it's not my problem. If you've got issues with my version of history, maybe it's because we're on different time-tracks. Huh? Never thought of that one. Did ya? Or maybe the Cro-Magnons used a time-machine to muck things up like they're always doing. I don't see why they couldn't. I mean you made a time-machine...

OK. Sorry. No need to get personal. I apologize. The point I was making is, no matter how twisted up the journey gets, at the beginning it's only you and at the end it's only you, and it sucks to be you.

OK. Sorry. Sorry.

It's near the end of the article, and I get a little giddy with delight when that happens. I promise, I won't get personal again. What I was saying is that you start at one end of the cycle and

you--and only you--come out the other, but with every jump that you make, everything gets worse. Trust me. Read any story. It's the way it always works out. Those are just the cold hard facts, but here's the rub. Suppose you had a time-machine, or will get one shortly in the mail from me as a sort of apology for all the rude and crass things that I've said... Anyhow, if you should suddenly receive a time-machine anonymously, build one in your garage, or whatever, knowing what you know now about time-machines, would you send it to an earlier version of yourself? Of course not. And if you wouldn't send it to an earlier version of yourself, you can bet a later version of yourself isn't going to send a time-machine to you either, and since that's the only way to get a time-machine, you have to ask yourself: who really sent you that time-machine in the first place?

Me, I'm thinking it's a trick. Probably your worse enemy sent you that time-machine in the hopes that something really, like really disastrously bad would happen to you. So the only thing to do is to send it to an earlier version of your worst enemy... or an obnoxious fantasy author. Say in his younger years. That would show me.

In the end, that's the real utility of time-machines. They're like the opposite of a blessing in disguise. Hate someone, send them a time-machine. Put it this way: if you were a Cro-Magnon and you had a time-machine, you'd probably send it to one of those know-it-all Neanderthal's. (And vice versa, except for the know-it-all part.) It's not like a time-machine is useful or anything. Not like a cloning device. Now those things rock!

I mean, right now I've got a clone pounding out this article while I'm out in the ocean surfing...

Hey! Wait a minute! I'm the one writing this article!

I'm going to have to talk to my other selves about that. Obviously that whole cloning thing isn't turning out the way I had intended, but before I go give myself a good talking to, I'd like to leave you with this final thought. Forget about time-travel. It's for rubes. If you want to strike pay dirt, what you need to do is pick

up one of those monkey paws, or if you can't find one of those because of all the animal activists running about, get yourself one of those infamous Rings of Three Wishes or Aladdin's Lamps. Now don't use it yourself. That's the last thing you want to do. What you want to do is give it away as a present. Trust me. This works. You'll never have to buy another Christmas, birthday, anniversary, or whatever gift again. Give it to whoever. When they open the box, they'll be like all happy-happy and full of praise. "A Ring of Three Wishes! For me?" Oh, they'll love you. But the best part, the very best part is--and I can guarantee this--is that within two weeks they'll be wishing they never got the stupid thing.

Which sounds really bad at first blush, but then you just need to take a breath and realize that two weeks is just about the right amount of time for them to forgive you for not getting them a present in the first place... and there you are sitting pretty with a unused monkey paw--good to go--once again.

If you wanted to, I bet you could open a small store or something. Those curio selling shopkeepers make out like bandits. Or, you could take notes on the entire experience and write it up as a journal article. Not that anybody would believe you, but I'm sure it would make a good story or something.

I suppose if I really wanted to be ironic, I could end by mentioning that the real reason these idiotic hybrid time-travel/wish related story-rants keep on turning up in your CLASSIER science fiction journals is because the lame plot device is like hot a potato saddled with a boomerang curse, and no matter how hard you hope, try, or wish upon a falling star, we'll never be able to cleanse the genre of the stupid things.

Thank you. Please join me next time when I'll debunk Wooden Nickels and explain why they're not the store of value most folks think that they are.

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