Why We Built a Teleportation Machine and Why It Was a Bad Idea: Marcus Landers’ Oral History about the Invention of the World’s First Matter Transference Device

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Why We Built a Teleportation Machine and Why It Was a Bad Idea:
Marcus Landers’ Oral History about the Invention of the World’s First
Matter Transference Device

Abstract
Stevie and I were sick of this town. That’s why we built our teleportation machine. Or rather, we decided to
build our teleportation machine in part because we were sick of this town, but also because this town’s public
transportation isn’t very good, and both of us got busted for Operating a Vehicle after Underage Consumption
and lost our licenses for two years—though neither of us even owned a car to begin with—and because my
mom is dead and my dad is a drunk, and because Stevie’s parents, while both alive and not drunks, are too
busy to drive him around and won’t let him borrow their cars because he lost his license, and because we’re
geniuses who finished high school by the time we were sixteen only to drop out of college a year later and
move back home—but really, Stevie was kicked out of MIT because he was caught drinking in his dorm room
several times, though he doesn’t drink anymore, I guess—and finally, because when Stevie went to college he
met a girl named Tiffany who is a violin prodigy and who gave Stevie a handy on the first date, and that was
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Stevie and I were sick of this town. That’s why we built our teleportation machine. Or rather, we decided to build our teleportation machine in part because we were sick of this town, but also because this town’s public transportation isn’t very good, and both of us got busted for Operating a Vehicle after Underage Consumption and lost our licenses for two years—though neither of us even owned a car to begin with—and because my mom is dead and my dad is a drunk, and because Stevie’s parents, while both alive and not drunks, are too busy to drive him around and won’t let him borrow their cars because he lost his license, and because we’re geniuses who finished high school by the time we were sixteen only to drop out of college a year later and move back home—but really, Stevie was kicked out of MIT because he was caught drinking in his dorm room several times, though he doesn’t drink anymore, I guess—and finally, because when Stevie went to college he met a girl named Tiffany who is a violin prodigy and who gave Stevie a handy on the first date, and that was the first time a woman had done something like that for Stevie so he fell in love with her, but without a driver’s license he couldn’t drive to visit her, and he couldn’t fly or take a bus because he gets motion sick and anxious any time he tries to travel long distances in a confined space surrounded by strangers. Really, while we had no shortage of
reasons, it’s that last one, the one about Tiffany, that made us decide to build a teleportation device. Or rather, that’s why Stevie decided to build a teleportation device, because, honestly, I didn’t give a fuck and would have just continued sitting around my dad’s house watching porn, getting drunk, and playing the Sega Genesis I bought at the vintage game store, but Stevie needed my thinking about physics and my coding know-how to complement his mechanical abilities, and I didn’t have anything better to do, and Stevie promised me a shitload of money if we were successful, and he reminded me about how much I hate Ohio, and how happy I was for the year I went to school at Cornell, which—that last part—I lied about that to Stevie; I was fucking miserable at Cornell, which is why I left of my own accord after a year and came back to Dayton, where I almost immediately got hit with that OVAUC, because I was, in fact, operating a vehicle after underage consumption. I wasn’t drunk, mind you, just operating a vehicle after underage consumption, which, as it happens, is all police officers care about if you are under age and operating a vehicle after having consumed, and I know it was a stupid thing to do, but here’s the thing: Even though I was miserable at Cornell, it turned out that I was more miserable after realizing that I had failed at going to college and had to move back in with my dad, so why not pilfer three beers from Dad’s “beer fridge” in the garage, get a nice buzz on in the middle of the damn afternoon and drive to Vintage Stock to buy a few games—I scored *Gunstar Heroes* and *Aladdin*, the latter of which is a better game than you’d think, not a quick movie cash-in as has become the norm with contemporary tie-ins—with the cash I made selling my furniture before leaving Cornell. What I’m getting at is this: While Stevie’s strategy of persuading me to help him by reminding me how “happy” I’d been at Cornell was way off the mark, he did at least remind me how disappointed and restless Dayton was making me, so I told him I’d help, and it wasn’t long before I’d cooked up the conceptual framework for the teleportation machine. Then Stevie actually built the fucker.

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The first time I was teleported—and we decided I would be the test subject because my calculations and the more difficult parts of the programming were done, so if something went wrong, I would have been more expendable than Stevie, whose engineering expertise would still be needed to fix the mechanical glitches that would have led to my theoretical demise—I threw up. I started out standing in one corner of the room, then the machine started scanning me, and the next thing I remember I was standing in the opposite corner of the room, feeling kind of funny and tingly, and throwing up all over the floor. After giving me a cup of juice and a cookie, Stevie asked me a shitload of questions about what it was like to be teleported—was I conscious in between being de- and rematerialized? If so, what did it look like? What did it feel like? Did I remember being dematerialized, and if so, did it hurt? I said, “I
remember you aiming the machine at me, and then I remember barfing.” I looked at my barf on the floor and marveled at the machine’s thoroughness. “This thing doesn’t miss any details,” I said. “It scanned my lunch.” And Stevie asked me again, “Do you remember anything at all between being dis- and reassembled?” I shook my head. Stevie looked annoyed, then asked, “Did it hurt?” And I said, “My esophagus is a little raw, if that’s what you mean.” Then Stevie asked me, “Do you feel okay? Do you feel like yourself?” I said, “Right now all I feel is a little hungry.” And Stevie said, “It made you hungry?” I pointed to my vomit on the floor and said, “Yeah, it made me hungry.”

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Stevie was able to build a teleportation machine because he is and always has been a brilliant mechanical engineer, to the point that people called him a prodigy when he was growing up—just like people called me a genius, which is how the two of us both wound up at the charter school for gifted kids with inclinations toward science, technology, and engineering, and which, by the way, is probably also why, in part, besides the handjob, Stevie fell batshit in love with Tiffany, who, being a violin prodigy, would also know what it felt like to be so good at something from an early age that she didn’t know any other thing to do than play the goddamn violin, well, and give handjobs, apparently. Our machine, paid for with money from the trust fund Stevie’s grandparents had left for him, looked like a giant laser canon, kind of like the SHV 20905, as seen in Tron, my favorite movie, the idea behind it all being that the machine would simultaneously digitize and disintegrate the subject intended for teleportation and send the digitized information to another location, where a second machine would rematerialize the subject. In essence, our machine wouldn’t actually teleport a subject the way most people think about teleportation—an object disappears from one location and then that exact same, original object appears in another—but by dismantling the subject molecule by molecule, making a thorough, digital copy of every last particle, storing that data, and then sending the data to another location, where a second machine would build a new version of the subject using the information stored by the first machine. In essence—nothing would be teleported, but disintegrated and then precisely rebuilt. To borrow terminology from Star Trek, what we’d built was more a transporter than a teleporter, but teleportation sounds more impressive than transportation—transportation being possible with such mundane devices as cars, buses, bicycles, and whatever—so we stuck to calling it a teleportation device.

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Before Stevie started running me through the teleportation machine over and over again, we tested the device on oranges because oranges are what the scientists in *Tron* used to test their machine. We’d watch the oranges disintegrate into nothing, then one of us would push the button and watch the machine try to rebuild them. We went through hundreds of oranges before we got the process right, because programming software to precisely scan an object while simultaneously disintegrating said object and then reproducing that object by converting energy to matter is exactly as difficult as it sounds: The first orange we reconstituted came back as a smear of pulp and juice; an orange that was the subject of a later test came back with its skin on the inside and its meat on the outside; and then, toward the end, when we were so close that we could hardly stand it, we made an orange that looked like an orange but didn’t taste like an orange—that is to say, the orange was lacking its acidic taste and smell, both crucial to the experience of eating oranges. After that attempt, Stevie said, “Do you think this is as good as we can do? Do you think we can remake all of the orange except for its essence—those essential smells and tastes that make oranges, oranges?” I told Stevie that his concern was nonsensical, that the molecules to make the orange taste and smell like an orange are part of the orange; we just needed to make our machine more precise so it wouldn’t miss those molecules. A few more bags of oranges later, we were successful: When we peeled the skin from that last orange, bit into the fruit, and felt its juice sting our mouths, we felt powerful, like two brilliant teenagers who had just built a teleportation device, which I guess is exactly what we were. “We did it,” I said. “I told you we could,” I said. And Stevie said, “But do you think we can make it work for a human?” And I told him we already had: “There shouldn’t be any difference between a human and an orange,” I said. I told Stevie the scanning resolution and data transference were set to capture every single molecule of any person, place, or thing, disintegrate that person, place, or thing, and then rebuild it. Stevie was worried, still, asked if we were missing something intangible in humans that might be lost. “We aren’t teleporting an object from one place to another,” Stevie said, stating the obvious. “We are copying an object, destroying it, then reconstituting it. What if we can’t copy some essence of the original?” I laughed at Stevie because he was talking about souls without actually talking about souls, which was insane, because anything that makes us behave in particular ways and remember particular things is part of the molecules that make up our brains. Even though I know that Stevie knew better, I explained all of this to him, and he seemed to feel okay about everything for a minute. But then Stevie asked, “So should we test it on a cat or a dog, first—to be safe?” And I told him no, that we should just use me as a test subject because the machine was pretty much ready. In retrospect, Stevie’s entire line of reasoning was strange because, like me, Stevie is an atheist and doesn’t believe in things like souls. Later, when I asked Stevie why he was so worried about this idea that there might be some intangible thing that might be lost through the digitization and reconstitution process, he told me what it was like
listening to his violin prodigy girlfriend play music, and how there was something in her performance that could never be replicated by any synthesized or mechanical attempt at playing the violin; of course, Stevie was wrong because, while a machine couldn’t make the same decisions that a person makes in the same way a person makes them, a machine would be able to precisely replicate a given performance if properly programmed, so I said, “But Stevie—we’re teleporting people, not performances.” He said, “But people make the performances.” And I said, “You’re not making any sense at all.” I said, “You’re smarter than this.” And Stevie said, “It makes sense in my head and my gut.” I said, “Your head and your gut are assholes.”

The second time I was teleported, Stevie reconstituted me on a tarp in case I threw up again, which I didn’t. Stevie made a mistake this time, though, and something else bad happened instead of me barfing. You see, because he was distracting himself texting back and forth with Tiffany, Stevie had forgotten that he had already reconstituted me once, so he pushed the button a second time, which, because our teleportation device doesn’t—or didn’t, rather—actually send the original subject from one place to another, but converted the subject to data that could be stored and sent, meaning, essentially, that our machine could also be used as a copy machine of sorts, caused the machine to begin reassembling a second version of me. Luckily, I saw the machine preparing to build me again, and I got out of the way, or I probably would have had a second me fused with me, or something, but because I got out of the way in time, there was just the second me, which was kind of terrifying in its own right. I stood approximately two feet away from where the second me was being reconstituted. I didn’t like watching myself being built by a laser, even though it wasn’t really me because I’d already been reconstituted, which, of course, because the other me being built would be an exact copy of me, made me wonder if I was actually me at all or if the other me being built was actually me, and as that new me was being built—each reconstitution took about fifteen seconds—my chest tightened and my face flushed because I was scared of meeting myself, and I knew that I needed to do something, so I grabbed an old aluminum baseball bat from when I was seven and my dad wanted me to play Little League even though I was terrible at it, and as soon as the second me finished materializing I used that bat to beat him to death. I hit the second me in the head and the neck, and when he fell down I kept hitting him over and over and over again until he was a sack of broken bones and smashed guts, a bloody human pulp. Stevie looked at me, his eyes wide with terror, and said, “That’s fucked.” He said, “What did you do?” And I said, “You know what’s fucked? Having two of me.” And Stevie said, “We could have just zapped him again.” And I said, “What if he didn’t want to be zapped?” And Stevie said, “Still, that wasn’t like you—that was insane.” And I pointed the bat at Stevie’s face and said, “Don’t say that.”
And Stevie stammered through an apology and said we could use the machine to disintegrate, digitize, and store the pile of other-me on the floor because the machine can store data for up to five people or people-sized objects at a time. Or, as Stevie also pointed out, we could just delete the data, and it would be gone forever. I said, “This machine can do that? Make it like it never happened?” And Stevie said, “This machine can do a lot of things.” But Stevie paused before answering, and I suspected that he maybe regretted sharing that information with me. As Stevie aimed the machine at the pile of blood and bone, he said, “We might be able to clean up the mess, but, no, we can’t make it like it never happened.”

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My third time through the teleporter went off without a hitch, and, once I was rematerialized on the tarp, which was still a little bloody from the previous try, I told Stevie we should start figuring out how we would actually make this teleportation thing work, which confused Stevie, I think, because he thought we’d already made it work. I pointed out that we had only made it work in a single room, and there really wasn’t much point in a machine that could only disintegrate an object and then reconstitute it a few feet away after you swiveled said machine. I told Stevie we needed to build more machines and send them to places we wanted to teleport so that we could send ourselves to those places in a matter of seconds, like sending emails, but it might take a little bit longer, a few minutes or hours, maybe, because the files that contained us would be very large. Stevie said, “I don’t think I want to do that.” So I asked him, “Then what was the point of this?” I asked him, “Why did we go to all this trouble?” And Stevie said he wasn’t comfortable using the machine on himself, which frankly was a bit ludicrous—and I pointed this out—because we’d tested the machine on me three times, and outside of a little puke, and the unfortunate occurrence following the second attempt, which was all Stevie’s fault—this, too, I pointed out—for hitting the goddamn button twice instead of once, everything went fine. Stevie told me there was no need to get all worked up about it, told me to calm down, then said he would review the data from our tests and that we should sleep on what to do next, and then he went home, and I went upstairs and played *Altered Beast* on my Genesis, and even though I felt tired, because being disintegrated and reconstituted is a little bit exhausting, I was also pretty restless and frustrated with Stevie’s new reluctance to use the machine, so I kept playing my game and killing things—including, but not limited to, Cerberuses; a variety of zombies, including normal zombies, headless zombies, and ogre zombies; a small chicken-devil thing called a Chicken Leg; and a variety of monstrous animal-man hybrids, such as goatmen, warthogmen, and horsemen, the latter of which have horns on their noses, so they should probably be called unicornmen, but I guess that sounds less scary because people aren’t generally afraid of unicorns—and a few times, the things I was trying to

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kill killed me, at which point I’d throw the game controller against the wall and shout expletives. For the record, I usually don’t get that mad.

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The next day Stevie came over and told me we had to dismantle the machine and that we couldn’t use it anymore, and when I asked him why he showed me some file sizes from the machine’s hard drive. Apparently, Stevie thought this data was important because the size of the file-that-was-me was 0.17 percent smaller the third time we tested the machine than the second time, and 0.032 percent less the second time we tested the machine than the first time, which Stevie took to mean that the machine wasn’t as precise as we’d thought and that I was losing matter each time I was teleported. I told Stevie his hypothesis wasn’t sound because if I was losing that much matter, my body would have shut down, or I would have fallen apart, and that maybe the difference between the first two tests was the lunch I didn’t eat before the second test so I wouldn’t puke it up, and maybe the difference between the other tests had to do with the clothing I was wearing or, I don’t know, water weight. Stevie didn’t want to hear it and reverted to his argument that I was losing some unquantifiable essence—which was ludicrous, because his entire argument was based on file size data, which is absolutely quantifiable—and then, out of nowhere, he started shaking in this way that he sometimes does when he is upset, and that he’d done since I met him, all the way back when we were kids at the charter school, and said, “I’m never going to see her again.” I told Stevie he was acting a bit over the top and if Tiffany was really into him, they’d find a way to make their relationship work, but after I said that I regretted it because I realized that maybe Tiffany wasn’t totally invested in Stevie, and wasn’t trying to find a way to make their relationship work, and so Stevie was trying to make our machine work because of that, and all he could probably think about was Tiffany giving handjobs to and playing her violin for other guys—at least that’s what I would have been thinking about if I were Stevie—so to try to make my friend feel better about our machine, I said, “I’m exactly like I was before.” I said, “Look at me.” I said, “Not a hair out of place, and my organs are working brilliantly, and I can hear you and see you and talk to you—why are you worried?” When Stevie ignored me, I got up in his face and shouted, “Look at me,” which caused Stevie to step away from me and mutter something about how we should sell the machine. He said he could use his part of the money to buy bus tickets so Tiffany could come visit him, and some company could use our work to perfect the machine. “The machine is perfect,” I said. “And you hate this place,” I said. “And you want to go see Tiffany play violins and you want to get handjobs from her,” I said. But Stevie said, “I don’t want to use the machine.” So I suggested we get Tiffany to come to Dayton, and we’d get her to use the machine so she could experience how it works, but then we’d leave the copy of her in the machine’s data storage so after she left and went back to MIT to
resume her studies, we could just make a new Tiffany that Stevie could hang out with.

“And hell,” I added, “we could even make a third Tiffany, and I could have someone to hang out with.” I said, “We can make an army of Tiffanies.” I said, “Violin prodigies for everyone.”

Stevie said, “I think you should go upstairs—maybe go get some air.” He said, “I’ll find a buyer for the machine and mail you your half of the money.” I told Stevie he didn’t understand. I said, “This is about so much more than money,” even though I didn’t yet understand what else it was about, and then I asked Stevie why he would have to mail me the money instead of simply giving it to me, but he didn’t answer the question, saying instead, “I’ll give you 60 percent.” Then Stevie told me not to come any closer to him, which was weird, because I didn’t think I had been moving closer to him, but now that I think about it, I’d gotten pretty close by that point, and I was getting closer still. “Seventy percent,” Stevie said. “And we’re talking millions upon millions of dollars. This is the scientific discovery of the millennium,” he said. “Just don’t come any closer.” I took another step, and Stevie took a swing at me but missed, allowing me to catch him off balance and push him into the wall, where I held him, more out of self-defense than as a form of attack, but I looked down at Stevie’s face, and I could see he was terrified, and I wasn’t sure what he was terrified of—was he terrified of me?—and then Stevie kneed me in the balls, which startled me more than it hurt, and scurried out from where I had him pinned, and he ran to the machine and picked up the baseball bat, which still had some pieces of skin and hair stuck to it that had belonged to the other me that Stevie had accidentally created, and he started hitting the machine, but he wasn’t hitting it at the right places to really break anything, which was strange because Stevie made the thing, so he should have known how to do some damage, which makes me think that Stevie probably didn’t really want to destroy the machine—yet, anyway—and he was just doing it all for show—so when I grabbed the bat from Stevie, he looked a little bit relieved for a second, and then he started crying and blubbing about how much he missed Tiffany, and he was begging me not to hurt him, and the crying was pitiful, and the blubbing was pitiful, and the begging was pitiful, and Stevie was pitiful, and I felt the weight of the bat in my hand and thought that maybe I could help Stevie. Or maybe I wasn’t interested in helping Stevie at all but wanted to feel something else—it doesn’t matter, because Stevie must have seen me examining the bat and gotten scared, because the next thing I knew he punched me in the stomach and pushed me in front of the machine, and then the fucker zapped me, and in addition to the initial jolt of the beam reaching deep into my body, between all of my molecules, to scan and dematerialize me, the only thing I felt was a white hot rage. I was going to kill Stevie.

But then Stevie rematerialized me, and I didn’t want to kill him anymore. At first I didn’t know how long I’d been in the machine, but I knew it was longer than usual
because, while I couldn’t tell you how long I was being stored or what it all looked like, this time, while I was inside the machine, I was aware that time was passing and, more importantly, I could feel things, namely, what it feels like to be data, and I’m not sure how it happened, or that it should even be possible—and I still haven’t told Stevie yet, and I probably never will, because I like the idea of this being my secret—but I felt myself being stored inside the machine’s hard drive: It was cool and dry, like the kind of place where you’re supposed to store some medications and food, and it was clean, or at least it felt clean. And everything was meticulously ordered and arranged, and I was aware of all of my pieces, and they were all ones and zeros, perfectly constructed, and it occurred to me later, after all of this was done, that Stevie had to be wrong about me losing something intangible every time I was sent through the machine, but maybe he was right about something else, because if I was able to feel this way inside the machine, then Stevie was right to talk about souls without talking about souls, because when I was aware of myself as coded data I felt a peace and warmth that could only be described as spiritual, so maybe we do have souls, and maybe our souls are numbers, and maybe, rather than losing pieces of my soul every time I passed through the machine, the digitization process allowed me to feel a quantifiable, tangible version of that weird, abstract thing that Stevie had previously been too chickenshit to name, but to which he had no problem vaguely alluding. Then, several weeks after all of this happened, I realized something else: If I was going to this wonderful place and feeling this beautiful thing that made me feel peace and warmth, I was also abruptly being pulled from that place every time Stevie pushed the button to reconstitute me—or at least the version of me that was being reconstituted was being yanked out of the place, because until being deleted, the copy of me would still be on the hard drive, but the rebuilt version of me—the version of me talking to you now—would feel violently expelled from that numerical womb, that digital heaven, and maybe all of those repeated expulsions might have had something to do with my mood swings at the time.

Anyway, as it turned out, Stevie had only left me in the machine for a few minutes, so I was grateful for that, I guess, but that wasn’t why I didn’t want to kill Stevie after coming back out of the machine. I didn’t want to kill Stevie because, well, I just didn’t want to kill him. After I was rematerialized, Stevie stood across the room from me, nervously keeping a finger close to the machine’s button, presumably in case he needed to use it again, and I realized I was still holding the bat, because I guess I never dropped it from before, and suddenly the simple act of holding the bat felt like too much, so I dropped it, and when I dropped it, I heard Stevie sniffle, and I felt like I should be sad or angry or embarrassed, but I wasn’t, so instead I told Stevie that everything was going to be okay, which seemed like the easiest, least meaningful thing I could say in that situation, though I guess Stevie did look a little bit relieved after I said it, so maybe it was a little bit helpful. Then Stevie said, “I’m not using the
machine.” And this time I didn’t care, and thought that Stevie was probably right not to use the machine because, even though I hadn’t had time to process what I’d felt in the machine, I was feeling oddly let down and bummed, which I now realize was probably caused by my expulsion back into the world of physical matter, so I said, “You don’t have to use the machine.” I said, “In fact, you shouldn’t use the machine.” And Stevie said, “I’m going to disassemble the machine now.” And I said, “Whatever,” and part of me wondered what would happen to the digitized version of me stored inside the machine, but I wasn’t that worried about it, so I left the basement and grabbed an orange, left over from our experiments, and I peeled that orange, and I bit into its meat, and I could taste the orange, but not like I used to taste oranges, so, thinking I’d found some of our test oranges that we hadn’t eaten or thrown away, I tossed the orange in the trash and pulled another from the bag with similar results. I tried another orange, and another orange, and another, and another, and another, but none of the oranges, despite providing the expected bite of citrus so necessary to the experience of eating oranges, tasted particularly exciting. And all the while, I could hear Stevie in the basement dismantling our machine, and I remember thinking about maybe trying to stop him—and in retrospect, now that I have a clearer understanding of what was happening to me, I wish I would have—or something, but whatever, so I grabbed a beer from the garage and turned on my Genesis and started playing NHL ’94, which is one of the best hockey games ever made, and it was all right, but not as good as I remembered, and while I was listening to Stevie working in the basement, I wondered whether he was going to sell the plans to the machine but decided he probably wouldn’t because he had looked so scared a few minutes ago, and I was surprised that the prospect of not making all of that money didn’t bother me at all, and as the weeks passed, I learned that I also wasn’t bothered by the fact that I literally didn’t do anything but play Sega and watch porn, and I wasn’t bothered when Stevie stopped talking to me for days and days without explanation, nor was I bothered when he came back around, after Tiffany dumped him in a text message, just long enough to blame me for messing up the machine, thus messing up his relationship, and really, I’ve realized that nothing really bothers me now except that most nights I can’t sleep, and while I’m lying in bed I feel these phantom tingles run through my body—the way some people feel their cellphones vibrating in their pockets when their cellphones aren’t even in their pockets—and in the space between those tingles I feel my own ones and zeroes, and I sigh, close my eyes, and wait for the next phantom wave to wash over me, expose me, quantify me, order me. I wait to feel my numbers.