

Press & review factsheet

The Grid

George Williams

The Grid is an epic space opera combining political intrigue, military conflict, hard science fiction, and thriller elements.

The Premise

After the discovery of Quantum Displacement, humanity has spread across eighty-two planets within three hundred light-years of Earth.

Travel, trade, and communication depend on the Grid, a vast interstellar transport network managed by ALICE, an autonomous artificial intelligence that continues to expand the network, explore space, and terraform new worlds.

Across those worlds, authoritarian states and corporations maintain a fragile balance of power, threatened by rivalry, war, and dangers no one yet understands. To those who rule, people are nothing more than assets.

Separated by light-years and unaware of one another, seemingly unrelated lives begin to converge as that balance starts to shift.

Audience

The Grid may appeal to readers interested in the scale and political worldbuilding associated with works such as *Dune*, *Foundation* and *Game of Thrones*, combined with the technological and societal questions characteristic of modern hard science fiction.

Genre: Space Opera, Hard Science Fiction, Artificial Intelligence.

Language: English

Length: Approx. 178,000 words · 496 pages

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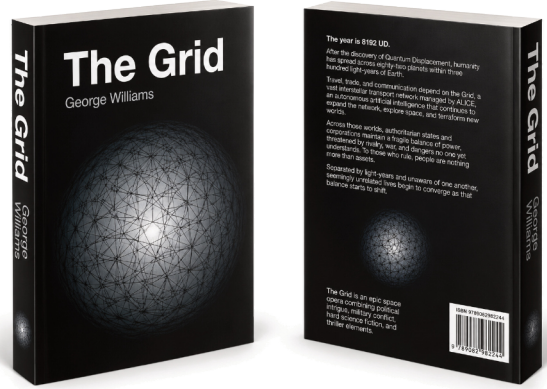
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What sets *The Grid* apart

The Epic Scale

The Grid features worldbuilding on a **massive scale**, with its own unique logistics and constraints.

Space Opera rooted in today's cultures

Character arcs gradually converge in a plot that unfolds like a thriller, against a backdrop of rivaling states and corporations rooted in **contemporary cultures**.

Hard Science Fiction and Gritty Realism

The Grid is hard science fiction with gritty realism avoiding plot-induced stupidity and conventional hero types, to create its own **distinctive style of storytelling**.

About the Author

George Williams is the pen name of a Dutch author with a background in chemical engineering and computer science who works professionally as a program manager of strategic IT initiatives.



His longstanding interests in computing, astronomy and science fiction began during the home-computer era of the 1970s and 1980s.

He began writing *The Grid* in 2019. At that time he couldn't find a novel that appealed to him and thought, *Why not write a book I would like to read?*

And so it began. The novel developed over approximately seven and a half years into his debut science-fiction novel.

Prologue of The Grid → → →

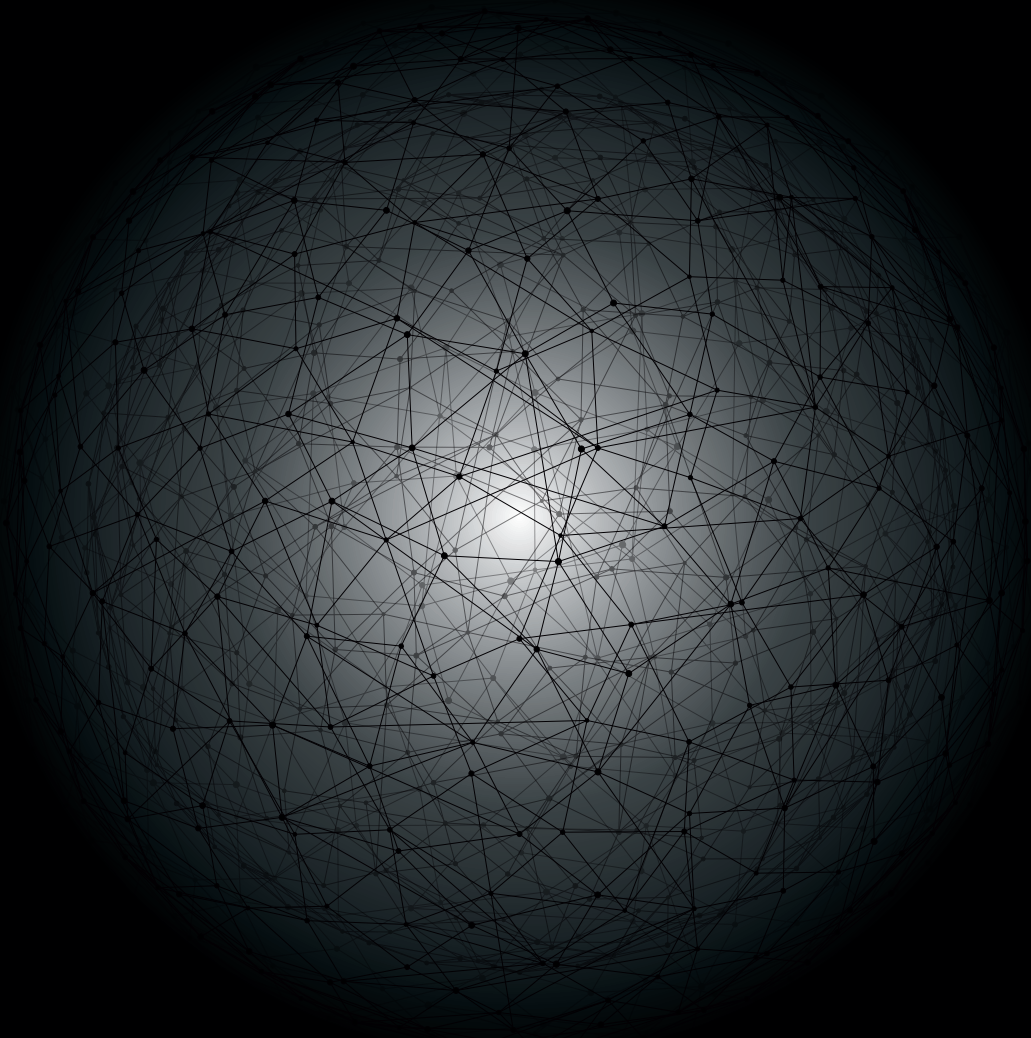
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Year 2812, Day 281 UD, Geneva, Planet Earth

It was a beautiful, sunny fall day in Brussels at Sea. Above the entrance of the monorail station, a display showed:

Tuesday 2 October 2812 07:47 33 °C / 92 °F.

Professor Dr. Helena Brandt walked through the entrance of the monorail station and entered the monorail toward Geneva. Helena was in her early sixties and had long gray hair that she wore in a knot most of the time. She wore augmented glasses and was reading through them for most of her journey to work. Helena was responsible for the large quantum collider that was used to investigate a quantum axiom that matter could co-exist in multiple places at the same time.

At her destination station, Helena left the monorail and stepped onto the travelator that brought her to the laboratories. She walked toward the security gate and said, "Helena Brandt," after which the transparent door to the security scanner opened. She stepped in and the door closed behind her. The scanner scanned for weapons and unauthorized substances. Meanwhile, the iris scanner, fingerprint scanner, and DNA sampler confirmed her identity. A green light lit up, and the door on the other side opened. A synthetic voice softly said, "Welcome, Frau Brandt. Please proceed."

She walked out of the security scanner, through the lobby, and up the stairs to her laboratory. In the laboratory, she dropped her bag, took her lab coat from a hanger and put it on. "Cappuccino," she said, and the coffee machine in the corner of the room prepared one. She grabbed her cappuccino and entered the control room, where her staff was already waiting.

"Good morning, everyone. Everyone ready to push it to the next level?"

Everyone on her team nodded and said, "Yes."

"Good. Let's start it up."

Her assistants powered up the large quantum collider and performed the routine checks.

"The beam is stable, Frau Brandt," said Paul, the lead assistant.

"Good. Increase energy to 1 EeV."

"Increasing to ... 0.9 ... 1.0 ... and stable."

"Excellent, now increase to 1.5 EeV."

"1.1 ... 1.2 ..."

Paul saw a power spike on his monitor. One of the plasma reactors malfunctioned, overloaded, and unleashed a power surge on the large quantum collider that supercharged the beam. During a fraction of a second, Helena heard loud crackling sounds and saw herself, her team, and the equipment at various points on the large quantum collider.

After the crackling had stopped, it was quiet. Helena was disoriented and looked around in confusion. The lights were out, yet the room was brightly lit, and she had to squeeze her eyes shut. There was a smell of ozone, and she could hear birds. She looked to the right, where she saw rocks and plants, at the spot where she had expected to see the back wall of the control room. When she looked over the edge of the floor, she saw her assistants below who shouted at her, "Over here, Frau Brandt!"

"It's not safe up there. Lower yourself from the edge of the floor. We will catch you."

She lowered herself and let go. On the ground, she walked and climbed over rocks for about ten meters and turned around. What she saw made little sense. Part of the building that included her control room was perfectly carved out as a sphere from the research institute: the concrete part of the structure and everything in it. Debris lay scattered underneath it on the rocky terrain. Among the debris, she saw half of a body that was split in two in a puddle of blood. She looked up and saw the other half of the body on the edge of the floor. Next to it, she recognized the toilet rooms with water dripping from the pipes that were now open.

Helena asked her wristwatch, "Where am I?"

"One kilometer southeast of Montreux," the watch replied.

"But ... but that can't be right?" she said aloud and confused.

"Paul, check where we are."

The assistant also asked his wristwatch and got the same answer.

"This ... this ... um ... we ... we are on the other side of the lake ... fifty kilometers from where we were!"

Paul shook his head and stared ahead in shock.

Helena whispered, "What the hell happened? How on Earth did we get here?"

The scientific world was shocked at the time. They weren't shocked about the accident, but about the fact that they couldn't find a plausible

explanation for how the cutout sphere could end up fifty kilometers (thirty miles) farther.

At the time ...

Year 2938, Day 217 UD, Huǒjiàn Space Station

Over a century later, Professor Lee Yang floated in his white spacesuit with red stripes on arms and legs, in zero gravity, and nervously validated his calculations for the last time.

From his space station at some seven thousand kilometers from Earth, he could see the starting point of the Huǒjiàn Space Quantum Collider, and the first of the one hundred spheres. He had ordered that the spheres should be positioned at even distances from the starting point all the way to the endpoint, fifteen hundred kilometers farther. Each of the black-and-yellow striped spheres was powered by three fusion reactors in orange containers, which were remotely controlled and kept synchronized by the central computer system at the space station. The spheres were perfectly aligned with each other to allow the carrier beam to travel over a clear line of sight between them and exactly through the center of each sphere. Flashing buoys were floating around the spheres to warn ships to maintain distance.

Professor Yang had unraveled the mystery of the accident with the large quantum collider a century before. Theoretically, that was. In his opening line of his speech on the subject, he had summed it up: “We have always known that matter is nothing more than energy particles, but we never dared to dream what the possibilities of it were. So let’s dream again. What if ... we could synchronize a pattern of energy particles? Over a distance!”

Professor Yang was the one who had seen the relationship between the safety precautions of Brandt’s laboratory and what the power surge had caused. As a safety precaution, Brandt’s laboratory had a metal honeycomb structure that enveloped the control center of the large quantum collider. And because it was part of the building, nobody had even considered the Faraday cage as a factor. But it was the wireframe sphere in which the fabric of matter was torn apart and had created its echoes in the sphere across the lake and other spheres along the path of the large quantum collider.

And now he was about to prove his theory. He looked through the window and saw that the robots had placed the small container with

plants and small animals in the first sphere of the quantum collider. His heart pounded in his chest, and sweat broke out on his forehead as he realized that not only was his research on the line but also his reputation. "Professor? We are waiting," whispered someone floating right behind him, snapping him out of his thoughts. He tilted his head slightly up and said, "Yes ... right. For the People's Republics!" and proudly pressed the button.

The hundreds of fusion reactors supercharged the carrier beam from beginning to end. For a fraction of a moment, the particles of energy that comprised the container were in every sphere the beam passed through and nowhere at the same time. In a split second, the omnipresence of the container was established.

The supercomputer reduced the power in reverse order, and the container with the plants and small animals reverted to its single-quantum-state instance at the last sphere of the collider, fifteen hundred kilometers farther.

Impatiently, Lee and his team waited for the images of the container to appear on the screen, while the robots were bringing it to the airlock of the lab on the other end of the collider.

After sighs of relief, loud cheers erupted when they saw that the plants were intact, and flies were erratically flying around, and mice were floating while thrashing wildly with their little paws in weightlessness.

After decades of secret research, Professor Yang had reproduced what had happened by accident a century earlier: transport via quantum displacement.

Subsequent tests with animals on Earth were successful at first, but the test subjects all seemed to be intoxicated after quantum displacement. Later tests with convicts revealed brain and organ damage at the cellular level.

Further experiments revealed that the damage at the cellular level was the result of fluctuations in energy transmission caused by the Earth's atmosphere between spheres. Research was continued in space, and the first prototypes of grid stations were built.

Year 3157, Day 36 UD, Geostationary orbit, Planet Earth

Two centuries later, in 3157 UD, the first commercial connection became operational between two quantum displacement stations. It was between the quantum displacement station in geostationary orbit around Earth,

thirty-six thousand kilometers above the state of Johor in Malaysia, and the quantum displacement station at Mare Imbrium on the Moon.

Later, two more grid stations were built at very stable points in Earth orbit, the so-called Lagrange points L4 and L5. L4 was the same distance from both Earth and the Moon, and ahead of the Moon. L5 was at the same distance from both Earth and the Moon, but following the Moon in its orbit around Earth.

Year 3349, Day 121 UD, United Federations HQ, Geneva, Planet Earth

Another two centuries later, two more quantum displacement stations were built and became operational. These were station Cassini in areostationary orbit around Mars and station Oort in jovistationary orbit around Jupiter's moon Europa. By now, the expansion into space was in the hands of the United Federations Space Agency, or UFSA, an international joint venture, as no state could finance these activities alone.

Quantum displacement calculations that were required for transport between quantum displacement stations were extremely complex, and for this purpose a dedicated autonomous artificial-intelligence control system was developed: The Autonomous Long-haul Interchange & Communications Executive, ALICE for short. To safeguard the investments and enduring collaboration on the further expansion of men into space, the Assembly of the United Federations agreed to a manifesto that was given the name the *Geneva Act*.

The Geneva Act had three main clauses:

- i. The Transport Network is a neutral transport infrastructure that is operated completely independently of any entity. The Transport Network shall unconditionally provide transport of persons, cargo, and communications to all entities. Earth, as a neutral entity, controls the Grid on behalf of the United Federations.
- ii. The Transport Network shall expand itself autonomously and self-reliantly, terraform new planets, and coordinate the colonization of new autonomous planets.
- iii. The Transport Network taxes entities for use of the Transport Network pro rata, in kind, or in currency.

Furthermore, it was agreed that UFSA in Geneva would be the only entity with direct access to the control system ALICE. A year later, ALICE was launched with the directive to operate and further expand the quantum displacement network, and to seek suitable planets for colonization and terraform them, all autonomously. The system was trained with all the knowledge men had at that time of engineering, chemistry, physics, mathematics, biology, astronomy, philosophy of science, and even human history. ALICE designed, built, and sent out ships to explore space, where they would stop at regular intervals to build a quantum displacement station and receive the ships that would explore the next stretch and build the next quantum displacement station. ALICE also built quantum displacement stations near resources, such as asteroid belts and ice moons. It also built the factories for mining ships, the mining ships themselves, and dark refinement factories. The refined materials such as hydrogen, deuterium, helium-3, oxygen, ice, were stored in cryogen-cooled spheres that were parked in massive storage fields near quantum displacement stations in the darkest regions of space, far away from starlight that could heat them up. And ALICE built quantum displacement stations near suitable planets for terraforming.

ALICE had unlimited space, unlimited resources, and all the time in the universe. ALICE expanded and grew into a vast network of quantum displacement stations, with scouting, mining, and terraforming operations, massive resource supplies, planet-sized dark factories, and fleets with ships expanding in every direction. The network of quantum displacement stations, which people had popularly called *the Grid*, grew recursively, exponentially, and without restraint, to a scale of operations with dazzling numbers that was far beyond anything its creators had ever imagined.

One strategy that the Grid had developed was to build a circular plane of grid stations as fast as possible. It began with building a grid station at the center. Next, the parts for a second grid station were received within a timeframe of five minutes. Assembly of the second grid station from prefabricated parts was designed to take no longer than it took to transport it. When that grid station was assembled, it could also receive parts for the next one. To keep sufficient room for the next grid stations to arrive, the grid stations were placed in expanding circles from the center, each circle building the next. In less than a week, the Grid could create a circular plane with a million spheres.

Year 3792, Day 121 UD, Deep Space

Four hundred years later, in the year 3792 UD, the first planet that met the criteria for terraforming was discovered by scout carriers of ALICE. It was a planet at the right distance from its star, with an atmosphere of predominantly carbon dioxide, some traces of other gases, and no moon. ALICE had analyzed the planet and shaped a terraforming strategy for it. She began by transporting two hundred and sixty thousand grid stations to a lower orbit around the planet. Via a circular plane of adjacent grid stations, balls of ice and oxygen, the size of a grid station, were ejected at the right angle toward the planet, immediately upon arrival at a station. After an incessant influx of ice and oxygen for two hundred years, freshwater oceans had formed and oxygen had mixed into the atmosphere.

In the next phase, ALICE created grid stations in stationary orbit and large platforms underneath them at the equator. Conveyors with grid-station-sized spheres, six massive grippers, and fusion reactors that generated antimatter, descended to and ascended from the surface, carrying transport spheres with them. They later received the name *conveyor* because thousands of them ascended and descended painstakingly slowly at the speed of a balloon between the planet's surface and the grid station in stationary orbit above. ALICE sent robots to the surface to build bases around every platform on the equator with power plants, areas for drones, production facilities, and warehouses.

Once the base was operational, spheres landed on the surface with fertilizer, microorganisms, algae, plant life, and seeds, which were dispersed over the planet by drones. With plenty of carbon dioxide, starlight, and water, algae thrived, microorganisms spread, and green areas decorated the landscape. Plants slowly found their way.

In parallel, ALICE had lunaformed a moon for the planet. ALICE had deployed ten million grid stations in the pattern of a sphere with a diameter of five thousand kilometers. Rocks were transported to these stations from asteroid belts in stellar systems. Each rock was gently pushed to the center of the constellation of spheres at a calculated speed, and distributed among grid stations based on their weight to keep the growing cluster of rocks centered. After the first year, the gravity of their collective mass held the rocks loosely together. As the mass gradually increased, so did the gravity.

After four hundred years of continuous transport of rocks, the Grid had shaped an orange-red moon with oceans of lava, with a mass equal to that of Earth's Moon.

Year 4205, Day 24 UD, Planet Azure

ALICE released its first terraformed planet for colonization in 4205 UD. ALICE had reported back to grid communicators on Earth that the planet was ready for colonization, and the news came as a total surprise to the United Federations Assembly.

It read: Planet 1 terraformed and habitable. Grid stations added as transport destinations. Images of the planet are included.

After seeing the images of the azure-blue, algae-rich freshwater oceans and lush green land masses, the grid communicator who had received the message had named it *Planet Azure*, and the name had stuck.

The moment states and corporations realized that nobody owned anything on the new planet, all hell broke loose. They immediately began to transport whatever weapons they could gather to the planet, to claim as much territory as they could. Armies inevitably collided, and claims were disputed. The situation rapidly spiraled out of control and became the first world war on a planet other than our own.

Ten months later, virtually all life on the planet's surface had perished. Radioactivity was high in areas that had been hit. Biochemical and chemical agents had polluted the water of the planet and poisoned or infested whatever tried to survive. Almost nothing could survive on the planet's surface in the open air. The planet had become uninhabitable. States and corporations pulled out their forces, except for a small contingent of guards at the grid stations in stationary orbit.

Year 4206, Day 1 UD, United Federations HQ, Geneva, Planet Earth

In the aftermath of the destruction of planet Azure, embarrassment and regret over the loss of the planet prevailed over the animosity between states. This led to an expansion of the Geneva Act with three articles to prevent the destruction of terraformed planets in the future.

- iv. Manifests are mandatory for all transports and must be submitted with the transport request at the outbound grid station. Transports require prior approval by the authorities at the inbound grid station. Manifests are public, except for those of diplomatic transports, which will not be disclosed under any circumstances.
- v. The following offenses are punishable by annihilation of the offender at the discretion of the judiciary artificial-intelligence subsystem:

- The destruction of a planet through overexploitation or weapons of mass destruction.
 - Any interference with diplomatic transport.
 - The destruction of assets of the Grid.
- vi. The planet's environment must stay within operational boundaries provided by the Grid. The Grid measures compliance and will freeze all traffic to and from planets when parameters exceed the operational boundaries until parameters are restored, with Earth exempt.

This further led to the amendment of the first article to transfer the control over ALICE from Earth to a judicial artificial-intelligence subsystem:

- i. The Transport Network is a neutral infrastructure that is operated completely independently of any entity. The Transport Network shall unconditionally provide transport of persons, cargo, and communications to all entities. The Transport Network is fully autonomous and controlled by the judiciary artificial-intelligence subsystem. Earth maintains contact with the system on behalf of the United Federations.

Year 4207, Day 143 UD, Forbidden Zone, L4

More than a year later, two systems that were built from the same stem system as ALICE were ready, commissioned, and integrated with ALICE. The first system was the *Judiciary Oversight, Surveillance, and Sentencing* system, JOSS for short. JOSS was trained in forensic investigation, data retrieval, monitoring, analysis, law, ethics, and philosophy and given the instruction to uphold the Geneva Act.

The second was the *Geneva Act Law Enforcement* system, GALE for short, which was trained in law enforcement, astronomy, physics, chemistry, and weapons design and construction. GALE was programmed to execute every ruling that JOSS made.

To protect future terraformed planets from a disaster like Planet Azure, ALICE was given the directive to enforce a quota of three hundred million settlers for newly terraformed planets, uphold a transport embargo on anything other than settlers for two hundred years, and guide settlers during this period to establish their own governance, economy, and army to achieve independence.

With the subsystems and amended directives, ALICE became truly autonomous, self-managing, self-reliant, and self-learning.

Year 8192, Day 62 UD, Grid Communications Center, Geneva, Planet Earth

The Grid Communication Center was a yellow-black-striped, three-story-high, windowless, steel, cubic structure at the center of a terrain ten times its size and surrounded by an equally high concrete wall with barbed wire, satellite dishes, and automated defensive systems. Its remarkable, vibrant yellow-black stripes were reminiscent of wartime eras, to warn conflicting parties not to target the vital building. Access to the center was restricted to grid communicators and maintenance staff. The center was guarded by heavily armed multi-state forces of the United Federations Assembly.

Marcus 3019207 walked toward the security gate. He entered the small building in front of it and undressed in the locker room. He left his clothes and belongings in his locker and entered the security scanner. After his fingerprints, hand geometry, face, iris, retina, ear shape, voice, and DNA were confirmed, the door on the other side of the scanner opened. He put on clean white stretch workwear and socks from a stack and continued to 'the bunker', as grid communicators called it, where his biometrics were checked again before he entered. Inside the bunker was a pristine white, two-story-high office with a single desk opposite the main screen that filled the entire back wall, and two comfortable chairs.

His mentor, Robert 3520488, turned around in his chair.

"Morning, Marcus."

"Morning."

"Congratulations on your first official day as grid communicator."

"Thank you," Marcus replied while he sat down.

"It's all yours, Mr. Grid Communicator," he said, grinning.

Marcus looked at the big screen in front of him. At the center of the screen, the colonized space around Earth, filled with tiny star constellations, was rotating around its axis, and data was displayed underneath it:

Radius from Earth: 301.2 light-years / 19,048,212 astronomical units.

Time since Regensis: 4,843 universal years.

G-type stars discovered: 17,929 / with a habitable zone exoplanet: 3,017.

Terraformed planets: 82.

Quantum Displacement Stations: 98,681,237 / Eclipsed: 1,248,337.

On the left side of the screen, data on transports was scrolling past too fast to read. Source and destination grid station, date and time of departure and arrival, both universal and local, a summary of the manifest, and the number of grid stations passed. Marcus had asked ALICE once to pause the transport data for a moment so he could read it. He thought he had found an error when he read the time of arrival was 11:63. But when he told Robert this, he burst out laughing and said, "You know the minute is a universal measure with a fixed length. You seem to have forgotten that planets have different rotation speeds. So some planets have more minutes in an hour and others have more hours in a day."

"Good morning, ALICE."

"Good morning, Robert."

"Anything requiring our attention, ALICE?"

"Not today, Robert."

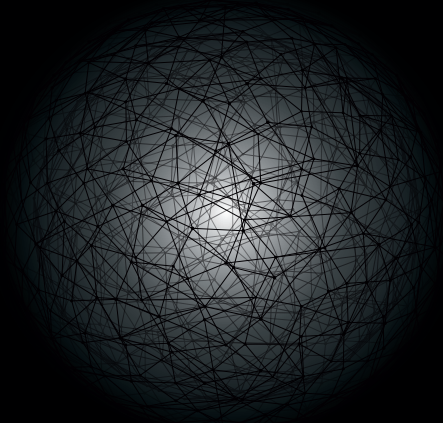
The year is 8192 UD.

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