

## **The Planet of the Apes**

*Orbiting the sun at about 98 million miles is a little blue planet—  
and this planet is run by a bunch of monkeys*

[View my project online as a flash animation: [http://iacs5.ucsd.edu/~pbang/dance\\_monkeys.htm](http://iacs5.ucsd.edu/~pbang/dance_monkeys.htm) ]

The planet is Earth, and the monkeys are us, of course. In “Dance, Monkeys, Dance,” slam poet Ernest Cline is simply saying what we’ve all felt at one point or another in our lives about the human race: we’re just a bunch of monkeys, essentially. And a bunch of fucked up monkeys at that: we think we amount to something more than monkeys, but we do not have anything that is uniquely human in its essence. Some of the things we might consider as human distinctions are language and technology, but animals have them as well--only on a lesser scale. If we really wanted to separate ourselves through the sheer degree of which we have these certain skills (and not just "either we have it or we don't"), we might as well consider our unbelievable ability to wage war.

In the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, a naturalist named Charles Darwin was traveling the world looking to solve a scientific dilemma of the time. Scientists more or less believed in a theory of catastrophes, where the Earth and all species of living organisms in it were created by a very powerful god who can do such a thing. (The ancient Greeks and Romans believed it would have

taken more than one god to achieve such feat, but the Christians of this time believed it only took a single God. Today, most Westerners feel it doesn't take a god at all to create the universe they perceive.) Every creature and every plant was designed individually by God to be the way that they are. From that point of creation, Earth and its species stayed pretty much the same as God intended them to, until a major catastrophe occurs—and the last such catastrophe to occur was the biblical flooding and Noah's Ark. As the theory went, all the plants and animals that survived are populating the Earth to the present day.

But Charles Darwin could not be fully satisfied by the catastrophist theory. Already, there were doubts about the geological side of the catastrophist theory at that time; Sir Charles Lyell has argued that the Earth was in a constant state of change, not stasis. Darwin doubted the species side as well. In the discovery of fossilized skeletons of "extinct" organisms he saw too much similarities to the organisms living around him. Catastrophists would simply view the fossils as evidence of a catastrophic event that wiped those species out; Darwin insisted they could be early biological ancestors, the same way geographic variations of a species can be shown to have come from common ancestry.

Thus in 1859 Darwin published *The Origin of Species*, the book that brought the theory of evolution into acceptance. (It would not be proven "true" until the development of heredity

and genetic theory in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century). There are nuances to the theory of evolution, but the “survival of the fittest” paraphrases it well—as long as “fittest” is construed to mean the most suited to surviving in the particular environment, not simply the “strongest” or “most powerful.”

When he further published *The Descent of Man* in 1871, he was only clarifying what most people have started to realize: human beings are really just a bunch of animals, sharing a common evolutionary lineage with apes and other primates. Really, we’re monkeys in essence.

But Darwin was just another monkey. Ernie Cline—“exhibit A, monkey making noise”—is just another monkey. If there’s one concept to be gotten out of “Dance, Monkeys, Dance,” it’s that we don’t really need other monkeys to tell us that we’re all really just a bunch of monkeys.

How fucked up monkeys we are—*that* we need to be told.

We tend to nod along to the idea that we are no different from monkeys, but in the back of our minds we still reserve the notion that we are some sort of superior type of animals. No matter what, we’ll still keep certain things uniquely human. Take language; we *do* use, and like to use, big words like *self-awareness* and *Australopithecus*. There is nothing quite like our ability to talk to one another in the rest of the animal world, even among the monkeys; or is there?

Recent research have shown that the non-primate dolphins and whales can communicate to each other, through their squeaks and rumblings, in addition to primates who have been taught to

communicate to humans using sign language and to each other using invented symbols. None of them use as many syllables as humans do, though.

We also have technology. We have the automobile, indoor plumbing, synthetic dyes, the personal computer, and the iPod. But technology per se is not something only humans have; other animals do exhibit some degree of technological prowess—beavers making dams, birds using rocks as nutcrackers, wasps constructing towering mounds. Chimps in the wild are adept at using stones for various things, and monkeys in zoos can be often seen using sticks to reach long distances. Tool use is actually pretty common in the animal world; the animal world just doesn't have the Pyramids, or F-4 Phantom jets.

See, we like to make up distinctions like these in order to put ourselves above the rest of the animals—as if they mattered, if we are truly no more than a bunch of monkeys.

But if we were to turn out to be more than just a bunch of monkeys, it wouldn't just be because of language or technology; it would also be because of something like our unbelievable ability to out-savage the beasts when it comes to killing each other.

Obviously, other animals kill each other all the time. Most of the time, they're just really, really hungry, and would die otherwise. They also usually kill each other either in small packs of predators against a larger pack of prey, or a solitary predator out to hunt for a single prey. The

eventual killing is savage and brutal, but the way the odds of the small pack going up against a larger pack, or the way the solitary predator puts it's own life on the line in mortal combat for the kill, almost makes it seem noble. The point is, this is as bad and carnal as the animal world gets when it comes to killing each other.

When it comes to killing each other, humans like to wage wars. Humans wage wars not because they're really, really hungry, and would die otherwise; they simply go to war when they think they should. Wars are never fought between a small aggressor and a large prey; it's more often between two aggressors who try to increase their numbers to as large as they can, or between a larger aggressor and a smaller prey. And modern war leaves no chance for any sort of noble battle, as kills are racked up through cruise missiles, roadside bombs, artillery shells, sniper fire, or RPGs. Whereas no more than a dozen may become casualties on both sides of an animal hunt, thousands of human beings die on the first few minutes of a single war battle.

But, really, why do we care? We're just monkeys. Monkeys who develop things like language and technology and war to such an advanced degree, but still amount to nothing more than monkeys at the core.