

# The Immortalist



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By Alexander Baron



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A Russian multi-millionaire, a Japanese robot maker, a former gang member paralysed from the shoulders down...what do these men have in common? The rich man wants to live forever; the man in the wheelchair is helping map the human brain which may lead to it; and the scientist hopes to upload his mind to one of his creations. Crazy or what?

Whether or not you find the goal of cyber-immortality credible, there is a lot of fascinating work going on here that will undoubtedly benefit the rest of mankind, including especially quadriplegics; with the aid of electrodes implanted in his skull, Erik Sorto is able by mere thought alone to direct a robot arm to pick up a drinking vessel and hold it to his lips.

There is a lot more in *The Immortalist*, the first in a new series of *Horizon*, a documentary series that while not exactly immortal has been around since 1964. One person who is not present is *Aubrey de Grey*, but he and his team are approaching immortality from a slightly different angle.

Again, it is all fascinating stuff, but can human consciousness – which is what we are talking about – really be treated like a computer programme of 1’s and zero’s, and uploaded to another machine? What happens in any case when you upload a file? Unless you are using FTP which gives you the option of moving it, you are creating a new copy. It may be exactly the same, but if somehow you created a new copy of you, would it still be you? Would there be two of you? This is not so much science as philosophy, or perhaps more properly, metaphysics.

One dissenting voice says the brain-computer analogy – one most of us have used at some time – is only an analogy and is in any case not correct. The late Thomas Szasz went even further and said mind does not exist. Whatever the answers to any of the questions posed here, one thing is certain, none of them will be answered within your lifetime.

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