

**HUMANS:  
A BRIEF  
HISTORY OF  
HOW WE  
FUCKED  
IT ALL UP**

Tom Phillips

"With the delicate touch of a scholar and the laugh-out-loud chops of a comedian, Tom Phillips shows how our species has been messing things up...[for] four million years."

—Steve Brusatte, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Rise and Fall of the Dinosaurs*

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Originally published in Great Britain by Wildfire in 2018

This edition published by Hanover Square Press in 2019

**I**n April 2018, a deal was announced to reopen a previously closed coal-fired power plant in Australia. This was unusual for obvious reasons—as the world tries to slowly move away from climate-change-causing fossil fuels, reopening a coal-burning plant seems a strange move—but it was even more unusual because of the main impetus for it being reopened. It was to provide cheap power to a company mining cryptocurrency.

Bitcoin is the most widely known of the cryptocurrencies, but there's an ever-expanding ecosystem of the things as companies launch new ones at a seemingly exponential rate, hoping to cash in on the mad scramble for digital money. These cur-

rencies aren't "mined" in the way that, say, gold is. They're just bits of computer code, most of them based on something called blockchain technology, where each virtual coin is not just an item of symbolic value but also a ledger of its own transaction history. The computational power needed to create them in the first place, and to process their increasingly complicated transaction logs, is significant—and, as such, sucks up electricity at a crazy rate, both to run the ever-larger data centers devoted to crypto-mining and to cool them down as they overheat.

Cryptocurrencies don't have any intrinsic value, and by design most don't have any kind of central authority to regulate and control their flow. The only limiting factor is the cost of the computing you need to do to create and exchange them. But the belief among some people that they're the currency of the future has led to many cryptocurrencies surging in value, as everybody agrees that they're worth something—or, at the very least, that there'll be another sucker along in a minute who thinks they're worth more than you do, until all of a sudden there isn't. So their value has become wildly volatile, depending entirely on the mood of the market. It's a classic financial mania, bubbles forming and bursting over and over again, as everybody tries to not be the one left holding a suddenly worthless parcel when the music stops.

But like most manias, it has real-world effects. It's not just Australia reopening a power plant: in the rural west of America, 170 years after the gold rushes first brought people flooding west, tempted by the prospect of overnight riches, there's a new gold rush happening. Lured by cheap power and cheap rent and space to build, cryptocurrency firms are investing hundreds of millions creating huge, power-hungry crypto-mines in small country towns across Washington, Montana, Nevada and more. Residents of one town where these twenty-first-century prospectors have moved in complain that the around-the-clock roar

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of the servers is keeping them awake, affecting their health and driving away local wildlife.

By the end of 2018, one estimate predicts that Bitcoin mining alone will use as much energy as the entire country of Austria.

This book has been about the failures and mistakes we've made in the past. But what about the mistakes we're making right now, and the ones we'll make in years to come? What shape might the fuck-ups of the future take?

Making predictions is, as we've noted, a sure-fire way to make yourself look stupid to historians further down the line. Maybe the decades and centuries ahead will see humanity commit a whole series of completely original, novel mistakes; maybe we'll find a way to stop making mistakes at all. But if you were of a mind to put money on it, a sensible bet would be that we'll probably carry on making the exact same mistakes as we have in the past.