I think 2004 will be remembered as the year that socially dysfunctional Silicon Valley nerds started getting venture capital to codify their own Asperger’s Syndrome in the social interfaces that they created with services like Orkut and LinkedIn, and demonstrated thoroughly just how completely they don’t understand human–human interaction, let alone computer-mediated human–human interaction. I noticed on danah’s blog recently that AOL only lets you have 200 friends. First of all, 200? Not even a base two number! What’s going on there! I can just hear Dustin Hoffman in Rainman: “Can’t have more than 200 friends. Must discard a friend. Kmart sucks.” – Ed.

As technologists, we often frame technological use rather than build technology based on users’ practices and needs. In this talk, I step back and offer a different framing for what we technologists and entrepreneurs have done and what kinds of values we have instilled in users. My goal is to challenge us to reconsider our approach so that we can truly meet the needs of people.

While “social software” has recently emerged as a phenomenon in the tech community, “sociable media” has been around since the beginning of the Internet. Email, BBSes, Usenet, chat rooms, MUDs, and MOOs all captured the imagination of technologists throughout the 1980s and '90s. Alongside the development of these technologies, academics and pundits spouted off about the utopian dreams that could be fulfilled by these innovations. Their prescriptions mirrored the particular concepts set forth by science fiction, often without the richness that the writers were trying to convey. Idealists envisioned a world where embodied identity would not matter because online, no one would know that you’re a dog.

While many science fiction writers try to convey the nuances of human behavior, their emphasis is on the storyline, and they often convey the social issues around a technology as it affects that story. Building universal assumptions based on the limited scenarios set forth by sci-fi is problematic; doing so fails to capture the rich diversity of human behavior. Science fiction is not trying to understand human psychology in general; the authors are trying to tap into some aspect of human behavior in order to convey a story.

Extending those conceptual models to the world at large fails to handle the reality that our lives do not play out in a cleanly packaged narrative. From a human psychology perspective, sci-fi models are often naive and simplistic, tools for the story. Outside of sci-fi, human psychology has been a topic of contemporary cultural discourse for the last two decades, and topics of human dysfunction and mental illness have captured the mainstream imagination through science news articles and films. Remember, George Bush Sr. declared the 1990s “The Decade of the Brain.”

Although all types of mental disorders hit the mainstream press, multiple personality disorder in particular captured the imagination of the public during the 1980s and ’90s. Multiple personality was perceived to be the canonical psychiatric disorder, and films tried to capture what the