Lecture 12 - Describing the Future

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What did you think of the reading?

One thing I love about Neal Stephenson is the completeness of his worlds. It's fairly easy to imagine another thousand mornings of waking up, and then realizing that you've arrived in the world of Snow Crash.

What characterizes the world of Snow Crash?

Pervasive capitalism and franchising, duplicated the same over the whole world. Huge– almost city wide– organizations. Pervasive danger, and safety for a price.

How likely is it?

The growth and spread of corporations seems almost unstoppable– that seems sufficient to produce most of Stevenson's world. This results also in the danger of the world of Snow Crash, where people are only interested in stemming crime for a price.

Is the Internet likely to grow into the Metaverse?

The more likely conclusion– unless post-innovation standardization sets in– is that instead of one Metaverse, there will be hundreds of competing metaverse, each with distinct features and communities.

What does culture consist of?

One answer is "memes", the Darwinian ideas we will discuss for the next class. To classify these cultural ideas, we can identify four big groups: symbols and language, relations and institutions, behaviors and traditions, and beliefs and world-view. The four are mutually supportive.

What new symbols does the world of Snow Crash have? What new relations?

What's the relationship between culture and self-identity?

Snow Crash has a lot to say about self-identity, a core component of culture. Our ideas make us, and they delineate what we imagine is possible for ourselves and the world.

How are self-identities formed?

What is our culture in need of?

Cultures change– as a result of new technology, shifts in power, and the introduction of new ideas. What are the holes in our current world-view, that will draw in new ideas?

I think we lack a strong concept of a "citizen of the world". Traditional religions are also causing a problem: we need a new one that doesn't lose its ability to inspire when it recognizes contemporary social and scientific advances. The role of personal communication devices is in rapid flux, in part because we don't yet have a way of conceiving of self-identifying to truly include them.

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