

Project Hieroglyph: Building a Network of Technological Imagination

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How do we create a blueprint for a better future? How can we make our public conversations about the future more robust, engaging and inclusive? Project Hieroglyph, founded by science fiction author Neal Stephenson and headquartered at Arizona State University's Center for Science and the Imagination, aims to rekindle our grand ambitions for the future through the power of storytelling.

Hieroglyph brings together top science fiction authors with scientists, engineers, humanists, designers and members of the public to write "science fiction of the present": stories built on technological visions that we could realize today, or in the very near future, if we only had the political will and economic means. The project is both a series of science fiction anthologies (the first volume will be published in late 2014 by HarperCollins) and a burgeoning digital community (<http://hieroglyph.asu.edu>) where participants share ideas and resources, debate technical minutiae and sweeping ethical questions, and build communities around radical ideas ranging from 3D printed lunar structures to biomimetic sustainable cities.

The inspiration for Hieroglyph is Stephenson's provocation that our public discourse about the future is overwhelmingly gloomy and dystopian, and that we seem to have lost sight of our ability to think and do "big stuff": the Apollo Program, national infrastructure projects, and the microchip, for example. Hieroglyph encourages its authors and researchers to envision the future through the lens of *thoughtful optimism* – a refusal of catastrophic endgame thinking that is rooted in scientific, technological and social realities and acknowledges the messiness, imperfection and complexity of any vision of the future.

Hieroglyph is a cultural engine for generating a broader sense of agency about the future. The future is not something people in white coats are cooking up in a lab somewhere, or something that Apple and Google are working on exclusively. Whether we consciously accept it or not, we are all making choices that shape the future we are creating together. Science fiction stories function as prototypes that reveal how the decisions we make as workers, learners, and citizens articulate with our technological instruments to create finely-tuned socio-technical systems. Science fiction, in this sense, is not just a tool for prototyping technological development – it is a cultural lever for promoting ethical thinking and decision-making.

The project's digital community is an incubator for big ideas and a nexus for conversation and cooperation among people from vastly different backgrounds. Generating a technically plausible and compelling vision of the near future requires a vast range of expertise, and the Hieroglyph digital platform provides a structure for effective team-building and communication. Our presentation will follow the development of two stories – Stephenson's "Atmosphæra Incognita," about building a 20-kilometer tall steel tower, and "A Hotel in Antarctica" by author and NASA scientist Geoffrey Landis – to demonstrate how the process of collaboration unfolds and results in compelling narratives grounded in emerging technology, human complexity, social structures, and ethical quandaries.