

***Vioneering and our common future***  
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*The best way to predict the future is to invent it* — Alan Kay

According to some technology enthusiasts, such as Raymond Kurzweil, our technological developments seem to be following an exponential accelerating rate. A common vision of these technology enthusiasts is that the accelerating rate of development of science and technology will enable us to transform the world in more profound and significant ways than any other time in our history, escaping the limits surrounding the human condition. More importantly, some of these people have gone beyond having visions about the future to actively engage in a diverse set of activities to shape the future they envision. This is what Patrick McCray, a historian at the University of California, would call a "vioneer" (2012). If we unpack this neologism, we get on the one hand "vioneary" and on the other "engineer". McCray uses Gerard O'Neill with his space colonies and Eric Drexler with his universal assemblers as clear examples of the hybridized nature of vioneers.

Two current personalities that seem to fit this vioneer nature are Raymond Kurzweil and Peter Diamandis. The former is an inventor, futurist, author and currently director of engineering at Google, while the latter, is an engineer and entrepreneur best known for being the founder and chairman of the X PRIZE foundation. Kurzweil and Diamandis not only share positive technological visions about the future, the vioneary aspect which is an essential part of the vioneering motivation, but actively engage in shaping that future that they envision, the engineer aspect.

One example of Kurzweil and Diamandis vioneer's nature is that together they co-founded Singularity University in 2008, a new university concept whose mission is "to educate, inspire and empower leaders to apply exponential technologies to address humanity's grand challenges".<sup>1</sup> It is a university in which not only the visions supported by them and their followers are taught but it is also a place that fosters the use and development of technologies (such as nanotechnology, biotechnology and artificial intelligence) to shape the future and impact positively the world. This combination of activities promoted by Singularity University is an example of the type of activities carried out by vioneers "to nudge society toward expansive scenarios of the technological future they imagine" (Mackray, 2012:152).

In this regard vioneering is not only about developing a broad and comprehensive vision of the future, which often embraced technological utopianism, in which the technologies they promote are seen as shaping future societies and radically transforming the human condition. Vioneering is also about doing research and engineering<sup>2</sup> to advance that vision, as well as to promote those ideas to the public and policy makers.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://singularityu.org/>

<sup>2</sup> That is, applying technical skills, knowledge, and calculation to press forward the technological future.

That is why Kurzweil and Diamandis are examples of visioneers — because they imagine futures shaped by the technologies they helped promote.

Another feature of visioneers is that they often work at the blurry border between scientific fact, technological possibility and optimistic speculation, which is one of the reasons why their claims are contested and challenged. Considering that strictly speaking the often radical visions held by this type of visioneers are not impossible, one can see why some people are not too comfortable about visioneering, as we just cannot know the type of societal changes we would be confronted with and the real impact of their vision if they were to succeed.

But let us return to another key feature of visioneering, namely a belief (at times almost like faith) in that the particular technological future envisioned will help us to solve seemingly intractable social problems (a clear example is Singularity University mission stated above). Visioneers' faith in a particular technological future makes them reject other possible futures, especially those stressing the limits surrounding the human condition (such as limits of natural resources or biological limitations) as well as the all-too-human nature of its people, who might not necessarily use these technologies only with the aim of improving the human condition or who might end up using it blindly in the name of improving the human condition. In addition if we consider the inevitable disagreement about what the future should be like and how it might be best realized, we can see that the future is a contested arena where diverse interests and values meet. That is one reason for questioning the tension between visioneering the future as one in which radical visions of the future and technology optimism abounds and one with the pragmatic goals of technological development and its positive impact into people's lives.

Thus, visioneering should not be an activity solely for technological optimistic entrepreneurs, but also an activity in which academics from the humanities and social sciences are also actively engaged; producing visions that are more inclusive of other realities face by humankind as a whole and not necessarily techno utopian future, and at the same time actively engaging in "engineering" the future, an activity that need not be about molecular machines or immortal avatars. Having a broader set of visions will provide a valuable and more ecologically valid space in which other scientists and engineers could mobilize, explore and push the limits of the possible both in technological terms and social terms. More over having visioneers from different backgrounds and who hold a different set of assumptions is crucial for the growth and diversification of today's ecosystems and for achieving a more meaningful and inclusive debate about the future. The consequences of failing as academics to be more actively engaged in the shaping of our future is that the future will then be driven by a very narrow set of visions that are unlikely to cover the wide range of possible scenarios about the future. Instead of just theorizing about the dangers and perils of certain visioneering projects, we as academics can also start shaping the future by visioneering ourselves, and not only visioning.

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## References

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