



Singularity University: Hope or hype?

Kurzweil, Diamandis, and Page want to help people apply modern technology to solve poverty, hunger, and pandemics, but solutions are more likely to be found in other fields of study.

Peter Glaskowsky February 5, 2009 6:08 AM PST ↗ 💬

The "Singularity" is that postulated point in time when technological progress, led by machine intelligences designing their own replacements at an ever-increasing rate, becomes so rapid that we mere humans can no longer comprehend or control it.

It's a popular concept in science fiction. Some people believe that this point will eventually be reached in the real world. I think that those people are drastically underestimating the other limits to progress, such as bandwidth limits for data gathering, the difficulty of comprehension, and the inverse relationship of speed to reliability in data analysis.



Logo of the Singularity University

They're also confusing exponential growth curves (which lead to arbitrarily high growth rates) with S curves, which apply to real-world situations in which growth rates increase for a while as key limits are overcome, then slows again.

But while we're waiting for God to emerge from machines, some of the people promoting the concept of the Singularity are looking for practical ways to turn technological progress into social progress.

The latest such effort involves futurist Ray Kurzweil, Peter Diamandis of the X Prize Foundation, and Google co-founder Larry Page. The new Singularity University is a school aimed at both students and executives in various technology disciplines.

From a Los Angeles Times blog post:

"Dubbed Singularity University, its founders hope it will help close the gap in understanding and applying fast-developing technologies to solve what they called humanity's grandest challenges...such as poverty, hunger, and pandemics."

The Singularity University Web site identifies these areas of technology for its curriculum:

- Future Studies & Forecasting
- Networks & Computing Systems
- Biotechnology & Bioinformatics
- Nanotechnology
- Medicine, Neuroscience & Human Enhancement
- AI, Robotics, & Cognitive Computing
- Energy & Ecological Systems
- Space & Physical Sciences
- Policy, Law & Ethics
- Finance & Entrepreneurship

This all sounds wonderful: that is, I wonder if Kurzweil, Diamandis, and Page actually believe that the solutions to poverty, hunger, and pandemics will be found in technology. It seems to me that it would be more useful to take these students and executives through some classes on philosophy, theology, politics, sociology, and history--fields they're probably *not* sufficiently aware of and that are much more directly related to the causes of, and possible cures for, social problems.

I've been to two of Kurzweil's Singularity Summits, including the most recent, in October. I didn't write about it here because I simply didn't see anything worth writing about. Most of the conference wasn't even about the Singularity in any meaningful sense.

It will be nice if the Singularity University can achieve useful results for society, but I suspect that it will just be a longer, more labored version of the Summit, a painful muddle of science and science fiction identifying no clear path to a future we might not even want.

YOU MAY ALSO LIKE

SPONSORED LINKS BY TABOOLA

Handmade in Switzerland: 24 hours...

SPONSORED BY SLOW-WATCHES.COM

Check if you are eligible for a U.S Gre...

SPONSORED BY U.S GREEN CARD - FREE CHECK

If you're over 50 - this game is a must!

SPONSORED BY THRONE FREE ONLINE GAMES

Det här är spelet som spelare över hela...

SPONSORED BY FORGE OF EMPIRES - FREE ONLINE GAME

💬 POST A COMMENT

Culture



English | Español



MORE FROM CNET

- Best phones of 2019
- Holiday Survival Guide
- Upgrade to Windows 10 for free
- The guide to wellness
- New to Netflix in December

AFFILIATE DISCLOSURE

CNET may get a commission from retail offers.

ABOUT

- About CNET
- Sitemap
- Careers
- Help Center
- Privacy Policy
- Terms of Use
- Mobile User Agreement
- Licensing
- Ad Choice

© CBS INTERACTIVE INC.

All Rights Reserved.

FOLLOW US

