

Making a misstopia

by Nick Price

One of the shackles tying us to predetermination is the idea of Utopia and Dystopia. This forces us into seeing the future as either beautiful or miserable. But there are many possible futures, their quality is subjective and, importantly, none are perfect. A more useful future is a Misstopia: a possible future that is a provocative launching point to generate new ideas that can be used in the present.

Understanding misstopia

What might a misstopia look like? We already have them, but we don't realise it. They appear in the creative arts though to the world of business.

In the creative arts world we are familiar with alternate futures from the writing of H. G. Wells, from Hollywood film-making, and more recently, from the computer gaming industry. Viewing these future visions from the creative world as either utopian or dystopian locks in our judgement of their qualities. Let's consider an example.

Creative misstopia

The 20th century movie *Blade Runner* (and the book on which it was based, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* by Philip K Dick) is often judged to portray a dystopian—dark, undesirable—future. But making that judgement stigmatizes the future in question, labeling it with a bundle of pre-conceived ideas about what it means to be a dystopia and preventing us from thinking more deeply about useful ideas that might be gained from that future.

In the 21st century book *Seveneves*, Neal Stephenson explores our present-day ability to cope with a disastrous space event leading

to a near term scouring of life from our planet. It is dark in nature, but fertile ground to explore what humankind is capable of with its existing technologies combined with global cohesion to create an enduring glimmer of humankind into the future.

If we consider imaginal futures such as these as misstopias—suspending our judgement of bad or good—we can reduce the emotional barriers to critical thinking. We can tease out the ideas and consider them individually. The positive qualities, for example, are extra-planetary exploration and extended bio-engineering. The negative issues are the endpoint of a compromised biosphere, tragic urban environments and the ethical problems of created life. These provide rich starting points for invention and implementation.

Business misstopia

That's fine for the creative world but what about business? What are the attention seeking dystopias there? Consider the Global Financial Crisis or the “Lehman Problem” of 2008. Its potential recurrence is a distracting dystopian future. Work has been done since to contain the original conditions that led to it. So the shape of a future financial crisis is likely to be entirely different. Like an unexpected result from a referendum that steers an economy on a distinctly different course.

A referendum based incident provides a cushion of time, since it is signalled in advance. The cushion of time allows exploration of the misstopias, possible futures. Disassociated from the good/bad dynamic allows more sophisticated ‘what if’ games to be run. There is a complicating factor, though: for those

with responsibility for maintaining economic stability or political leadership, being seen to explore instability or contrary political results can send the wrong signal. It might be read as expectation, not exploration. In the same way, in the commercial world, revealing strategic thinking about the future can compromise the competitive advantage it offers.

Invention and innovation

Misstopias also have something to tell us about invention, implementation and its scaling through innovation. Consider the trite, future-driven ideas of ‘flying cars’ or ‘jet packs’. Taken as utopian dreams these are mocked. As misstopian ideas, they can be seen as starting points for new ideas. ‘Flying cars’ have immediate problems with engineering, let alone airspace management. However, elements of autonomous personal vehicles, pervasive data networks, geolocation, artificial intelligence and military/commercial drone technologies can be deconstructed on the path to that misstopian idea.

Avoiding the labels of utopian or dystopian, with all the baggage they carry, gives us room to tease out the value each may hold. This is much closer to how we deal with the world in the present. Our world, and our possible futures, are not light or dark.

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