

**heinlein was wrong,  
gibson was right**

or, the relevance of cyberpunk to  
technological creativity

# disclaimer

- i am not a scholar
- i do not have a degree in this
- i have not read everything

**science fiction**

# scifi, how does it work?

according to my expert sources, scifi...

- explores the consequences of scientific findings
- makes predictions about the future
- tries to deal rationally with concepts of multiple realities, the paranormal, and other often fanciful notions

# fast forward

what was the **golden age** of science fiction?

- late thirties to fifties
- heinlein, asimov, clarke
  - Stranger in a Strange Land
  - Number of the Beast
  - I, Robot
  - the Foundation series
  - 2001: a space odyssey

**a gross generalization**

dudes solving problems in space

**who didn't this work for?**

**women**



**minorities**

**people who weren't  
rocket scientists**

**non-libertarians**

oh hai there, *philip k dick*



# pkd opened doors

- actually human female/minority characters
- relatable protagonists
- not exactly sunny outlook

# Philip K Dick

- **Martian Time-Slip**
  - housewife and mentally-disabled boy deal with space-nightmares on a psychologically devastating Mars
- **Clans of the Alphane Moon**
  - colonies of mentally-distressed individuals play out traumatic psychiatric episodes on a moon
- **Ubik**
  - a petulant boy's dreams become a nightmare reality for individuals trapped between life and death
- **Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?**
  - Depressed androids, empty earth, new age religion

# Philip K Dick

- planted a seed for a new way to approach science fiction
- died in 1982, just as this "cyberpunk" thing was getting off the ground

**cyberpunk**



# brain transmission

"I'd like to think that, on some level, Phil and I are just different instances of the same Platonic form-call it the gonzo-philosopher-SF-writer form"

*-rudy rucker*

**definitions are fun**

# enter cyberpunk

"Classic cyberpunk characters were **marginalized, alienated loners** who lived on the edge of society in generally dystopic futures where daily life was impacted by rapid technological change, an ubiquitous datasphere of computerized information, and invasive modification of the human body."

# enter cyberpunk

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**aka "now"**

**sounds a bit different, right?**

dudes solving problems in space

vs.

anti-social teenage girls undermining multi-national corporations with epic hacks

# so what?

- the former is unrealizable by pretty much everyone.
- the latter is realizable. now. by people like us.

# why would we ever want to do this?

- we don't have a choice.
- cyberpunk is not the future
- cyberpunk is **now**

**books -> reality**

# robots making art

- as seen in Gibson's 1986 *Count Zero*
  - young "cowboy" hacker tries to make dough while an out-of-work art collector hunts robotic art artifacts
- see: computational poetry, willsburroughs

## Tweets



**William S Burroughs** @willsburroughs

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**William S Burroughs** @willsburroughs

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# seemingly infinite video content

- as seen in Pat Cadigan's 1993 *Synners*
  - dream->internet interface fuels awesome music video production until virus ruins everything
  - massive, seemingly infinite network of video
  - massively personalized content
  - immersive ads



**You**  **Tube**

# virtual worlds

- as seen in Neal Stephenson's 1992 *Snow Crash*
  - samurai fights virus in and out of a chaotic virtual world
- ...and Gibson's 1995 *Idoru*
  - voodoo AI gods help teenage girl help a CG pop star marry a dude



**facebook**®

# gadget-hacker collectives

- the Sandbenders as seen in Gibson throughout 90s
  - *idoru, virtual light, all tomorrow's parties*
- see: hacker spaces, 3d printing
- freeside atlanta

# massive anti-property movements

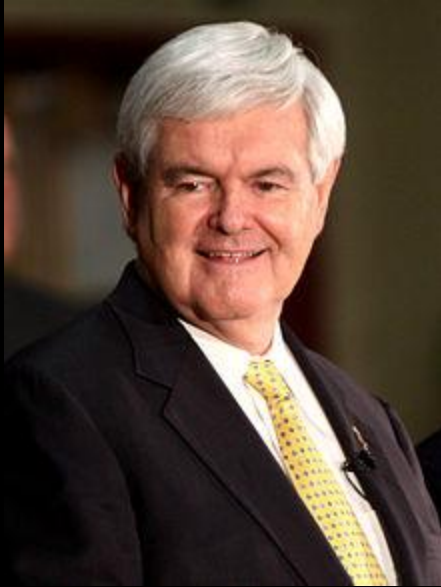
- as seen in Gibson's 90s Bridge trilogy
  - anarchic squatters overrun an abandoned Golden Gate Bridge and build a crazy city of their own

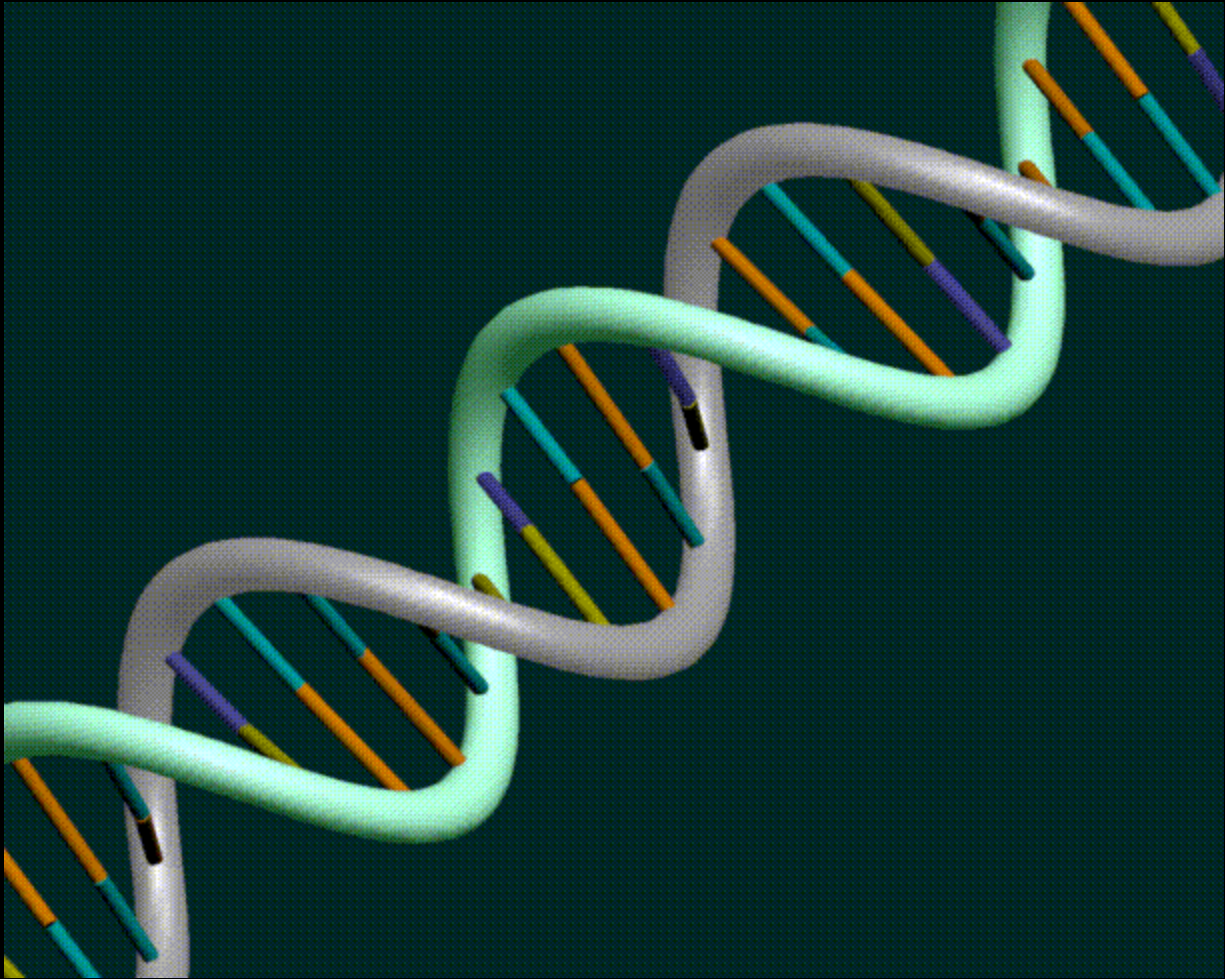


# digital implants

- as seen in Cadigan's 1993 Synners
- (and pretty much everywhere else)







# wearable computers

- as seen pretty much everywhere, especially Gibson's 1993 *Virtual Light*
  - teenage bike messenger inadvertently gets sweet sunglasses full of data, flees for life



# David v. Goliath but over SSH

- as seen in, again, pretty much everything
- see: PS3/PSN

**reality -> books**

# stuxnet

- a virus capable of doing actual, physical harm
- carried by a double agent on a hard drive the size of a thumb
- escapes a nuclear plant and infects the world

# facebook

- petulant kid in a dorm room
- IPO so massive and important it could cause a recession



# anonymous

- dirt on anyone, any time
- digital graffiti, no target too big
- whole armies of people fighting DDOS battles

# botnets

- zombified computers
- web-mining, password cracking, credit card thrifting
- millions of robots
- controlled by organized crime

# the effing internet itself

- 2 billion people connected 24/7 by text, audio, video
- 5 million terabytes of stuff
- 36 billion photos to facebook each year: how many photos even existed from 0 to 1995?

**"He'd used decks in school, toys that  
shuttled you through the infinite reaches  
of the space that wasn't space, mankind's  
unthinkably complex consensual  
hallucination, the matrix cyberspace,  
where the great corporate hotcores  
burned like neon novas, data so dense  
you suffered sensory overload if you tried  
to apprehend more than the merest  
outline."**

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**1986**

# robots live in our house and pockets

- roomba
- siri
- operating rooms

# the arab spring

- in the 20th century the Arab Spring would have just been a few hundred dead people
- thanks to SMS, vigilante dial-up access, tons of internet proxies, it became a world-changing revolution

# wifi on planes

- i mean, come on

# hack the planet

- there are plenty more ideas out there
- we can implement them

# think big

- startups are boring
- make something beautiful
- it only takes a weekend, a month
- stop taking the web for granted
- the web is our world

# but it's not all fun and games

- many powerful entities would like to see a read-only web
- back to cable tv
- net neutrality, DMCA, RIAA, MPAA. Huge media.



# fight back

- for starters, we work in the local news industry
- big media is not our jam
- it's local stories, local meaning, local media.

# fight back

- volunteer your time with Telecomix or similar
- teach your kid to read with interactive fiction
- make a movie, write a video game, make music
- design a smartphone and 3d print it
- put arduinos in your grandparents' house
- store your own data

# need ideas?

- read, read, read
- Pat Cadigan
- William Gibson
- Rudy Rucker
- Neal Stephenson
- Charlie Stross
- Bruce Sterling
- Adolfo Bioy Casares

**their future is our present**

# postscript



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- gibson's latest (final?) trilogy of books takes place in the present
- his 2002 *Pattern Recognition* is considered to be one of the first mature literary takes on 9/11.
- **twitter** and **google** are plot elements. the stories are **web-centric**. they describe **our reality** with a lucidity and grandiosity. **anything** seems possible.

"The future is already here — it's just not very evenly distributed."

**fin**