

Long Now Foundation presentation

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Alexander Rose, the executive director of the Long Now Foundation, visited PLAN*B in Helsinki on Thursday 27 January 2005 to give a lecture about the purpose and current activities of the foundation.

The 10 000 Year Clock is a clock that measures years instead of seconds and centuries instead of hours. The challenge is to design a clock in that will function reliably over the time period of 10 000 years. The first prototype of the project requires attention from people on a regular basis – it has to be manually wound like old-fashioned clocks. This is one of the strategies the foundation is recommending for projects with a very long time span. If a project requires maintenance, there is a higher probability that it will function over a time span of several generations. The idea is that it's better to build solutions where a small problem can be solved on a regular basis, instead of creating a longer term solution (and possibly a much greater problem) for the future generations. For example it is better to design a storage space for nuclear waste that will be safe for 100 years instead of a trying to design one that would stay safe for 10 000 years.

The long term goal of the 10 000 Year Clock project is to build a large scale clock which would be a symbol for long term thinking. It would be an attraction that people could visit, just like the Big Ben or the Statue of Liberty. Recently the Long Now Foundation purchased a mountain in Nevada desert where the clock will be placed together with a 10 000 Year Library. The site is located in a national park and should be safe from earthquakes, nuclear warfare, etc. Another advantage is that the visitors will have to reserve some time to visit the site, since it is 5 hours away from the closest airport.

Another initiative by the foundation is the Rosetta project, inspired by the famous Rosetta stone. The Rosetta stone contains the same text written in three ancient languages and has been an important tool for understanding early languages and writing systems. The

goal of the project is to create a new version of the Rosetta stone, a public archive which contains the same text written in as many languages as possible. The project has crucial timing since it has been predicted that as many as fifty to ninety percent of the 7000 languages on the planet will disappear during the next century, with little or no significant documentation. The Rosetta project is currently the most extensive online language archive of all languages.

The Rosetta Project is archiving ten components for each language including a parallel text, an audio file, word lists, grammars and more. The parallel text which was chosen to be documented in this project was the Genesis from the Old Testament. It was chosen because it is the most translated text ever in the history of humankind. This choice made the process of collecting the languages easier but has also brought up some difficulties since there are many people who would have preferred another text.

Alexander also spoke about the 'Digital Dark Age' which our generation is currently living in. The current information storage mechanisms will leave very little information for the future generations to explore. This is due to the quick pace in which digital storage formats are becoming obsolete and impossible to access. Another factor is that within the digital production process, people often save only the final versions, not the drafts and the files created in the working process. 'If Leonardo Da Vinci were alive today, his notebooks would not be preserved for the future'.

Alexander finished the presentation by talking about the foundation's approach to democracy. The democratic political process is by definition time limited through elections with the consequence that long term projects are not prioritized and/or realized. In PLAN*B FOR ARKADIANMÄKI project, the Long Now Foundation is asking people to propose solutions for the lack of long term thinking in politics.