



A clock for the next civilization – what could it say about the past and future?
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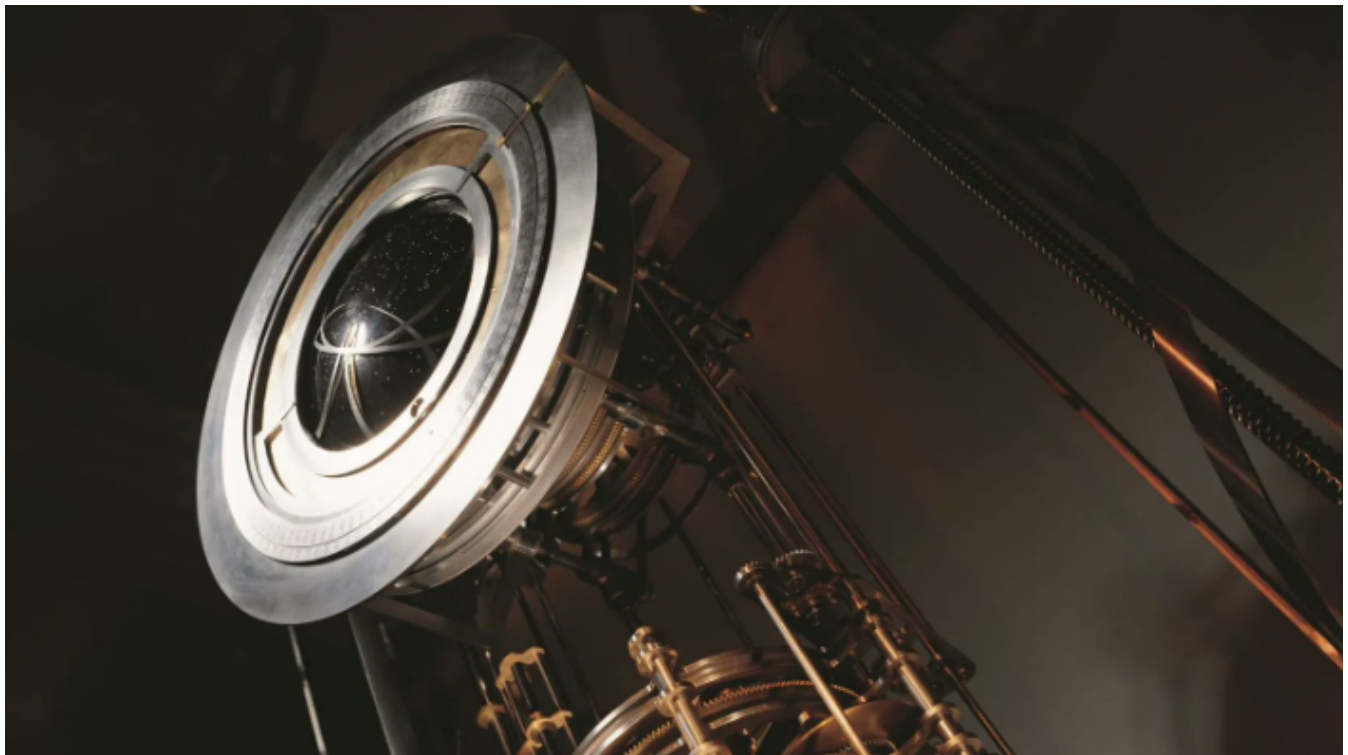
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MEGHAN MCCARTY CARINO AND JESUS ALVARADO

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A prototype of the 10,000-year clock, funded by Jeff Bezos.
Courtesy Long Now Foundation

The Long Now Foundation is building the Millennium Clock, which is meant to last 10,000 years. It underscores, for we in the present, the need for long-term thinking.



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Deep inside a mountain, a full day’s hike from any road, in a dry, deserted part of West Texas, a foundation funded by Jeff Bezos is building a clock that’s hundreds of feet tall.

It’s been called the Millennium Clock, the 10,000 Year Clock and the Clock of the Long Now. Like Stonehenge, the Colosseum in Rome and the Pyramids in Egypt, its makers hope it will outlast our civilization and tick for 10 millennia.

It’s powered by sunlight, engineered to withstand earthquakes and bad weather, and maintain its accuracy for thousands of years with basically no maintenance — a feat even the most expensive Swiss watches can’t achieve.

The clock is intended to be [“an icon to long-term thinking.”](#) a reminder of the long arc of history and our small place in it.

Marketplace’s Meghan McCarty Carino spoke with Alexander Rose, executive director of the Long Now Foundation, which has been building the roughly \$40 million prototype of this clock in Texas. He said it doesn’t look anything like the timepieces we’re used to: There’s no second hand, minute hand or even hour hand because it’s measuring time on a much grander scale.

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The following is an edited transcript of their conversation.

Alexander Rose: One of the tricks that we used in terms of the technology here is to just slow things way down. The dials on this clock are not 12-hour dials like a normal clock. These dials are dials that show mostly astronomical effects of stars and where the moon is, the sun and some very slow effects like the precession of the equinoxes, which is the Earth's 23-degree axis swinging around on a cycle that's almost 26,000 years.

Meghan McCarty Carino: I think we're fascinated by monuments from ancient civilizations, sort of trying to tease out what we can learn about the values of that civilization, about the different sort of advancements of that civilization. I'm thinking about the Pyramids or Machu Picchu. I mean, how do you imagine people interacting with this clock in the future, and what is it going to tell the next civilization?

Rose: For the most part, we try and be very nonprescriptive about what we hope that people will think when they encounter it. I think as you look at some of the oldest monuments in the world, things like the Pyramids and Stonehenge and Machu Picchu, as you mentioned, some of them are kind of easy to understand. Like, the Pyramids were clearly a tomb, things like Stonehenge a little bit less clear because it's almost more like a clock, actually. And Machu Picchu in ancient, really some kind of temple or city. But none of them were trying to, in some way, say that they cared about the future, or at least not the future of the future generations. They were definitely more about their present. And this clock has an element of that too. While we hope that if somebody finds it in the future, they'll think that the past generations did care about them, and we're sending them a message of that care. But even in the present, that we're having this conversation now, or even if somebody comes in and says how the clock may not work, they've already engaged in the kind of long-term thinking that we're hoping that the clock achieves. So it's as much of an idea in the present as it will hopefully be a present for the future.

McCarty Carino: And why is a clock something to leave to civilization?



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Rose: Well, it's a project about time, so a clock is kind of the, the most obvious choice. And there's all kinds of things that you could do. You could leave some kind of time capsule or library. There are projects like that. You could leave the future a bunch of nuclear waste that's gonna live, you know, last for tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of years, which we're already doing in a number of other places. So, since the idea here, though, is, is a project about time and to change the way people think about time in the future that they may be leaving for future descendants, a clock seemed appropriate.

McCarty Carino: This is a project that many millions of dollars are going toward to leave something kind of for the future. On one hand, you know, we can think about monuments like the pyramids. On the other hand, it sort of reminds me of "Ozymandias," you know, the Shelley poem about this monument to greatness that has decayed into nothing but sand. Do you ever worry about the utility of a project like this?

Rose: I think it's, you know, it's always worth being reflective of that. In the case of the way that we're engineering, this decaying into sand itself would be quite difficult. I think it's vastly more likely that people might decide to destroy it or scrap it for its metal. But our hope is that we're creating, at least, or inspiring, possibly, some generations of people that are going to make the world a little bit better in the future, rather than worse.

McCarty Carino: What is the timeline on this? When can we expect the clock to be ready for visitors?

Rose: Well, that we don't know. We've been working on it for quite a while. I've been on this project since 1997. There's a, one of the first prototypes that was finished is at the Science Museum in London, a few more prototypes are in our offices in San Francisco. And in fact, one of the, there's actually one of the prototypes is just opened with the new Air and Space Museum at the Smithsonian earlier in October. But the final one, that's the monument-scale version, still has a ways to go. But we hope to have it done in, in some number of years and hopefully be able to open it to the public.

McCarty Carino: And the idea is that the public would be able to visit at some point.



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Rose: One is the people that don't even go but that know that it exists and that it can be used, in a way, it's just kind of a note that, that our civilization has built something like this. And that if, if people are working on a project they were thinking would be a yearlong project, but really needs to be a much longer one. They can kind of point to this and say, Hey, like these people built this thing, why don't we make this a 100-year project? or something like that. And then the people that visit it, I, you know, I really hope that the experience somewhat changes them, that we should be able to look forward or at least have some sense of responsibility for the next 10,000 years as well.

Related links: More insight from Meghan McCarty Carino

If you're having a hard time visualizing this giant clock in a mountain, above is a video of its installation from back in 2018. At the [Long Now Foundation's website](#), you can sign up for email updates if you're thinking you might want to make that long journey to see the clock when it's finally done. But in the spirit of long-term thinking, there is no completion date



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with another Bezos preoccupation: his commercial space enterprise, Blue Origin. In both cases, Karpf charged, we see the wealthy focusing their energies on some sort of escapist fantasy rather than contributing to solutions to the very real problems we have in the present.

Now, Bezos is just one of a bunch of futurist thinkers from Silicon Valley and beyond who've been working on this clock for decades. In fact, the term "Long Now" was coined by the British musician Brian Eno, who wrote: "Now is never just a moment. The Long Now is the recognition that the precise moment you're in grows out of the past and is a seed for the future." [Eno is also helping to design the chimes the bell might make](#) as it marks each passing year, which he released on an album back in 2003.

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