e-flux Architecture

What would a future geopolitics powered by the technology behind Bitcoin look like?

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Superhumanity
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Detail of painting depicting Ethereum blockchain founder in front of a fantasy world powered by their token Ether. Behind the earth, the spirits of Austrian economists Friedrich A. Hayek and Ludwig von Mises.

In 2008 a mysterious figure(s) released a paper under the pseudonym Satoshi Nakamoto describing blockchain protocol, a peer-to-peer system of trade underpinning the digital currency Bitcoin. Since then, it has come to light that the applications of the blockchain protocol are potentially far-reaching.

For one thing, it could render "trusted third party" verification (currently facilitated by governments, banks, accountants, notaries, and fiat currencies) obsolete with direct peer-to-peer transactions, disrupting huge swaths of the financial services industry. But even beyond disrupting how transactions are carried out, some people see in blockchain technology a blueprint outlining the digital infrastructure for an entirely new model of nationhood.

Blockchain nationhood could amount to a post-geographic alternative to the nation-state system, whose infrastructure has the striking quality of being developable alongside (i.e. without being an immediate challenge or obvious threat to) current nation-state governments. As a result, such initiatives are in a uniquely advantaged position for takeover if certain, specific factors align.

This slide show uses sculptures as visual metaphors to define some of the more radical visions of a blockchain future, and describes the conditions of possibility for their implementation.

It's a possible technologist's answer to some of today's urgent problems. Take a look »

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Blockchain's origin: Satoshi Nakamoto and the peer-to-peer answer to a seemingly corrupt financial world

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In October 2008, in the wake of the Lehman Brothers crash, a mysterious figure named "Satoshi Nakamoto" released a white paper describing a peer-to-peer electronic money system. The money system, known today as the crypto-currency "Bitcoin," is based on a distributed network that prevents double spending and replaces the need for "trusted third party" verification. Verification of transactions instead occurs automatically by using a single ledger distributed across the entire network, which timestamps all transactions and creates the infrastructure for consensus across all nodes; a chain of identical blocks — the "Blockchain." In the following years, the idea scales to an unignorable number of users, propelled in part by the gripping founder narrative. To this day the identity of the person(s) behind the pseudonym Satoshi Nakamoto, a reference to a Pokemon character and a Japanese iconoclast merchant from the 1700s, remains unclear.

"Our current system needs to be burned down and remade. Cyryptocurrency is the phoenix, and Satoshi is ash from which the peonix rises... and the name of a silly Pokemon character. In Japan the name of Ash is Satoshi." – Craig Wright, one of many figures allegedly behind Bitcoin creator Satoshi Nakamoto.

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Blockchain's potential and classical economic liberalism

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As has been noted by both critics and proponents alike, the blockchain is a multi-faceted instrument — a story and a technology — that resonates with a political history. The after-image of thinkers like Friedrich Hayek is preserved in visions of market systems as self-regulating totalities.

What could the blockchain threaten? part 1: trusted third-party elites

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Entrepreneurs in the banking industry are exploring the use of the block-
chain as a way of automating much of the labor involved in the most fundamental op-
erations of capital markets. From settlement to security, the blockchain could replace
many of the services currently provided by banking industry professionals and make
the sector faster with lower overhead costs — continuing the tendency in the industry
towards accelerating trade and consolidating power.

A cutout of banking superstar and blockchain entrepreneur Blythe Masters in a trade fair style booth promoting a prototypical banking application for the protocol.

What could the blockchain threaten? part 2: the nation-state model

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The blockchain protocol has the potential to mint digital currencies outside
of the jurisdiction of a central bank — the institution that the state has vested with the
authority to issue and regulate money. However, the disruptive potential of the block-
chain need not only apply to creating alternative systems for money. The blockchain
also has the potential to index and protect what could be called a kind of proprietary
identity — the mechanism used to identify individuals and legitimize their participa-
tion as economic and legal subjects in a state system. Establishing proprietary identi-
ty enables people to own property or be taken to court, for example, and is typically
associated with citizenship. By giving people the capacity to establish and enact al-
ternatives, the blockchain as a tool could be seen to challenge existing sovereignty
models.

An edition of the boardgame RISK exploring the post-geopolitics of Silicon Valley blockchain startup 21.Inc. The founder, Balaji Srinivasan, is exploring alternative money
systems and sovereignty models using Bitcoin's blockchain as its basis. He envisions Bitcoin as the money protocol for a third kind of internet — the "internet of value,"
enabling a post-national free market world where latency is zero in financial transactions between machines and geography is redefined following the cloud.

The emergence of post-geographic nationhood, part 1

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As commentators have long claimed, we are seeing the beginnings of a
schism between community and location. Since the growth of the internet in the early
1990s and more recently with filter-bubble-generating social media people have been
able to form international communities based on mutual affinity. Community is no
longer necessarily borne out of geographic proximity.
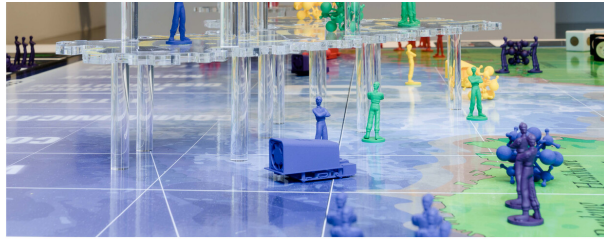
Detail of the 21.co edition of RISK showing a vertical offshore cloud infrastructure being built and populated by visionary founders, hardware and networks. The act of constructing post-geographic communities is enacted in game form – underlining the role of markets and competition in establishing the ubiqity of a proposed Bitcoin protocol for accelerated commerce.
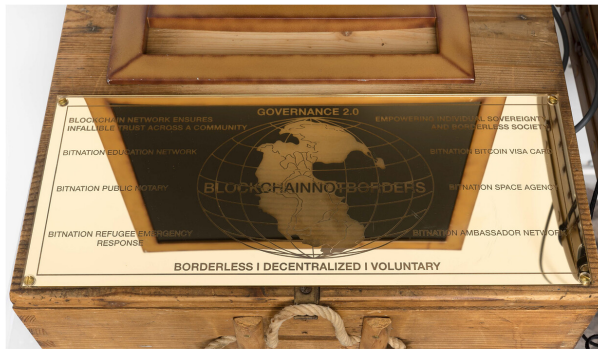
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The emergence of post-geographic nationhood, part 2

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The blockchain affords location independent communities the infrastructure to realize new, post-geographic models of nationhood. If two fundamental components of a state are a legal apparatus and financial infrastructure, the blockchain has the potential to technologically underpin both. Initiatives like Ethereum have built digital ecosystems addressing exactly this potential. Ethereum has given rise to projects like Bitnation, the DAO (Decentralized Autonomous Organization) and other self-organizing groups who are able to define their own rules and automate compliance. Using immutable encrypted code distributed across all nodes in an opt-in network, people have newfound agency in their ability to choose and/or construct new systems of governance.

Sculptural detail showing the ambitions of Bitnation, a fledgling initiative hosted on the Ethereum blockchain platform. Bitnation aims to provide the digital infrastructure for a new borderless society. Among the services the company wants to facilitate are an educations network, a public notary, refugee emergency response system and an ambassidorial network. One of the most visionary projects being built with the blockchain, it proposes infalible trust across a community.

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The perilous (nation) state

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The blockchain's potential for disrupting governance emerges at a time when many urgent forces can be seen threatening the stability of existing sovereignty models. Scientific predictions around the impact of climate change suggest the possibility of a refugee crisis at a scale we as a civilization have yet to have seen. The re-emergence of nationalist movements and a reanimated appetite for authoritarianism has bred a volatile geopolitical climate prone to escalating conflict. Massive stores of arms, recently understood as largely symbolic or dormant, now seem more likely to be pulled from the arsenal. Not only do these threats mark instability, but also a perception that the systems in place are corrupt and in need of radical change. At a time when retreats into nationalism and trust in strong men as leaders are being proposed as fixes to a broken sovereignty system, one can understand the interest in alternatives.

Detail of a sculpture exploring a pioneering app built on the Ethereum platform. A distressed toumbstone supports diagrams mapping transitioning sites for government. A post-national tech victor emerges at the present/future end of the timeline.

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Blockchain future states

If the blockchain emerges and scales up enough, it could provide a viable alternative to existing economic and legal infrastructures and become a default protocol for future power. If there continues to be a disenfranchised voice calling for radical change to the world's existing sovereignty models – if reactionary forces implode in the face of inflammatory border conflicts and devastating ecological inevitabilities – then the blockchain's adaptive solutions may provide, by default, the most robust answer to the speculated imminent chaos. A technocratic solution to governance like the visions proposed by blockchain-laced dreams could be seen as a way of circumventing the nation-state system and all of its geopolitical instabilities. It could also, by the same token, be seen as a way of circumventing its checks and balances and pave the way for an extended reinvestment in the unabated power of the self-regulating free market.

The Ethereum "frontier" as a special edition of the board game RISK. Decentralized apps form a radically new network of intersecting self-governing entities that offer services currently provided by nation states. The free-market development of this ecosystem irradicates the nessessity of depending on many of our incumbent heirarchies by default.

Superhumanity is a project by e-flux Architecture at the 3rd Istanbul Design Biennial, produced in cooperation with the Istanbul Design Biennial, the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea, the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Zealand, and the Ernst Schering Foundation.

Category
Technology

Subject
Futures, Networks, State & Government, Money & Finance, Geography

Return to **Superhumanity**

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Simon Denny is an artist based in Berlin. His recent exhibitions explore the implications of blockchain technology on sovereignty.