

## **Singularity Summit at Stanford**

### **Welcoming Remarks**

**Todd Davies, 5/13/2006**

Good morning. My name is Todd Davies and I'm the associate director of the Symbolic Systems Program here at Stanford. I'd like to welcome all of you on behalf of Symbolic Systems and our co-host, the Center for the Study of Language and Information at Stanford.

The Center for the Study of Language and Information, or CSLI, is an independent research laboratory here on campus. It was founded in 1983 to bring together researchers at Stanford and nearby laboratories to study human and machine intelligence, and the problems common to both of them. Symbolic Systems is an interdepartmental program, founded in 1986, just three years after CSLI's founding. "Sym Sys", as it is affectionately known, turned the research problems that sparked CSLI into a degree-granting academic curriculum, borrowing courses from departments such as Computer Science, Philosophy, Linguistics, and Psychology, and occasionally adding a few of our own.

Today's event, the Singularity Summit, is the latest in a series of special events that the Symbolic Systems Program has hosted on campus, focusing on the connections between our curriculum and the issues of the wider world. We have hosted (usually co-hosted) at least one such major event each year since 2000, and have also devoted a significant number of our weekly Symbolic Systems Forum lectures to this theme. Seeing that the pattern was consistent, we decided to give this series of events a name: Symposiums on Symbolic Systems and Society, and a page on our website, [Symsys.Stanford.edu](http://Symsys.Stanford.edu). This year's Symposium is really a sequel to the first event in the series, which was held six years ago and also co-hosted by Symbolic Systems and CSLI. It was titled, "Will Spiritual Machines Replace Humanity by 2100?", and featured among others Ray Kurzweil and Douglas Hofstadter, both of whom will appear on stage today. The other major events in the series have focused on issues such as digital divides across

race, class and gender, Internet policy, uses of new media in labor unions, and e-democracy.

Today's summit touches on vital questions posed by the prospect of accelerating technology for augmenting and perhaps even replacing human intelligence. The summit is occasioned by the recent publication of the book, *The Singularity Is Near*, by our keynote speaker Ray Kurzweil. In his book, Ray Kurzweil says that the singularity is "a future period during which the pace of technological change will be so rapid, its impact so deep, that human life will be irreversibly transformed. Although neither utopian nor dystopian, this epoch will transform the concepts that we rely on to give meaning to our lives, from our business models to the cycle of human life, including death itself." Throughout the day, a number of prominent speakers with different points of view will comment on this and related ideas, culminating at the end of the day with a round table discussion and audience participation.

I imagine there are many in the audience who are, like me, a bit unsure what to think about the singularity idea. Technology that augments human abilities can be used either to attenuate or to amplify existing inequalities. It might even have opposite effects in different societies. It could benefit humanity and the planet as a whole, or it could wipe out humanity. One could argue that getting rid of humanity would be a bad thing, but some actually argue it would be a good thing.

An understandable reaction to the notion of singularity is to assume that it is science fiction and unlikely to happen in our lifetimes. But if we think about the quote I just read, I am struck by how powerfully it seems to describe events that have already happened. One of the latest such events is the advent of ubiquitously available communication technology and information about other people through things like online social networks. Think for a moment about how much of our cultural practices and our literary heritage are based on assumptions that these new technologies undermine: that it is often impossible to contact someone; that one must cultivate relationships in order to gain information about people; that

one's physical appearance must carry a heavy burden of telling strangers about one's personality. Basic propositions about the social world that have been true throughout human history are suddenly becoming false, and many of us wonder whether our life experiences or our favorite old movies (say, from the 1990s) have much relevance to this new reality.

Disruptive changes like this may help to prepare us for the kind of event horizon that Ray Kurzweil and others invite us to consider - a world in which advances in technology are no longer under human control. I hope we will all think critically but with an open mind about what we hear today, and that we will challenge our illustrious panelists to share with us their deepest motivations, hopes, and dreams. For now, at least, the singularity looks to be something that is in human hands, and that is why we convened this summit.

Now I'd like to present both the primary sponsor and the primary organizer of today's event: Peter Thiel and Tyler Emerson, who will introduce our keynote speaker.