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Les Elkind

We are entering a time when story will blend back into reality, and deities, sprites and avatars once again become agents of action in our day to day lives. Homer would feel comfortably at home in this world we are creating.

These non-human characters, along with representations of government, corporations, and collectives of every conceivable type, are all about to become actors on the very same stage on which we perform our daily human parts. I say this because it appears inevitable, given the way our consensual reality is evolving right before our eyes. And it is coming soon.

This is not a dream of the technological future as much as a description of what comes about naturally, when millions and millions of people connect on the internet while carrying enough computing power in their pockets to augment their view of reality. As the network spreads out to cover all the places we inhabit, and smarter and smarter phones are with us everywhere, our view of the world around us is developing in a way that is just now becoming visible on the internet of 2012. Holding up your iPhone

to translate a sign, pay for your latte, or see directions to the nearest station is just the beginning. Your waking world will soon be overlain with intelligence and imagery coming to you over the ubiquitous network, communicating all sorts of information about the world which you will use to augment your local point of view. It will be as natural to you as checking the name on the mailbox to see who lives there.

In this immersion we will interact with virtual agents representing whoever, or whatever, placed them there for us to encounter.   Motives for spending the resources to deploy such agents will likely include advertising, political campaigning, and similar reasons for buying the bandwidth and production values needed for a convincing virtual presence or impressive augmentation of reality. But, thinking about the emergence of social media as a real force in human society, it occurs to me that what has been termed 'crowdsourcing' represents another way in which expertise and resources will become available for generating augmentations of reality. And this leads me to mention Rainbow's End.

Rainbow's End is a novel, published a few short years ago by Vernor Vinge, the person usually credited with first applying the term 'Singularity' to what will result from the phenomenon of accelerating intelligence. While Rainbow's End may leave something to be desired in novelistic terms, I think it succeeds remarkably well as a feast of ideas. It is an illuminated

look at the social and cultural implications of real time, communally augmented reality. In the world of Rainbow's End, which takes place some 10-15 years from now, many of the apps that people use in daily life to add layers of augmentation to their view of the world come from something Vinge calls "belief circles." A belief circle is the worldwide community of people who share a point of view about whatever thing or issue is the focus of the belief circle. We can easily identify the belief circles joined by people in our current world: political parties, churches, teams we root for, brands of which we are loyal consumers, the list is extensive. In the world of Rainbow's End, belief circles provide a real time feed augmenting their members' internet-connected view of the world.   Belief circle members can see the world with these additional layers of embellishment, commentary, even opportunities for participatory action, all shared with the rest of the belief circle.

A belief circle numbering many millions of people who are passionate about a cause, or even just obsessed with something like Hello Kitty, could be large enough to mobilize the resources needed to create such a communally augmented view of reality.   Picture what we currently know as Facebook 'likes,' Yelp reviews, and Twitter hashtags evolving into some kind of animate annotation, commenting on the world around us, perhaps even represented by identifiable avatars with whom we can converse.

Switch the channel to see a different point of view from a different belief circle, or turn it off entirely to get some good old fashioned peace and quiet.

Within individual belief circles, as in any human society, identifiable personalities will emerge out of the rushing flow of imagery and communication, like standing waves in a river. Corporate Goliaths will be literally animate in the augmented world, as well as Trons representing their users, not to mention various political candidates and future Kardashians. Extending the fantasy of a current State Farm TV commercial, imagine that when you summon your insurance agent to the scene of an accident by singing the future, hyperlinked version of the State Farm advertising jingle, the agent, looking and sounding exactly like the State Farm guy on TV, really *is* there with you.

This might all seem far away at the moment. But, as I was writing this, just being able to refer to something I termed "apps people use in daily life" seemed to me an example of how far down the road we've already come with respect to these developments. A few short years ago that phrase would have been almost meaningless to most people, but now it no longer requires explanation for anyone.   Watching prime time television last night, I saw advertisements already urging me to "download our app" so I could begin interacting directly with the advertiser. The rest of the scenario will not be far behind.