

E-Government and Digital Citizenship in the Metaverse of Neal Stephenson's "Snow Crash"

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Abstract: "Snow Crash" is the first book to mention the *Metaverse*, a virtual escape from Cyberpunk reality that reshapes identity, governance, and society. The elimination of physical barriers to the point where identity is no longer debated, instead of benefiting the creation of identities not accepted in the real world, becomes a catalyst that significantly intensifies issues of identity, privacy, and social class divisions. Stephenson's novel serves as a reminder from the post-Cold War era, when the World Wide Web emerged, cloning succeeded, and globalization spread worldwide, marking the beginning of the crucial need for ethical control and supervision of technological development, where collective benefits must come before organizational interests. The author believes that in a world where AI technology increasingly influences people's lives, the topics addressed in "Snow Crash" since 1992 will begin to play a significant role in ethical references and technological development before e-government systems to create digital citizenship become part of daily life in the future. The novel emphasizes the need for transparent governance systems that balance technological advancement with public well-being to ensure equality and responsibility in the digital age.

Keywords: *Metaverse, digital citizenship, e-government, digital inequality, Snow Crash*

Introduction: The Metaverse and "Snow Crash"

In "Snow Crash", the narrative is set in the 21st-century United States, where immersive technology allows individuals to choose between dwelling in a decaying physical world or constructing a new life in the virtual realm, the Metaverse. Here, power, justice, and governance have shifted into the hands of private corporations. The novel paints a vivid picture of a semi-dystopian world, where e-government and digital citizenship are intertwined with market mechanisms, corporate dominance, and a transformed state apparatus. This shift profoundly affects the relationship between governments and public services in the virtual world. "Snow Crash" serves as a stark reminder of the potential trajectory of privately developed virtual worlds and underscores the importance of preventing such spaces from devolving into a virtual dystopia. As the first book to explore the concept and structure of the Metaverse, "Snow Crash" provides a foundation for developers to design inclusive virtual worlds that contrast with its fictional portrayal. The novel also invites readers into a broader understanding of the social, economic, political, and technological transformations it

envisions. Published in 1992, during the era of the burgeoning Internet, the World Wide Web, and the late 1990s dot-com bubble, the book remains strikingly relevant.

One of the novel's most compelling aspects lies in its depiction of a fragmented virtual landscape controlled by corporations and privatized city-states, termed "burbclaves" and "franchise nations." Traditional notions of centralized governance collapse as federal, state, and local governments lose their authority. These entities, operating with diminished influence, are often relegated to subcontracting roles or marginalized. Fundamental administrative responsibilities, such as law enforcement, infrastructure, and public services, fall under corporate control, while religious institutions are reduced to entities of apathy and superstition. Profit and capital become the ultimate goals, transforming corporations and private entities into what can be described as "digital governments."

In real-world contexts, digital governments or e-governments signify the use of digital technology, particularly the Internet, to enhance the efficiency and accessibility of government services and democratic processes. These initiatives aim to streamline processes, increase transparency, and foster closer connections between governments and citizens through online platforms. Services might include document submission, online voting, and public access to digital platforms like apps and websites. This concept traces its roots back to the 1990s, when the Internet and online networks began gaining widespread attention. Comparatively, the rise of blockchain technology today mirrors this period of increasing public interest, as evidenced by Google Trend data showing exponential growth in searches related to blockchain since 2004.

Digital citizenship complements digital governance by defining individuals' rights and responsibilities in virtual spaces. Citizens are expected to understand fundamental digital rights, such as privacy and security, and to actively participate in maintaining order and inclusivity within these spaces. Responsible use of government-provided digital platforms is crucial to ensuring the efficiency and fairness of such systems. However, the idealized vision of e-government diverges significantly from its portrayal in "Snow Crash". The novel's e-government is no longer a centralized authority but a "decentralized network of private entities running their own quasi-governments." These corporations determine who qualifies for "citizenship" and access to state services, essentially dictating taxes and policies within their territories. This extreme scenario reflects a world where digital systems are dominated by private corporations rather than democratically elected governments, underscoring the diminishing control of public sectors in the face of technological advancements.

Within "Snow Crash", the Metaverse emerges as both a cautionary tale and a blueprint for developers. It highlights the unavoidable connection between the Metaverse and technologies, such as virtual reality (VR) and virtual worlds (VWs), designed to immerse users in lifelike experiences (Lynna J. Ausburn et al., 2019). Virtual environments harness the capabilities of extended, augmented, and virtual reality technologies to provide alternative experiences and opportunities for self-expression (Dwivedi et al., 2022). Ideally, the Metaverse offers a safe space for individuals to explore identities and experiences unattainable in the real world, such as experimenting with gender identity or engaging in riskier scenarios (Martha Gabriel et al., 2009). This concept stands in stark contrast to the evolution of word-of-mouth networks through conventional social media platforms (Sajithra & Patil, 2013). "Snow Crash" compels its audience to confront the possibilities and dangers of a privatized digital future, reminding us of the ethical and societal considerations necessary to shape a more inclusive and equitable virtual world.

Identity, Privacy, and Social Divisions in the Virtual World

The virtual world depicted in “Snow Crash” serves as an alternative realm where users from across the globe can escape the dystopian realities of the physical world. However, this escape is akin to trading one peril for another — though encountering the “crocodile” of the Metaverse may be more appealing than facing the “tiger” of real-world dystopia. The Metaverse transcends geographic and physical boundaries, enabling individuals to express their true selves, a concept aligned with the idea of self-representation, which is dynamic and evolves continuously across time, societies, and environments (Brady et al., 2022). Individual differences play a crucial role here, as each person seeks to express their identity in unique ways, with identity itself shining differently depending on the context, setting, and surrounding individuals (Hu et al., 2015).

Digital self-representation, as explored in the novel, holds significant influence over user behavior in virtual environments, where individuals often reveal their innermost desires that they cannot express in the real world (Yee, 2007). Within the world of “Snow Crash,” the notion of universal access to e-government platforms appears theoretically plausible. Yet, this virtual utopia is fraught with ethical and social challenges. By offering users the chance to create identities rejected in real life, the Metaverse intensifies debates on privacy, authenticity, and social stratification. Not everyone achieves their aspirations, as resources determine one’s ability to craft a desired avatar. Governed by algorithms and driven by profit, corporations dictate rules and curate experiences to align with their vision. Users are monitored like performers in a circus, retained to harness data for commercial gain.

While the online realm may appear inclusive to individuals of all genders, conditions, or skill levels — including the elderly and those with disabilities — this inclusivity serves commercial interests, treating humans as commodities. Digital citizenship becomes a double-edged sword: promoting access while exacerbating inequalities. Those with resources purchase advanced avatars and access exclusive zones, while others are confined to limited experiences. Stephenson reveals how digital environments fail to reduce societal inequalities and instead amplify them. This reflects broader concerns about the digital divide, where disparities in access to technology and education worsen systemic inequalities.

The responsibilities governments should uphold — cybersecurity, privacy protection, and infrastructure — are relegated to private enterprises. Functions like law enforcement and public services are outsourced to corporations such as “MetaCops Unlimited.” As a result, access to essential services depends on financial capacity, deepening inequalities and expanding the digital divide. “Snow Crash” presents a cautionary exploration of a world where corporate interests reign, posing critical questions about the ethical and societal implications of such a future.

Governance in the Age of Digital Fragmentation

In “Snow Crash,” the virtual world embodies an “Almost Dystopia,” reflecting the looming challenges of a digital future fraught with sorrow, pain, and injustice. Neal Stephenson masterfully juxtaposes this vision with the dystopian realities of the physical world, where physical and psychological oppression reign — citizens are surveilled, thought-policed, and subjected to the manipulation of truth through tools like “newspeak” and rewritten histories. These methods cultivate systems of contradictory beliefs (doublethink) that often lead to resistance or revolution. By contrast, the dystopia of the digital world is less overtly oppressive yet equally insidious, as it normalizes extreme

control and enables individuals to harm and dominate one another under the guise of competition. This leads to a troubling acceptance of abnormality as the new normal.

The novel's protagonist, Hiro Protagonist, navigates this fragmented digital landscape, offering a lens through which readers glimpse the social spaces and information networks of "Snow Crash's" Metaverse. Emerging amidst an era of "Digital Fragmentation," the Metaverse pioneers' concepts such as augmented reality and e-governance platforms, ideas that resonate strongly with contemporary discussions on technology. Set in a decaying 21st-century Los Angeles, the story unfolds against a backdrop where the U.S. federal government has significantly diminished in power, and private corporations dominate vast territories, marking the decline of the nation-state. In this privatized governance model, corporations wield unprecedented authority, leveraging advanced digital platforms to enforce policies and control behaviors, effectively forming "franchise governments." Users must conform to corporate policies, with each organization free to strengthen its internal rules, govern its domains, and monetize every aspect of existence.

In this dystopian digital world, everything—including humans—is commodified. Citizens become akin to products on an assembly line, constantly tracked and monitored. Data about their preferences, activities, and behaviors is meticulously recorded, enabling corporations to tailor services, predict user behavior, and enforce strict codes of conduct. The choice of where to live or how to exist is dictated by platform owners, as digital inhabitants are profiled based on their records, purchase histories, and affiliations with corporate entities. This corporate dominance exemplifies a dystopia where technology prioritizes profit and efficiency over collective well-being.

A striking element of "Snow Crash" is its portrayal of a society where traditional governance disintegrates into a system of corporate franchises. The novel unabashedly declares the obsolescence of the nation-state, replacing it with competitive markets where companies enforce laws, manage infrastructure, and dictate public policy. Efficiency and profit, not public interest, become the driving forces of governance. Stephenson uses this framework to critique the true nature of power, which in this context, is no longer tied to democratic elections or representation but is instead wielded by private entities through electronic governance.

This concept of privatized governance highlights the dangers of a digital age where technological advancements outpace ethical frameworks and regulations. The franchise system in "Snow Crash" reflects contemporary concerns about the privatization of public services, where tech companies increasingly influence societal infrastructure. It raises critical questions: Who ensures accountability? How are digital citizens protected from exploitation in market-driven digital societies?

Within these digital platforms, the activities of users mimic real-world citizenship to some extent: interacting, transacting, and participating in virtual corporate or governmental meetings. However, access to these activities is stratified, contingent on a user's financial resources. Corporate entities dictate privileges, emphasizing that technology has become a tool of control rather than empowerment. The novel underscores that governance is not solely a matter of systems or structures—it is fundamentally about power. Through its lens, "Snow Crash" becomes a mirror reflecting the control exerted over physical spaces, warning of a future where digital spaces replicate and amplify real-world inequalities.

Technological Development and Ethical Oversight

In a world where technology forms the backbone of state power—replacing traditional reliance on military might or security apparatuses—“Snow Crash” by Neal Stephenson explores how those in power utilize technology as a tool for governance and control. Through innovations such as smart cards and vast personal data repositories, governments and platform owners can surveil and manage citizens with unprecedented efficiency. However, this often comes at the cost of transparency and accountability, as decisions are driven by algorithms and corporate executives rather than democratic processes. The novel portrays how states tether users to their platforms, treating humans as commodities and economic indicators of governmental wealth. As the physical world crumbles, people depend on digital platforms for refuge, escalating the demand for rights and protections in the digital realm. However, in “Snow Crash”, such protections are largely absent. Wealthier users afford high-quality avatars and connectivity, while poorer users are relegated to low-resolution experiences that compromise their digital and physical safety. Even state employees, such as those under Mr. Lee's Greater Hong Kong, are treated as disposable assets.

This depiction underscores how unchecked technological progress exacerbates existing social hierarchies. Digital rights—privacy, data protection, freedom of expression, and equitable access—are often overlooked in favor of corporate interests. Stephenson highlights how technological advancement frequently outpaces ethical frameworks. While governments should create policies to protect these rights while balancing security, “Snow Crash” reveals a dystopia where unchecked corporate power leads to privacy violations and ethical lapses. At the heart of the narrative is the Snow Crash virus — a technology capable of harming individuals in both virtual and physical worlds. It exploits the brain's language processing abilities, illustrating the dangers of monopolizing technological knowledge without oversight. Stephenson uses this as a warning: even small innovations in virtual space can profoundly impact mental and physical well-being. Without scrutiny and regulation, user safety is jeopardized.

The novel exposes the absence of accountability within its dystopian framework. Governments, though equipped to regulate platforms, prioritize profit over safety, neglecting maintenance and security to maximize returns. The Snow Crash virus serves as a dual threat — compromising both the Metaverse and cybersecurity. Its ability to manipulate communication and cognition underscores the risks of unregulated technological dominance. Despite its consequences, “Snow Crash” critiques a world where organizational interests overshadow collective well-being. This mirrors current debates among AI developers and cybersecurity experts on whether issues like data privacy should take precedence over advancement. Stephenson's work calls for ethical governance to balance progress with protecting citizens — particularly within the Metaverse. The novel foreshadows the growing need for robust digital policies to safeguard equity, inclusivity, and transparency in e-government systems. As the digital realm intersects with governance, “Snow Crash” serves as a cautionary tale and a call to action for leaders to align technological progress with ethical principles, fostering a future where innovation and humanity coexist harmoniously.

Lessons for the Digital Future

It has been over three decades since “Snow Crash” was first published, captivating readers with Neal Stephenson's extraordinary imagination. Written long before many of today's technological advancements, the novel envisioned a world where augmented reality, virtual reality, artificial intelligence, and data systems merge to create a digital citizenship vastly different from its traditional counterpart. The book teaches us that the future — a seamless integration of immersive

technologies allowing individuals to choose between real and virtual worlds — holds the potential to become either a utopia or a dystopia. The direction we take hinges on whether we prioritize commercial gains or ensure no one is left behind.

While “Snow Crash” illustrates the extreme social consequences of a version of e-government driven entirely by profit, it also raises profound questions about the nature of governance and the responsibilities of governments in a world dominated by technology. How should governments manage big data to ensure privacy is respected and data isn’t exploited? How can AI be used responsibly? And to what extent should tech companies be regulated so governments can maintain their role in promoting citizens’ well-being?

Today, governments are adopting digital platforms to streamline public services, including law enforcement. However, the proliferation of digital IDs, automated systems, and privatized data collection has sparked concerns about privacy, surveillance, and corporate influence. By digitizing paper-based, face-to-face processes, governments aim to enhance efficiency, reduce costs, and minimize human error. For instance, online systems for tax reporting or patient records ease administrative burdens and accelerate operations. This shift optimizes resource allocation, improves services, and reduces manual overhead. A well-implemented digital government can promote transparency and accountability, vital for sustaining public trust. Transparency allows citizens to access services and scrutinize spending and decision-making. Digital platforms can empower citizens to hold governments accountable and ensure ethical governance. However, digitalization also risks societal stratification, creating a “two-tiered society” where access to services depends on wealth and digital literacy.

The world in “Snow Crash” is not just imagination but a cautionary tale resonating with contemporary society. It urges us to consider the consequences of e-government systems that prioritize profit and control over transparency and equity. As tech companies gain influence over infrastructure, they risk turning governance into a tool for private gain. This shift poses ethical and social challenges, compelling reflection on the balance between progress and ethical oversight. Through its portrayal of privatized governance and commodified behavior, “Snow Crash” reminds us of the dangers of unchecked technological advancement. It pushes us to question how digital policies can foster equity, inclusivity, and transparency instead of inequality. As Stephenson’s narrative highlights, digitalization should empower citizens, not exploit them. Society must build digital systems that prioritize ethical governance and collective well-being over profit and control.

Conclusion

The novel “Snow Crash” remains relevant more than three decades after its publication, serving as both a critique and a blueprint for the technological developments reshaping governance and society. It explores the unsettling transfer of power from traditional governments to private entities and the replacement of religious institutions by technology. It highlights the erosion of human rights under irresponsible governance. Stephenson’s work warns that the worst-case scenario is likely if society ignores the implications of unchecked technological advancement. The novel underscores the need to balance technological efficiency and democratic principles, with systems accessible to all citizens. Digital platforms must ensure inclusivity, bridging divides and accommodating individuals with disabilities. Governments must address social inequities while citizens understand and exercise their rights and responsibilities. Digital spaces serve as bridges between democracy and innovation,

enabling civic engagement and democratized governance. The lasting influence of “Snow Crash” lies in its role as a cautionary tale and a guide for designing inclusive virtual systems. Its lessons advocate for ethical technological development and inclusive governance to ensure society’s advancements benefit all.

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