The future, according to Michio Kaku

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When Michio Kaku [1] speaks, people listen. The theoretical physicist boasts an impressive resume: B.S. from Harvard, Ph.D. from Berkeley, Professor of Physics at the City College of New York, co-creator of string field theory, best-selling author, radio host, and film and television star. The man is a rock star in this industry. And so it came to pass that on the third day of NI Week, Dr. Kaku regaled the masses with his earthly wisdom.

The Amazing Criswell once said, “We are all interested in the future, for that is where you and I are going to spend the rest of our lives” (incidentally, this was probably Criswell’s only accurate prediction). Dr. Kaku is smart enough to know this—the best way to enthrall a room full of geeks is to discuss the future.

Dr. Michio Kaku speaking at NI Week 2010. Credit to National Instruments.

Dr. Kaku's central thesis was that ten years from now, chips will cost a penny. This will enable their integration in everything from clothing to Barbie dolls. Medical practitioners will monitor us 24/7. We won't be able to hide anything. Potential abnormalities and diseases will be detected years before they occur.

The notion of "practicing medicine" will be radically redefined. Preventative medicine will be integrated into our daily lives. When you use the restroom, your toilet will analyze for cancer colonies years before a tumor appears. If you blow on your mirror, it will check for the early signs of lung cancer.

"Surgeons" won't physically touch their patients. Rather, they will manipulate a 3D model of the patient, and a robot will perform the physical actions. "Smart pills" will provide doctors with "Intel inside."

The earliest computers took up entire laboratories. Then we had the PC, the laptop, the netbook, and the smartphone. All the while, our computing devices have been getting smaller. As Dr. Kaku reminded us, our cell phones have more computing power than all of NASA when they put a man on the moon. In the future, the notion of a "computer" may cease to exist.

Our glasses will be Heads up Displays (HUD), with the sum of humanity's knowledge at our command. When we interact with people, our glasses will provide full biographies for each individual. They'll even convert foreign languages into subtitles. Sound familiar? This is the way the Terminator sees the world. Life imitates art.

In many ways, Dr. Kaku's vision resembles the dystopian future predicted by *1984*. There will be no secrets and little to no privacy. But we'll also live longer, healthier lives. Dr. Kaku ended on a hopeful note. While robots will invariably perform the repetitive tasks, they won't replace the jobs requiring creativity and pattern recognition (two tasks they struggle with). The jobs of the future will be artists, scientists, writers, and yes, engineers.

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