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Peter Thiel Convenes His League Of Extraordinary Wackaloons

In Silicon Valley crazy doesn't get you committed. It gets you noticed. It gets you funded. It gets you rich. Crazy is even a corporate rallying cry. As the late [Steve Jobs](#) said: here's to the crazy ones.

If that's a toast, then billionaire [Peter Thiel](#) is buying the drinks. And little plates of sushi. And tables piled with platters full of desserts. And an evening at [San Francisco](#)'s landmark Museum of Modern Art, which the PayPal founder and venture capitalist rented to throw a party for his favorite charities Wednesday.

One attendee joked that the museum was now home to the world's biggest gathering of would-be Bond villains. In some parallel universe the minor modernist masterpiece is their headquarters. In this one, the immortality researchers and people who worry about super-smart machines have just one night at the museum to pitch their plans to scores of Thiel's guests.

To do that, each built a Lego sculpture to illustrate their big idea. Not an easy thing to do when you're hollowing out a mountain and building a giant clock that will run for thousands of years inside it. Each group wants to remake the world, rather than save a few struggling wretches at the edge of it:

- The Long Now Foundation is building a giant clock in the Texas desert that will run for thousands of years;
- The SENS (Strategies for Engineered Negligible Senescence) Foundation is researching the biological mechanisms that cause aging and looking for ways to reverse it;
- The Seasteading Institute wants to help establish offshore colonies for medical tourism, offshore workers, and even autonomous micro-nations;
- Singularity University focuses on educating small groups of promising

young leaders on how to deal with the growth of exponential and disruptive new technologies;

- A separate group, the Singularity Institute, is preparing for a world where artificial intelligence surpasses that possessed by humans.

This sort of stuff is why feminist blogger Amanda Marcotte once described Thiel as a “complete wackaloon.” Thiel, however, is a billionaire. Marcotte is not. Wacking loons pays well, apparently. Aside from founding PayPal and funding Facebook, Thiel has stakes in data-sorting software company Palantir and commercial space venture SpaceX (see “[Life After Facebook](#)”).

If all of the above isn't radical enough, Thiel is funding two separate efforts that aren't looking for money. Kids participating in Thiel's '20 under 20' Thiel Fellowship milled around the crowd. In a jab to the kidneys of the higher education industry, every year Thiel pays about twenty students under twenty-years-old to stop out of school and pursue big ideas for two years. Thiel is also funding Breakout Labs, which will pay for research into radical ideas with potentially huge implications.

Thiel left the emcee duties Wednesday night to Jim O'Neill, the head of his Thiel Foundation. O'Neill called for attendees to stop requiring that new hires have college degrees and ask for specific skills, and to offer to write recommendation letters for 'talented scientists, engineers, and entrepreneurs' for O-1A visas. “We need more extraordinary people working to solve hard technology problems,” O'Neill said.

Thiel and O'Neill are both libertarians. Grab O'Neill after his remarks, and he'll admit he's feeling good about libertarian champion Ron Paul's prospects in the Republican presidential primaries. Thiel endorsed Paul during the last presidential race four years ago. Two years ago, he endorsed Paul's son, Rand, for the U.S. Senate. “The political system is overdue for rapid innovation,” O'Neill said. The same might be said of the fields targeted by the charities Thiel is funding.

They're only wackaloons until they change the world.

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