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Welcome back to the Unfinished newsletter, where we explore the intersection of tech, ethics, and social impact.

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What we're thinking about

This week, Nathan Schneider, a media studies professor at the University of Colorado Boulder who has [written on everything](#) from cryptoeconomics to the Lord's Prayer, published a story with *Noēma* magazine about [encoding human rights in the blockchain](#). It's a deeply informed piece that we highly recommend.

"No technology is beyond the reach of human politics," Schneider writes. "There are always ways for humans to intervene and ways that the tech constrains them. Designers cannot really choose one or the other, only decide on a balance. To be neutral on human rights is in fact a choice not to consider human rights. Neutrality is an implied refusal, a missed opportunity, a failure of imagination."

To learn more about his perspective, we gave Schneider a quick ring while he was in transit to this year's [Consensus](#) event in Austin, Texas. (Unfinished is there, too: [Follow Alison McCauley](#), our Chief of Advocacy, and [Harry Evans](#), CTO of Unfinished Labs, for updates.)

This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity.



Conversations around web3 are often very polarized, with cynics and boosters making a lot of noise on both sides of the issue. It drowns out some of the more substantial, nuanced discussions that fall somewhere in the middle. What do you think about how intense some of this dialogue has become, and how would you encourage people to approach it?

I've been around this stuff for a long time. I started as a reporter covering the early development of Ethereum in 2014. I've seen tendencies in this scene that I consider really worrying and really dangerous, as well as tendencies I find very helpful and very important. There have been times where I've been really excited about what's going on, or really depressed about what's going on. I've experienced those extremes.

It's not a question of *whether* this [tech] is happening. This stuff is happening, and I don't think you can put it away, so it becomes a question of *how* [we'll use the technology]. What is it that we're aiming towards? What is it that we're going to focus energy toward building? What kinds of regulations might be useful or necessary? The question of *how* is what's most important. It allows us to do more of the good and less of the bad. That's the real creative opportunity.

Who are you trying to reach when you write a piece like the *Noēma* article?

One is people who, like me, are interested in economic justice, social justice, a more democratic world, and a more humane world. This is an attempt to sketch out how this technology might contribute to those goals.

I'm also very interested in the audience of developers. It's important for people building these tools to cultivate a culture of human rights, of concern for human beings.

I've seen people change their orientation over the years, too. I'm editing a book of [Ethereum co-founder] [Vitalik Buterin's essays](#) that'll be coming out in September, and over the course of these essays, you see an evolution. At first he's very optimistic, hopeful, and focused on economic incentives as a solution to everything. By the end, there's much more of a sense of what can go wrong and more of an orientation toward centering human beings in design, rather than tokens.

At Unfinished, we're always interested in bringing people who care about social impact into these conversations about tech development and web3. How do you think about social impact in your work?

Technologists have really centered technology and finance to an unhealthy degree. They have not really focused on real human use-cases that could solve real problems in people's lives. There's a lot of talk — from the beginning, people [in the crypto space] have talked about banking the unbanked, cross-border transactions, and economic freedom for the global poor. But when you look at the projects that are out there, they're largely gambling houses for people with money to play with.

At the same time, I think people interested in working around justice need to find ways to learn and think together. I've seen in the last few months a number of groups — including around the Unfinished circle — doing that work, taking time with study circles, with experimental projects, to get to know the [technology] to see if there's anything in here for us.

My lab at the University of Colorado Boulder is doing a project called **Sacred Stacks**. It's a small cohort of low-tech communities that are focused on social justice exploring their relationship with new technologies. We're not starting the discussion with any particular technology or foregrounding the tech. We're really trying to foreground the community and ask them what their needs are, and what kind of tools will support their needs.

It's an approach of doing community-centered work with technology rather than foisting technology-centered solutions onto communities. We'll design healthier technologies if we start with the human beings involved.

Where do you find hope and optimism in the web3 space?

The hope lies in the fact that it is a space of creativity, with self-governance and self-experimentation. In the world outside — the world of governments and international institutions — we're really at a kind of log jam in so many respects. There are so many crises that we don't seem to have the wherewithal to address. There are so many accountability crises — powerful institutions that people don't trust and don't feel they can rely on.

One of the deep challenges is that we don't have spaces to reinvigorate the life of the democratic project. That's something that I see around crypto. You see new voting mechanisms that you don't see anywhere else. You really see people reinventing the wheel. You see a technology that is, at least in principle, co-owned by default, which is a real break from the way in which we've owned and managed technology so far.

For years, I've been trying to support startups doing shared ownership and governance through cooperative models. In our current system, they face real barriers. I'm interested in any way that we can open the door for real economic democracy. These [tech] tools won't guarantee that that happens, but they are an opportunity... There's a lot of really negative tendencies in the crypto world that are in danger of winning out, but I think it's necessary to try.

👉 If you enjoyed this conversation with Nathan, register to see him (and many others!) speak at [Unfinished Live this September](#).

Other notable reads

📖 If you missed it last week, [the New Yorker published a thoughtful feature](#) by Gideon Lewis-Kraus that explores how much we actually understand about social media and its impact on society.

📖 [The Atlantic has a new essay](#) by Jonathan Zittrain about the role community governance has to play in “fixing” Twitter and Facebook.

📖 And our partners at [New Public published the latest edition of their magazine](#), with 11 stories that explore the concept of trust in different ways: “As always, we look for the human concerns that lurk just behind the technological ones. Our goal is not simply to pose whether trust is necessary in digital infrastructure — it undoubtedly is — but to approach the topic from unexpected directions that inspire new thinking,” the editor Wilfred Chan writes.

Announcing the Explorer Awards



We're thrilled to announce the Explorer Awards in partnership with the Filecoin Foundation. On offer is a \$100,000 funding pool dispersing between \$1,000 and \$10,000 for projects that advance learning and development in decentralized technology.

[As the announcement says](#), “We’re living in an age where very few entities control the vast amount of information on the internet, and that information is vulnerable to single points of failure. Decentralized technology can enable a better future — where users have more control over their data. This joint initiative will support that trajectory — bringing more people from different

backgrounds into the space and providing resources for education and learning.”

Find out more — and apply — [here](#).

And just for fun...

AI-generated art is once again a hot topic with [the introduction of DALL·E 2](#), an application from OpenAI “that can create realistic images and art from a description in natural language,” per [the company’s website](#).

You can try a web application called “[DALL ·E mini](#),” a less powerful version of the technology that nonetheless gives a decent impression of what it’s all about. The results are invariably a bit weird, and kind of enchanting.

We’ll leave you with this summertime vibe created by the machine:

DALL·E mini

DALL·E mini is an AI model that generates images from any prompt you give!



Thank you for reading.

Follow Unfinished ([@byUnfinished](https://twitter.com/byUnfinished)) on Twitter for ongoing chitchat on the changing web.

Have a great, restful weekend.

The Unfinished team

Project Liberty, 888 Seventh Avenue, 16th Floor, New York, New York 10106

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