UPDATED SECOND EDITION!

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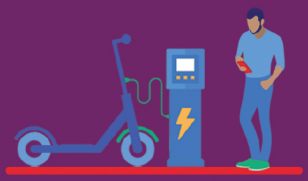

THE FUTURE NORMAL

HOW WE WILL LIVE, WORK, AND THRIVE IN THE NEXT DECADE

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ROHIT BHARGAVA

HENRY COUTINHO-MASON

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IDEAPRESS PUBLISHING

WASHINGTON, DC

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Paperback Edition

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Cover Design: Amanda Hudson, Faceout Studio
Interior Design: Jessica Angerstein

Icon Design: The icons in this book were created using generative AI tools and prompts written by the authors and human designers.

Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file with the Library of Congress.

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-64687-188-9
Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-64687-065-3

Special Sales
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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

To our respective parents,
thank you for believing in our futures.

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AUTHORS' NOTE:

WHAT'S NEW IN THE SECOND EDITION?

Three years ago, AI wrote a song for us. Today, it *could* write this entire book.

But it didn't. And the story of why not perfectly captures the journey we've all been on since the first edition of *The Future Normal* was published. In early 2023, most readers were likely to use AI for smaller tasks like polishing emails or fun diversions like reimagining song lyrics (see page 79). How much things have changed.

What would have been considered magical when we wrote the first edition of this book is now not only possible but unremarkable. AI, in other words, quickly went from our future to our normal.

Given its impact, we wanted to take the opportunity to use this new edition to assess the impact of AI on each of the ideas in the original book. These "AI Provocations," as we call them, offer insights into how AI will propel these trends in the coming years but, more importantly, give you a practical playbook on how to accelerate your engagement with these opportunities.

We know many readers will be curious to know exactly how we used AI in writing this edition. We used the latest AI tools to research

developments since the first edition and brainstorm ideas for the provocations. Being able to interrogate all our public writing, as well as our private notes from recent conversations with readers, clients, and the instigators themselves, didn't just save hundreds of hours; it also helped us surface new ideas.

Can we point to a specific provocation that was "AI-generated"? No—because alongside the AI inputs, we applied our dual perspectives, built over more than a decade of studying trends, to make these analyses deeper and more non-obvious. There are undoubtedly fragments of AI-generated copy in these pages. But every sentence has also been through multiple rounds of edits by human and AI editors. It would be *ab*normal to do anything different now.

We also took the additional step of generating new icons for each section based on the previous icon concepts. The result was a more bespoke and more interesting (we hope!) range of icons to bring each trend to life visually.

The future has always required new ways of thinking and an open-minded willingness to embrace new collaborations. In the future, we believe those collaborations will be a combination of humans and technology. In this latest edition, you will see that belief put into action. Now, it's over to you.

Rohit & Henry

INTRODUCTION

The Earth technically didn't *need* to be rescued from a hurtling asteroid … but we decided to save it anyway.

When NASA announced an ambitious test program in late 2022 with the Hollywood scriptworthy mission to destroy an innocently passing asteroid, it seemed like a wildly ambitious but probably sensible idea. After all, it's been 66 million years since the dinosaurs were wiped out by an asteroid, and the data suggests another strike is mathematically long overdue. Thankfully for humanity, NASA was successful, showing we *could* save the planet if an asteroid were headed our way.

This galactic intervention was the perfect example of how we often imagine the future: A bold vision. World-changing technology. Heroic science. Global impact (or more accurately, averted impact). This story *feels* like the future should, even as it takes place here and now. That's because early ripples of the future can always be seen in the present. What is happening on the edges of most industries or in society—the technological marvels, the ambitious innovations, the bold social agendas—hold the potential to become mainstream in the future, to change how we'll live and work and what we'll value.

As futurists, both of us have spent the better part of the last decade studying and deconstructing these early signals, Rohit, through his bestselling *Non-Obvious Trends* series, and Henry, in his pioneering work at the foresight platform TrendWatching. Although we often marveled at the world's most visionary technologies and well-intentioned

entrepreneurs, we also started to notice the inconvenient reality that many of them would fade away. We have engaged in rich dialogue with uncanny holograms, donned full bodysuits to "feel" virtual wind, and suffered the pitying stares of passersby while wearing Google Glasses in public. We have anxiously strapped ourselves in as passengers of prototype self-driving cars and watched artificial intelligence "write" a full-length article years before it was widely available. For every world-changing innovation we celebrated, another would fail to reach the mainstream or hit an unexpected impasse.

The truth is that the future is abandoned, defunded, ignored, or ridiculed just as often as it is realized. So the real challenge isn't predicting the *future* but rather predicting what will become *normal*.

What Is the "Future Normal"?

On many levels, humans are trained to elevate novelty over normality. It is hard to blame us. Nearly two decades ago, researchers linked the way our brain processes things we haven't seen before with an increase in dopamine levels and a higher tendency to explore and seek rewards for our effort.[1] Normal, on the other hand, is boring. Renowned futurist Jim Dator, a University of Hawaii professor who spent 40 years pioneering the field of futures studies, once wrote that "any useful idea about the future should appear to be ridiculous."[2] The quote is so widely regarded it has come to be known as Dator's Law, and it perfectly illustrates how the future and the normal are often cast as contradictory ideas. How can any idea sufficiently "futuristic" ever be simultaneously described as "normal"? In writing this book, part of our aim is to recast the normal from ordinary to important. From obvious to non-obvious.

During the pandemic, it became cliché to declare every shift in how we lived and worked as our shared "new normal." Making bread, Zoom happy hours, and greeting each other with elbow bumps were all part of this new normal. Today, most of those pronouncements have become

dated. We are breaking bread together rather than making it alone at home; people are socializing in bars and restaurants again; and we are back to shaking hands.

So how can one decipher which innovations and shifts will become our future normal? We are firm believers that people's basic, fundamental needs and wants—e.g., the need for identity, connection, self-improvement, status, and more—evolve at a far slower pace than the innovations that cater to these needs. If they evolve much at all. Understanding people's wants and needs helps us uncover why some advancements have become normal and why plenty of seemingly unstoppable ones have not persisted over time.

For example, supersonic air travel is 50 years old, but barely exists today. That is partially because of high fuel prices and sonic-boom noise concerns, but also because other solutions to the basic needs that the Concorde jet targeted became normal, without needing to fly at supersonic speed. Private jets became increasingly accessible while offering greater flexibility; business class travelers' productivity was boosted by lie-flat beds and in-flight Wi-Fi.

Similarly, baking bread during the pandemic was less about the bread and more about needing a sense of ritual and familiarity at a time of disconnection. Zoom happy hours and elbow-bump greetings were an attempt to satisfy our desire to connect safely. As we started to emerge from our homes and welcome one another with handshakes and hugs once more, those behaviors were quickly abandoned as the so-called new normal gave way to the normal that existed before.

In this book, you'll read about the ideas and instigators that are bringing about new ways to satisfy these fundamental needs and wants, changing not just complete industries in the process, but also sending waves out into the wider culture and society. You'll read about a startup that could exponentially reduce the environmental impact of the food industry by taking an old NASA technology to synthesize protein from carbon dioxide. You'll meet researchers who may supercharge

learning in the future thanks to their pioneering work creating muscle memory through a passive haptic learning glove that uses electrical pulses to teach people how to play the piano in minutes. You'll discover companies working to refreeze the Arctic, end generational loneliness, mass produce solar microgrids, create urban forests, and popularize the practice of sharing your job.

As we offer you glimpses of what our future normal might look like, we must also make an unusual confession: although we curate the future for a living, neither of us have typically labeled ourselves a *futurist*. In fact, it was the discovery of this quirk that inspired us to collaborate on this book.

The Reluctant Futurists

From our alternate vantage points based in Washington, DC, and London, we have spent years interviewing world-changing startup founders, speaking at conferences with themes like "Future 2050," and being called upon by world governments and future-building tech firms to offer a vision of the next decade that is adequately sexy and optimistically plausible.

Yet our collaboration on this book was far from inevitable. It would be better described as an accident of serendipity. Separated by an ocean, our first meeting happened by chance during the morning coffee break at a conference in New York. Upon seeing one another's name tag, we realized that we had each been reading the other's work for years but had never spoken … until that day.

While sipping our coffees, we quickly bonded over the discovery that the event's planners had taken the liberty of including the job title "futurist" on each of our name tags. This term is a professional mantle both of us have long worn reluctantly. Each of us felt our respective work always seemed better described as *near futurism*—a quest to catalog

and understand the implications of the biggest innovations on our lives *today* and over the next few years.

We both felt that we took a different approach than many futurists. Instead of asking what *could* change the future, we routinely found ourselves asking, "What already *has*?" and "Do we *want* this change to be a part of humanity's future?"

Indeed, neither of us spends much time looking at futurist scenarios at all. Our energy is focused on the present. As *now-ists* rather than futurists, we stay on top of business innovations because they so often spark insights into what our future normal will look like. Any new business innovation—whether an entirely new brand or startup, or a new product, service, or initiative from an existing brand—is a bet on the future. Taken in isolation, each of these bets is a signal that a group of people believe their view of the future will be successful. When similar wagers are being made by multiple businesses in a diverse range of markets and categories, we can extract insights about where our future normal is going.

Renowned writer Isaac Asimov once revealed that he never saw himself as a speed reader but rather as a "speed understander." This is a skill we have spent years honing and teaching. Anticipating a fast-moving future is hard, but it is not impossible.

How to Read This Book

This book is designed to be accessible for those of you feeling pressed for time or experiencing short attention spans.

To accomplish this, we have organized the book into three big thematic sections that each include 10 short, topical chapters. In the first section, we explore how we will connect, get healthy, and thrive, looking at innovations in health, learning, media, and entertainment that are poised to affect our daily lives. In the second part of the book, we turn our lens to how we will live, work, and consume. Moving from

the workplace to our home lives and what we buy, the chapters in this section will offer a new perspective on our consumption and careers, and how they will likely shift in the future normal.

Finally, in part three we will focus on longer-term innovations that are fundamentally shaping how humanity will survive beyond the next decade. Though we remain near-futurists, this section is our chance to not only focus on the now, but also offer our own vision for what these current innovations might mean for the future of cities, the environment, agriculture, and government.

At the start of each section, you will find a summary of the big themes and macro trends within it. Read the book from start to finish or head straight to the section or chapters that feel most relevant to you. At the end of the book in Appendix A, we've also provided a selection of curated "playlists" to help you zero in on the chapters that will have the greatest impact on your life and your career, no matter what industry you work in.

We remain forever mindful that you have the most important job of all: turning these insights into your own future normal. To help you lead the future, at the end of each short chapter, we pose a handful of questions and provocations that we hope will spark rich discussions with your team and the people around you.

While this book contains many insights into what's around the corner, it is also a celebration of those who are creating that future. We are both optimists, and our optimism drives the ideas in the pages that follow. Everywhere you look, there are brilliant pioneers working to create a healthier, fairer, and cleaner future for us all. We hope after reading this book, you'll be inspired by their stories to imagine as hopeful and prosperous of a future normal as we do.

FUTURE TREND OVERVIEW

MULTIVERSAL IDENTITY

GREEN PRESCRIPTIONS

UNNATURALLY BETTER

URBAN FORESTS

IMMERSIVE ENTERTAINMENT

METABOLIC MONITORING

CALCULATED CONSUMPTION

NU-AGRICULTURE

CERTIFIED MEDIA

AUGMENTED CREATIVITY

GUILT-FREE INDULGENCE

WASTE-FREE PRODUCTS

STEALTH LEARNING

REMOTE WORK FOR ALL

SECONDHAND STATUS

MILLIONS OF MICROGRIDS

ENDING LONELINESS

WORK DECONSTRUCTED

NEW COLLECTIVISM

MAKING WEATHER

VIRTUAL COMPANIONSHIP

REFLECTIVE CULTURES

GOOD GOVERNING

BEYOND NET ZERO

PSYCHEDELIC WELLNESS

BIG BRAND REDEMPTION

THE 15-MINUTE CITY

AMBIENT HEALTH

IMPACT HUBS

INHUMAN DELIVERY

TRENDS IN THIS SECTION

MULTIVERSAL IDENTITY

What if we could all be our real and most authentic selves both online and offline?

VIRTUAL COMPANIONSHIP

What if you could develop a meaningful relationship with an app or a robot?

IMMERSIVE ENTERTAINMENT

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AMBIENT HEALTH

What if buildings and homes protected—and even boosted—our health and well-being?

STEALTH LEARNING

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GREEN PRESCRIPTIONS

What if doctors prescribed nature like they prescribe drugs?

ENDING LONELINESS

What if closing the generation gap could cure loneliness at any age?

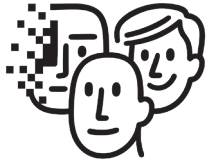
METABOLIC MONITORING

What if tracking your glucose level became as normal as counting your steps?

PART 1

HOW WE WILL CONNECT, GET HEALTHY, AND THRIVE

We believe a discussion about the future has to start by looking inward at how we spend our time, and so in this section we will meet a number of instigators who are changing the way we consume media, learn, communicate, and manage our health. From the way our identities are becoming "multiversal" to how we might end loneliness and better connect with one another, imagining a better future normal will require us to address some big social challenges. At the same time, to live healthier and more fulfilling lives, we will need to rethink many of our current assumptions around wellness and shift our habits and priorities to do the things that can help us live longer and better.



CHAPTER 1

MULTIVERSAL IDENTITY

What if we could all be our real and most authentic selves both online and offline?

One of the hottest streetwear brands of the past decade, Daily Paper, started with a merch drop of five branded T-shirts designed for early followers of the eponymous blog. The blog was started by three African friends—Abderrahmane Trabsini, Jefferson Osei, and Hussein Suleiman—who moved to Amsterdam as refugees during their childhood. Today, they have grown from those humble beginnings to develop a $30 million fashion brand that calls upon their shared African heritage and has a cult following. Their fan base sees the authenticity of the brand as the major reason for its beloved status.[1]

What we choose to wear is one of the most visible forms of self-expression, powering everything from our own confidence to the way we shape the first impressions that others have of us. Our identity, though, goes much deeper than clothing and accessories, or how we present ourselves from the outside. Identity is shaped by the communities we

are part of—everything from our race to our nationality—and how we seek to find the place where we belong.

The same holds true online. For the past decade, our notions of virtual identity have gone through a fascinating transformation. The early days of social media felt like a game with very strict guidelines. We would only share the most flattering images or post about the most fabulous times we were having. The unwritten rule seemed to be that social media was the place where we posted the best of ourselves and the events or things we wanted to remember (and be remembered for). Our online identity back then was crafted to present a highly curated and controlled version of ourselves. The method for engaging with those posts seemed to reinforce these guardrails—the only buttonized emotion you could respond with was to "like" something.

A backlash against the faux authenticity this ecosystem incentivized seems inevitable in hindsight. Life is not always great. Sometimes we lose a job or end a relationship or have our stuff stolen. The bigger the gap between social media reality and real life, the more we began to feel that our online identities were a lie—or at least not fully truthful. Over time, this created a simmering resentment of celebrities, influencers, and anyone else who tried too hard to curate an identity that seemed disingenuous. The dishonesty became easier and easier to spot in a sort of know-it-when-you-see-it way. The hashtag #blessed became ironic.

Today, we are increasingly repelled by people who try to fake their way into appearing "down-to-earth" online, which in turn reflects our increasing desire to surround ourselves with people who are unafraid to be their imperfect selves. For most of human history, being *afraid* to be oneself has been the norm. People have faced (and continue to face) discrimination due to the gender they identify with, the color of their skin, the language they speak, or the country they come from. Being oneself, in other words, has too often felt like a dangerous life choice for many people. But recent research suggests that the virtual world might allow many of those same people to feel safer being themselves.

When creative software company Adobe polled 1,000 Gen Zers in 2022 to explore how they felt about using social media to express themselves, "over half admitted that social media was the only place they felt they could be themselves, with three in five (58 percent) stating that having an online presence makes them feel more comfortable in their own skin."[2]

As time progresses, we will all increasingly find new ways to balance how we see ourselves with how we present ourselves through digital tools and media. One way we'll do that is by shaping our virtual avatar versions of ourselves to be strategically minimalist and, therefore, intentionally expressing only certain aspects of our personality. In part driven by a reluctance to share too much revealing personal information coupled with a desire to guard our privacy, these avatars will not capture all the nuances of our identity and personality. And yet the choices we'll make when creating these avatars could have life-altering effects. When we create a virtual version of ourselves that presents us to the world as a musician, for example, it may inspire us to lean further into this passion in the real world as well. A 2007 research study from the Stanford Virtual Human Interaction Lab famously called this the "Proteus Effect"—a term describing how "an individual's behavior conforms to their digital self-representation independent of how others perceive them."[3]

Eventually, these multiversal versions of our identities will feel true and authentic enough to reinforce the truest and most authentic versions of ourselves in our daily lives. In this future normal, being oneself could become more than just an ambition promoted by self-help books—it will be a reality both online and offline.

Instigator: Ready Player Me

Ready Player Me avatars for Rohit (@rohitbhargava) (L) and Henry (@hcoutinhomason) (R). (Source: Ready Player Me)

The hardest part of creating a virtual avatar on the leading avatar creation platform Ready Player Me—named after the hit 2011 science-fiction novel *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline—might be choosing the hair or the eyebrows. What won't hold you (or any user) back is a lack of technical ability. Thanks to platforms like this one, being tech-savvy is no longer a prerequisite for joining the virtual universe. Ready Player Me offers an addictive, easy introduction to building virtual avatars that are compatible with thousands of games and apps. Founder Timmu Tõke created it to allow people to make their own avatars and use them across the metaverse easily.

According to VentureBeat, "Users want the avatars to be representative of themselves or of the heroes they want to embody. Hence a default avatar system for the metaverse needs to not only work well in that chaos but win the hearts of game developers, designers and end-users alike."[4] Attracting more than $50 million of funding from investors and plenty of brand partnerships from Samsung, L'Oréal, Adidas, and hundreds of others, the platform is quickly becoming the one of choice for users new to virtual avatars.[5] Sophisticated users, too,

are finding that the integrations with other platforms offer tempting new opportunities to explore their digital identities. One example is Disney-backed Inworld AI, which promises to "bring virtual characters such as those that people create with Ready Player Me to life with AI" and allows users to add a personality to their avatar by setting a sliding scale of moods and personality traits such as anger, emotional fluidity, authority, and aggression.[6]

Platforms like these are pushing the boundary between how we portray our real selves, both in the real world and online, through a highly customized avatar.

> **An avatar gives you the opportunity to show your identity as much as you want. You can put it in there. It's still you in a way, but you can abstract it enough so it's safe. You still have this barrier, although it's fairly personal. It's personal enough to be relatable, but it's not creepy or too out there.**
>
> —Timmu Tõke, CEO, Ready Player Me[7]

While you might assume many people would create avatars vastly different from themselves, one study from the University of Alberta discovered that "most people who create avatars of themselves only make minor changes compared with their real selves."[8] Even though we may not be able to shoot lasers from our fingers or fly around the world in real life, the research suggests we are likely to retain much of our real selves inside the virtual avatars we choose. This desire to retain an essence of our real selves will be most apparent in our virtual avatars, but a similar need will also drive us to find other ways to exhibit our personalities when we are online *and* offline. As a result, through the journey to shape our identities both digitally and in real life, our true identity will become multiversal in nature.

IMAGINING THE FUTURE NORMAL

When we wrote *The Future Normal,* the early excitement about the metaverse was already deflating as attention shifted toward AI. Rather than focus on any specific emerging platforms or devices, we continued tracking how people were exploring digital identities.

- **What will *authentic* mean?**

  People will be able to show up in many forms—as certified "real" humans and hyperrealistic AI avatars with fantastical filters. Different communities and platforms will embrace different norms and behaviors, but intention will remain most important. Alternate identities will be deemed authentic if they have been created with permission from the people they emulate.

- **How will AI-powered digital twins shape the perception of identity?**

  There's a lot of attention on the newfound ability to give agency to AI-powered personal assistants. But these personas will present data, design, and legal challenges (as well as opportunities). Who will be responsible for the actions of someone's AI agent, and how will transgressions be disciplined?

- **Will "proof of personhood" bring blockchain into the mainstream?**

  Early verification platforms like World App have been deeply controversial due to allegedly deceptive practices,[9] but the importance of tools "to anonymously and securely verify that you are a real and unique human (not a bot)[10]" is growing as AI avatars become commonplace. Over time, this will become central to the debate over what autonomy and personhood actually mean.

CHAPTER 2

IMMERSIVE ENTERTAINMENT

What if you could be part of entertainment instead of watching it passively?

For more than 15 years, Taylor Swift has inserted secret messages, hints, and puzzles in her music and social media posts and videos, driving her tens of millions of fans on quests to figure out their meaning. These carefully designed trails of clues are often wildly creative. One time, her team painted a mural of a butterfly in Nashville that fans correctly decoded as the secret location of a surprise appearance. In another, she drove a minor fan frenzy by releasing new song titles through a retro game of bingo in a series of online videos. Swift's savvy tactics to engage with her fans even prompted one reporter to suggest the singer has "created her own mythology."[1] Her efforts have spanned real-life events, exclusive videos, and digital experiences, and spread across so many social media platforms that she has built her own metaverse of sorts … an entire digital multiplatform universe that engages her loyal community at every turn.

What Swift has spent years building for her fans can offer us a clue about what the future normal of entertainment will look like: more immersive. While live performances have always offered a sort of sensory immersion, technology has accelerated the possibilities for just how deeply we can become part of an experience. This is the promise of immersive entertainment. We don't just watch the show, we become part of it in ways that are enhanced by technology but remain visceral, physical, and memorable. After being trapped in lockdowns during the pandemic, the power of real-life experiences seems even more precious now. "As humans, we have some essential, unspoken need to see a performance, be part of the crowd, and experience everything that comes with it," explains reporter David Sax in his book *The Future Is Analog*.[2]

The desire to lose ourselves inside an experience also explains the recent popularity of art exhibitions that turn paintings into larger-than-life immersive experiences. In the past few years, no less than half a dozen production companies have created shows inspired by the work of artist Vincent van Gogh. One of the most popular, the *Van Gogh Exhibition: The Immersive Experience*, allows visitors to walk among animated and moving projections of the painter's major works; it opened to sold-out crowds in dozens of cities across eight countries and raked in nearly $300 million.[3] Similar experiences based on the work of other renowned creators, such as Austrian artist Gustav Klimt and Spanish Surrealist Salvador Dali, are also underway.

Theaters, too, are considering ways to be more immersive. This doesn't always require the use of cutting-edge technology either. In an extreme example of how personalized immersive entertainment can get, in 2020, the self-described experience maker Yannick Trapman-O'Brien created *Undersigned*, a show described as "a psychological thriller for an audience of one."[4] The lone audience member attending the experience participates in a performance tailored entirely to them based on questions they answered upon arrival.

Not content to simply allow audiences to passively sit and watch a performance, a number of companies are also working on technology to build a fullbody haptic suit, through which a wearer could actually *feel* the sensations across their body that relate to a particular experience. Early applications are being tested to make video gaming more immersive and even to offer a new dimension for live sports fans. Coupled with the ability to put helmet cameras on actual players, we can imagine a moment in the future where a connected fan could feel what athletes feel while watching a sports match unfold directly from their perspective. It would really be the closest thing to being on the field yourself.

In the future normal, describing these experiences as merely *entertainment* will feel inadequate. Instead, these moments of immersion will hold the power to shape reality around us and allow us to forget that the outside world even exists—at least for a short while. They will create entire worlds that audiences will temporarily inhabit to experience the range of emotions that great performances have always offered, but in a far deeper and more profound way. We will, in essence, be able to *live* inside the story.

Instigator: ABBA Voyage

In May 2022, the beloved Swedish band ABBA kicked off their most ambitious concert series yet. The four bandmates, who famously parted ways in 1982 and vowed never to tour again, did *not* reunite to play together on stage. At least, not in person. Instead, the concert series features digital avatars of the band members, which they quickly started calling their ABBAtars, backed by real-life musicians in an experience that *Rolling Stone* described as "uncannily, eerily realistic."[5]

ABBA Voyage digital "ABBAtars." (Source: www.abbavoyage.com)

ABBA Voyage is a whole new entertainment experience that merges the physical and digital worlds, integrating digitally recreated versions of the musicians modeled after their famous 1970s selves and then putting these ABBAtars on stage to sing some of their most famous songs in front of adoring fans.

Wanting to ensure the show would be more than an "old-fashioned circus trick,"[6] as band member Björn Ulvaeus recalled, the band turned to Industrial Light & Magic, the group responsible for the special effects in *Star Wars* and many other Hollywood productions. Surrounded by specialized 3D cameras, Agnetha Fältskog, Björn Ulvaeus, Benny Andersson, and Anni-Frid Lyngstad (whose first initials form the name of the band) spent five weeks in a Stockholm recording studio so their gestures, facial expressions, and performance movements could be captured and become the raw data for the creation of their ABBAtars. Aside from the obvious technical complexity, the show required such precise staging that the band also decided to custom-build their own 3,000-seat ABBA Arena in East London's Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park.[7]

ABBA Voyage was immediately a huge hit, selling more than 380,000 tickets before the show opened.[8] One of its most in-demand ticket options was the Dance Booth—a private room with its own dance floor

allowing 10 to 12 ticket holders to dance their hearts out to the music and performance of the ABBAtars.

> **To me, the only question that really mattered was not if it is good enough but how will the audience react when we're not really there, you know? Will they look at it as a painting? Would you applaud a painting? Would you applaud a movie? You don't do that. Would they be immersed in what we're trying to achieve here?**
>
> —Benny Andersson, Band Member, ABBA[9]

As we write this story, the ABBA Voyage show has been running for three years and has inspired the entertainment industry to invest in creating more immersive experiences. It is also accelerating the audience demand for more of these types of shows.

The Walt Disney Company has been delighting fans with immersive experiences at its theme parks for generations. In 2020, the company struck a deal with Secret Cinema—a live theater company renowned for their immersive live companion shows to films—to produce interactive experiences related to some of its titles. First up, a real-world version of the Marvel Universe for an experience that premiered in September 2022 and is built around the *Guardians of the Galaxy* franchise.[10] Like other Secret Cinema productions, the show allows audience members to participate in the storyline, even generating a character for themselves.

All of these examples suggest there is a growing appetite for partaking in experiences that ambitiously welcome audiences to engage with them in a deeper and more personal way. The future normal of entertainment experiences isn't going to be always sitting back and watching a big screen at home or in a theater passively. People will increasingly seek to balance out those more passive entertainment experiences with others where they can be participating, interacting, dancing, and immersing themselves into the moment in a real and tangible way.

IMAGINING THE FUTURE NORMAL

The multibillion-dollar Sphere in Las Vegas has turned the volume around immersive entertainment up to 11. While it shows where things are headed, it's certainly not the only show in town. Here are some ideas to consider when it comes to this exciting arena:

- **What if experiences involved all our senses?**
  Haptics (vibrations and tactile feedback) are already today's normal in video game controllers and 4D cinemas. Moving forward, AI will make it easier for experience designers to integrate smell, temperature, and even taste simulators to create experiences that give you literal goosebumps.

- **Which stories will we immerse ourselves in?**
  As many experiences get bigger and more complex to deliver, many will lean on familiar IP franchises (from ABBA to Star Wars to Squid Game) to bring in audiences. When AI is employed to bring much-loved characters and stories to life and enables people to immerse themselves in their favorite narratives, these stories become even more transformative.

- **What if the immersion offered "collective awe"?**
  Virtual experiences could soon match, or even surpass, their real-life alternatives. Over the past few years, experiences that make people feel part of something bigger have thrived while overhyped headset devices have struggled to gain widespread adoption.[11] The lesson? Technology might enable immersion, but human connection is what sustains it.

CHAPTER 3

CERTIFIED MEDIA

What if you could trust the authenticity of the media and content you consume?

It started with porn (of course it did). In November 2017, an anonymous Reddit user launched the /r/deepfake subReddit message board, publishing a series of AI-generated videos that mapped the faces of Gal Gadot and Scarlett Johansson onto porn stars, creating fake but near-believable videos.[1] The deepfake genie was out of the bottle.

Fast-forward six years, and deepfakes or synthetic media—media produced or manipulated by AI—have become mainstream. During the pandemic, streaming video platform Hulu launched an ad campaign called "The Deepfake" to promote its live sports programming. Since Hulu was not able to shoot traditional commercials with celebrity athletes, who were on lockdown, the company overlayed the athletes' faces onto unlikely body doubles doing pandemic activities like baking sourdough bread or learning to play the ukulele, before giving up and announcing that live sports were back.[2] The deepfake ads were a clever nod to the limitations of shooting ads during the pandemic. At least this time the people being faked were in on the joke. The majority of deepfake

examples over the past several years haven't been quite so innocent. As the technology gets better, for example, it is increasingly becoming the digitized weapon of choice for criminals and politicians alike. In the Philippines, a country whose citizens spend more time on social media per day than any other nation,[3] misinformation through faked media has played a significant role in determining the winner of the past several presidential elections.[4] Described by one Facebook executive as "patient zero" in the global disinformation epidemic, the country is increasingly used as a cautionary tale of the unchecked power of disinformation to sway public opinion.

In South Korea, a country with the world's fastest average internet speeds, a more novel use of deepfake technology emerged when the team supporting People Power Party candidate Yoon Suk-yeol used hours of recorded footage of the candidate (dubbed "AI Yoon") to create deepfaked content that "uses salty language and meme-ready quips in a bid to engage younger voters."[5] The bid worked: Yoon Suk-yeol won the election in March of 2022.

Out of concern for the potential of manipulated media to affect public opinion, in late 2019 California passed two laws focused on deepfakes. Law AB730 makes it illegal to distribute deepfakes of politicians within 60 days of an election, while AB602 allows subjects of deepfake pornography (still the most common use of the technology) to sue the creator.[6] Meanwhile, the Cyberspace Administration of China issued regulations requiring any content made with or manipulated by AI to be clearly labeled.[7] Other nations around the world are considering similar legislation to try and stem the tide of manipulated content.

But deepfakes are also the bellwether of a much bigger issue facing us in the digital era. How does fake or manipulated media erode the public's trust? More importantly, how do we *know* what is real? Legislation alone cannot solve the problem. The rise of social media and the fact that anyone, anywhere, can produce and distribute media is overwhelming people's ability to assess whether the information they encounter is

trustworthy. In 2022 the Edelman Trust Barometer, an annual report on the state of trust around the world produced by global communications firm Edelman, found three-quarters of global respondents worry that "fake news" (a term only popularized since the 2016 US presidential election) is being used as a weapon to undermine their society.[8] They are right to be concerned. In 2018, MIT researchers famously reported that misinformation spreads up to 100 times further and six times faster than truth, and political falsehoods spread three times faster than other misinformation.[9]

In the early days of the Russia-Ukraine war, for example, a video was released that appeared to show Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy urging his citizens to lay down their weapons and surrender to the Russian invaders.[10] Fortunately, its execution was amateurish enough that few were fooled, but it clearly signaled the potential risks of this technology.

The increasing ease with which manipulated content can be created and disseminated makes the task of certifying what is true (and what isn't) urgent for us all. On the surface this might seem like an impossible task, yet when liars can use technology to create convincing fabrications, perhaps technology itself can help to expose their deception. This is already happening and will accelerate as more services use the digital footprint of the media to identify fabrications and flag them in real time. As these tools become more commonplace, people will become more accustomed to seeking out these trusted third-party validations before putting their faith in a particular piece of content. Even when they do, they will increasingly maintain a (hopefully) healthy level of skepticism about the verified truth of any person who is sharing content that is not delivered in real time. The combination of these instant verification tools and the adoption of greater levels of media literacy among everyone will combine to make this concept of certified media truly part of our future normal.

Instigator: Truepic

Enter Truepic, a startup based in San Diego that aims to restore trust in photos and videos. Launched in 2015, the company offers a free camera app that embeds metadata like time and location on the image taken and then sends it to Truepic, which verifies it and uploads it to a server.[11] In late 2020, the startup announced it was partnering with Qualcomm to embed metadata about when and where an image or video was taken directly into the firmware of the chip, allowing users to take photos or make videos that are "verifiable."[12] This is significant because Qualcomm makes the chips that power almost all non-Apple phones—Samsung, Google, Xiaomi, Microsoft, LG, OnePlus, and Motorola—which means the technology will be available in billions of smartphones. In 2022, the company released Truepic Lens, which enables any app that features images to integrate Truepic's validated metadata directly into the app's camera function, ensuring an image's provenance.

> **We are working to find a solution [to disinformation] as quickly as we can—really for the sake of democracy as a whole.**
>
> —Jeffrey McGregor, CEO, Truepic[13]

It's not difficult to imagine potential use cases for Truepic's technology, and early adopters of the tool already have. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and citizen journalists are using Truepic's app to capture verifiable images in conflict zones. The *New York Times* has been experimenting with Truepic and other similar technology.[14] In addition, insurance companies have a vested interest in confirming the authenticity of images their customers send when filing claims. Other sectors would also benefit from technology that authenticates images, including peer-to-peer platforms such as e-commerce, dating, and real estate sites to name a few.

Truepic verified image examples. (Source: Truepic)

Given how content-rich our lives are, the advantages of being able to more readily trust media are enormous. Social media wasn't a factor a generation ago when Francis Fukuyama wrote *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity,* but his central argument still holds: a society riddled with distrust cannot be an economically—or a socially—prosperous place.[15] A world where the images, videos, and words that we share digitally can be verified as true in the moment we consume them, however, will enable our future normal society to be more trusting, truthful, and limit the power of those who seek to manipulate us for their own personal gains.

IMAGINING THE FUTURE NORMAL

One common thread in this book is that the future may feel radical at first, but can quickly feel, well, *normal*. Nowhere is that more evident than in the explosion of synthetic content. As you consider how to navigate this new reality, here are some considerations to ponder:

- **What if the real shift is cultural?**
  The spread of lighthearted deepfakes (like the viral image of the late Pope Francis in a puffer jacket)[16] heightened public awareness of AI capabilities, but also blunted fearmongering. Widespread exposure has meant many people no longer have any expectations of digital content being "real," which creates a trust gap affecting everyone's ability to believe anything we see or read.

- **Where will we seek out verified content?**
  While most people seem comfortable navigating through an ocean of synthetic content in their social feeds, there will be plenty of situations where authenticity matters—think dating sites, home rentals, insurance claims, and more. As always, context is everything.

- **Will trusted brands become the new arbiters of truth?**
  For all the recent skepticism and undermining of the mainstream media, established brands and platforms may become the de facto certification authorities. People will gravitate toward content ecosystems they trust, created or funded by brands they recognize, rather than solely relying on technical verification systems.

CHAPTER 4

STEALTH LEARNING

What if you could educate yourself using the very videos and games that are typically written off as a waste of time?

Every generation has its moral panic—and TikTok seems to have triggered the latest one. The app's powerful AI, which quickly zeroes in on users' likes and dislikes and serves them a seemingly infinite stream of short videos, has raised alarms among everyone, from policymakers concerned about national security to parents worried about rising social media addiction. These concerns are real, but TikTok today also offers far more than one-minute videos of dance challenges. Videos with the hashtag #LearnOnTikTok have been viewed more than 400 *billion* times (as of the time of this writing).[1] People can watch educational videos on everything—science experiments, historical facts, medicine, mental health, language, personal finance, and more. In China, where TikTok originated, the app has a youth mode that integrates educational content within the video feeds and limits usage to 40 minutes per day.[2]

During the pandemic, the platform even announced a $50 million Creative Learning Fund to reward creators posting educational con-

tent.[3] TikTok's entrance into microlearning shouldn't be surprising. For the past decade, how-to videos have been some of the most popular on YouTube. The phenomenon inspired Chris Anderson, curator of the famous TED Conference, to suggest that the richness of video is dramatically changing the creative and social landscape by democratizing and accelerating the learning process.[4] But social media videos are not the only way that learning is becoming seamlessly embedded into people's daily online lives. Video games are also providing an even more interactive, yet similarly stealthy, learning experience for millions of younger players.

Sometimes the learning doesn't even require conscious attention. A team of researchers at the Contextual Computing Group at Georgia Tech have released multiple experiments in "teaching manual skills without attention"[5] through the use of a soft robotics glove that sends electrical impulses to the fingers. Known as passive haptic learning, test subjects using these types of gloves have achieved superhuman results: learning how to read braille in a matter of hours and playing songs on the piano in less than 30 minutes. As this type of innovation sees more widespread adoption both inside educational institutions as well as in our daily lives, this technology-fueled aspect of stealth learning will allow more people to embrace lifelong learning and acquire new skills and knowledge in a way that fits more seamlessly into their lives.

Stealth learning can also be an equalizer of long-standing inequity, allowing more widespread distribution of educational content and reducing the barriers to knowledge by delivering content in unexpected ways through the content and experiences that are already being consumed by users.

As this educational content—often available in the same platforms that we count on for entertainment—becomes the future normal, people will not only acquire skills faster but will do so happily and expect to learn everything at greater speed and more pleasurably, both inside and outside the classroom.

Instigator: Roblox

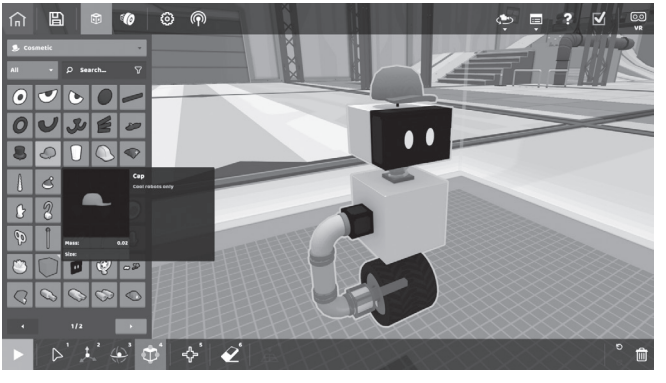
If you know a kid under age 16, chances are you've heard of Roblox. The platform, which allows users to play online multiplayer games developed by other users, was launched in 2006, but its popularity shot up during the lockdown as bored-at-home kids flocked to it. Besides the sheer number of games it publishes (as of early 2023, the platform had more than 40 million games[6]), Roblox enables players who create games to receive a cut of the income the game generates from in-game purchases, like add-ons and upgrades. This thriving virtual economy saw Roblox become one of the hottest mid-pandemic IPOs, listing in March 2021 with an eye-popping $42 billion valuation.[7]

By the third quarter of 2022, Roblox's audience ballooned to over 58 million daily active users, most of whom skew extremely young, with over half under 13 years old.[8] The *Economist* reports that three in four American children age 9 to 12 are on the platform, as are one in two British 10-year-olds.[9] The company has invested heavily in safety and security, as well as in the development of educational content and tools. As a result, although parents are concerned about how much time kids spend on the platform, they are generally comfortable letting them explore and play in it.

In late 2021, Roblox also invested more heavily in education by introducing the Roblox Community Fund, a $10 million fund that provides grants to developers creating educational experiences.[10] One of the initial grants supported the development of RoboCo, a virtual robotics game designed to engage players in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) learning while they build, program, and customize robots to complete challenges.[11] Through Roblox Education, users and educators have access to free software, development and collaboration tools, and curricula for kids to learn everything from computer science to entrepreneurship to coding.[12]

> **I've used the Roblox curriculum with my students well before distance learning was required and have seen firsthand how they benefit from combining learning and play on their favorite platform. While they learn game design and coding, they also acquire valuable social skills and create long-lasting friendships.**
>
> —Bianca Rivera, Librarian at Ruth C. Kinney Elementary, NY[13]

Despite its simple graphics and game dynamics, Roblox is often considered an early example of a proto-metaverse. While no one knows exactly what the metaverse(s) will develop into, its potential to transform education is frequently cited as a key use case. Meta even made immersive education the center of its summer 2022 campaign, promoting the metaverse.[14] It's not alone. Startups are increasingly creating new virtual learning environments. Labster, a Danish startup that creates virtual STEM lab simulations, allows students to access a variety of high-tech experiments—from studies of bacterial growth to the biodiversity of an exoplanet—from its platform.[15] Moving to game-like environments makes sense in this context. Science experiments are time-consuming, require expensive specialized equipment and materials, and are risky. Virtual simulations don't have to be any of those.



Roblox screengrab. (Source: www.roblox.com)

Virtual environments are also perfect for enabling the stealth part of learning—as often the learning comes as a side benefit of the immersion itself. Back in 2015, the USC Shoah Foundation created a memorable holographic learning experience by recording more than 1,500 hours of conversation with Pinchas Gutter, a survivor of six Nazi concentration camps.[16] The live interactive exhibit, called *Dimensions in Testimony*, toured around the world and offered anyone a chance to ask real-time questions that Gutter would "answer" holographically based on his recorded testimony. It was originally developed as a historical preservation of human experience from one of the darkest times in human history. What emerged was a way to educate the world about the suffering of Jewish people during the Holocaust with a witness account that went far beyond history books.

Today, such virtual experiences are offering a first-person look at everything from what daily life is like in a refugee camp to the emotional turmoil prisoners experience when placed in solitary confinement. This type of learning, sometimes couched as entertainment, is emotional, visceral, and only happens inside of this type of immersive experience.

In this sense, virtual learning is not only faster but, in some environments, it may also be *better*. While access to virtual reality (VR) hardware remains largely cost prohibitive today, as VR headsets become simultaneously more powerful and affordable, VR games will offer new levels of immersion and interactivity that will supercharge stealth learning, just as conventional video, gaming, and social media do today.

Far from the traditional classroom, platforms like Roblox are transforming education as kids can learn alongside friends to achieve goals that personally matter in a gamified platform they also use for entertainment. You are reading this book because you already understand the importance of lifelong learning. In the future normal, stealth learning can make it seamless and enjoyable, too, for all ages.

IMAGINING THE FUTURE NORMAL

The boundaries between education and entertainment continue to blur. AI-powered personalization can make all sorts of learning more bespoke for people of all ages, but beyond one-on-one instruction, let's also explore some more non-obvious implications:

- **How will we respond to being constantly coached?**
  Wearable devices with real-time metrics will make it possible for education to be ever-present. The optimistic case is continuous, just-in-time learning, but many people won't appreciate being *constantly* nudged in everything they do. The future of learning will need a more balanced approach.

- **How do we prevent attention exploitation?**
  The same mechanisms that make stealth learning effective—habit-forming design, reward loops, and personalization—can also be used to exploit attention. Effective implementation will need to distinguish between ethical engagement and addictive manipulation.

- **Could your fellow learners also become your teachers?**
  Whether in games or on social platforms, it is people and human connections that result in true engagement. The bottom line? Embracing and fostering community will be as important as AI in the race for personal and collective growth through learning.

CONCLUSION

THE FUTURE WILL BE NORMAL

Writing about the future can feel a bit like writing a step-by-step guide to falling down the stairs … an exercise in futility that will end badly. Most people will tell you—as many told us during the writing process—the future is inherently unpredictable. No one *knows* what is going to come next. After spending more than two decades collectively working in the field of futurism surrounded by incessant predictions about everything you can imagine (and things many of us cannot), we know this isn't entirely true.

The future, in some ways, is *always* predictable. If you know how to read the signs, anticipating the likely outcome can be akin to predicting what will happen in a formulaic romantic comedy. The heroes will go through angst and misunderstandings, but you know they eventually will end up together. The future normal can be a little bit like that. Not as easy to predict as Hollywood tropes, but not impossible either. As we wrote in the introduction, there are two reasons for this. First, signs of the "future" are always here, already in the present. And second, for most of us "normal" remains remarkably stable even as the world around us changes. Even futurist Jim Dator, whose suggestion that the future

must always "appear to be ridiculous" that we shared in the introduction went on to write that any future that "typically seems at first obscene, impossible, stupid, 'science-fiction,' [or] ridiculous … becomes familiar and eventually 'normal.'"[1]

In the course of writing this book, we had the opportunity to speak with many instigators who are shaping this coming normal in profound ways. Some of them understood the potential impact of their contributions. Many others, hyper-focused on their work, didn't spend much time pondering the future beyond their field of vision. This book is an intentional compendium of their stories. If the span of topics covered felt overwhelming as you read them, you will easily understand the awesome sense of responsibility we felt to properly convey the work of these innovators in an approachable and cohesive way. Early on, we chose to focus only on the topics we felt have the most potential to create a more hopeful and optimistic future.

We recognize that even being able to have that perspective is a sign of our privilege. And we remain mindful that a positive future is not a foregone conclusion. We know all too well that nearly every instigator or innovation presented in this book has many possible outcomes. And some might take a turn toward the dark side or create unintended consequences.

At the end of each chapter, we tried to confront this truth by posing discussion questions to spark debate. It may be easy to feel unaffected by some innovations if you don't work in the same industry they operate or aren't on the front lines of using them. But we believe every idea in this book will eventually impact each of us, no matter where we work or what generation, gender, or mindset we identify with. Respecting this shared human nature is often the real key to understanding the future normal.

There's no doubt we *are* surrounded by huge changes and keeping up with them can feel daunting. During the writing of this book, AI went from something we wrote about to a tool we use daily. No one is immune to the accelerating gales of technological and cultural reinvention.

But if you look back through history, you will see that many of our fundamental motivations barely change over centuries. The need to be secure. The desire to be loved and to appear successful to those around us. The quest to discover ourselves and develop as individuals. These are the deeply human needs and wants that are as present in the plays of Shakespeare as they are today in the 21st century.

The secret to seizing emerging opportunities has always been in bridging these two dimensions—embracing the new, while grounding it in what will not change. Amazon founder Jeff Bezos once observed: "I very frequently get the question: 'What's going to change in the next 10 years?' … I almost never get the question—'What's *not* going to change in the next 10 years?'—And I submit to you that that second question is actually the more important of the two."[2]

While we might collectively suffer from the human and societal costs of Bezos's relentless pursuit of lower prices and faster delivery, more than any other billionaire he has consistently managed to profitably connect the future to the normal. Bezos also perfectly encapsulates the choice we are all confronted with today. Will we build a future normal that is safer, healthier, less wasteful, and more fulfilling for humanity? Can we choose the optimistic paths spotlighted by the instigators featured in this book? Or will we succumb to greed, implement technologies without considering their moral implications, and place profits over people?

The future normal will not be a story about technology. It will be about the ingenuity of people and what we can accomplish when we work together. More than anything else, this book is about the future we choose to imagine. Now it's up to all of us to make it … normal.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It's impossible to thank everyone who has contributed to this book. Alongside hundreds of formal interviews over the course of three years researching and writing this book, there were also countless informal conversations where an offhand observation planted the seed of an idea that ended up in these final pages. It has been a huge privilege to have been able to ask so many smart people, "What does the future normal look like to you?"

In addition, as prolific writers and creators ourselves—we also relied on the intelligent and constant voices of our readers. These weekly dialogues often opened our eyes to other perspectives we hadn't considered.

Beyond our communities, we must start by thanking our editor, Genoveva, who has been unfailingly patient and perceptive. Her ability to read our earliest drafts and help us to sharpen our arguments and develop our stories is second to none.

In addition, we had a wonderful array of editors, sensitivity readers, and fact-checkers all working on various drafts of this book, and all of them helped to improve it in some way. The journey to write this book also offered us the chance to make consistent use of the technology of the moment … and across just the few years of our writing, it was fascinating how much this changed. While writing the first edition we were going live, hosting impromptu discussions with strangers on a popular conversation app called Clubhouse. For the second edition, we

leveraged tools such as ChatGPT's Deep Research and asked Anthropic's Claude to improve our arguments by asking it to generate critical reviews of our writing. After that experience, we can now confirm that getting a one-star review stings no less when generated by a computer.

The process of writing this book, in other words, was instructive in helping us define and reveal what the future normal might be because we have lived it every day.

Going back to our human support team, we also owe our thanks to Kameron, whose keen eye and attention to detail helped ensure the finished book came together on time.

To Marnie, Megan, Jessica, Rich, Athena, and the rest of the Ideapress team, thank you for being constant professionals and ensuring that the book looks and feels just as beautiful as we had hoped now that we can finally hold it in our hands.

Henry would also like to thank Brent, Greg, Amali, Carolyn, Sian, and Reinier. Thank you for your support and for introducing me to so many of the brilliant innovators featured in the book.

Rohit would like to thank his speaking team of Renee, Katie, and Lindsay, as well as all the event managers and fellow speakers from events around the world whose pioneering voices offered a regular reminder that the smartest insights aren't just original … they are also best told and remembered as stories.

Henry's biggest thanks must go to his wife, Anita:

> *I couldn't be prouder of the work that you have done during the pandemic as a doctor on the front line, and then last year when you gave birth to our beautiful daughter. To be able to do both of those things while still humoring and supporting me while I have been working on this book is truly incredible. I can't thank you enough for your patience and for everything that you do for our whole family. I know that our future will continue to be extraordinary.*

Similarly, Rohit would like to thank his wife, Chhavi:

> *Our journey over the past decade has been amazing—launching a virtual summit together, cofounding a publishing company (Ideapress!), and even authoring a book on diversity and our definitely underappreciated "Naan-Obvious" cookbook. Through it all, you've been a partner in every sense for me on this project and all others. Our future normal is so much better because we're on this ride together.*

And finally, both of us are indebted to the next generation of Bhargavas and Coutinho-Masons: Rohan, Jaiden, Jago, and Dahlia. We are eternally grateful for your relentless inspiration and curiosity. For you, the instigators in this book are not the future, they will just be normal. And we suspect you'll be right at home among them.

APPENDIX A

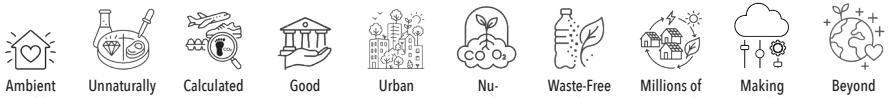
INDUSTRY PLAYLISTS

What trends matter most for my industry? That's the question we are routinely asked most often ... and usually one we are reluctant to answer. There is magic to be found in reading insights that seem on the surface to be unconnected to the work you do. Serendipity comes from these presumed "useless" ideas, as they are often the ones that spark the freshest insights.

Yet we understand the desire for curation, and the truth is there are some chapters that are easier to act on for those in specific industries. This section highlights our suggestions for which chapters to read first based on 14 major sectors. While you will undoubtedly find value in reading other chapters too, this is a good starting point and a way to make the book more immediately actionable. Good luck on your journey to imagining your own future normal!

INDUSTRY PLAYLISTS

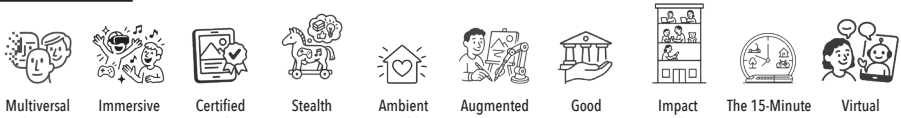
CLIMATE & ENVIRONMENT



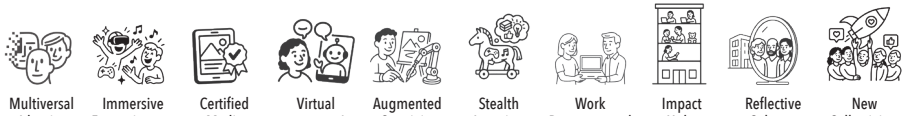
CONSULTING & CREATIVE SERVICES

CONSUMER, RETAIL & FASHION

EDUCATION



ENTERTAINMENT, MEDIA & ART



FINANCIAL SERVICES & INSURANCE

FOOD & BEVERAGE

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