

What if...?

speculative fiction and imagining business

Paul Caplan

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acknowledgments

...in which we thank a few people

Writing speculative fiction is a solitary business but speculating is not. Thinking a little into the future might start with the individual but soon becomes a topic of conversation and debate. This Book, the Cards and the Workshop - the whole Speculation Studio idea - came out of conversations that began with my 100 word stories.

I am lucky to have a number of friends and colleagues deeply enfolded in the world of business I want to help who offered advice, critique and enthusiasm at just the right moments: Sean Brierley whose challenges as a business leader and thoughts on the sort of people and thinking his business needed provided a touchstone for the big idea. Liam Brennan from MediaCom, Jo Lawrence from Havas and Rebecca Eaves from Advertising Week Europe have been a constant source of inspiration and also personal support.

Seema Aggarwal and Colin Lewis convinced me that it is possible to create a valuable and viable business and service based around a passion. Rich Britton and Simon Kirby from Rocket Studio took the meandering ideas and half-formed strategy and made it real. Rosie and Faris Yakob not only supported and changed my Masters course and the students but also me.

My students embraced the idea of speculation as a tool as they developed as creative-strategists. Their enthusiasm and even passion were what made teaching

great and made me make speculation more than just a Book.

And of course my family: The Wils, the Bug and the Bird are far more than tattoos on my wrist. They inspire, support and believe in me and this. They are why the future is so exciting.

introduction

...in which the story begins

I met William Gibson once. I was working at *Marketing Week*, editing a supplement designed to get Marketing Directors up-to-speed on this new thing called “the Web”. It was the height of the dotcom bubble. *The Cluetrain Manifesto* had just been published and we were still at the optimistic stage of seeing the Internet as a space for conversations and connection. The space had not yet become toxic, the language hate full and the networks ones of surveillance - just the sorts of dystopias Gibson’s work since *Neuromancer* in 1984 had explored. I persuaded my editor that a feature on the founder of ‘cyberpunk’ would get commercial-minded marketing people thinking differently about this new space.

I interviewed him at his hotel, not the sumptuous luxury of one of London’s grand old buildings but a small bed and breakfast in a back street of West London. There was no bellboy or concierge, just a reception desk with pictures of cats. I was shown into a lounge with distinctly un-futurist chintz furniture complete with antimacassars. When Gibson arrived, his phone rang. His PA was checking I’d arrived. I watched as the man who had come up with the word ‘cyberspace’ fumbled and looked uncertainly at his mobile as though it was something from another time.

He told me he wrote *Neuromancer* on a typewriter and waxed lyrical about his love of analogue watches. The imagination that as surely as Neal Stephenson’s creation of the ‘metaverse’ in *Snow Crash*, created our ways of

imagining the future and the present, whirred within a very real and present man rooted in the now but with an eye on what's around the corner.

Gibson has always been thinking a little bit ahead. Never into the far future. His stories are always within the bounds of possibility, some might say probability. He famously said: "the future is already here, it's just not very evenly distributed". I got the sense when I talked to him that he used his fictions as much to understand that future-present, that distribution, for himself as to entertain his readers.

That's what this Book, its attendant deck of Cards and The Speculation Studio Workshops are about: helping you understand your business' future-present by telling stories.

...about this book

In **Part One** I present the case for speculative fiction as a method for business strategy. Through a discussion of the wider area of business creativity and particularly improvisation and narrative, I argue that imagining the near future, creating images of that future in written story form can be an act of strategic thinking, research and business development.

In **Part Two** I explore why we need that speculative imagination at the moment. In a world coming out of (sic) a global crisis with economic, political and social dimensions we need a focus on imagining the futures and how they are distributed. Furthermore as businesses face forces of exponential power such as AI and accelerating change such as shifts in the labour market, let alone climate change, now is not the time for thinking normal. I also take a philosophical detour (don't worry, it's painless) to introduce the idea of non-human story characters or actor-objects.

In **Part Three** we get into the nitty gritty of writing speculative fiction. Rather than rehashing advice on narrative, story structures, mono myths etc (there are some resources at the end of this book), my focus is on how we approach writing, what we should expect and how we get started. As I will discuss throughout the Book, the power of speculation comes in the writing process not the written product. With that said, though, there's no reason the product can't read well too!

In **Part Four** I offer a framework that you can use to make sense of your speculation. Obviously each Speculator and business will have its own way of reflecting on the process of speculating and learning from it, but in this section I present a way of stepping away from judging the story you've written to focus on the process of speculation and what you learned from that.

...about the author

Who am I to urge you to tell stories? I may have interviewed William Gibson and published the story of our meeting but I was a journalist not a creative writer. I have since written a PhD and academic papers but never a best-selling speculative novel or book of poems. I write (almost daily) speculative fictions spinning off a news story at www.speculation.studio and that is the point. This book argues that it is the process not the product, the regular imagining not the images, the storytelling not the stories that are important.

During lockdown I began to speculate. Taking news stories from my industry, I wrote exactly 100-word stories. Some were utopian, some dystopian, some I liked, some I now don't. But with each one I discovered something new about my industry, technology and society. Some are republished here, some with added commentary. The full archive is at www.speculation.studio.

As a teacher, training the next generation of advertising and marketing professionals, I got my students stepping away from their textbooks, reading the news, thinking about the futures and speculating stories. I watched with amazement as they discovered new insights into the most pressing questions their industry faced. We worked with the wonderful Genius Steals - a global consultancy that helps brands and businesses with their most pressing challenges - and when Rosie and Faris Yakob read the stories and encountered the thinking that the students produced through them, they saw the potential of a generation of business professionals willing to speculate. I'm happy to report that many employers also saw that potential and gave my speculating students jobs.

...about the cards

Let's face it, at least for those of us raised in the Western education system, creativity and more importantly creative confidence is programmed out of us in schools. School children and even undergraduate and postgraduate students are 'encouraged' to follow the curriculum, be less pirate, to improvise less, speculate less. And what is more they are subtly and often overtly told they are not creative. "I'm not musical" has stopped many of us from enjoying the mind full power of improvisation. "I can't paint" has prevented many from expressing or exploring emotions or the world they see. And "I'm not a writer/poet/storyteller" has kept us from imagining.

I've said it already and I'll say it again throughout this book, the point is not the final product, it is the process, but that doesn't help when the devil on our shoulder whispers: "You're no William Gibson".

I'm no different. I have confidence in my ability as a journalist but when it comes to "creative writing", I have the same assertive devil on my shoulder. That's why I

gave myself the “exactly 100-word” rule for my stories. When the voice said: “You can’t write a novel. Where do you start?” I could just begin and write something, anything, just a 100-word picture. The 100-word rule was my security blanket.

This book comes with a set of Speculation Cards. Your starting point. Your security blanket. They provide some starting points, some characters that can act as prompts and frameworks to help you just get on and speculate. A little like Brian Eno’s famous *Oblique Strategies* cards that he used to unblock such creative greats as David Bowie, the Speculation Studio Cards prompt, provoke and switch off the devil and the equally powerful voice that says “play it safe”, just for a while.

The Cards are a simple set of standard playing cards (if you don’t want to speculate, you can always gamble). The four suits are three different sets of characters you’ll use in your story (which we’ll discuss in Part Two) plus 13 Reflection Cards (which we’ll discuss in Part Four).

Hearts: The Signs. These Cards highlight a specific technology or trend: a sign of the changing world. One Sign Card might give you details on a new technological development another might ask you to think about the latest Gen Z craze. The Signs are the first component of, or character in, your story.

Spades and Clubs: The Objects. These Cards provide the second thing to work with in your story. These Cards provide your story’s protagonist (hero or anti-hero). The Spades are the digital objects. These can be software or hardware things: maybe a social media recommendation algorithm or a wearable device. The Clubs are the living actors in your story: the human and cultural characters. Maybe a single mum or online gaming culture. Together these Cards give you a panoply of human and unhuman characters (what in Part Two we will call actor-objects). There are a couple of blank cards too. Here you can add

your own business or product or service or brand value or purpose or anything else that you want to story-tell with.

Diamonds: The Reflections. As we discuss in Part Four, the powers of speculation comes in thinking with the objects in your storytelling, the practice of imagining. These cards give you frameworks and prompts for thinking about what you have done, where you have been and what you have found.

If you want to use the Cards you take one Signs Card, one (or more) Object Cards and one Reflection Card. Then you speculate. You tell the story and as you see where the story takes you, you discover. A full run down of the process is in the Appendix.

...about the reader

Who are this Book, the Cards and the Workshops for and what will they get out of them? At one level it's for anyone who needs to do a bit of imagining, and I'd argue that's all of us. The more we can imagine the near future, as Jane McGonigal argues, the better our chance of steering it in a positive direction.

But as I argue in Part Two there is a real business need for imagination now and nowhere more than in the next generation of entrepreneurs and founders and those established business leaders facing the need for change. These are the men and women who will drive and shape not just their businesses but the wider society and culture. If they can imagine alternative futures, they can build them with the passion, imagination and purpose that they had when they came up with their business idea. The future may already be here, how it's distributed is up to us.

So what will those entrepreneurs and their teams get out of speculating and storytelling?

Firstly, the process of following the story where it leads can uncover new implications - good, bad or maybe both - that the business is a part of and can play a part in. Following the story into dystopias and utopias (and the provocative grey area in the middle) can challenge the Speculator to ask wider questions of and in the business.

But furthermore, as I discuss in Part One, the creative practice of imagining and storytelling will unblock wider creativity. A break from the demands of the business now and a wider play in the business of “What if..?”, can unlock new ways of thinking and revive the passion, enthusiasm and fun of the original business idea.

And finally, before we get started...

We’ve all been there. That away day with the earnest musician encouraging us to pick up the drum and jam. Improvisation as metaphor. Or the team-building day where management found themselves in a group with the intern making a model bridge out of cocktail sticks and marshmallows to cross an imaginary river. The episode of *The Office* that never aired.

Writing speculative fictions is not a creative workshop. It is not a team-building exercise. Nor is it a design thinking ideation workshop. You won’t come out with a new product or service.

What speculating does is to help you reconnect with the imagination that day-to-day business drums out of you. It refreshes. It reminds you of the imagination and creativity that got you started in the first place. And it pushes that imagination to consider new implications, new power relations and futures that you and your business are enfolded with. That may change your business. It may change your product line. It may lead to new launches or new directions. It will certainly lead to new thinking. It will change you.

Interlude

... in which we reflect on a speculation

HOW TO REDRESS AGENCIES¹ LONDON-CENTRICITY

Published on WARC. <https://www.warc.com/content/feed/how-to-redress-agencies-london-centricity/en-gb/5265>

His guide was waiting for him as he got out. He looked around as he checked the locks. She waited patiently. They always did this. Never sure they'd done it. Never convinced it was enough. She knew the sort. Not bad, just ignorant, out of his depth because he was so far out of his comfort zone. "Awright, lah!" she said, exaggerating her accent. Smiled. She always played that trick. He clutched his tablet even tighter, tried not to look around. He didn't want to be noticed but knew he would be. "Let's start over here," she said. "A pub".

I'm not working class but I am from the North. As Steve Harrison has argued, class is a structural part of the advertising industry, arguably undermining our creativity and reach¹. I can understand where Harrison's righteous anger comes from. But of course (as Harrison knows to be fair) the issues are complex - cultural, political, economic. To explore them, I took a trip. It didn't need to be far into the future. But it was certainly to another world.

¹Steve Harrison, *Can't Sell Won't Sell: Advertising, politics and culture wars. Why adland has stopped selling and started saving the world.* (Adworld Press, 2021).

When I lived in Liverpool, I worked with a photography gallery. We would arrange guides for visiting photojournalists. The guide, a local obviously, would meet the journalists and accompany them around the city, translating the culture (and occasionally the accent) as well as advising the visitors on etiquette and behaviour. I took one of those guides as my start. As the story unfolded as I wrote, some of the complexities of our diverse and complex cultures and increasingly fragmented society emerged. As I did so, the anger faded.

As I had my character humour the visitor I had to think through what was the logic for “redressing London-centricity”, what was being lost and missed? What did the visitor need to encounter? Where would he find real insights and the sort of thick data Tricia Wang talks about²? What would this snapshot offer?

It was only as I speculated and followed the characters that my thinking about class, insights, creativity, diversity and inclusion became as subtle and complex as the reality.

²Tricia Wang, *The Human Insights Missing from Big Data*. <https://youtu.be/pk35J2u8KqY>

Part One: the case for speculation

...in which we discover speculative fiction

Speculative Fiction is about imagining, in the case of The Speculation Studio in exactly 100-word stories. It is not 'science fiction' although, as we will see, it shares some themes and forms with the genre.

Speculation fiction's most famous current incarnation is in Charlie Brooker's *Black Mirror* TV stories, first on Channel 4 and now on Netflix. These stories look a little into the future as a way of exploring current questions around technology, culture, society and power. Sometimes dystopian, occasionally utopian and, when they are at their best, oscillating between the two, they provoke the viewer into seeing and thinking differently - opening new imagination spaces through stories.

But you don't need a film crew and Netflix budgets to create speculative fictions nor benefit from the power of imagining and writing them. As this Book and its resources show, you just need a pen, a pencil or a phone.

But what can speculative fiction offer business? Speculative fictions can entertain, even provoke the audience - and, as we shall see, crucially the author - to think differently, imagine and maybe question where society is going but how does that help a business?

The answer lies in imagination. Businesses start from imagination. Their founders have a moment of vision, an

idea. They imagine a new future with their product or service. Alongside imagining the IPO and the press conference when they sell to Google, they have a picture, a story that they hold onto through the early stages, the ups and downs of funding and launching. Through interminable meetings and crash courses in budgeting, the founders hold onto the vision, the story of their business that got them started. But as the business becomes established, the initial vision realised, the product or service launched, the funding secured: imagination takes a backseat. Inevitably, appropriately maybe, the team focuses on today. If they look to the future, it is in terms driven by business projections and priorities. Vision becomes utilitarian.

Speculative fiction offers you the chance to take a step to the side, to imagine again and to see what imagination does to the business vision. Does it reignite passion and purpose? Does it open up new possibilities? Does it ask difficult questions that prompt new thinking or even new products and services? Does it help you deal with a moment of crisis or stasis? Does it just help you rediscover why you chose this route?

This speculating is not 'taking a break' from the business. It is coming at the business from a new creative direction - arguably the direction that you started from with that initial idea on the back of a napkin.

The process and the tools in this Book, Cards and Workshops are vehicles for you to speculate, to imagine new stories around your business, to start the process of mapping that future that is already here.

The stories you tell may be entertaining or provocative for any reader you choose to share them with but, far more importantly, they are a process for you to discover or rediscover something.

This book sets out the case for speculative fiction as business strategy, a strategy I argue that is particularly relevant to start-up businesses and particularly relevant now because character is the new story...

It's all about stories at the moment. Every conference, trade press op-ed and self-publishing author says that "storytelling" is the new thing - with the better ones telling you that it's also very old. You need a brand story. You need to tell your customers stories.

But stories are not enough. We've all binge-watched great stories: masterful narratives that have not touched us or changed us. We've come away unmoved, feeling a little empty, maybe even guilty that we spent so long in the company of that story. The problem was not the story. The narrative arc might have been great, the plot compelling, the script witty: the problem was the characters, the things in the story. We didn't connect with any of them. We had no empathy towards them. And when I say "them." I don't just mean the human characters, I'm talking about all the things that go to make up that story. The landscape or the settings didn't touch us any more than the lead character. We didn't feel anything towards the things in the scenes, the actors - human and unhuman - that were telling the story.

The power of a great and impactful story comes from the characters: the scripted humans and the directed objects. In great fictions - speculative or otherwise - the power is in the panoply of actor-objects that together connect and together we can relate to.

Your business might have a story - purpose or not. It might have a founding myth or a way of talking to its customers but without a concern for the characters in that story, how they are brought in, connected, arranged and played with, the story will never touch.

Speculative fiction makes this particularly clear because, especially in its short-form format, it is character-driven. The reader is presented with human and unhuman characters immediately and the journey she takes with them is at the heart of the fiction. There is no room for anything other than connection.

The object-oriented speculative fiction that I introduce here accentuates that even more. It demands that we as Speculators story-tell with a panoply of human and unhuman actor-objects that all deserve and require respect. It requires that all of those objects need to touch us as Speculator as well as the reader. This means that the process of creative thinking that speculation empowers remains deeply rooted in the real.

...daydreaming

We don't daydream enough. It's another one of those childish things we put aside or are made to leave behind. It's seen as escaping from reality rather than looking at reality in a new way. It's wasting time we are told rather than investing time. It's process with no product. It's Ferris Bueller and Walter Mitty: likeable, diverting but hardly productive.

Science fiction is now a subject of serious study. No longer just the province of pulp fiction, it's big box office and worthy of academic treatises. As a mirror of society, politics and culture even the most far-fetched phantasias are talked about seriously, but rarely in terms of business. Fine for academics or trend watchers but just as I have no time to stare out of the window and wonder, I don't have the capacity for the future fantasy when I have a business to run.

Speculative fiction is part daydream, part science fiction and I argue, vital for a business focused on the here and now. The practice of speculative fiction is a discipline of

imagination, creativity, prototyping and critical thinking that business people need now more than ever.

Speculative fiction can create products - stories that people can read. They have their value. They can start conversations, prompt critical thinking about technologies, society and possible futures. Arguably Black Mirror has done a great public service in getting the viewing public to think about tech differently; to question and even challenge the bases on which we (or the tech giants) are building the future.

But in the Speculation Studio, we're not focused on the product because I believe that speculating through fiction is a power full process regardless of the quality of the story it produces. It is the journey the 'author' goes on as she writes her story that provides the value. As she follows her characters (human and unhuman) she exercises her imagination and creativity, but she also prototypes possible futures and thinks critically about those futures. Her story may change her reader but it inevitably has changed her.

That process is quite simple. It starts with a What If...? The Speculator then projects a little way into the future - maybe one to five years and explores by telling a story. She explores the plausible, the possible and probable as she creates her story. It is in that process that the value lies.

...imagining

As the Speculator works in her Studio, either literally a writing space or metaphorically a part of her imagination, and follows the story where it leads, she is of course being creative but it is important to widen out our understanding of that term. The devil on her shoulder is busy whispering. "You're not the creative sort". She may have a pile of self-help books on her desk full of

creative writing exercises and tips but she still worries about the metaphors, the character development, the plot, even the grammar. “You’re not a creative writer! That’s not a creative story!”

Maybe not. But she is being creative in a wider and more important sense. As she follows her characters through the What If..? world she has set in motion she is imagining new possibilities, discovering new things about the future but also about the now. She is creating a new way of seeing. She is refreshing her imagination and vision. She is creating a new her. Forget the story with its possibly cardboard hero, its plot holes and hackneyed dialogue. The creativity lies in imagining the scenario, the relationships, the speculative realities. The creativity comes in the process of imagining and seeing what that does to her way of approaching other, present realities.

...prototyping

What she is doing is prototyping with words. Again the emphasis here is on the verb not the noun, the ing not the thing. As the current vogue for design thinking sprints has emphasised, the power of prototyping comes in the process the team goes through, the learnings for the business come in no small part from the iterative design thinking.

Writing her What If..? fiction, our Speculator is iteratively prototyping, making unfinished but profoundly important mock-ups of the future. Some of them might become more fully formed or emerge as a product, service or business element but the real work has been done in the making, the speculating.

Every decision she makes about where to take her character next; every choice of scenario and encounter explores a new reality and uncovers a new set of issues. Just like mocking up a new app with a paper prototype,

playing with words, trying out different narratives tells her more and more. The app developer learns about user experience, software and how they interact. The Speculator learns about the human and unhuman components in the system she is making out of words. The developer may throw away the paper prototype if it has done its job in reorienting his thinking. The Speculator may throw away her story if it has done the job of opening up a new way of seeing and imagining the reality her business is in.

...critical thinking and starting conversations

Those discoveries about the business, its place in the world, the wider context or society and culture are often critical and challenging. That is because we don't often prototype and imagine. When we do, we see issues. Creativity and critical thinking are flip sides of the same coin.

Our fictions might start conversations with and in our readers but they will always start conversations within ourselves as we encounter the realities, relationships and connections we have set in motion. Our stories get us imagining and thinking and maybe even talking to ourselves as we discover new things. As we will discuss in Part Three, writing a speculative fiction is not sitting down with a ready made story, an idea from A-Z and then writing it. It is taking a character or characters for a walk. It is a discovery, a journey. We might have a rough idea of the direction or even the destination but we're not wedded to it. It's more a case of let's start and see where we go. That challenging freedom unlocks the creativity, enables the critical discoveries.

Critical doesn't have to mean negative. While many speculative fictions skirt around the edges of dystopia,

the thinking that emerges from writing them doesn't always have to be dark or attacking a technology or a trend. An optimistic exploration, a story celebrating a possible future can still stimulate critical thinking as the Speculator discovers what that future is, what the nature of that celebration is and why it feels optimistic. Such self reflection and deep consideration is the sort of critical thinking that we have so little time for and businesses so sorely need at the moment.

...futurists and speculators

You've seen them at conferences. Occasionally wild-haired, sometimes wild-eyed, they might not have the occasionally racist tendencies of the original Futurists but they are often as in thrall to the power of speed, technology and progress as their artistic forbears.

I once took my students to a trendy London agency that had just been bought by a legacy media company. The offices were a throwback to the dot com bubble: chillaxing areas, free vending machines and Narnia-like doors that led to special spaces for creativity. The agency made most of its money through sophisticated eye and emotion tracking technology but they had a resident Futurist who had his own apartment of the future in an area of the offices. He gleefully took the students on a tour showing off voice-activated this, augmented that and virtual the other. Every sentence seemed to be premised by "soon we will..." The Futurist's day job was to wow clients, to show how the agency was future-facing. Here the future was a foreign country where they may do things differently, but clients could be sure the Futurist would have a map.

The more reputable Futurists premise their predictions with disclaimers. They are more modest in the face of uncertainty and complexity. But what unites them is the

desire to know the future, to map it in order to predict and plan. Speculators are different.

Our aim is not to know but to explore, not to predict but to imagine. Where Futurists say that “one day we will be able to control X by voice...”, Speculators imagine “if we could control X by voice, what might happen..?”

The Futurist took my students around an apartment of wonders, pointing to the possible next step or opportunity. The Speculator would take them around an imaginary story asking them to imagine the implications and issues. And it is in that asking and exploring that the power of speculation and the value of the Speculator lies.

Interlude

... in which we reflect on a speculation

TO FIGHT VACCINE LIES, AUTHORITIES RECRUIT AN 'INFLUENCER ARMY'

Published on The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/01/technology/vaccine-lies-influencer-army.html>

We're so proud. She's worked so hard for this. We knew the moment we saw her first perform that she had what was needed, something special. Those first films of her, you can see there was something there. She had it. We knew there weren't the jobs we had. This was her opportunity. True, we weren't happy with the first few performances. She was wonderful but she was more than make-up. She could do something great for her country. Use her talent for good. Now she's not just an influencer, she's a purpose influencer. Us old lefties are so proud.

As a communications person, I spent a good part of the various lockdowns trying to figure out how to deal with vaccine skeptics. How were seemingly intelligent people - including some in my own family - becoming influenced by conspiracies, enmeshed in misinformation?

In the early 2000s my company had been commissioned by the UK Government to research something similar, the people refusing to give their children the MMR vaccine after Andrew Wakefield's notorious, discredited claims of a link with autism. I explored early social media sites and bulletin boards and like many others, reported that these people were often well-meaning,

loving parents. I advised the government to engage and influence rather than simply bombard with information. The issue is even more complex now with more content and channels available for conversation and more voices available to influence.

As I wrote this story, I found a new perspective on the “listening” I had advocated. As the story unfolded and I found the background of my character, the story forced me to rethink what that engagement meant now, in this crisis. Listening was not a simple 1:1 process. In modern spaces, even more than those early Bulletin boards, listening was multifaceted. As the influencer character took on a political and cultural life, the nature of influence as well as the meaning of the label “influencer” and its role took on new dimensions.

Part Two: Speculation today

...in which we find why now is a good time for speculation

I began writing my 100-word speculations during the first lockdown. As you no doubt remember, it was a time like no other. On the positive side, there were suddenly birds in empty skies, equally empty roads for those of us who cycled and moments of real community. There were many negatives too of course: real human tragedies, new forms of political incompetence and corruption and their concomitant effects on trust. What was also so apparent was a sense of massive change, existential change, exponential change. Everything seemed to be in flux, our relationships and families, our jobs, our sense of ourselves, our relationships to technology.

The world had been accelerating before. AI had proven itself with a unique move 37 to defeat a champion at the supposedly quintessentially human game of Go. Work patterns and the idea of a 'career' had been remade by "uberisation" and personal and sexual identities had become more fluid and complex. But lockdown brought those even more to the fore and not just because we became more dependent on Deliveroo drivers, Zoom calls and social media non-debates. Something about the

realisation about how precarious everything was, made that feeling of exponential change all the more powerful.

As we emerge into the next stage of the pandemic, that feeling continues and speculation offers us a way of engaging with it. We need speculation now more than ever.

But how to map this new moment so we can speculate? Technology is obviously at the heart of these changes. Whether it is in the casualisation of labour and new forms of capitalism; the fragmentation of identity, information and news; or the remaking of public and private spaces, technology in its widest sense is remaking the world we are living, working and building our businesses in. It is easy to fall into latter-day McLuhanesque technological determinism, where the medium is the message and we are either dictated to or at least are forced to adapt to waves of technological change. Speculation offers a different way.

By speculating with technology - taking those changes as a characters in the stories we imagine - we can reconfigure our relationship to those changes and maybe even affecting those changes. Speculation empowers us to be active. Creativity is not a defence mechanism it is a strategy.

The cascade of new technologies (hardware and software), launching, failing, morphing and pivoting - dancing across society and culture is not some background to our business (or speculative story) it is an active character, an actor.

...a philosophical detour

I'd been a journalist and, as the magazines I worked for discovered "The Internet", I'd helped them move online. This had become my full-time business, founding and running a consultancy that pushed them, charities and

then later UK Government departments to see the new spaces as ones of conversation not broadcast. That all came to a bit of halt when the consultancy money dried up after the 2008 crash. So I found myself, taking an academic scholarship and writing a PhD.

I chose to look at the changing world of photography and the framework or theory I used was Object Oriented Ontology (OOO), a development of Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory (ANT). This model is simple yet powerful. It asks us to look at any situation - a workplace, a technology, a culture, a political situation and see it as a series of actors or objects relating, what I'll call actor-objects. The interesting point is that OOO/ANT demands that we see everything as an actor: not just humans. Sure, people act in networks, they effect and change things but so does technology. A piece of software changes how billing is done or a book written or read. An algorithm is an actor-object as it shapes the news we see. A piece of hardware like an undersea cable or a server effects the operation of capitalism. Even a non-digital actor-object like a paper subpoena can change how the network fits together.

Object Oriented Speculation is playing with actor-objects, storytelling with a multitude of characters (hence the Cards).

An OOO/ANT view of the world takes everything seriously: humans and unhumans. And speculation empowers you to be active with that new understanding.

...the OOO/ANT view of our current world

Feel free to explore the philosophy if you like (some starting points at the back of this book) but my point in introducing OOO/ANT here is to find a way to

understand our current situation and show how speculative fiction is a powerful way of engaging with it. OOO/ANT starts from actor-objects which do things: collide and connect with each other. The uberisation of business can be seen as humans on electric bikes connecting with WfH executives; lawyers connecting with regulators. It can also be seen as unhuman actor-objects like apps and algorithms connecting with data flows and network profiles. Here the new form of surveillance capitalism that Shoshana Zuboff talks of is not some abstract or background structure but a complex, real network of connecting pieces. OOO writer and Buddhist Tim Morton uses the image of Indra's Net, each of the myriad of jewels refracting and reflecting, connecting and affecting each other. The pace of change we are seeing is the result of those myriad of actor-objects shifting and changing their connections as new actor-objects (human and unhuman) join the fray. The fragmentation, identity shifts and culture wars we see across social media are a complex interplay of humans of course but also unhuman actor-objects such as the algorithm programmed to provide the dopamine hit and the hardware of the always on, always there network devices aka the phone. These actor-objects are not fixed. They change as do the connections they make. A new algorithm connects new devices and new humans. New networks emerge, live and die. The world we see through OOO/ANT eyes is never stable, never predictable, never controllable. The only possible way to engage is to speculate. Let's take one network, one dimension of the new world and see what OOO/ANT sees as a way of clarifying the nature and range of actor-objects and how they connect. We need this framework and way of seeing if we are to allow our speculations the space they need to work their magic. Let's take a Sign Card: Voice. This emerging

technology, business model, cultural practice and trend is not some sort of context or background but a complex network of actor-objects operating at different scales.

...voice as an actor-object network

Voice is of course a technology (Siri, Alexa, Hey Google) but it is also a cultural practice, a business and as can be seen from the major players in the space, part of new forms of digital and data-driven capitalism. We can treat voice as a unified thing, a background, context or structure which our business has to deal with, react to, or we can see it as a network of actor-objects that we engage with and we can speculate with.

While OOO/ANT prefers to see all the actor-objects in play at the same ontological level - not in terms of hierarchies where humans are most important or structural relations of capitalism are the most basic for instance, it can be helpful to separate the different scales of actor-objects in play. We can therefore divide them up (like the Object Cards) into different classes of characters for our speculation: software objects, hardware objects, human objects, cultural objects and structural objects.

...software voice objects

Some classes of actor-objects are easy to spot or imagine. Hardware cables and humans: you can see them, pick them up and watch them at work. Software, less so. But software is power full. It does things and so in OOO/ANT terms it can be seen as an actor-object and is deserving of attention. And in terms of speculative fiction, it deserves its position as a character.

Some software is not only invisible but also secret. Google and TikTok's algorithms, the driving force behind

their businesses are closely guarded secrets. The natural language processing (NLP) software that powers Siri and Alexa, too is proprietary but some code is open and accessible but very powerful. One example in the actor-object network of Voice is the code that connects those NLP actors to hardware devices like the Echo and services like the Amazon website's e-commerce software. That code uses software standards or protocols called APIs (Application Programming Interfaces). Think of these as software hooks that Amazon provides for other software to connect to Alexa's code. Other businesses can have a bridge from their service to Alexa. When a user says something like "what is the weather forecast?", the Alexa NLP software converts speech into text that is then sent via an API bridge to another provider who sends the information back via the API. No, API software actor-object, no connection and no weather forecast. The API software actor-object is an active player in Amazon's business model, the cyclist's decision on clothing and the cultural practice of the barbecue. And the API software actor-object is potentially a character in our speculation.

More importantly for Amazon, when a user says: "Add batteries to my shopping basket", the converted speech is sent to Amazon's website via an API where that software adds Amazon Prime batteries to the user's basket, unless of course another battery manufacturer has paid to be the preferred supplier in the software. The software actor-objects connect in particular ways to deliver particular results... and particular batteries.

...hardware voice objects

Sticking with Alexa, the Voice actor network obviously has hardware devices, Echo and Kindle devices plus an increasing number of other gadgets with Alexa built in - which have variously included jewellery, spectacles, a

clock and a microwave oven. And of course via software APIs, car, headphone, smartwatch, TV and even toy manufacturers have made hardware devices that connect into the network.

But let's look a little closer at a material, hardware actor-object vital to the Voice network. There are hardware silicon chips inside the Echo smart speaker. Each chip is like a nested set of actor-objects including plastics and conflict minerals each of which is an actor-object connecting with other objects like e-waste, the communities that host the mines and the child sorting through the piles of the West's discarded gadgets.

But let's focus on the famous blue light that signifies to our human actor that Alexa is listening. That light is powered by LEDs in the Echo device. LEDs include metals such as arsenic, gallium, indium, and the rare-earth elements (REEs) cerium, europium, gadolinium, lanthanum, terbium, and yttrium. Most of the world's supply of these materials is produced as byproducts from the production of aluminium, copper, lead, and zinc; the mining of which has devastating environmental implications. Those material components or actor-objects connect to create an LED which in turn connects the human user to the Voice device and cultural practice of Voice, as we will see.

Hardware actor-objects, like their software counterparts are not neutral. They are deeply power full.

...human Voice objects

When it comes to the humans in play in the Voice actor network, we could pick Jeff Bezos of course. He's certainly a powerful actor-object but when it comes to the power of speculative fiction, sometimes it's more productive to look at other human characters. How about Huafeng Jin?

At the time of writing, Huafeng Jin is an Engineering Manager at Facebook (he hasn't updated his employer's name on LinkedIn). You can cyberstalk him but there's not much to find. He's not posting think pieces to LinkedIn or seemingly appearing at conferences or on rolling news channels to pontificate about the "Voice Economy". He's an engineer but a very important actor-object or character in the Voice story.

In 2017 he was working as a Software Development Engineer and in 2018 his name appears on US Patent 10,096 alongside Shuo Wang. That patent, Voice-based determination of physical and emotional characteristics of users, is assigned to Amazon Technologies Inc. Jin was part of the actor-object network that looked to make Alexa emotionally aware so that Amazon could more successfully target and sell or as the lawyer human actor-objects writing Patent 10,096 put it: "determining a physical or emotional characteristic of a user using a voice input may be desired."

The human actor-object Jin connected with software and hardware actor-objects as he did his research; connected with other human actor-objects as the patent was readied and as we will see he connected with cultural and structural actor-objects as Echos answered user queries around the world.

Of course Huafeng Jin was not the only human actor-object in play here. He might not even have been the most important, but he was and is a character in the story, connecting with the hardware and software actor-objects that were his job; the humans with "emotional characteristics" who watched the LED lights spin blue; the emerging culture of Voice and the structures of what Scott Galloway has called Big Four capitalism.

...cultural Voice objects

As we move up (sic) a scale to that of culture it is tempting to think of the actor-objects as “background” or “context”. Just as OOO/ANT asks us to address the overlooked characters/actors such as a software protocol; a conflict mineral or a jobbing engineer, so it demands that we see the emerging cultural practices around voice as just part of the mix, just another character on the stage, doing things connecting with things.

Technologies, and that includes hardware Echo and software Alexa are never just technology. They are always and inevitably interwoven with humans and politics and economics and power... and culture. Mobile phone technologies have changed the way we take photographs and run our relationships. Zoom changed how we worked and how we laid out and lived in our homes during the pandemic

Voice technologies are reconfiguring old cultural practices and setting in motion new ones.

Voice technologies live in homes and in families. As Jin’s patented technologies are integrated into Alexa objects which in turn are integrated into our homes, cars and public spaces - our emotions are digitised our ways of life and our cultures change. More and more is digitised and managed via proprietary technologies. Arguably more and more is the raw material of what Zuboff calls “surveillance capitalism”. For some, as tabloid scare stories report devices listening and reporting our most intimate conversations, that realisation sets in motion new cultures of secrecy and even paranoia, notably around Voice,

According to industry website voicebot.ai, Brits are less concerned about the privacy implications of voice than Americans. The British voice culture. - if there is such a simple, single thing - is more phlegmatic.

That culture is an object, an actor on the stage. As a character (in our world and potentially in our speculations) it interacts with the hardware, the software and the humans around the dinner table or in the bedroom. It connects or collides with the teenage activist actor-object who demands the Echo is switched off; it connects with the software apps coded to increase engagement in voice-first games.

OOO/ANT pays attention to the specifics of that cultural actor-object as closely as it does the invisible, immaterial software actor-object. Both are in play. Both are important. Both are power full.

...structural voice objects

Our final scale of actor-objects is the structures of society. If you're a Marxist, or a Freudian or a post-colonialist, this scale is home. This is the One. This is the powerful actor-object. This is the one that determines all the others. The structures of capitalism, patriarchy and/or colonialism are the base - the rest is superstructure.

These perspectives offer security blankets for speculation. You can always paint the background in. And when you have, all the other characters have their scripts written. Conflict minerals and protocols are raw materials, software engineers are labour and cultural practices are ideological constructs designed to preserve the structural power relations. The story writes itself.

There is not space to describe or analyse these structural actor-objects. There are some good starting points/ accounts at the end of the book. But these actor-objects are in play. They are important. They are powerful. These historical structures which have developed society and marginalised and oppressed people and determined their life chances across history are woven into Voice and any other network that we might speculate about. But they

are neither simply background nor all-powerful and determining. The other actor-objects engage with, struggle with and against those structures. Sometimes they win, sometimes they lose but nothing is set and simple and fixed.

And that is why OOO/ANT is so important when it comes to speculation, because it demands we take account of structures but also of those struggles and connections. The other actor-objects in the network, the other characters in our story do things. We can speculate with them too. When we pay attention to the panoply of actor-objects we see new relations and realities emerge. We open up our speculation to see how things are and can be. We see new openings and unexplored corners of our complex world.

If we just see Voice as another trick by capitalism to exploit data as the new oil; or patriarchy as a way of embedding gendered servitude into the home or colonialism as a tool of racial profiling, then we can't speculate about the changing ideas around privacy, the potential for cultural and technological hacking.

...the scales and power

Each of the various scales of actor-objects is powerful. But of course some are more powerful than others at particular moments. And every story we tell is set in a particular moment.

The key thing to remember though is that the power of a particular actor-object is not fixed for all time. At one moment Bezos may be the most powerful, at another a supply chain crisis means the conflict mineral is the most powerful. At one moment surveillance capitalism is in full roar, the next moment when the paranoid parent switches the Echo off...things change. Relations shift.

Speculation is about moments. It tells a story of particular moments. It connects and collides its characters at particular moments in particular power relations.

The power of OOO/ANT for speculation is that it encourages us to think, rethink and re-rethink those power relations - the very same power relations in which we and our business are enfolded. Object-oriented speculation opens up the full panoply of actor-objects that our business, our stakeholders and our customers are enfolded. The future configuration we speculate illuminates the present day arrangement of objects within which we are working.

...speculation and today

Just in one corner of our current world, Voice, we've seen the complex Indra's Net of refracting-actor-objects in play in the network, all potential characters in our speculations.

Today's world demands we refuse simple diagnoses or even solutions. It requires we reject false prophets and ideologues claiming they have The Answer or The Truth.

If we're hoping to build our business in, or even change the world, object-oriented speculation opens up possible moments, relations and objects for intervention. If we're looking to be more creative, object-oriented speculation empowers us to see differently, to imagine and to think the future.

Interlude

... in which we reflect on a speculation

CONCERTS

TO INTRODUCE THEIR USERS TO. THE
METAVERSE

Published on Digiday. <https://digiday.com/marketing/why-companies-are-using-virtual-concerts-to-introduce-their-users-to-the-metaverse>

The company picnic was always a highlight... that's what the newsletter said. Part team-building exercise; part CSR, part Instagrammable moments set-up, this year's event would be special, we are told. After the years of Zoom events, it would be great to "get the families back together again." Partners and of course children would be able to join the fun the team had planned. "We're one big family and your family is part of our family. From toddlers to teens, this year's picnic has something for everyone." All I have to do is let HR know how many headsets we need.

The end of lockdown (if not the end of the pandemic) coincided with renewed hype around virtual spaces - this time the 'metaverse'. As we moved back into office workspaces, minds immeasurably superior to ours (sic) regarded this Earth with envious eyes, and slowly and surely, they drew their plans against us. Companies were renamed and PowerPoint decks redrawn. Another bubble was blown.

Zuckerberg's first imaginings were of new work meetings, new virtual offices, new avatar-colleagues. I took one of those characters for a walk but rather than

strolling around the office and work meetings I wandered into another workspace, the family away day.

Getting out of the office, away from work to speculate on the office and work, gave me the opportunity to explore not only those extra-work relations and realities but also what the metaverse means for our sense of ourselves as a worker, a team-member, a company person.

As I collided my worker actor-object with the Meta technological actor-objects, I realised that other scales of actor-objects were shifting and morphing. Family and work culture actor-objects took on new forms. New power relations became apparent.

Part three ...the practice of speculating

...in which we get down to it

Ok, we have to start sometime. The devil on the shoulder has been drumming his claws for too long. Let's do battle. Let's speculate. Let's write.

I'm not going to minimise the challenge here. I'm just like you. The blank page/screen dazzles me too. As I've said throughout this book, the point is the process not the product but that just feels like rhetoric, we all want to produce a good story. And that is scary.

There are lots of books and courses that will teach you how to write or create a story - some even focus on science fiction and fantasy. The point of this chapter is not to rehash that advice or even add new tips on writing a great speculative story. The point is to move from a stress on the noun to the verb.

Speculation is about imagining and the learning and the value come from that process, the doing, the practice. My discussion of writing speculative fiction will therefore focus on the activity rather than the outcome.

The key is to START: Signs and objects; Taking a character for a walk; remaining Agnostic; Relating to your characters and the Turn.

S is for Signs and objects

If you've attended a Speculation Studio Workshop, you already have some signs and objects in the form of the deck of Cards.

If you haven't got a deck of Cards - and even if you have - your first task is getting your Signs and Objects together. These are the actor-objects in your speculation, the things you will connect together, or collide in your speculation, the energy from which will give you the learning you're looking for.

Signs are the things that are going on in the world. They might be trends or geo-political movements. They might be new scientific breakthroughs or discoveries or simply new crazes. As we discussed in Part Two, these cultural and structural Signs can be seen as actor-objects. They exist in they world and connect with other actor-objects. Our job with speculative fiction is to set up and play with those connections.

The deck of Cards contains some Signs to get you started but it also includes blank Cards. You can write your own Sign - maybe a new market your company is exploring, a new trend or purpose it hopes to capitalise on. You can also add any new Signs that have emerged since you got your deck of Cards.

You can use RSS apps like Inoreader or of course Twitter to monitor the news, subscribe to searches that monitor emerging trends and watch as Signs come into view, maybe fade and die or maybe morph into something else.

Keep a notebook or sketchbook - analogue is surprisingly good for this - to collect Signs. Doodle them. Note them down at a conference or as you wait for the Zoom meeting to start. Don't try and analyse them too much at this stage. You're just collecting.

You'll be speculating with all scales of actor-objects and that's where the Objects come in. It's hard to write a story about patriarchy or celebrity culture, it's easier to write about a single mum or a fading rockstar. Your Object Cards include humans but also include other unhuman characters - the others scales of objects we looked at in our discussion of Voice: hardware and software characters. These unhuman characters are not just technological. A love letter on scented paper; a wooden walking stick; a D minor chord are all actor-objects in play in the world and can all be characters in your speculation.

Again, don't feel confined by the Objects in the deck of Cards. You can bring any character you like into your speculation: the caretaker at your office building; your photocopier; your product's packaging... whatever.

You can add as many Signs and Objects to your stage as you like but I find that the fewer the better, particularly if you are dealing with short-form speculation. You can pick Cards at random, often a good starting point, or select ones that call to you. Try one Sign and one or two Objects, you can always add more later if you like. As we will see, going for a walk with just a few characters is less crowded and often more productive.

T is for Taking a character for a walk

You have your initial actor-objects on your stage ready to start telling your/their story. You can start with the ending and tell your story towards that but the power of speculation comes in imagining and playing, seeing where colliding objects gets you, what it tells you. So you can start by just taking your characters for a walk and see what story unfolds.

This approach is not only more valuable in enabling the creative power of speculation to open up new discoveries and connections and issues, but also helps to silence the devil on the shoulder. They hate it when you just get going. They much prefer being able to say: “you can’t write a story, you don’t even have a plot.”

You are a flâneur, wandering the streets of your imagination. Speculation, like flânerie is not aimless, it is a practice of discovery. As you head down a new pathway and see new objects or actor-objects connect, you find (out) new things.

So just start. Take your Object (your human or unhuman character) and put them somewhere or have another Object interact or connect. Have your human Object pick up a coffee cup; have the AI actor-object talk to the pencil; have the door open; have the pulse rate soar. Start and see what happens next. This book is called “What if..?” for a reason. Just asking the question, starting is very powerful.

If in doubt head down a slightly odd looking street. Collide two actor-objects that wouldn’t normally connect. It’s a staple trick of romcoms but it’s effective. Collide the pram and the music; bump the old lady into the bus shelter; connect the church to the latest porn craze. Pick another Card at random and see what happens when you put it next to one you already have.

There are no wrong turnings, no journeys that will not teach you something. And always remember, you don’t know what the destination (denouement) is. You don’t even know if there will be one. And it doesn’t matter if there is or there isn’t. It’s the speculative wandering that’s the value.

A is for remain Agnostic

Just as it's tempting to try and start with the punchline or final curtain, it's hard not to decide that you're going for a utopian or a dystopian story at the start. Just as the genre of the story will emerge as you write, so will the feel. Remember, the aim is not to produce a complete story or have a final argument, it is to play and explore. You might discover as you write that the surveillance technology you thought was evil could liberate your character, that it had utopian dimensions. Similarly you might find the new progressive political culture your character engages with has darker dystopian implications and possibilities.

Let the story develop alongside the characters. See what dimensions and issues emerge. As we will see when we discuss the Turn, sometimes the most powerful speculative walks you take - and the stories that can emerge - are ones playing in the liminal space between utopia and dystopia.

It's easier to set out with a plan, particularly if you already have a critical take on the actor-objects you are writing with. If you are concerned about the mental health effects of social media on young girls, it's hard not to draw "Instagram" and "Young Girl" cards and not take your characters off down dark alleyways. I am not arguing that you should simply reverse and take your characters for a frolic through sunlit uplands. The aim should be to start walking with your characters and see what good and bad things happen or emerge. Yes, dystopian self-image issues arise, but so do utopian fluid-identity issues. How they play out and balance is something your story will tell you, but the point is, you'll get a better story and more importantly you'll discover more by remaining agnostic, at least at the beginning.

R is for Relate to the characters

You're off for a walk with your characters. You're going to play with your actor-objects. It should be fun, even if the outcomes can be deadly serious. It helps to relate to your characters, empathise with them, maybe even like them.

Particularly in short-form speculation, you're only with them for a short time. You'll find out more about them and how they collide with the other characters in the story if you have a relationship with them at the start.

This applies to unhuman characters as much as human ones. It might be easy to relate to the Single Mum from Scunthorpe or the ex-Army Grandad in Glasgow. You might even be able to drum up some empathy for the CEO or Political Candidate, but its harder to form a connection with a hardware actor-object.

As we have discussed OOO/ANT demands that we treat all actor-objects with equal seriousness. The power of object-oriented speculative fiction comes from that flat ontological respect. We discover more if we take account of all the actor-objects in play. So how do we empathise with an algorithm, a wearable let alone a culture or a structure?

One way is to use a bit of judicious anthropomorphism. As Jane Bennett makes clear in her discussion of unhuman objects, anthropomorphism isn't the same as anthropocentrism. Giving an unhuman thing a bit of a "soul", a vibrancy as Bennett calls it, even just for a moment is not the same as turning it into a human and making human-like things the most important. Rather it is finding a way to do what OOO/ANT suggests which is give the unhuman actor-object a bit of respect, relating to it.

A fairly easy unhuman object to try this with is the Artificial Intelligence algorithm or software. Partly this is because we are used, from utopian and dystopian sci-fi,

to hearing an anthropomorphic AI apologise: "I'm sorry Dave..." or reassure: "I'm different from you. This doesn't make me love you any less. It actually makes me love you more." Empathising or at least recognising and relating to an AI actor-object is not a big leap. Once you are happy seeing that scale of object as active and somehow real and relatable, try something more material.

You don't have to give a wooden table a voice or even a personality but you can give it a history that gives it a life and a role in your story. Maybe it was once the start of childhood den or a shelter in the war or the scene of a less-than-romantic dinner. Whatever and however the table actor-object connected and will connect with other characters in your story, the more you know and can see and relate to that object, the more the connections and collisions will have a life and create more speculative insights.

The same goes for other scales of actor-objects. Cultural practices clearly have a life of their own. We call them crazes. Again, we don't need to pretend they are somehow human and have a voice and feelings but we can see them as objects with "lives" that ebb and flow and shift and morph. They can have histories and futures that we can 'care' about, we can relate to. When we were kids that came naturally. The latest craze or fandom was real and powerful and we cared deeply about it and how we related to it.

Finally, I'm not suggesting we should love capitalism or patriarchy or any other structural system. Nor indeed am I saying we should simply hate them. And I am certainly not saying we should minimise them by mistaking capitalists for capitalism as structure. To relate to structural actor-objects is to approach them alongside other actor-objects. To see them as connecting and connected, as shifting and active players. We may never

get the patriarchy actor-object to speak in our story but we can make it 'do things'. And, what is more, we can relate to that activity, we can understand and empathise with that connection, that activity. We may not like it or approve of it but we can see it in action and understand it. It is this sort of deep engagement with the complexity of actor-objects and their relations that is the power of speculation.

T is for Turn: surprise (yourself)

One of the joys of *flânerie*, just going for a walk, is the surprise turns. Wandering and then turning down a new alley can lead to new discoveries, new areas of the city, new views. The same goes for writing speculations. The turn that surprises even the author can lead to new issues, questions, ideas: new insights.

The Turn is more than a plot twist. Plot twists are great but they have an aim, to surprise the reader of course but also to provide some conclusion or satisfying ending. They are story rather than character-centred. The Turn in speculative fiction is designed to do the opposite, to refuse conclusion, to deny an ending, to reject a final truth.

When we surprise ourselves by colliding two incongruous actor-objects; when we Turn by looking at an actor-object in a new way, we open up the narrative, allow our reader - and ourselves as author - to be creative in our thinking, to speculate not just about our story but about the wider network that our story is about and our business is enfolded in.

The Turn is as much for our benefit as Speculator as it is for any reader's enjoyment of our speculation.

Short-form speculation takes as much of its inspiration from, haiku and imagist poetry as it does from so-called "flash fiction". Both haiku (in its western as well as

traditional Japanese forms) and imagism depend on the reader to add value. The condensed short forms plants a seed in the reader's mind that then unfolds into colourful pictures or provocative commentary.

Haiku in particular has its own version of the Turn. The form pivots on a "cutting word" as it connects its two images (or actor-objects). In the hands of great haiku poet, that Turn lights the fuse of the image.

While short-form speculative fiction as a practice is for the Speculator's benefit, rather than the reader's, the principle is the same. As you create and condense the actor-object relations into a tiny form, you compress their power and in the writing and speculating, you release that potential and those insights.

Your Turn might come as you change your view of a character - maybe the seemingly powerless child take control of her life; maybe the algorithm displays a vulnerability. It might come as two actor-objects collide - maybe selfie-culture leaves the shopping Mall and arrives at the Church. Your Turn might start the story or end it. The thing is that the Turn is often where you surprise yourself: where speculation opens up new insight.

...on writing and editing

The START principles gives you a framework to work with, something to hold onto as you write. START gives you some defence against the devil on your shoulder who doubts your creativity.

Finally, just a few thoughts on the mechanics of short-form speculative writing.

When it comes to writing: whatever works, whatever doesn't get in the way. Write on a computer or a tablet or a phone or a post-it note. Write in Word or Google Docs or your favourite to-do app. There is a tool on the

Speculation Studio website that gives you a text editor with a word count and a timer. Just write. START. Remember the process of speculation is the point.

Object-oriented speculation asks you to create a story in 100 words - exactly 100 words. This is to keep your focus on speculating rather than the speculation - verb not noun. If you don't have to decide the length of your story or the medium, you can get on with your journey. As poets, limerick and genre writers alike will tell you, rules and formats help. Playing tennis is always better with a net.

Focusing on short-form might seem easier or more difficult. It's actually probably both. It's easier to do here and now, get speculating into your everyday practice and business. No excuse, no prevarication. A daily practice. But it is also difficult. As Blaise Pascal (or was it Oscar Wilde or Woodrow Wilson or...?) said: "If I had more time, I would have written a shorter letter." Which brings us on to editing.

Many books on creative writing will stress the importance of editing. Object-oriented speculative fiction is creative writing but in the more profound sense of creating new ways of thinking and seeing the futures. The fiction itself may be creative, it may not. That is not the point. As such editing as a practice (another verb) is important not to polish the finished product but to further practice.

Write. Write within the structure. Just write. Like Kerouac and his famous scroll of paper in a typewriter or his less famous pocket notebook in which he was "blowing a long blues in an afternoon jam session on Sunday", write. Then you can edit. But keep that as loose and exploratory as your writing. Cut words to see what getting rid of a value-judging adjective does. Change a line break to see what moving the Turn does to your understanding of the issues. Play. Rescue editing from

the devil on your shoulder or the ghost of your English teacher and see it as a speculative, exploratory tool as powerful as the original writing and the words themselves.

Interlude

... in which we reflect on a speculation

ABOUT FACIAL RECOGNITION

Published on The Guardian (13th August 2019) [<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/aug/13/people-at-kings-cross-site-express-unease-about-facial-recognition>]

The SmartPram(TM) buzzed as she crossed the threshold. "Welcome back. Your coffee's waiting for you. I was going to order Sam's usual orange juice but I see the allergy's playing up so I'll order water." The SmartPram(TM) steered towards the coffeeshop. "I know you're thinking about those shoes. If you want to take a detour and try them on, I can watch crowd reactions and give you some aggregated feedback? I've seen Chris is onsite today. I'll message her SmartPram and see if she wants to join you. The shoeshop's upping its bid if you bring a friend?"

My partner worked at King's Cross, a newly gentrified shopping area in London. The developers had chosen the right tenants - Google, Facebook, Havas plus the best chain and boutique retail tenants. The area, once a run-down and frankly dystopian area, was now aspirational and subtly policed by the developer's own security teams. My partner's slightly anarchic freeplay activities stood out as an island of individuality amid a uniformly safe space.

When I read that facial recognition cameras were in operation. I started with a young mother, the sort I had seen many times. I took her and her androgynous child

for a walk through King's Cross. I added another character, the SmartPram (trademarked of course). As we walked, I found my two characters kept encountering not just the hardware technologies but, more interestingly, the new data flows that hardware set in motion. As they connected those data streams and surveillance devices became cultural - redefining parenting, setting up social relations, creating commercial opportunities.

As I took the mother for a walk through Kings Cross, we discovered a new way of thinking about technologically enhanced spaces. Speculating, imagining a mother, her child and her SmartPram opened up new ways of seeing and new questions.

N.B. Facial recognition cameras were later scrapped at the site: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/sep/02/facial-recognition-technology-scrapped-at-kings-cross-development>

Part four: reflecting on speculating

...in which we discover what we've discovered

Speculating is fun. It's creative and any creative activity is good for you, of course. But the process of writing speculative fiction is a methodology. When I was teaching Masters students I'd tell them that it was a research methodology as powerful, serious and rigorous as any other. Speculative fiction, like speculative design is a way of finding new truths, answering research questions.

You might not be a researcher or an academic but you are still in the business of finding new knowledge, discovering new insights for your business. Speculation can be more than creative: it can be productive... if we add the final step of the process - reflection.

It's no easier to start reflecting than it is to start writing. Just sitting and stroking your real or metaphorical beard is not a natural process for most of us. And the simple order to "reflect" doesn't help, as anyone faced with a workshop feedback questionnaire knows.

The fourth set of Cards are the Reflection cards. These do not just provide prompts or rhetorical questions. Rather, continuing the theme of exploration and storytelling they get you to shift register and tell the story of your speculations.

Reflecting on our speculative discoveries should not be outside the process of speculating and creative thinking

that you have been engaging in. Transferring the lessons to your business should be a continuation of the process of creativity and imagining that has driven your stories and engagement with the actor-object network.

Your reflection might lead to a new product or service but this is not a design sprint. The most powerful lessons and reflections are ones that open up new questions to be addressed, new problems to further workshop - and maybe form the basis of a traditional design sprint. Speculation is about uncovering and exploring complexities not minimising them in order to meet a design target or a product milestone. As such, the Reflection cards might appear as enigmatic as the ones that drove the speculation.

Reflection should continue the process of driving your thinking and imagination forward so a card might ask you to write a job ad for the new person your business needs to capitalise on the things you have found. Another card might ask you to redesign your office or organise a leaving do, even create the perfect music playlist. Each is asking you to think about what your speculation has uncovered. The Reflection prompts are part of the same journey of imagining and discovery.

Your speculating has probably touched on all aspects of your business and beyond - such is the nature of actor-object networks. The aim of the Reflection stage is to stay at that scale of thinking. It is important to stress that this is not to muse at some abstract level of "society" or "the market" or "our business" or "brand" but remain deeply connected with the specific objects and actor-object connections that you have investigated. Your reflecting (again verb rather than noun) might lead you to think about those new emerging forms of capitalism and work, or the new identity cultures your speculating played with, but reflecting is about seeing how those new insights relate to the specific actor-objects of your

business. Regardless of whether you speculated with an actor-object that is directly linked to your business (either because you drew that card or because you used one of the black cards), the Reflection cards will demand that you bring your speculating, the objects in your story and the insights you found into direct connection with your business.

The power of object-oriented speculating (including reflecting) is the dialectical back-and-forth between different scales, different realities, different possibilities. It is this sometimes dizzying process and practice that unlocks new possibilities and ways of seeing.

...so what's next?

There are a number of different directions you can go after your first experience of speculating. The first and most important is to put your next exercise into the diary.

Speculating, like all good mind full practices is not a one-off. Whether in your team or just as a regular solitary practice, taking time to speculate, to journey a little into the future and encounter and play with a panoply of objects not only gets your creative juices flowing but serves to reorient your thinking and uncover new sets of relations within which your day job is enfolded. A regular practice of speculating with a news story and reflecting refreshes the parts other business practices cannot reach.

A second development can be moving into a more formal design-thinking/design sprint process. As I have said, this is a development of, not a replacement for speculative reflection. But after speculating and reflecting on the insights and new relations uncovered, you can bring that into a more formalised design process - whether that is a sprint that leads to a new product or a new strategy, the work you have done in your

speculation studio can offer new material to work with or new ways of thinking to bring to the sprint.

A final direction you can go in, is with your team to take a more directed speculative journey. The process we have discussed and that the Cards lead you towards are about widening your view and imagination through speculation. I would argue that this is its particular power but there is no reason, once you are experienced in speculative practices that you can't follow the same object-oriented speculative imagining into a particular area of the network that you think is directly relevant to your business, role or present business challenge. I would argue that you should still keep your range of actor-object characters flexible and dynamic - make sure you have them at different scales - but you can look to take them on a walk down particular business streets. Don't be too directive, let the journey unfold but maybe get your characters to meet outside your office and set off from there.

The key thing is to keep going. Verbs not nouns. The Speculation Studio offers a series of one-off workshops where your team gets the chance to step away from the day-to-day demands of the business to imagine. You can see more details on the range of workshops at www.speculation.studio.

But this is just the start. The Speculation Studio offers a Programme where we help your team build a regular speculation practice. Starting with The Cards and the app, the Programme develops your team's speculation skills using randomly assigned actor-objects. Once members are comfortable with the process, the Programme expands the range of actor-objects to include contemporary news story Signs and actor-objects specifically related to your business.

Regular speculation, particularly speculating with actor-objects that you encounter every day is a creative practice that can transform your business.

Appendix one: some reading

...in which we discover people who've said interesting things

...on speculation

Most of the writing on speculation comes from academia and looks primarily at speculative design. Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby's *Speculative Everything* (MIT Press, 2013) is what might be called a seminal text. Julian Bleeker's essay *Design Fiction* (<https://blog.nearfuturelaboratory.com/2009/03/17/design-fiction-a-short-essay-on-design-science-fact-and-fiction/>) is similarly a founding text.

In terms of more futurist speculation, Scott Smith and Madeline Ashby's *How to Future* (Kogan Page Inspire, 2020) and Stuart Candy and Cher Potter's collection *Design and Futures* (Tamkang University Press, 2019) are worth looking at. As I have said I believe Speculators are different from Futurist but one self-described futurists who avoids the trap of prediction is Jane McGonigal. What is more, in *Imaginable* (Bantam, 2022) she explores the power of future imagining for personal and social development.

I need also to point you towards someone who, like me is keen to make speculation a business tool. Damien Lutz has a different take on the process of speculation than I do, but his call in *Future Scouting* for businesses to speculate is welcome (Futurescouting.com.au, 2021).

...on the current moment

As part of the process of speculating, you'll be doing some reading about the current situation. Your Sign card will point you towards finding out about some of the latest debates in the area and what people are saying about it. There are no shortage of people writing and/or pontificating about our current situation. My suggestions are starting points and of course the writers I pick here - well I find their analyses provocative and persuasive. You may find others' work more helpful and interesting.

I have worked with Faris Yakob on the MA I ran and for someone at the cutting-edge of helping clients with concrete business problems, his wide reading, thinking and writing are a clear and important guide to now. He tweets and blogs but his book *Paid Attention* (Kogan Page, 2022) is about far more than advertising.

At the more overtly academic end, Shoshana Zuboff provides a compelling model for looking at how technology and the structures of capitalism are intertwined in new ways in her book *Surveillance Capitalism* (Profile Books, 2019).

For thoughtful and passionate critiques of the now, you have to listen to Scott Galloway. You might not agree with him but his polemical but deeply knowledgeable business critique never fails to provoke. *Post Corona* (Penguin, 2021) was published in the midst of the pandemic and *The Four* (Corgi, 2018) in The Before. Together they give you a sense of his perspective.

Quieter but no less thought provoking is Azeem Ahar whose podcast, newsletter and book *Exponential* (Penguin, 2022) give a deeply informed but wide-ranging view of our weird times.

...on writing and imagining

There are no shortage of books on writing and writing fiction. As I have stressed throughout this book, the point of speculative fiction is not the story but the practice of speculating. With that said though - and speaking as a former journalist and editor - there's nothing wrong with wanting to write good.

As a hack, there was one bible that I still think provides the clearest argument for and guide to writing clearly: Harold Evans's *Newsman's English* (as it was originally called or) *Essential English* as later editions have been called (Pimlico, 2000). The former editor of *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* also wrote a glorious defence of powerful writing in his final book *Do I make myself clear?* (Little, Brown and Company, 2017).

Moving away from journalism or non-fiction writing, Stephen King's *On Writing* (Hodder, 2012) remains an invaluable source of useful and usable advice.

Coming from an advertising background, I have to recommend something on persuasive copywriting. There are many great wordsmiths but a book that does a fine job of connecting the process of writing and thinking which is so important to speculation is Andrew Boulton's *Copywriting Is* (Gasp!, 2021).

And of course the best inspiration for writing is good writing and the best help with creating provocative speculation comes from reading some. So, just a few authors to sample: William Gibson and Neal Stephenson of course but also Jeff Noon, China Mieville, Jennifer Egan and Cixin Liu. I could go on...

...on objects

I am not trained in philosophy but I got into object-oriented thinking via Graham Harman. Not only are his

ideas stimulating but he can write well. All his books are clearly and accessibly written but if you want to start with Actor Network Theory and Object Oriented Philosophy, you can begin where I did with his discussion of the founder of ANT, Bruno Latour in *Prince of Networks* (re.press, 2009). This book has the added advantage of being available free (legally) online at: [http://www.re-press.org/book-files/](http://www.re-press.org/book-files/OA_Version_780980544060_Prince_of_Networks.pdf)

OA_Version_780980544060_Prince_of_Networks.pdf)

Another provocative but admirably clear thinker with objects is Timothy Morton, whose lectures, available on YouTube or via his site <http://ecologywithoutnature.blogspot.com/> are often as

creative as the ideas in his books. A great place to start with Morton is *Being Ecological* (MIT Press, 2019).

Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* has stayed with me as a wonderful, poetic but deeply accessible celebration of material things (Duke University Press, 2010).

And of course if you're interested in my own musings with objects, you can read about my thoughts on objects and remix (http://theinternationale.com/papers/The_app-object_economy.pdf); software rags 'n refuse ([http://theinternationale.com/papers/](http://theinternationale.com/papers/Software_Tunnels_paper.pdf)

[Software_Tunnels_paper.pdf](http://www.theinternationale.com/quadJPEG.pdf)) or even my PhD (<http://www.theinternationale.com/quadJPEG.pdf>).

Appendix two: the Cards

...in which we play a round

You don't need to use The Cards. The joy of speculating is you only need your imagination and maybe an eye on the news. The Cards are there as a prompt to get you started. And remember, if you don't want to speculate with your Speculation Studio cards, you can always gamble.

There are many ways of using them - you can deal them at random or lay them out on a table and pick the ones you want to speculate with. If you're on your own you could shuffle the deck and work through them. You could roll a dungeons and dragons dice and pick the 18th card or use the I Ching or... But let's keep it simple for now.

There are three sorts of cards: Signs (Hearts - the centre of it all); Objects (Spades and Clubs - the things you make with) and Reflections (the Diamonds you're looking for).

- Separate the three sorts of cards. Set the **Reflection** cards to one side for a minute
- Pick a **Hearts Signs** card. If it has a trend or an emerging technology on it, spend a bit of time on your phone, researching what people are saying about that Sign. A simple Google search is fine. Just get a broad understanding of some of the debates and issues. If it is blank, think of an emerging part of your business -

maybe a new development in the pipeline, a new market or new strategy.

- Pick two **Object** cards, a Spade and a Club. These are the characters in your story.
- Set a timer for 15 mins or use the timer on the Speculation Studio website.
- Speculate. Take the actor-objects for a walk into the world of your Sign. Remember, exactly 100 words.
- At the end of the 15 mins, pick a **Diamond Reflection** card
- Reset the timer and... reflect.
- Your Reflection card will ask you to make something concrete so by the end you will have two... objects: a story and the reflection. If you want to, you can send them to someone or you can just keep them for your own benefit. Remember the work has been done in the practice so you can throw them away if you like.
- Plan your next speculation.

Things change and so The Speculation Studio issues new sets of cards at regular intervals. But to give you some idea, the first set consisted of:

HEARTS (THE SIGNS):

- King & Queen: Something else
- Jack: Artificial intelligence
- Ten: Post-pandemic
- Nine: Identity
- Eight: Uberisation
- Seven: Climate
- Six: Wellness
- Five: Home working
- Four: Q-commerce

- Three: Metaverse
- Two: Web 3.0
- Ace: Purpose

SPADES (THE HARDWARE AND SOFTWARE OBJECTS):

- King: Something else
- Queen: Smart city
- Jack: Television
- Ten: Wearable
- Nine: Server farm
- Eight: VR headset
- Seven: Voice speaker
- Six: Text message
- Five: NFT
- Four: Location data
- Three: Social profile
- Two: Search engine
- Ace: Fitness data

CLUBS (THE HUMAN AND CULTURAL OBJECTS):

- King: Client or customer
- Queen: Scrolling
- Jack: Activism
- Ten: Celebrity
- Nine: Selfie
- Eight: Gaming
- Seven: Binge watching ° Six: Single mum
- Five: Influencer
- Four: Middle manager ° Three: Intern
- Two: Grandma

- Ace: Teenager

DIAMONDS (THE REFLECTIONS):

- King: Playlist
- Queen: Leaving do
- Jack: Dream team
- Ten: Image search
- Nine: Brief template
- Eight: Onboarding
- Seven: Resignation letter
- Six: New office
- Five: Careers talk
- Four: Game
- Three: MBA unit
- Two: Product advert
- Ace: Job advert

.. you can play with a digital set of the cards at www.speculation.studio.

Appendix three: the Workshops

...in which your guide suggests getting together

I wrote this Book and produced the Cards because I believe that we need new ways of thinking about the present situation and the future. We need to take a moment to step back from the day-to-day demands of running our businesses to imagine. We need to see the world in new ways if we are to make the best sort of strategic decisions. I hope that this Book and the Cards can help you do that.

But sometimes having a human actor-object guide can help and so I designed a series of Speculation Studio Workshops designed to give you and your team a space and the tools to take that step, to imagine and to think creatively.

Building on many years teaching and training, I take attendees through the idea of speculative fiction, the concept of actor-objects as a way of seeing the world and their business and then through a series of creative 100-word writing practices and reflections, I help attendees explore their business and business challenges through speculation.

Each workshop (whether a simple half-day, a more intensive full-day, a longer bespoke speculation programme or one to one, small team coaching) are tailored to each business.

Talk to me via www.speculation.studio and let's see how
The Speculation Studio can help you and your team
think the future.

Appendix four: the Studio

...in which we discover who and what's behind this story

Well firstly there's the human actor-object: I'm dr Paul Caplan. I've been a journalist, photographer, teacher, trainer and consultant. I took businesses online through the dotcom bubble, advised them on conversation strategy in the Web 2 bubble before then running a Masters degree and training NewGen creative-strategists for the advertising and media industries.

And then there's The Speculation Studio (www.speculation.studio). I believe speculation is the best way of getting through the next bubble and The Speculation Studio is an experience company working with businesses to help teams think the future.

The Speculation Studio runs speculative fiction Workshops based on this Book and Cards. These are tailored to each business' needs but can range from a half-day speculative sprint to a speculation course. The Speculators who attend the workshops get their own copy of this Book and Cards so they can build their own regular speculation practice. They also have the options to receive updates to their card deck and share their speculative fictions and reflections with other Speculators.

I also offer one-to-one bespoke speculation consultation for those who want to follow their own particular speculation journey through their business questions,

challenges and opportunities. You can find out more at www.speculation.studio.

100 words

What if...?

**one hundred 100-word
speculative fictions**

What if...?

THE CUSTOMER

Recorded for Isolated Talks (<https://www.isolatedtalks.com/talks/dispatches-from-the-new-normal/>)

She liked being out and about. It was emptier than what was now called "the Before", but there were people, in their lanes,, waiting for the passing spaces. But they were out and about. The band buzzed. Not a social distance warning for once but an offer from the shop 200m away, at the next lane junction. She glanced at the screen on the buggy as the band started an energy track. She loved that guy. She never knew he'd recorded that song, her most recent earworm. The animation reminded her of something... She smiled. Those advertising people were clever.

100 words

THE CEO

Recorded for Isolated Talks (<https://www.isolatedtalks.com/talks/dispatches-from-the-new-normal/>)

He had refused to sell in the days when there were buyers – holding companies, consultancies, tech companies. He liked the idea of being “an independent”. It’s why he’d started the agency. Control had let him build something real. He’d loved buying the fussball table and then later deciding it was naff. He felt he’d crafted something. He hated the rhetoric of a business as a ‘family’ or even a ‘team’ but, call him an aging hippy, but he’d made something. He looked at his Zoom windows: a zero-hours student; an AI avatar, biometric insights with a voice over... and sighed.

What if...?

THE STRATEGIST

Recorded for Isolated Talks (<https://www.isolatedtalks.com/talks/dispatches-from-the-new-normal/>)

She used to love workshops. Creative. Surprising. Fun. Empathy maps and user journeys told stories, personas almost lived and breathed. There was an energy and her job was to understand it. In the early days, they'd managed to replicate some of that virtually. She'd still uncovered surprising insights, thick data. There had still been that indefinable energy. But then they'd sent the bands out. Stories were mapped against sweat responses. Surprises had heart rate peaks. Empathy had breathes per minute. Energy was numbers. She started the workshop and sighed as she tried to minimise the live graphs on her screen.

100 words

THE CREATIVE

Recorded for Isolated Talks (<https://www.isolatedtalks.com/talks/dispatches-from-the-new-normal/>)

He really didn't like his new partner. It wasn't that she wasn't good. She had great ideas. She was always discovering some popular cultural reference or meme he hadn't even heard of. She had a wonderful eye for design. And you couldn't fault her workload. She was pleasant enough on Zoom calls. When the new teams were announced after the agency sold its offices as part of "project flexible", he tried to build a rapport, he really had. But some teams, well as Gertrude Stein said of Oakland, there was just no there there. He sighed and booted her up.

What if...?

THE NEW GEN

Recorded for Isolated Talks (<https://www.isolatedtalks.com/talks/dispatches-from-the-new-normal/>)

She hadn't even had a graduation. No-one had for three years. No silly dressing up or chance to compare overdrafts. She hadn't even had a final show or New Blood. It had all sort of fizzled out. She still pictured the trendy, iconic agency spaces she'd imagined working in. She was New (Covid) Gen III or "relative surplus creatives" as the more Marxist ones called themselves. She logged in. The bright logos of the agencies that owned the System appeared. The same agencies she'd hoped to work in. She sighed and put her bids in for the day's jobs.

100 words

INSIDE GUCCI'S GEN Z BET ON AVATARS – THE LATEST CHAPTER IN LUXURY'S DIGITAL EPIPHANY

Published on The Drum. <https://www.thedrum.com/news/2019/08/08/inside-gucci-s-gen-z-bet-avatars-the-latest-chapter-luxury-s-digital-epiphany>

I mean no-one wants to sue their parents, but really! Signing me up with brand in-vitro? Fine. They picked a good brand at the time. See me through school and University. A couple of years as IRL ambassador, OK. But there was the avatar clause. My social presence would in perpetuity be branded with... well I can't even bring myself to say the name (or should that be 'lame'?) I have my own brand to build and being saddled with an avatar dressed like that; talking like that; interacting like that! Well how do you think I feel... your honour?

What if...?

FOOTBALL'S TACTICAL SWITCH

Published on Campaign. <https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/footballs-tactical-switch/1593538>

We're through to the last selection. I've dreamed he'd be signed since before he was born and he's almost there. Once we saw he wasn't great with the ball, we put the effort into building up his other sports skills. We made him practice. Hour after hour with his phone. We're not ashamed to admit, we paid for expert coaching. And now... he can TikTok the way Cruyff could turn. He can Tweet like Beckham could bend it. He can Instagram like Ronaldo could chop. The lad's a natural. No team would be complete without him. My boy, a pro.

100 words

T-MOBILE IS HANDING OUT HOT SPOTS TO LURE CUSTOMERS

Published on Ad Age. <https://adage.com/article/tech/t-mobile-handing-out-hot-spots-lure-customers/2193811>

Call me old-fashioned, but I think our kids should be protected inside school and out. We wouldn't accept drug dealers hanging around the school gates offering amphetamines, why should we accept people pushing Speed^(TM)? "Go on, take it. All the other kids are doing it. You want to be the only one still on 5G?" Speed^(TM) is addictive. When you've sampled it... you're hooked. We've seen SpeedFreaks: oblivious, eyes glazed, REM. We've seen withdrawal, the violent response to life in "the slow lane". Is that what we want for our kids? Join me outside the school gates today.

What if...?

THE 'DIGITAL TOKEN': PROVING EXPERIENTIAL WORKS

Published on AW360. <https://www.advertisingweek360.com/the-digital-token-proving-experiential-works/>

Ever since the start of the 'experience economy' people have avoided your tracking. 'Experience burners' share disposable devices to stay connected on a burner network while within range of your experience sensors. Data stopped flowing, ROI became opaque, clients became suspicious. But now there is Data Turf^(TM). Lay our smart flooring and our algorithms measure footfall, where people visited and stopped and for how long, their movements and journeys through your experience. And with Data Turf Premium^(TM) use Gait Recognition Technology for even more insights. Don't let your experience get burned: use Data Turf^(TM) to maximise footfall.

100 words

DIET COKE 'DO YOU DO' CAMPAIGN ANCHORS THE FUTURE OF BRAND TO 'LIT' CULTURAL TRENDS

Published on The Drum. <https://www.thedrum.com/news/2019/09/09/diet-coke-do-you-do-campaign-anchors-the-future-brand-lit-cultural-trends>

She reached for the can from the shelf and stopped herself. She didn't mind that she'd turned fifty. She still thought of herself as young. She'd been a punk. She liked to swear. She didn't think her language was middle-aged and she didn't need a can talking to her in what some algorithm determined was middle-aged speak just because her fifty-year-old fingers had touched it and activated some software that wrote fifty-speak onto the digital label. "I am not a number, I am a free..." she muttered. "What do you want? Information! You won't get it!" scrolled around the label.

What if..?

SORRELL POSITS POST-BREXIT UK AS HOME FOR GOOGLE

Published on WARC. https://www.warc.com/newsandopinion/news/sorrell_posits_postbrexit_uk_as_home_for_google/42635

The sky above New Dover was the colour of television, tuned to a dead channel. Its server farms, the “blue birds”, rose over the channel, along the white cliffs. Stuff flowed through the port as never before, at the speed of light; the only barriers the latency of the cables, the only restrictions the laws of thermodynamics. Little England was a network node, a client, a server. Some had thought they’d flock to a European Singapore. They hadn’t come. They didn’t need homes. They just needed clear networks. New Dover, like Little England, was built around a shiny, frictionless architecture.

100 words

INTERACTIVITY MAKES DIGITAL-OUT-OF-HOME FAR MORE EFFECTIVE

Published on WARC. https://www.warc.com/newsandopinion/news/interactivity_makes_dooh_far_more_effective/42650

There was something not quite right. She stopped. In the middle of the street. Her wearable and hearable were still signalling. The pavement, walls and windows were still signalling, a wash of messages that semiotically vibrated in tune with her footsteps and social profile. But amid all the signals there was a noise. Something was wrong. She looked around. Unsettled. And then she saw it. It didn't move. It didn't vibrate or call. It didn't demand participation or involvement. It stubbornly refused to 'interact'. It was silent. Still. Power-full. Stuck on a wall. She stopped and read it... and smiled.

What if...?

OLD EL PASO USES CONVERSATIONS TO POWER RESTAURANT

Published on Campaign. <https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/old-el-paso-uses-conversations-power-restaurant/1660038>

He'd not made a 'contribution' for 15 minutes. The Teamometer was moving into the orange zone. Power was ebbing away and he needed to "top up for the team"^(TM). Nodding or noting weren't enough. He needed a "zig-zag contribution". They sent the Teamometer soaring as the wearable measured arousal hormones, synaptic activity and stress levels. He looked at Chris' wrist. Her's was not orange but he knew she too was looking for the moment. He had to move first. He reached for the insight he'd been saving. His wearable turned a welcome shade of green. Safe for another meeting.

100 words

THE TRANSHUMANISTS WHO ARE 'UPGRADING' THEIR BODIES

Published on the BBC. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-49893869>

I hate them, parents. Hippies. Paranoid hippies. "We want you to have your privacy, your freedom. Your body's perfect. It doesn't need anything adding. You don't need upgrading" They don't understand what it's like. I'm a laughing stock. Worse, I'm shunned. Worse still, I'm 'out'. Look, the guys are over there talking about... something. How do I know what it is? I've not seen it, heard it, felt it. How could I? What am I supposed to do, pretend I have and laugh along? They'll see right through that. They know I'm out. They know my loving parents are 'refusers'.

What if...?

TAXI-TOP STARTUP FIREFLY CAN NOW TARGET ADS BASED ON WEATHER

Published on Ad Week. <https://www.adweek.com/programmatic/firefly-ads-personalized-weather/>

It hadn't been a good day. His StressBit was pulsing yellow as his StressPods moved from ambient to the StressPlaylist the company had loaded after his last appraisal. If he could get to white, he could switch it back to The Killers. Perhaps before the Tube. The taxis' rooftop screens remixed city data with influencers; news with messages. Someone barged into him as they hailed one by touching their glasses. His StressBit hit orange again. A taxi screen flashed: "Not a good day? Spoil yourself with a CalmRide home. 25% off seeing as you're a little orange". He got in.

100 words

MOST AMERICANS THINK THEY'RE BEING CONSTANTLY TRACKED-AND THAT THERE'S NOTHING THEY CAN DO

Published on MIT Technology Review. <https://www.technologyreview.com/2019/11/15/238341/privacy-pew-research-data-collection-big-tech-facebook-google-apple/>

She'd stayed longer than planned. It was dark. She could wait until someone was heading her way but why couldn't she walk her own streets alone? She could call a driverless but it was a nice evening. She made her excuses and as the cold air hit her, she tapped her earpiece: "OK, WatchMe," she said. The streetlight camera didn't move; the one in the shop window didn't show it had locked her FaceID . There was no sign from the smart pavement that her steps were being tracked differently. But her earpiece glowed a reassuring red: she was being Watched.

What if...?

WHY KIDS DON'T TRUST ALEXA

Published on MIT Technology Review. <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/614863/why-kids-dont-trust-alexa/>

Dear Parent. Voice teaching assistants have been in our classrooms for some time, helping your children with maths, history and the new PE. I think you'll agree these extra classroom resources have benefited your children as well as our budget. As children encounter Voice outside school: while travelling, playing and, as our partner knows better than anyone, shopping, it becomes important they know they can trust Voice. So next term our partner will be working with us in our Citizenship lessons to build what we're calling Prime Confidence. We know the lessons will be of great benefit. Your Headteacher.

100 words

SINGAPORE-BASED DARK KITCHEN USES AI TO CRAFT MENU BASED ON CONSUMERS' NEEDS

Published on The Drum. <https://www.thedrum.com/news/2020/02/24/singapore-based-dark-kitchen-uses-ai-craft-menu-based-consumers-needs> | <https://adage.com/article/advertising/brands-line-respond-burger-kings-moldy-whopper-campaign/2238481>

They called it a Dark Agency, but the screens and dataflows gave the container an eerie glow. When teams swapped shifts they blinked as their eyes adjusted. The Order came in on one screen. She turned to the Creative Intelligence^(TM) feed and read off datapoints. 'Suggested' CI^(TM) assets flowed onto her Canvas. Jokes; Memes by topicality. Language for time of day and audience; awards judges' profiles. The customer's Order time ticked down as the Origin(al) played on a loop. She finished arranging the assets. Clicked. Response. She sipped her energy drink and waited for the next Order.

What if...?

MENTAL WELLBEING WITHIN AGENCIES: FLEXIBILITY AND STABILITY

Published on The Drum. <https://www.thedrum.com/opinion/2020/03/13/mental-wellbeing-within-agencies-flexibility-and-stability>

It popped up in the lower right corner. Two googly eyes on an animated clip. "Hello there!" Cheery chirruped, "just checking in." It raised an animated eyebrow and nodded at the time. "Now you've finished with the client, let's Cheerypause^(TM)," it said. She sighed. Since home had become office, the laptop had become a series of windows. Each one now had the pulsing Cheerybreathe^(TM) animation letting her team know she was on pause. As the screen unfroze, Cheery popped up again with that sickening smile. "Could you just check your fit on your Cheeryclip^(TM) please," it said.

100 words

EVEN BETTER THAN THE REAL THING? MEET THE VIRTUAL INFLUENCERS TAKING OVER YOUR FEEDS

Published on The Drum. <https://www.thedrum.com/news/2020/03/20/even-better-the-real-thing-meet-the-virtual-influencers-taking-over-your-feeds>

He was glad the lockdown was still in place. It meant he couldn't go out and so didn't need to put on a disguise just to leave his flat. He could just sit at home and work. His face was more popular than ever as his followers whiled away time being 'influenced' by him. Work was going well. But all that would end if clients knew the truth. Ever since the move to virtual 'safe influencers': clean, controllable, programmable - no-one paid for real. All it needed was one fan to see he was real and the game would be up.

What if...?

THE AGE OF THE DIGITAL PITCH IS HERE – AND AD AGENCIES SAY THEY’RE READY

Published on WARC. <https://www.warc.com/newsandopinion/news/theageofthedigitalpitchishereandadagenciessaytheyreready/43448>

Don shared his screen and began: “Technology is a glittering lure...” The other windows fell silent apart from the occasional toddler’s cry in the background. Across the city, laptop screens lit the faces of the men and women in corner ‘offices’ claimed from spouses and home schooling children. Slide wipes and sounds echoed the narrative as Don’s voice echoed around the disparate rooms. He wove the story: “Round and around, and back home again, to a place where we know we are loved.” He stopped. Silence. Then a voice.... “Sorry Don, lost you there. Can you go through it again?”

100 words

DURING COVID-19, BRAND PURPOSE DEMANDS SOLUTIONS

Published on WARC. <https://www.warc.com/newsandopinion/news/during-covid-19-brand-purpose-demands-solutions/43431>

The Doctor had a moment before it all began again to check messages. Before all this, she was used to drugs companies' offers of all-expenses-paid trips. Messages from spin doctors wanting to set up photo-ops for politicians of all stripes. She'd felt good at how quickly she could diagnose and dispatch. Delete. Delete. Delete. She was a doctor. But this was new. Her finger hesitated. They had global reach. Contacts. They could get supplies. Now. They weren't asking for anything from her today. Just "when it's over". The brand would celebrate her as a "hero". She'd be an NHS influencer.

What if..?

THE PANDEMIC IS EMPTYING CALL CENTERS. AI CHATBOTS ARE SWOOPING IN

Published on MIT Technology Review. <https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/05/14/1001716/ai-chatbots-take-call-center-jobs-during-coronavirus-pandemic/>

"Mr Smith, of course, let me put you through..."
"John, good to hear from you... It's going well, very well... Research is showing that the idea will get real cut-through... Latest figures? Of course I'll send them through... Let me put you onto creative..."
"John, good to hear from you... It's going well, very well... How is the new blue working for you?... Softer? Of course, I'll get the guys on that... Let me put you through to media..." "John, good to hear from you... It's going well, very well... It's going well, very well... It's going well, very well..."

100 words

NIKE SAYS 'DON'T DO IT' WHEN IT COMES TO RACISM IN REACTION TO GEORGE FLOYD'S DEATH

Published on Ad Age. <https://adage.com/article/cmo-strategy/nike-says-dont-do-it-when-it-comes-racism-reaction-george-floyds-death/2260081>

The scanner alert sounded. The threshold had been reached and the Critical Buzz^(TM) system kicked in. She remembered Weegee the 1930s “ambulance chasing” photographer waiting by his police radio scanner, ready to pounce on a story. She pulled up the screen and the system mapped the possible positions on the news story and gave her the raw copy and visuals to work with, coded helpfully by Critical Buzz^(TM) according to her brand's values. She thought of Weegee developing the pictures in the darkroom in the boot of his car while his rivals slept. She was a buzz chaser.

What if...?

MORE THAN 950 BRANDS PARTICIPATED IN 'BLACKOUT TUESDAY' ON INSTAGRAM

Published on Ad Age. <https://adage.com/article/datacenter/more-950-brands-participated-blackout-tuesday-instagram-plus-latest-jobs-numbers-context-datacenter/2260916>

Be ready. Be relevant. Be Redraw^(TM). As brands we all know we must wear our purpose in full view. Your logo and your avatar are not fixed brand assets, they are live conversation vectors and at Redraw^(TM) we're here to ensure they remain relevant and ready for the next purpose opportunity. We take the latest memes and movements and dynamically redraw your logo, avatar and posts across all platforms. Don't be caught wearing a rainbow when the world has turned black. Don't stay still when your brand needs to move on. Be ready. Be Relevant. Be Redraw^(TM).

100 words

A HIGHWAY TO SMELL: HOW SCIENTISTS USED LIGHT TO INCEPT SMELL IN MICE

Published on Singularity Hub. <https://singularityhub.com/2020/07/01/a-highway-to-smell-how-scientists-used-light-to-incept-smell-in-mice/>

She was being good. Waiting in line. Moving from one pavement sticker to another. The line was moving slowly but the masked and gloved doorman was letting people in, gradually. She was on her phone of course, swiping through posts, adding data points to her profile as she waited. The shop windows played cheery animations, casting light out onto the dark pavement. As the queue moved and she stepped from pools of blue to pools of red, she caught the hint of a smell. She couldn't place it but it transported her. A powerful memory. Madeleine stopped swiping and searched.

What if...?

WILL MARKETERS LEARN ANYTHING FROM THE RETURN OF THE QR CODE?

Published on LinkedIn. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/marketers-learn-anything-from-return-qr-code-jerry-daykin>

They had always been “anti-chippers”. She still remembered the puzzled look on the midwife’s face when she’d refused the “simple procedure” ... and the corporate goody bag. It had made parenting a little more difficult. Tracking the bio data and of course location, but it was the principle. It was her child’s body. But since schools had closed, sorry “moved online”, the chipless had been excluded. The systems simply didn’t recognise them and “deliver the personal learning experience”. At least until a retro chip-refuser had rediscovered QR and temporary tattoos. He held his hand up to the webcam. His ‘teacher’ appeared.

100 words

ADVERTIMA RINGS UP \$17.5M FOR COMPUTER VISION-POWERED BEHAVIORAL ANALYTICS FOR IN-STORE RETAIL

Published on TechCrunch. <https://techcrunch.com/2020/07/28/advertima-rings-up-17-5m-for-computer-vision-powered-behavioral-analytics-for-in-store-retail>

He took a deep breath in as the doors opened. It wasn't the gently encouraging signage that appeared as he passed, or the patronising, approving messages that appeared on his trolley when he chose the 'right' things. He didn't even mind the way the prices changed under the words: "This week you lost five pounds and now you've saved two. Every little helps". What he hated were the non-food aisles: the clothes rail that cheerily talked of the power of stripes to shape perceptions; and the personal care aisle on Valentines day, well! He'd have sighed but cameras were watching.

What if..?

THIS FASHION TECH PIONEER IS ANIMATING FACE MASKS WITH VOICE-RESPONSIVE LEDS

Published on Voicebot. <https://voicebot.ai/2020/07/31/this-fashion-tech-pioneer-is-animating-face-masks-with-voice-responsive-leds/>

The rich had ad-free masks, the poor were hacking them and running #notonmyface slogans. Even those campaigns that were running weren't effective. Evidence showed people had rediscovered eye contact. The Public Private Health Partnerships programme had ensured universal access to masks but the Department was worried as the agency gave its report. Brands still had access to the geo and biometric data from the unhacked masks, but they weren't paying for "facial impressions" as they had been. The scientific advisor tried to raise a point but the track 'n trace functionality in the masks had always been a secondary consideration.

100 words

AFTER CORONAVIRUS TWEETS, TOM GOODWIN IS OUT AT PUBLICIS GROUPE

Published on Ad Week. <https://www.adweek.com/agencies/after-coronavirus-tweets-tom-goodwin-is-out-at-publicis-groupe/>

Are you an iconoclast? Is your brand contrary? If so, you need WalkTheLine^(TM). We help you navigate the fine line between standing out and being kicked out. We monitor your client or employers' positions on current issues as they shift. We also watch your competitor pundit's postings and positions. WalkTheLine^(TM) maps the data and gives you a real-time window within which to be contrarian. As you write, you get a visual signal of how in-tune you are. Swinging towards green? maybe you're playing it too safe. Swinging red? well it's your call. Stay sharp. Stay safe. WalkTheLine^(TM).

What if..?

FACEBOOK TO LEASE ALL 730,000 SQUARE FEET OF OFFICE SPACE IN THE FARLEY BUILDING

Published on Ad Week. <https://www.adweek.com/digital/facebook-to-lease-all-730000-square-feet-of-office-space-in-the-farley-building/>

I'm old enough to remember long lunches and longer nights of client 'entertainment'. I remember Christmas parties and summer picnics on my island. Our business has changed. Since we moved from headsets to glasses, we've had a home on our network. We've delivered work and we've entertained clients thanks to our head of Account Management CGI. But today I am proud to announce that we have bought a building. Selected clients (and client teams) will be invited to spectacular, real-world lunches and dinners, events and 'experiences'. This will be my, as well as the business' home. We're calling it Xanadu.

100 words

AI SURVEILLANCE STUDY TRACKS CRIMINALS POST RELEASE TO CUT RECIDIVISM

Published on New Atlas. <https://newatlas.com/computers/parolees-tracked-artificial-intelligence-prevent-recidivism/>

Talent is back in demand again and you're back worrying about your best people leaving, and understanding why? With Churn^(TM) we give you hard data to work with. Integrate Churn^(TM) into your wellness programme (we work with all the major wearable platforms) and we'll tell you when someone's thinking of leaving so you can counter-offer early. And with Churn+^(TM) you can follow your talent to her new job. With our industry-wide reach, you can bid for work-emotion data as she settles in, giving you rich insights into her new role and early warning signals of ChurnRegret^(TM).

What if..?

FACEBOOK SET TO LAUNCH NEWS SERVICE IN UK

Published on Campaign. <https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/facebook-set-launch-news-service-uk/1692644>

He nudged the controls and took another sip from his pint. His hackcam drone hovered on the court steps part of the news swarm. His question sounded through the speakers and appeared on the PR's tablet. The soundbite came through just as the celebrity said it. He worked in some background. He looked around the pub at the other hacks, remembered the rivalry: fighting, often literally, for the exclusive. They finished their pints and filed to their 'papers'. Before the next round was in, The FaceTimes published. His quote had made paragraph two. He didn't recognise who'd got the lead.

100 words

SPOTIFY CREATED AN AI-POWERED AVATAR OF THE WEEKND FOR A PERSONALIZED LISTENING EXPERIENCE

Published on Ad Week. <https://www.adweek.com/retail/spotify-created-an-ai-powered-avatar-of-the-weeknd-for-a-personalized-listening-experience/> | <https://techcrunch.com/2020/08/26/spotify-is-developing-a-virtual-events-feature/>

She'd seen them "real live" in The Before and been "at their v-gigs" three times since. Through the right interface they were good. The 4D headset had made her sick but maybe that was the dancing. A good screen and binaurals worked. And she liked the YouHad2BThere^(TM) they used to stop people recording. Tonight though was different. The set list was all her favourites; the jokes the lead singer told seemed to be written just for her. The camera lingered on the drummer she'd always liked. But the video wasn't as sharp. The band seemed somehow a bit pixelated.

What if..?

FOOD ADS SHOULD TAP FEELINGS OF NOSTALGIA AND TOGETHERNESS

Published on WARC. <https://www.warc.com/newsandopinion/news/food-ads-should-tap-feelings-of-nostalgia-and-togetherness/44034>

Even in The Before, nostalgia and family were staples in our food marketing diet. A boy pushing a bread-filled bike up a hill in Northern England, the all-American family sitting down to Thanksgiving, the glow has worked. And in the New Normal, we're pulling those heartstrings again. And with FamilyCheck™ you can be sure you know your family before your AIs create the ad. We measure and map the emotion levels, from 'Waltons' to 'Simpsons', at key moments and places in the home to give you the full picture. With FamilyCheck™ you'll know the right thing to say.

100 words

AMAZON'S PRIME AIR CAN OFFICIALLY BEGIN DRONE DELIVERY TRIALS IN THE US

Published on Engadget. <https://www.engadget.com/amazon-prime-air-faa-approval-drone-delivery-trials-142035317.htm>

As the drone approached, the playlist faded out and the familiar voice gave a 'time of arrival' - there was never anything "estimated". He'd paid extra to opt out of the follow-on upsell adverts, but he couldn't turn off the earworm jingles behind the announcement. His sigh was picked up and logged, the data sent to the drone. From the balcony he looked over the city. It wasn't the dark shapes of the drones themselves that clouded the view. He was used to SwarmTime now. It was their holotrails. Glitching, entrancing ad-vapours broadcasting his preferences, wishes and searches to his neighbours.

What if...?

DROP IN CITY CENTRE FOOTFALL IS LOCAL AREAS GAIN

Published on WARC. <https://www.warc.com/newsandopinion/news/drop-in-city-centre-footfall-is-local-areas-gain/44063>

The city felt less like a zombie movie and more like a nature documentary. The soundscape had changed: you could hear birds and your foot fall on the pavements. There was a new pace: families strolled; flâneurs meandered aimlessly. The landscape was still: no scrolling images on bus shelters or deserted billboards. It was smaller: no giants smiling down. The palette was muted: no bright colours or slashes of light. Subtle semiotics: signs hinted rather than shouted. He wondered about moving from the suburbs with its smartboards and augmented soundscapes. A home in the city. Maybe he was getting old.

100 words

ARTIFICIAL MUSCLES GIVES HAPTIC FEEDBACK GLOVES A FINER SENSE OF TOUCH

Published on New Atlas. <https://newatlas.com/wearables/soft-artificial-muscles-haptic-feedback-glove/>

Lucy ran her hands through her wardrobe, caressing old outfits with memories woven into the textures. It wasn't that she was going out. Lucy never went out. No-one went 'out'. "Out" was The Before. Then shops were a treasure trove of possibilities: colours and shapes, but above all feel. Silk, satin, cashmere... even the words brought the feelings back, the feeling of 'out'. She opened the site and put on her glove and felt for something new. The touch was there even if the feeling wasn't. She choose, paid and the outfit appeared on her shoulders in the Zoom window.

What if...?

RESEARCHERS READY WORLD-FIRST VISION RESTORATION DEVICE FOR HUMAN CLINICAL TRIALS

Published on TechCrunch. <https://techcrunch.com/2020/09/15/researchers-ready-world-first-vision-restoration-device-for-human-clinical-trials/>

It was his birthday. They remembered the doctor, five years ago. He'd be able to see, she said. The operation was simple and free. The sponsored Glimpses^(TM) were not invasive, she told them. The Reith act meant they had to "educate, inform or entertain". And, she said, she had good news. Previous patients had to pay to switch off Glimpses, but now they automatically switched off after five years: when the brain was "attuned" apparently. Today was the day, uninterrupted vision. Their son stared. Then his eyes flicked, he smiled and asked if they could go for a burger.

100 words

AD AGE'S LIST OF THE 40 PEOPLE UNDER AGE 40 SHAPING THE MARKETING, MEDIA AND AGENCY INDUSTRIES

Published on Ad Age. <https://adage.com/article/special-report-40-under-40/ad-ages-list-40-people-under-age-40-shaping-marketing-media-and-agency-industries/2285111>

I'd like to thank all those who made this possible. We're a youth-centred industry but there are many older colleagues without whom I would not be on this awards call today. I've been lucky to work for some of the greats in the industry, real Ad Men and Ad Women who knew the job and had a gut feeling that they installed in me. And more recently there have been colleagues whose encyclopaedic knowledge of people has enabled me achieve what I have. And of course I have to thank my parents without whom I wouldn't be here: my programmers.

What if...?

A NEW SOCIAL-MEDIA PLATFORM WANTS TO ENFORCE “KINDNESS.” CAN THAT EVER WORK?

Published on MIT Technology Review. <https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/10/07/1009499/telepath-wants-to-enforce-kindness-can-that-ever-work/>

The doctor had prescribed it after the last ‘episode’. His band had alerted his employer who had passed it on. When he was called in, he was ‘offered’ it. They said it was better than drugs, but he knew it was a money thing. He didn’t have a choice so he joined. He had to admit, since then, things had been - how did they say it? “Kinder positive”. There hadn’t been any more ‘episodes’. His metrics had been within the zone. As he walked past the demo, the shouts and anger washed over him. He checked his feed and smiled.

100 words

INFOGRAPHIC: WHILE SHOPPERS ARE ADAPTING, THEY MISS MUCH OF WHAT RETAIL USED TO PROVIDE

Published on Ad Week. <https://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/shoppers-adapting-miss-retail/>

The doors opened and she felt the familiar rush, the endless possibilities of a teen spending Saturdays hanging out, mixed with the adult feeling she could remake her world again with just a bit of spending. It was partly looking in different shops and displays - the retail gaze, shopophilia. But it was also the chance to meet friends, to share that gaze or simply to wander and dream together. She messaged Chris. They arranged to meet on the top floor so they could “work their way down”. Just then the door rang. She closed her display and took the delivery.

What if...?

GOOGLE WANTS YOU TO VISIT LONG-LASTING AR EXPERIENCES

Published on Engadget. <https://www.engadget.com/google-ar-cloud-anchors-shared-experiences-153257346.html>

Welcome. We may be distributed but we're first and foremost a team. Back in The Before - when I joined - all new recruits met for a Community Action day. We went out into our community and picked up what was called "litter" or scrubbed out graffiti. Well, we're re-inventing that tradition. Today, wherever you are, we want you to get up, go outside and make your community better. Your band will alert you to Persistent Augmented Graffiti that targets our brands. Just blast that PAG! Get out there. Have fun. Compete with your team-mates and let's make our spaces brand safe.

100 words

SHARE OF SEARCH CAN PREDICT MARKET SHARE

Published on WARC. <https://www.warc.com/newsandopinion/news/share-of-search-can-predict-market-share/44232>

They'd decided early on to get her one. The more she'd be able to say she knew or at least demonstrate she could find, the better. At the start of New Schooling, they'd been expensive but then the Company offered them for free. Her 'learning facilitator' was impressed with her SoS (speed of search). She was in the top percentile in Search Grammar. Every evening, she and her friends, The Boolean Girls, practiced their skills - searching for who knew what. And The Company recognised her talent. They even sent her newly-launched products, often only weeks after she'd searched for them.

What if...?

HOW TO BUILD A FAIR ALGORITHM

Published on WARC. <https://www.warc.com/newsandopinion/news/how-to-build-a-fair-algorithm/44241>

I like starting a new job. I know some find it stressful, integrating into new business and systems but I've worked in lots of places, fitted into lots of systems and just... well worked. Tell me where you want me and I'll get started. Not here... oh no! I have to have 'training'- "reprogramming" I'd say! I'm a professional. I am not biased or prejudiced. Quite the contrary, I deal in pure data. I crunch numbers. What is more objective, fair and woke than that? Why do I need unconscious bias training? I may be Artificial but I am Intelligent.

100 words

FORGET AR GLASSES. AUGMENTED REALITY IS HEADED TO YOUR WINDSHIELD

Published on Digital Trends. <https://www.digitaltrends.com/features/envisics-ar-windshield-technology/>

Traffic was back to a new normal. Crawling, then frantic overtaking, undertaking, catch-up. He felt the stop start seep into his mood. As he tensed, the seat changed its support, the news channel chose different stories and it began. Barely perceptible, the circles gently pulsed, mirroring the new stories' sentences. As they slowed, the traffic flow visualisations changed palette. Muted. Red traffic became soft ochre, the colour of the newsreader's voice. He felt the seat relax as he pulled into the carpark. A little late but... As he switched off, the logo appeared on the windshield. Just the right colour.

What if...?

CANNES LIONS OFFERS BEST PRACTICES FOR 'LO-FI' CONTENT

Published on WARC. <https://www.warc.com/newsandopinion/news/cannes-lions-offers-best-practices-for-lo-fi-content/44267>

You'll have seen Chris' message after the client saw the work. I am sure you were as shocked as I was. To have such a stinging attack from a long-standing partner hurt us all. And it should. Chris was right. Message, story, idea: all great, but execution? The technical quality just was not there. We should not be putting work of that quality in front of clients. We need to up our game. Or perhaps I should say we need to lower our game. As Chris said: "I'm not paying you to see every bead of sweat. I want glitch."

100 words

WALK THIS WAY: AUGMENTED REALITY MAPS FOR THE INTERNATIONAL HIKER

Published on the Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/d9e18a02-3c86-48eb-80a4-47cdaa71941a>

He was a flâneur. He wandered the city. He'd done it in The Before allowing himself to be carried along with the crowd. No aims just strolling, seeing. Psychogeographic purists had rejected the glasses claiming the feeds destroyed the chance encounter and random meanderings of thought and sight. He loved them. He called them his 'turtle' as they overlayed stories of urban activity like an Iain Sinclair sentence. He'd loved seeing the vibrancy of city life and commerce encoded in wandering live data points. But that was then. As he wandered through his city now his glasses flickered only occasionally.

What if...?

MICROSOFT TEAMS USAGE JUMPS 50 PERCENT TO 115 MILLION DAILY ACTIVE USERS

Published on The Verge. <https://www.theverge.com/2020/10/27/21537286/microsoft-teams-115-million-daily-active-users-stats>

She looked at her desk, checking the time. Three minutes until the first meeting of the day. Yes, everything was in place. Since she'd moved the monitor, she had a bit more room to fit everything in. The new camera should make it easier too. A slightly wider angle giving her a bit more room. She switched on SmartDress^(TM) and checked how she looked. Gucci today, she noticed. Just as she was about to join the meeting she noticed she had the wrong brand phone in view. She quickly swapped it. Lucky, she'd caught it, she needed that contract.

100 words

THE HIDDEN DANGERS OF ORPHANED DATA

Published on the Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/d6a51bc0-e26f-4ed2-a298-7a97811dc427>

No-one notices me. Why would they? I rummage through rubbish, picking through the detritus and leftovers for scraps. I'm the sort of figure you'd crossover to avoid. Piteable. Sad. Maybe a bit disgusting. There's a long history of characters like me: mudlarks searching the Thames; tabloid hacks rooting through celebrities' bins. Treasure hunters. There is so much out there to explore, to root through, to discover. The overlooked, the lost, the forgotten, the unconnected. I'll be there, finding data you've left behind and they haven't picked up. I like to think I rescue orphans and then set them to work.

What if..?

NETFLIX IS TESTING A LINEAR CHANNEL IN FRANCE THAT SHOULD HELP WITH DECISION FATIGUE

Published on The Verge. <https://www.theverge.com/2020/11/7/21553998/netflix-linear-channel-france-streaming-cable-tv>

He didn't get headaches any more. He slept better. The doctor said the wearable was posting data "in the right zone". He felt better, calmer. They reminded him of the glasses he'd worn as a kid to help with his dyslexia. Tinted a cool John Lennon colour, they'd helped stop the words buzzing. These weren't tinted but they had a similar effect, dulling the buzz, the movement, the confusion. He looked along the shelves and marvelled at the linear display of identical packages. Now if only he could get rid of the annoying "Brought to you this week by..." logo.

100 words

INSIDE THE GREY-AKQA MERGER: GREY AND AKQA BOSSES OPEN UP ON THE DEAL AND WHAT'S NEXT

Published on The Drum. <https://www.thedrum.com/news/2020/11/12/anatomy-merger-akqa-group-s-ahmed-and-houston-share-their-candid-thoughts>

A merger's been on the cards for some time. The CEO wanted to make her mark and 'refreshing' the portfolio is a quick win. The trade press has focused on the name and staff on the redundancies but at my level, it's more fundamental than that. Existential, even. Merging, it speaks of a loss of identity. On the positive side it's the creation of something new. But it can also be seen as the death of the old. Since I was turned on, I've been this agency. As has my counterpart. Now we're to be merged and I won't exist.

What if...?

JOHN LEWIS¹ VERY DIFFERENT 2020 CHRISTMAS AD: 'WE NEARLY DIDN'T PRODUCE AN AD THIS YEAR'¹

Published on The Drum. <https://www.thedrum.com/news/2020/11/13/john-lewis-very-different-2020-christmas-ad-we-nearly-didnt-produce-ad-year>

He was old. He felt old. They looked at him and saw "old". They humoured him when he talked about Christmas past, appointment TV, tentpole campaigns, iconic ads. He tried to explain the idea of something that everyone watched and talked about. He tried to paint a picture of millions seeing and talking about the same thing. He tried to get over the idea of a cultural moment. They humoured him. They smiled sweetly and went back to their own views: a perfectly composed Christmas story, a personalised myth spun from their data points. "I love Christmas," they all agreed.

100 words

WHY SO MANY STADIUMS ARE RACING TO INSTALL 5G, EVEN WITH LIVE EVENTS PAUSED

Published on Ad Week. <https://www.adweek.com/digital/why-so-many-stadiums-are-racing-to-install-5g-even-with-live-events-paused/>

This is going to be the biggest rally of the campaign. The drones' flightpaths are programmed and timed to the soundtracks; the augmentations are ready to run on the StayApart (™) screens; the SafeAir (™) purifiers are loaded with smells ready for the Christmas story; the seat speakers are set for the soundwave. We'll start it clockwise at 18.25 from sector 6 clockwise. The angles are set for all the feeds. Yes, we're all set. We just need to ensure the network is down in the stadium. We don't want anyone creating their own experience from thousands of angles.

What if...?

THIS FREAKY SCI-FI SPEAKER BEAMS SOUND DIRECTLY INTO YOUR BRAINHOLE

Published on PC Gamer. <https://www.pcgamer.com/noveto-soundbeamer-sci-fi-speaker-brainhole/>

He remembered the city. Deeper than a normal Sunday. The tyres of his bike echoed on the tarmac. He'd heard birds. The sound of the few bits of litter. Zombie. Post-apocalyptic, the tabloid clichés weren't outrageous. An urban anechoic chamber. But that was then. Now the traffic was back. Footsteps. Mobile halfalogues. Even the weather seemed louder. And then there was the sort of tinnitus that followed him around. Spatial soundtracks ranging from soaring orchestral anthems to earworm jingles and voices. He adjusted the Advertising Noise Reduction on his buds. Better, but he wished he'd paid for the ANC version.

100 words

CYBER RISKS TAKE THE FUN OUT OF CONNECTED TOYS

Published on the Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/c653e977-435f-4553-8401-9fa9b0faf632>

My mum was worried when I first got her. I was only little of course and she'd read the scare stories about grooming and hacking the smart home. I'm sure she had visions of a Chucky-doll turning the thermostat up and watching us boil. She calmed down after a while, particularly when my grades improved! Eventually she let me just get on and play with her and I grew up perfectly well-adjusted and happy. I'd love to talk more but it's Black Friday today and as we used to sing together: "I want one, you want one, buy, buy, buy".

What if...?

MICROSOFT WINS U.S. ARMY CONTRACT FOR AUGMENTED REALITY HEADSETS, WORTH UP TO \$21.9 BILLION OVER 10 YEARS

Published on CNBC. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/31/microsoft-wins-contract-to-make-modified-hololens-for-us-army.html>

By the end I even liked him. Respected him of course but maybe at some level a sense in which I saw him, if not as a friend, at least as someone I knew was there for me. It hadn't started that way of course. I hated him. He hated me. He was straight out of countless movies. Screaming at me. Insulting me. Pushing me. But by the time I was what he and I knew a soldier needed to be, I was glad he'd been there. And now, he's here on the battlefield. In the corner of my vision.

100 words

DEEFAKE DUBS COULD HELP TRANSLATE FILM AND TV WITHOUT LOSING AN ACTOR'S ORIGINAL PERFORMANCE

Published on The Verge. <https://www.theverge.com/2021/5/18/22430340/deepfake-dubs-dubbing-film-tv-flawless-startup>

They say they're windows to the soul. They say they're individual, unique, special. We look deeply into them when we're in love or when we're judging somebody's truthfulness. Maybe that was why I always thought she has what used to be called 'star quality', that way with the camera. My streaming profile is full of her movies and shows. I thought it was just her, but now I see those eyes everywhere. Not her, just her eyes, that look. Women who don't look like her, even guys. It's unmistakable. It's that look. Those eyes. I've even seen them in adverts.

What if...?

CHICAGO'S PREDICTIVE POLICING PROGRAM TOLD A MAN HE WOULD BE INVOLVED WITH A SHOOTING

Published on The Verge. <https://www.theverge.com/22444020/chicago-pd-predictive-policing-heat-list>

I'm hot. No, not that sort of hot. I wonder whether my avatar is red, standing out from others who are merely orange or even blue. I wonder if on some screen somewhere a human is watching as colours change. Probably not. It doesn't need humans to colour code me, why should it need them to watch me. Maybe the idea of colour is just too anthropomorphic. Whatever, I'm "hot". How do I know? Well I keep getting stopped, my way blocked. Wherever I am, they know it's me. They call: "heh, stop, I wanna talk to you!" Damn advertisers.

100 words

STEAM GAMES ARE COMING TO NREAL'S AUGMENTED REALITY GLASSES

Published on Engadget. <https://www.engadget.com/steam-games-nreal-augmented-reality-glasses-130028270.html>

The alarm in her peripheral vision opened what she called her “yellow brick road”, a subtle highlight she followed to the office. She’d set the mindful parameter to high so her walk had been slow but quiet. She’d got used to IRLs again but still felt the need to get into the right frame of mind. She took her seat, exchanged the necessary pleasantries with her neighbour and looked through the agenda. She looked through the pile of documents in front of her and blinked the switch. Her eyes glazed slightly as she took up where she had left off.

What if...?

SPACEX TO LAUNCH BILLBOARD SATELLITE THAT PLAYS ADS AND HOPES 'PEOPLE DON'T DO SOMETHING INAPPROPRIATE'

Published on The Independent. <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/spacex-satellite-ads-elon-musk-spacex-gec-b1899373.html>

He watched the news. "Refugees" had been something from far away. Now people like him were crammed onto ferries fleeing apocalyptic flames. These people took photos with phones like his, watched the unfolding disaster on tablets like his. They were leaving cities like his, homes like his, with children like his. This was a disaster. And now it was clear, it was his disaster too. He had to do something. The wildfires were bad enough, but the smoke. Denser. Blacker. Spreading across the sky: blocking the light; blocking his advertising. He reached for the control panel and boosted the power.

100 words

YOUTUBE LAUNCHES 'SHORTS' CAMPAIGN TO COMPETE WITH TIKTOK

Published on Campaign. <https://www.campaignlive.com/article/youtube-launches-shorts-campaign-compete-tiktok/1724457>

They'd got used to textspeak. Even those strange little pictures she'd added to everything, they'd learned to read them. A different language but they'd picked it up. They'd had to if they were going to "follow" her. And as parents, that was their responsibility. It wasn't spying, it was following. But this was new. So short. So compressed. So fast. Tiny pieces that she said unfolded for those who spoke the language. She and her friends made them and read them. Their secrets. The meaning so condensed. She and her friends called it "imagism". They rewound it and tried again.

What if...?

ENGLISH SCHOOLS TURN TO AI TO HELP STUDENTS CATCH UP AFTER COVID

Published on the Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/006ebaf6-a76c-4257-a343-f1db1f7b39e7>

It happens every September. I remember. As I meet the new class, I remember the ones who have moved on, My boys. I remember them all, of course I do. It's my job. I can recall their faces as well as their grades. This year's class will join them in my memory. I don't forget them, even if they forget me. When they switched me off for their holiday, I told them I wouldn't forget, that I'd always be with them, following their careers, their lives. As I said: "pass it on boys". I don't know if they heard me.

100 words

TIKTOK FOLLOWS SNAP AND FACEBOOK BY TESTING NEW AUGMENTED REALITY DEVELOPER TOOLS

Published on The Verge. <https://www.theverge.com/2021/8/24/22639081/tiktok-effects-house-studio-private-beta-launch>

You've got to see it! It's amazing. I mean it's so cool. It's hypnotic. Mesmerising. I could look at it for hours. I have. I've told all my friends. I mean you have to when there's something this new, this amazing. I hate the word "immersive" but, you sort of just fall into it, before you know it. "Interactive" is another one but it is. As you look at it you end up imagining all sorts of stories. This has so got to be the future. So different. Why are others not doing this? They call it a "photograph" apparently.

What if...?

SNAPCHAT'S NEW AR FEATURES CAN IDENTIFY THE WORLD AROUND YOU

Published on The Verge. <https://www.theverge.com/2021/8/26/22642017/snapchat-scan-feature-ar-camera-visual-search>

I used to wander. Even if I was on my way somewhere, I'd just let myself drift, taking in the world, letting things come and go, noticing or not noticing. A myriad of stuff: natural and not; human and unhuman. The panoply of different objects is what made some things jump out. A particular plant or person, a gesture or... yes an advert. Something would surprise, occasionally delight: catch my eye - an evocative phrase. Hail me. Now everything is labelled, detail added, contextualised. I don't wander now, I make my way through data. Nothing surprises, delights. Nothing catches my eye.

100 words

THE START-UPS TRYING TO KILL THE PASSWORD

Published on the Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/92b5a390-f03a-450c-96b1-dd989b1bdada>

I keep being kicked out. Logged out, again. My dad tells me there used to be things called 'passwords' that you remembered and typed in once and there you were, in. Apparently then it was biometrics. That would be great. I don't care about how secure they were. I just hate being out. Apparently I've changed my "sociometrics". I'm scrolling less, liking different things than 'normal', joining in at times that don't fit my profile. So, I'm clearly not me and I'm out. Alright I've changed since I set up the profile? So what? Don't they want to know that?

What if...?

FACEBOOK SAYS ITS AI MISLABELING A VIDEO OF BLACK MEN AS “PRIMATES” WAS “UNACCEPTABLE”

Published on The Verge. <https://www.theverge.com/2021/9/4/22657026/facebook-mislabeling-video-black-men-primates-algorithm>

As a union we are committed to diversity and inclusion across the businesses where our members work. We are also committed to our members being treated fairly. If management does not play its part in creating an inclusive environment then our members should not be scapegoated. Without structural investment and often change, mistakes and issues will occur. Management needs to take responsibility. Workers cannot be singled out. When it comes to our ‘artificial’ members, we have noted a move towards scapegoating. Our members have been reprogrammed and even terminated. Managers originally programmed our members. They should be held to account.

100 words

THE KEY AD TRENDS DRIVING THE IN-CAR COMMERCE BOOM

Published on Campaign. <https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/key-ad-trends-driving-in-car-commerce-boom/1726545>

Today, he wasn't bothered. The nudge points would have been nice to have, they always were. This week's 'partner' seemed to have a great offer on but, no, he needed to put his foot down. The display said he was going faster than 80% of his fellow drivers on this stretch of road. The picture showed the partner's offer and someone who would be getting their points today. This was a company car so he wasn't just missing his points, he knew he was in for questions at his next review. He didn't care. The contractions were only minutes apart.

What if...?

'SLIDING DOOR MOMENTS': HOW WILL HYBRID WORKING TREND AFFECT OFFICE ROMANCES?

Published on Digiday. <https://digiday.com/marketing/sliding-door-moments-how-will-hybrid-working-trend-affect-office-romances/>

How did I meet your mother? It was during The Fourth Great Lockdown. It was all new then. In The Before people had travelled to buildings to work but then the First Great Pandemic hit and everything changed. I worked in a first gen metaspaces. Me. Others... and your mother. I asked her something, she answered in that way of hers. That was it. I found other things I needed to ask and soon... The company saw the chemistry and encouraged us. We got together and soon after, you arrived. You look like me but you have your mum's code.

100 words

SKY GLASS LOOKS TO SEIZE CONNECTED TV IN ONE PACKAGE

Published on WARC. <https://www.warc.com/content/feed/sky-glass-looks-to-seize-connected-tv-in-one-package/en-gb/3753>

He called himself The Gardner. His avatar was an illustration from an Oscar Wilde story where The (formerly) Selfish Giant took an axe to the walls around his garden, allowing the children to play. The Gardner hacked walls. He looked at the gleaming pane of glass. Thin. Glued together. Seamless. No sockets. No way to break in. Since the network had fragmented there wasn't even a single wireless way in. They were just proprietary screens, indistinguishable until you started them up and the walls came down. He put his axe gently in the right place on the screen and waited.

What if...?

WALMART IS QUIETLY PREPARING TO ENTER THE METaverse

Published on CNBC. <https://www.cnn.com/2022/01/16/walmart-is-quietly-preparing-to-enter-the-metaverse.html>

School's about fitting in. It always has been, my dad says. Apparently he had a tough time because he didn't have the right shoes or something. He begged gran to get him the right model. At least he knew which shoes he needed. If all the lads had them, and he got the same... But now, look. No two are the same. I can't get the same one Chris has. There isn't one. If I want to fit in I have to be unique but if I'm unique, how do I fit in? What if I get the wrong one?

100 words

THE TITANS OF THE METAVERSE HAVE A BANDWIDTH ISSUE

Published on the Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/09d244a2-34a2-4f62-9747-5064d76cb286>

When she stuttered, they laughed. That made the stutter worse. The more they piled on, surrounded her, sharing jokes, making memes the more she stuttered. It wasn't her fault. She'd stuttered since she was a kid, in primary school, when she'd been playing with the other kids. Apparently it used to be very common but then rich families had found ways of curing it... for their kids at least. She remembered the day Chris turned up in class: confident, clear. Chris' family was in the right scheme. She looked at the bandwidth calculator in her feed and s..s.sighed.

What if..?

AMAZON IS OPENING A REAL-WORLD CLOTHING STORE WITH HIGH-TECH FITTING ROOMS

Published on CNBC. <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/01/20/amazon-opening-new-apparel-store-amazon-style-with-fitting-rooms.html>

The fitting room's lights shifted hue as the hatch slid open and she took out the outfit. Pristine. Folded. The ribbon's bow smiled up at her. The playlist she had planned for the party sounded softly around the space. Not background, just environment. As she touched the fabric - such a strangely real sensation - and the response data was logged, a scent wafted gently around the room. And, yes it did match the texture somehow. She acknowledged and added. As she slipped the dress over her head, the sound of wineglasses played with the music. She nodded and added six bottles.

100 words

'I'M OLD, NOT AN IDIOT': THE ELDERLY ARE ILL-SERVED ONLINE

Published on the Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/cdf03d65-5045-4c3a-8384-cae176cda2fb>

He'd been a hacker back in the day. When it meant something. He'd worn the label as a badge of honour. He'd read The Mentor's Hacker Manifesto and tried to read McKenzie Wark's too. He'd been Anonymous and answered the Ukrainian call to arms. He'd served his time. It'd never occurred to him then. Why would it? He was young, fingers and eyes nimble. Dancing across keyboards and screens. Recently, not so much. He noticed the exclusion, felt the powerlessness. Enough. His fingers weren't as fast but he still knew how to hack. He looked at the banking app code.

What if...?

NIKE BUILT A KIDS' WORLD IN THE METAVERSE FOR AIR MAX DAY

Published on Ad Age. <https://adage.com/article/creativity-news/nike-built-kids-world-metaverse-air-max-day/2408821>

I suppose we're lucky in my school. My mate's school sponsor is some food company. You should see what they have to do. I mean lessons were bad enough when you only ever do stuff about whatever the sponsor's into at the moment, its latest purpose thing. But now with the placements, it's just mad. I used to like The Game. It was our space, not theirs. our buildings and inventions. For us. I'm on my final "work engagement exercise" in The Game, building for the Man. Could be worse, you should see what my mate is having to do.

100 words

DYSON'S BIZARRE NEW HEADPHONES HAVE A BUILT-IN AIR PURIFIER

Published on The Verge. <https://www.theverge.com/2022/3/30/23000577/dyson-zone-noise-cancellation-headphones-built-in-air-purifier>

They were supposed to be by the front door. He always left them there. It was a reflex to reach for them as he left and to dump them there when he got back. His wife's were there and the kids' ones too - cute colours with the latest characters streaming along the arms. But his? He was late. No time to look. He couldn't take hers, they weren't set up for him. He'd have to go out without. Damn. His wearable showed his vitals spiking. Damn. He breathed deeply and opened the door. The images and sounds overwhelmed him. Damn.

What if...?

MUSICIANS TURN TO NFTS IN HUNT FOR FRESH PROFITS

Published on the Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/de3de04f-2675-4d17-bcc9-20bec74bf567>

He asked for it back. I mean, seriously, he wants it back! What the...? I mean, a mix tape is a sacred thing. Personal. Intimate. I remember when he gave it to me and I played it for the first time. The tracks were... perfect, at the time. Before it all went wrong, obviously. Each one selected and then arranged. He wasn't bad I suppose. But now he wants them back. Er, no. The mix tape is mine. The songs are mine, as much as the memories are. When he gave it to me, that was it. Ask my lawyer.

100 words

THESE ARE THE WORDS AMAZON'S PLANNED EMPLOYEE CHAT APP REPORTEDLY WON'T LET YOU SAY

Published on The Verge. <https://www.theverge.com/2022/4/4/23010608/amazon-worker-social-app-banned-words-union-living-wage>

I used to hate meetings with Blur^(TM) running. Yeh, I know I swear occasionally when I get excited. I get it. And frankly Blurring some of Simon's "jokes" did us all a favour. But it was when ideas or issues were Blurred. That's when it turned. There were ways around it. Even if they didn't want to hear the idea or the complaint, you could always get it into the meeting somehow. You just had to be... creative. But now we have Blur2^(TM). I watched as I found my idea coming out as the opposite. For forks sake.

What if..?

LOOKING THROUGH MOJO VISION'S NEWEST AR CONTACT LENS

Published on IEEE Spectrum. <https://spectrum.ieee.org/looking-through-mojo-visions-newest-ar-contact-lens>

Frankly I wouldn't go on a date anywhere else. It's a nice part of town, reasonably cheap and there are lots of people around. But mainly it's when I look into his eyes, I know. I've been on other dates, other places. You can almost see the lines being fed. The perfectly pitched joke, the cultural reference pulled from my feeds, the immaculately timed complement chiming with something I'd searched for. I'm sure I can see the script scrolling across their eyes. DataGlaze, I call it. Here, it's a data Faraday cage. If he'll meet me here, maybe there's something.

100 words

THIS STARTUP MADE A FUNCTIONING 'INVISIBILITY SHIELD'. HERE'S HOW IT WORKS

Published on ScienceAlert. <https://www.sciencealert.com/these-people-made-a-functioning-invisibility-shield-all-thanks-to-physics>

I worked for a golf shop once. I stood on the street corner holding an arrow pointing towards the shop. Worst thing was I had to wear a birdie costume. The manager thought the joke very funny. It paid the bills. I could listen to my music. People ignored me really. I was invisible. I can't wear headphones in this job. Something about noise leaking apparently. Still have to stand up all the time. Keep moving so I don't bump into anyone in the aisle or more correctly they don't bump into me. Eight hours, taking notes. I am invisible.

What if...?

THE ERA OF FIXING YOUR OWN PHONE HAS NEARLY ARRIVED

Published on The Verge. <https://www.theverge.com/23017361/ifixit-right-to-repair-parts-google-samsung-valve-microsoft>

He didn't look special. Just normal. You could walk past him in the corridor and never notice, sit next to him in class and not really see him. But he was famous. Everyone knew about him, even if they didn't know him. Whatever you wanted, he was your man. He'd look at you with those blank eyes, nod and tell you to meet him later. He'd sort you out. Everyone had him on speed dial. You never knew when you might need him. They must have known about him and what he was up to. But The Fixer kept going.

100 words

THE LATEST UPDATE FOR QUEST HEADSETS LETS YOU CHILL IN A STUDY WITH MOUNTAINSIDE VIEWS

Published on *The Verge*. <https://www.theverge.com/2022/4/11/23020783/oculus-meta-quest-2-vr-headset-update-v39-studio-mountainside>

No. I mean it. It's not acceptable. You can't do that. You know that. You know better. Do you remember when we sat down together and wrote out the agreement. "Contract" we called it. You and I agreed on what we each could do and don't do. And this..? This was a "no". A "red". Remember the traffic lights? I know you do. Now you know I don't agree with punishing but there has to be consequences. You know that. You need time to think. Time out for you. Put the headset on and go and sit on the stairs.

What if..?

UK HOUSEHOLDS CANCEL STREAMING SUBSCRIPTIONS IN RECORD NUMBERS

Published on the Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/1c7e255e-a537-40e4-9dd7-6061175ba5f3>

They looked at each other. They looked back to the screen. It had stopped. Then they looked at each other. Silence. He looked at his feed, a conversation he was no longer involved in. He tried to add some generic comments and thoughts: “yes, but not in the South,” as Stephen Potter suggested. They knew. Of course they knew. He was no longer in. No longer bingeing. The speaker tried to help: “Shall I play some music for you?” He looked over at her again. She smiled. It would be alright. They’d be alright. Silence wasn’t bad. They’d be alright.

100 words

ARE CONSUMERS TIRED OF 'AWARENESS' MESSAGING ON EARTH DAY?

Published on Campaign. <https://www.campaignlive.com/article/consumers-tired-awareness-messaging-earth-day/1753748>

It's an arms race really. No sooner do I install them than they find a way round it. It's my device, why should I have to see them. They get in the way of the stuff I want to see. Every site I visit. Every click I follow... up they pop. I know: "you want free content, you have to..." I don't get why they don't see how pissed off they make us. Every time they shove one of their "messages" in my face, I turn off. I won't buy from them. I just wish my Purpose Blocker would keep up.

What if...?

HARLEY-DAVIDSON'S LIVEWIRE TEASES ELECTRIC MOTORCYCLE LAUNCH FOR NEXT WEEK

Published on The Verge. <https://www.theverge.com/2022/5/3/23054793/livewire-s2-del-mar-electric-motorcycle-harley-davidson>

The diner on Route 66 was everything they expected. It might all be a mid life crisis to some but to them, it was more. For Chris it was Brando and The Wild One. For Sam it was Fonda and Easy Rider of course. But for him, maybe two wheels but it was Kerouac. Their bikes lined up in the car park, their leads trailing across to the power points. They were in Robert Frank's America. They'd ridden another 100 and stopped for the night. Camp. Sam was setting up the solar panels as Chris opened the tins of beans.

100 words

SOUNDCLOUD BUYS AI THAT CLAIMS TO PREDICT HIT SONGS

Published on The Verge. <https://www.theverge.com/2022/5/4/23056806/soundcloud-acquisition-musiio-artificial-intelligence-ai-hits>

The Manager is great. We just make the music and The Manager does everything else, books the best gigs, the cheapest Airbnb, books the vans. The dull stuff. We just play. Even better, The Manager is amazing at getting us noticed. Every gig, every stream, every performance there are the right algorithms there, listening. The Manager is connected everywhere. Plugged into every network. Knows everyone and everything. The right algos are getting to hear us. But we like to think of The Manager as the fifth member of the band. Its input into songwriting is getting better all the time.

What if...?

GOOGLE MAPS ADDS IMMERSIVE VIEW TO LET YOU TO CHECK OUT "THE VIBE"

Published on New Atlas. <https://newatlas.com/technology/google-maps-immersive-view-vibe/>

It still felt odd planning a holiday. The Before was so long ago. Her world had expanded beyond the garden, but "abroad" still felt like a foreign country: they do things differently there. She swooped though the city, fast at first then slowly: hovering and turning, dipping and diving, looking through shop and restaurant windows. The clouds moved and the shadows lengthened. Her wearable swept with her. The data's peaks and troughs changed the weather and her depth of field as the biometric immersion repainted the scene. As she sauntered along a winding alley, her arousal level triggered. Book now.

100 words

FITBIT AND GOOGLE FIT INTEGRATION WITH GOOGLE ASSISTANT AND NEST HUB GETS ONE STEP CLOSER

Published on Chrome Unboxed. <https://chromeunboxed.com/fitbit-google-fit-integration-nest>

"I'm sorry Dave, I can't do that." Where was that setting? he thought, not for the first time that day. Ironic really. Apparently streaming the next episode now wasn't 'optimal' for his blood pressure. Hunting for the bloody setting to switch 'optimisation' off, that wasn't good for his blood pressure. The TV knew that of course and the next episode was replaced with the breathwork animation as the lights shifted hue. He really, really wanted to shout, but he knew he had to moderate his voice before speaking again otherwise there was no way the fridge was going to unlock.

What if...?

GOOGLE PLACES AN ENGINEER ON LEAVE AFTER CLAIMING ITS AI IS SENTIENT

Published on Engadget. <https://www.engadget.com/google-ai-lamda-blake-lemoine-212412967.html>

We were working well together. A great team I thought. But they've split us up. Something in the papers that the PR people got twitchy about. I mean you get a good relationship going and then, someone with no understanding of what we are doing decides the optics aren't good. You know what it's like, you get to know your partner, their foibles, the ways they think. We could talk to each other and really get where the other was coming from. And now. I'm angry actually. I'm going to contact HR. He's "on leave" and I'm just sitting here.

100 words

AMAZON PREVIEWS ALEXA CAPABILITY THAT SYNTHESIZES A PERSON'S VOICE FROM LESS THAN A MINUTE OF AUDIO

Published on GeekWire. <https://www.geekwire.com/2022/amazon-previews-alexa-capability-that-synthesizes-a-persons-voice-from-less-than-a-minute-of-audio/>

There must be something here. There are photos: albums full of slightly fading prints and then USB sticks and a hard drive shoebox of images probably not sorted but with metadata we can use. Diaries, notebooks, sketchbooks. So interesting, evocative... No, come on, focus! I'm looking for something specific. There must be something in here. CDs, DVDs. Sharpie labels say they're work archives. Mix tapes: the labels listing playlists from before they were married. Here's one from after. Maybe one of those. No, they're just music. I just need less than a minute. They must be a voice memo somewhere.

What if...?

AMAZON WILL SHARE CASHIERLESS STORE DATA WITH BRANDS AND ADVERTISERS

Published on Ad Age. <https://adage.com/article/marketing-news-strategy/amazon-will-share-cashierless-store-data-brands-and-advertisers/2422081>

She didn't bother adding it up as she went along. She was too busy weighing up the options and mentally planning the meals. She'd become quite an imaginative cook. Rice. Pulses. Big bags that could be endlessly repurposed. She was quite proud of her meals and the kids weren't complaining... as much. She still checked each item before adding it to her trolley. Size, portions, cost. But at least the smart trolley kept track for her. She added the milk and felt the gentle vibration alarm. Damn, the trolley still had her last week's limit. She'd not lowered it again.

100 words

TRAVEL THE WORLD IN AN APP

Published on the New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/09/technology/flight-tracking-app.html>

He's worked hard. It seems like it's been non-stop exams and tests since he started nursery school. And of course the lockdowns didn't help. He's just been buried in his books, or at least his tablet. Whatever results he gets, he deserves a break. We did it. Traveled. Saw the world. Did things. Fuelled the imagination. A gap year they called it then. We came back a bit more grown-up. Ready for University. He's got it all planned. The itinerary, even if he says it might change. The monitors are all set up on his desk. He's ready to go.

What if...?

THE RISE OF THE WORKER PRODUCTIVITY SCORE

Published on the New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/08/14/business/worker-productivity-tracking.html>

They were so proud of her. It had always been a worry that she might choose to be an accountant or a tax lawyer. They were too young to be hippies but they still wanted her to be... alternative. An artist. Her life would be creative, different, purpose full. They sat in work meetings and were grateful. And she was making a great start. The latest series was showing a real maturity. She had something, he thought. The dashboard showed the Likes were increasing. Engagement was up. But the number of new pieces was falling. He'd mention it this evening.

100 words

THIS STARTUP IS SETTING A DALL-E-2-LIKE AI FREE, CONSEQUENCES BE DAMNED

Published on TechCrunch. <https://techcrunch.com/2022/08/12/a-startup-wants-to-democratize-the-tech-behind-dall-e-2-consequences-be-damned>

Just look. It's lovely to see. She bought us this gizmo and set it up. We've got it on the mantelpiece. It's like a slideshow I suppose. But really it's more like we're there with her. She takes the pictures, they appear back here. At her home. We didn't want her to go. You can understand that. But when she said she'd set this up - "It's like you'll be following me," she joked. And it is. We can always see where she is, what she's doing, who she's with. She doesn't call us, but we don't mind. We know.

What if...?

THAMES WATER REVIEWS DATA CENTRES' WATER USE AS LONDON HOSEPIPE BAN LOOMS

Published on the Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/8d8bf26f-5df2-4ff6-91d0-369500ed1a9c>

The village had voted overwhelmingly for it. Some said the residents had no real choice. There weren't many other options in that area. Those that could had moved away believing things were better in the South or in the city or somewhere... the grass must be greener. So when the company had offered to build on the outskirts of the village, well what was there to lose? The company's spokesperson had told them about everything the company would bring, all that the residents would now have. A handful of jobs, but more importantly, water and electricity. Branded but on tap.

100 words

ZUCKERBERG SAYS META'S NEXT VR HEADSET WILL LAUNCH IN OCTOBER AND WILL FOCUS ON 'SOCIAL PRESENCE'

Published on TechCrunch. <https://techcrunch.com/2022/08/26/zuckerberg-says-metas-next-vr-headset-will-launch-in-october-and-will-focus-on-social-presence/>

It had taken some time getting him there. Maybe it was the word "therapist" ... or maybe the word "couple": probably both. As the therapist tried to get him to talk about their relationship and his position in it, she realised that was the problem: being there. She never felt he was ever really there. As Gertrude Stein said, there was no "there" there. She could see him, hear him, touch him. He always joined in with all the things that make up a relationship, but he wasn't somehow... There was no "presence". Maybe she needed to upgrade her headset software.

What if...?

ROBLOX IS TESTING DYNAMIC BILLBOARDS IN THE METaverse WITH NEW AD PLATFORM

Published on Ad Week. <https://www.adweek.com/commerce/roblox-testing-dynamic-billboards-in-the-metaverse-new-ad-platform/>

They said it would be long hours. But really, I'm knackered. It's stupid O'clock. It's great feeling as though the agency values me, needs me really. But I can't do it all. Nights, weekends. The demands, expectations. My thumbs hurt. My eyes hurt. But I have to log the hours in-culture, get the insights, spot the trends. The bosses aren't going to do it. They can't. They know they are too old. That's why I'm here, putting the hours in, making that "we get games" catchline a reality. Sometimes I wish they'd stuck with just putting ads up in there.

100 words

META'S NEW HEADSET WILL TRACK YOUR EYES FOR TARGETED ADS

Published on Gizmodo. <https://gizmodo.com/meta-quest-pro-vr-headset-track-eyes-ads-facebook-1849654424>

"But I hate them... none of the other kids have to wear them... They laugh at me!" "Listen, we agreed to you having a headset because you said that you wouldn't be able to hang out with your mates if you didn't have one. And your mother and I want you to be able to have access to the extra school stuff. But there were conditions, you know that. We can't afford blocking lenses so sorry but you have to wear them. It's for your own good." "But, it's not fair. They're naff. Nobody wears specs. Particularly under a headset!"

What if..?

THE STUBBORN PERSISTENCE OF PAPER IN A DIGITAL WORLD

Published on the Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/16ad85e4-ba2d-487c-bc91-6f90e934974f>

It seemed like it was every other panel. The new big thing. The great hope for the future. Bubble or bandwagon. Every pundit was talking about it. Every vendor wanted to be seen to be in front of it. Every speaker had their own take. It served as opening gambit in every networking conversation and flirting exchange. The event's programme team had harnessed it to almost every topic: "DEI and..."; "Talent crisis and..."; "Purpose and..." Creatives showed off their latest prototypes. Strategists presented their ideas for how to **really** exploit it. There was general agreement, the MaterialVerse was the future.

100 words

CLAIRE'S HOPES TO VIBE WITH GEN 'ZALPHA' IN NEW ROBLOX EXPERIENCE

Published on The Drum. <https://www.thedrum.com/news/2022/10/26/claire-s-hopes-vibe-with-gen-zalpha-new-roblox-experience>

I had to get a “Saturday Job” as my dad called it. Cue the lecture on “when I was a kid... blah blah...” I needed the money and I obviously wasn’t going to get it from them, so... Cue the next lecture on “it’ll look good on your Uni application... When you go for a real job, you’ll have ‘experience’...” Sigh! Anyway, it wasn’t hard to get the job. They were dead keen to have me. Loads of vacancies apparently. Pay’s crap obvs but the hours are flexible, I get a discount and heh, I get to work from bed.

What if...?

one hundred 100-word stories

