COURSE 1

READY SET FUTURE

READING MATERIAL

The Future as a Way of Life:

Alvin Toffler's Unfinished Business

By Marina Gorbis, 2016

INSTITUTE FOR THE FUTURE

FUTURES THINKING

taught by Institute for the Future with **Jane McGonigal**

COURSE 1

READY SET FUTURE

Do you want to think about the future with more creativity and optimism? Do you want to see what's coming, faster, so you can be better prepared for disruptions and more in control of your future? Do you want to get better at changing what's possible—in your company, your industry, your community, and in your own life?

This course will introduce you to the practice of futures thinking, as developed and applied for the past 50 years by the Institute from the Future, a Silicon-Valley-based research and learning group founded in 1968. In this course, you'll build your baseline understanding of what futures thinking is and what you can do with it. You'll master introductory techniques for growing your foresight. You'll meet a range of professional futurists and learn more about how they think and research what's coming. And you'll choose one or more future topics or personal interest to investigate with your new foresight skills.

This course is for anyone who wants to spot opportunities for innovation and invention faster, and gain the skills and confidence to help lead the course of events that are changing the world, instead of being led by them.

About this Specialization

The Institute for the Future is declaring 2020 "The Year of the Future," because we believe that foresight is a human right. Every human should have the chance to develop the creative skills needed to imagine how the future can be different, and to participate in deciding what the future will be. We believe futures thinking shouldn't be something that only happens in Silicon Valley. With our specialization in Futures Thinking on Coursera, we are the first organization ever to offer massively open, free training in futures thinking. We aim to upskill the entire planet in future thinking and future making, by teaching one million online learners via the Coursera platform. This text is one of 100 free readings distributed as part of our "Year of the Future" training.

Institute for the Future

Institute for the Future is the world's leading futures thinking organization. For over 50 years, businesses, governments, and social impact organizations have depended upon IFTF global forecasts, custom research, and foresight training to navigate complex change and develop world-ready strategies. IFTF methodologies and toolsets yield coherent views of transformative possibilities across all sectors that together support a more sustainable future. Institute for the Future is a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization based in Palo Alto, California.
www.iftf.org

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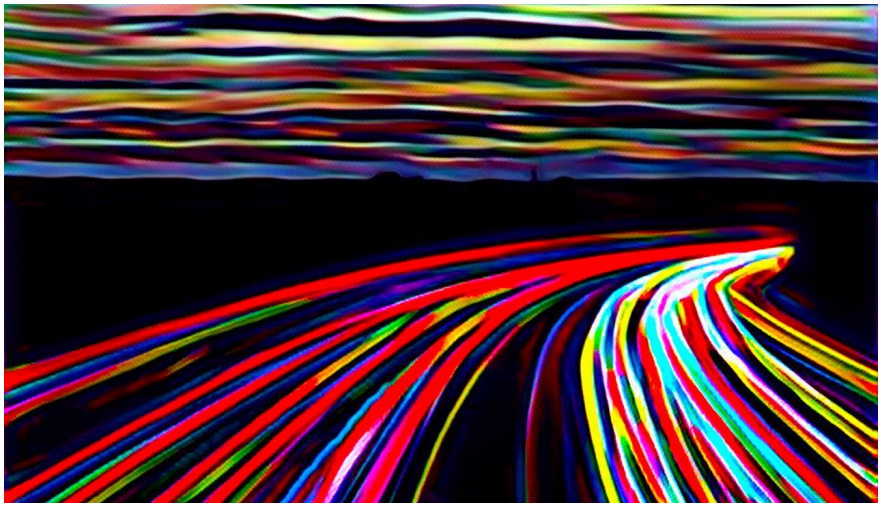
The Future as a Way of Life:

Alvin Toffler's Unfinished Business

Marina Gorbis

Jul 14, 2016 · 10 min read



Disorientation. Irrationality. Malaise. These were the sensations that in 1965 famed futurist Alvin Toffler, who died two weeks ago, suggested would run rampant in the face of the "revolutionary transitions" facing our society. According to Toffler, we would all suffer from a condition not unlike the culture shock experienced by travelers to foreign countries. He called it "future shock."

"Imagine not merely an individual but an entire society—including its weakest, least intelligent, and most traditional members—suddenly transported into this new world," Toffler wrote in a *Horizon* magazine article titled "The Future as a Way of Life." "The result is mass disorientation, future shock on a grand scale."

Arguably, we are living Toffler's future today. Many of us are in a state of shock as social media enables the rise of political figures who we could never imagine as viable presidential candidates, software eats people's jobs (according to some), massive data leaks allow loosely organized networks of journalists to uncover stories of global crime and corruption, and surveys consistently point to the loss of trust in most institutions across the globe. We are quick to marvel at Toffler's

foresight. I would argue, however, that our "future shock" is highly unevenly distributed. I'm not referring to science fiction writer William Gibson's comment that "The future is already here—it's just not evenly distributed." Rather, "future shock" is unevenly distributed in that pockets of our society are not only well prepared for the future but are, in fact, actively and consciously building their desired futures. For them, futures thinking has become an everyday reality, something deeply embedded into their lives, a process in which they have real agency.

> *Our "future shock" is unevenly distributed*

To see "makers of the future" in action, you come to places like Silicon Valley, where futures thinking has indeed become a way of life. Every startup founder, incubator, research outfit, and venture capitalist will readily regale you with visions of the future. Conversations here bubble with terms like "revolutionary transformation," "disruption," and "exponential." If you are not disrupting something, you are not likely to get funding, be featured on the conference circuit, or trend on social media. Embodying computer pioneer Alan Kay's bold edict "The best way to predict the future is to invent it," futures thinking and futures making have become the way of life for many in Silicon Valley and other pockets of techno-social elite throughout the globe. (One of my colleagues, Nicolas Weidinger, illuminated this in a blog post titled "Futures Thinking is the New Design Thinking.")

Simultaneously though, large and growing swaths of the population feel like they are powerless victims of the future. It's a divide that is deepening at an astonishing rate. If you are a young person living in a war-torn country or an urban jungle, futures thinking may feel like a luxury that you can't afford. When you see many of your friends die or go to jail before your twenties, the future means surviving another year or just another month. If your job has disappeared and your town's economy has been decimated, you feel like a victim of the future someone else is creating.

> *Envisioning and making the future must be a massively public endeavor*

To me, this dilemma is the most urgent task of futures work and, frankly, where Toffler's plan fell short. We need to make futures thinking a way of life for more people outside of the enclaves like Silicon Valley, corporate boardrooms, and academic think tanks. To accomplish that, we must distribute the tools of futures thinking and futures-making more widely. Envisioning and making the future must be a massively public endeavor.

The decades in which Toffler wrote the *Horizon* article and his best-known book *Future Shock* saw the birth of futures thinking or foresight studies as a serious endeavor. Toffler was but one of a generation of great men (yep, most were white men and the field is still heavily dominated by them) who were instrumental in advocating the need for long-term thinking. Frequently, they were overly optimistic in thinking that we really could predict the future if only we had the right set of tools and methodologies. Many futures organizations were not able to survive the era of government cutbacks. For example, the Office of Technology Assessment, once the U.S. government's hub for technology foresight, was finally closed in 1995. Toffler's grand dream of creating a cabinet-level Foresight Department led by a Secretary of the Future still remains unrealized. Instead, the practice of futures thinking has become widely embedded in the private sector through corporate strategy work, consultancies, and research labs. Institute for the Future's survival for almost fifty years is a testimony to this evolution of futures work. Over this period we've worked with foundations, NGOs, corporations, government organizations, cities, and communities around the world. We are motivated by the belief that everyone needs to be part of the conversation about the future, and become actively engaged in making that future. We see the need for futures thinking and futures making as one of the urgent needs in our society. Here's why:

The future is often a safe place. We can use it to build bridges.

It's hard to imagine this today, but in 1977 IFTF organized a workshop that brought together many of the most strident actors in the field of gun control to think about the future of gun ownership. Participants included the NRA, hunting organizations, environmentalists, and gun control advocates. The conversation was only possible because it was framed as a discussion about the future. The future is where people can abandon their immediate turf interests and think about new

possibilities, new constituencies, things that may be "unthinkable" today. The future is often a "safe place," maybe the only safe place for highly charged discussions. It is also a place where people can glean a bit from each other's thinking, unpack each other's assumptions, and start to build shared understanding, if not compromise. According to our archival documents, the future of gun control workshop was run as a conflict resolution lab. Each side had to play the role of the other in order to increase understanding and, hopefully, empathy. Similarly, today my colleague Tessa Finlev is using futures thinking to bring together warring communities in Sudan and other parts of the world, pioneering the use of Foresight for Peacebuilding.

Visions of the future are value-driven. They shouldn't be captive of one constituency.

Kevin Kelly, founding executive editor of *WIRED* magazine and co-founder of The Long Now Foundation, argues in his book *The Inevitable: Understanding the 12 Technological Forces That Will Shape Our Future* that there is a certain momentum embedded in our technologies that favor certain behaviors. For example, digital access makes it harder to claim ownership of content or prevent someone from copying and distributing such content. The internet is a kind of an infinite copying machine. But while there are certain inherent characteristics each generation of technologies possesses, their manifestation is not pre-ordained but is shaped by our values and what we deem desirable. For example, mobility and portability of everything is inevitable, but the iPod is not. Marshall McLuhan expressed it as "We shape our technologies and our technologies shape us." And right now with so much focus on the future coming from Silicon Valley, it is much too often Silicon Valley, with its strange brew of techno-libertarianism and counterculture, that is shaping the evolution of such technologies. It is not surprising that Uber has originated in Silicon Valley while the Platform Cooperativism movement, with its focus on creating alternatives to venture-backed platforms like Uber, is driven by progressive thinkers and activists on the East Coast. We urgently need to engage more communities and more people in understanding the directions of technologies we are creating and imagining and building alternative pathways for their evolution.

People must see themselves as actors in the future. To do that, the abstract future must be made proximate

and tangible.

Our present experiences and environments, including our physical surroundings, influence how we think. They are the filters on our imagination. And on a daily basis we are surrounded mostly by artifacts from the present or the past—buildings, streets, roads, infrastructure that was built decades, sometimes centuries ago. There is rarely anything in our physical environment and day-to-day interactions that gives us tangible and actionable signs of potential futures. For most people, the future is just not a part of their daily experience. In the book *Cultures@SiliconValley*, two cultural anthropologists, Jan English-Lueck and Chuck Darrah, who spent years conducting participatory research with the Silicon Valley natives, point out that technology and futures thinking are a part of everyday life in Silicon Valley. This is what people talk about at work, at home, on playgrounds while waiting for their children, in lines in grocery stores, and at parties with friends. When Google's self-driving cars are whizzing by you on the freeway and most people around you wear t-shirts with logos of tech startups, it is difficult to avoid encounters with the tomorrow. They are what IFTF calls signals, everyday examples of the future in the present and they are everywhere in Silicon Valley. We certainly can't move everyone to Silicon Valley, nor is this desirable (indeed, Silicon Valley is far from a paradise). But we can distribute these signals of the future more widely to engage more people, instill curiosity, and engagement in our collective futures. What would they want to do if they had access to these technologies? How would they use them in their own lives? What would they want to avoid? How would they want to shape their evolution? In the past 10 years IFTF has been dedicated to making futures thinking massively public. We've been creating and disseminating Artifacts from the Future—physical representations of future possibilities—as well as sharing tools for people to create their own future artifacts.

We conduct foresight trainings for myriad groups—educators, students, philanthropic organizations, communities, and businesses. We built an online platform—the Foresight Engine—to engage large groups of people in conversations about how future scenarios may change their lives. But we know that this is not enough. We need to massively scale up and recruit many more people as active participants in this urgent endeavor.

People need to have a sense of urgent optimism. The future can inspire wonder, awe, and hope.

Awe, unlike happiness or contentment, is that rare feeling we get when we are in the presence of something vast or great. It is how many of us feel when we encounter the Yosemite Falls, see a magnificent piece of art, or listen to a powerful speaker. In a recent series of experiments, Stanford researchers found that people who feel the emotion of awe, compared to being in a neutral state or simply happy, literally had an expanded perception of time. According to the researchers, the participants in their study reported that time "stood still" during "awesome" experiences. The feeling of awe is also correlated with willingness to volunteer time, the likelihood of choosing experiences over material objects, and even greater life satisfaction. In this state we believe we are capable of almost anything.

At the Institute for the Future it is easy to be awed on a regular basis, thanks to the fascinating people who come here to demonstrate a new technology they've developed, explain a novel scientific breakthrough, or share an artwork. This is what helps us cope with the potentially dire scenarios that a futurist can, and sometimes must, paint. It gives many of us a sense of hope that as much as we must consider the potential catastrophic outcomes for our world and humanity, there are seeds of the great, new, and wondrous being planted every day. The most wondrous of things is that there are no facts about the future. It's up to all of us to imagine and create it. Jane McGonigal, games researcher and designer at IFTF, coined the rallying call for "Urgent Optimism," a sense of hope and urgency combined into one. Now more than ever we need more people to embrace the sense of Urgent Optimism.

Futures Thinking is an essential 21st century skill: we need to cultivate it widely

For decades, researchers and managers have declared that transdisciplinary thinking is essential for tackling complex problems in our society. Transdisciplinary thinking goes beyond inter-disciplinary teamwork though. As writer and media theorist Howard Rheingold explains, this skill is really about "speak[ing] the languages of multiple disciplines–biologists who have understanding of mathematics, mathematicians who understand biology."

IBM and other future-thinking organizations actively seek T-shaped people, individuals who have depth in a particular field and breadth in their skill set and thinking. The best futures thinkers have just these kinds of minds because at its core, futures thinking requires an understanding of basic concepts and signals from a multitude of domains. A good forecaster must also have an eye for the larger patterns that these signals represent. Futures researchers are as much historians as futurists. They synthesize vast amounts of inputs to create coherent frameworks and relate compelling stories that make the future real. We call this “sensemaking,” and it’s perhaps the most important skill for young people to develop in this rapidly shifting world where so many of our assumptions and ways of doing things are being turned on their head.

In the past few years, some of the greatest men of futures studies have died. Along with Alvin Toffler, we’ve recently lost Paul Baran, Olaf Helmer, and Douglas Engelbart. While many of these early futurists were overly optimistic about our ability to predict the future, their call for society to develop tools and skills for foresight is more urgent than ever. The time is now to make *The Future as a Way of Life* reality for many.

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