

## Future Chronicles

**A dream scenario** We are time travelling to the middle of the 21st century, when scientists developed a method of shared dreaming. **Rowan Hooper** explains how it changed the world



Future Chronicles explores an imagined history of inventions and developments yet to come. Rowan Hooper is the podcast editor at New Scientist and author of *How to Spend a Trillion Dollars: The 10 global problems we can actually fix*. You can follow him on X @rowhoop

### Invention

*Communal dreaming*

### Timestamp

2050s

### Tagline

*Our dreams really do change the world*

This column appears monthly. Up next week: Chanda Prescod-Weinstein

**B**Y THE mid-21st century, the mechanics of sleep and dreaming were well understood, and manipulation of both became routine. Sleep machines guaranteed restorative deep sleep, and advances in REM sleep programming allowed both the adventure of lucid dreaming and the benefits of learning new skills while asleep.

A step change came with the development of a method of shared, community dreaming known as dream weaving. Communal dreaming promoted empathy across different demographics, bonding people via common goals of sustainable living and humanitarian support.

Several strands of technology came together to bring sleep and dreaming under control. Sleep manipulation arrived first, when neuroscientists found ways to induce the deepest state of sleep. When the subject settled into bed – or into sleep pods built in office spaces and public napping areas known as Z zones – their brain would rapidly transition from waking to delta wave activity, the slow brainwaves associated with restoration, repair and memory consolidation. Scientists discovered ways to compress the slow-wave sleep so as to achieve its benefits in a shorter time. A full night of delicious sleep could be completed in an hour.

Dream weaving built on several studies from the early 21st century. In one, mice were implanted with new memories by stimulating reward neurons in their sleeping brains. The rodents were nicknamed “Inception mice” in reference to an old film about dream manipulation.

In another key study, subjects’ brains were stimulated to rhythmically synchronise to bring about stable episodes

of lucid dreaming, when the dreamer is aware and in control of what happens in the dream. The brain could then be seeded with possibilities for dreams, much like old video games offered choices for players.

Finally, communication between the sleeping and waking world became possible by building on studies that used Morse code signals made by lucid dreamers. Moving closed eyes to the left meant dash; to the right meant dot. Soon, the system was improved so that when the sleeper imagined writing a letter, typing or even speaking, the associated

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brainwaves could be translated into real words and accessed in the waking world. Computing power became sufficient to record brain activity in connected dreamers and stimulate the same precise areas of the brain, allowing them to communicate while asleep and inducing a shared and interactive dream experience.

The impetus behind dream weaving came from a woman who had experienced epic dreaming all her life. This is a rare condition whereby people fail to enter deep sleep, remaining in REM sleep for most of the night.

The pioneer of dream weaving used advances in technology to tame and control her dreams, then to replicate the process in others. The company she created went on to develop dream packages, which allowed sleepers to experience almost anything they could think of.

Inevitably, pornographic dream scenarios were created, but the educational arm of the firm was the most interesting. The brain activity recorded when learning to ride a bike, for example, was copied and played into the brains of dreamers, who assimilated the skill in their sleep. Guided dreams enabled people to learn dangerous sports in a safe environment, to practise musical instruments, to paint, to learn languages and to converse with native speakers.

It had been known since the 2020s that talking about your dreams with others helps develop empathy, and sharing dreams while asleep with others had a deeply bonding effect. Dream engineers created scenarios around shared experiences. For example, perhaps dreamers have to defeat a dragon. They can work together: they might swim and breathe underwater to escape, fly away or take dragon form and befriend the creature.

At key points in the dream, engineers inserted uplink units where the dreamer could send a message to themselves in the waking world. These messages helped secure the memories from the dream; they bonded participants in the waking world. Sociologists and governments noticed that social cohesion improved as dream sharing spread, and the use of nudge theory in dreams to manipulate behaviour translated into positive social change, such as a switch to the consumption of plant-based foods.

A number of people rejected the sleep and dream technology, calling themselves naked sleepers. They went to bed at night and stayed there for about 8 hours, leaving the quality of their sleep and the tenor of their dreams to chance. ■