

PARMY OLSON

SUPREMACY

**AI, ChatGPT, and the Race
That Will Change the World**

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PROLOGUE

After picking up this book and reading these first few words, you might be wondering if a human wrote them.

That's OK. I'm not offended.

Two years ago, that thought would not have even crossed your mind. But today, machines are generating articles, books, illustrations, and computer code that seem indistinguishable from the content created by people. Remember the “novel-writing machine” in the dystopian future of George Orwell's *1984* and his “versificator” that wrote popular music? Those things exist now, and the change happened so fast that it's given the public whiplash, leaving us wondering whether today's office workers will have jobs in the next year or two. Millions of white-collar professionals suddenly look vulnerable. Talented young illustrators are wondering if they should bother going to art school.

What's remarkable is how quickly this has all come to pass. In the fifteen years that I've written about the technology industry, I've never seen a field move as quickly as artificial intelligence has in just the last two years. The release of ChatGPT in November 2022 sparked a race to create a whole new kind of AI that didn't just process information but *generated* it. Back then, AI tools could produce wonky images of dogs. Now they are churning out photorealistic pictures of Donald Trump, whose pores and skin texture look so lifelike they're almost impossible to distinguish as fake.

Many AI builders say this technology promises a path to utopia. Others say it could bring about the collapse of our civilization. In reality, the science fiction scenarios have distracted us from the more

insidious ways AI is threatening to harm society by perpetuating racism, threatening entire creative industries, and more.

Behind this invisible force are companies that have grabbed control of AI's development and raced to make it more powerful. Driven by an insatiable hunger to grow, they've cut corners and misled the public about their products, putting themselves on course to become highly questionable stewards of AI.

No other organizations in history have amassed so much power or touched so many people as today's tech giants. Google conducts web searches for 90 percent of Earth's internet users, and Microsoft software is used by 70 percent of humans with a computer. But neither company is satisfied. Microsoft wants to grab a chunk of Google's \$150 billion search business, and Google wants Microsoft's \$110 billion cloud business. To fight their war, each company has grabbed the ideas of others—which is why, when you boil everything down, our AI future has been written by just two men: Sam Altman and Demis Hassabis.

One is a scrawny but placid entrepreneur in his late thirties who wears sneakers to the office. The other is a former chess champion in his late forties who is obsessed with games. Both are fiercely intelligent, charming leaders who sketched out visions of omnipotent AI so inspiring that people followed them with cult-like devotion. Both got here because they were obsessed with winning. Altman was the reason the world got ChatGPT. Hassabis was the reason we got it so quickly. Their journey has not only defined today's race but also the challenges coming our way, including a daunting struggle to steer AI's ethical future when it is under the control of industry giants.

Hassabis risked scientific ridicule when he established DeepMind, the first company in the world intent on building AI that was as smart as a human being. He wanted to make scientific discoveries about the origins of life, the nature of reality, and cures for disease. "Solve intelligence, and then solve everything else," he said.

A few years later, Altman started OpenAI to try to build the same thing but with a greater focus on bringing economic abundance to humanity, increasing material wealth, and helping "us all live better lives," he tells me. "This can be the greatest tool humans have yet

created, and let each of us do things far outside the realm of the possible.”

Their plans were more ambitious than even the craziest Silicon Valley visionaries. They planned to build AI that was so powerful it could transform society and make the fields of economics and finance obsolete. And Altman and Hassabis alone would be the purveyors of its gifts.

In their quest to build what could become humankind’s last invention, both men grappled with how such transformative technology should be controlled. At first they believed that tech monoliths like Google and Microsoft shouldn’t steer it outright, because they prioritized profit over humanity’s well-being. So for years and on opposite sides of the Atlantic Ocean, they both fumbled in the dark for novel ways to structure their research labs to protect AI and make benevolence its priority. They promised to be AI’s careful custodians.

But both also wanted to be first. To build the most powerful software in history, they needed money and computing power, and their best source was Silicon Valley. Over time, both Altman and Hassabis decided they needed the tech giants after all. As their efforts to create superintelligent AI became more successful and as strange new ideologies buffeted them from different directions, they compromised their noble goals. They handed over control to companies who rushed to sell AI tools to the public with virtually no oversight from regulators, and with far-reaching consequences. The concentration of power in AI would lead to reduced competition and herald new intrusions into private life and new forms of racial and gender prejudice. Already today, if you ask a popular AI tool to generate images of women, it’ll make them sexy and scantily clad; ask it for photorealistic CEOs, and it’ll generate images of white men; ask for a criminal, and it will often generate images of Black men. Such tools are being woven into our media feeds, smartphones, and justice systems, without due care for how they might shape public opinion.

The pair’s journey was not all that different from one two centuries ago, when two entrepreneurs named Thomas Edison and George

Westinghouse went to war. Each had pursued a dream of creating a dominant system for delivering electricity to millions of consumers. Both were inventors-turned-entrepreneurs, and both understood that their technology would one day power the modern world. The question was this: Whose version of the technology would come out on top? In the end, Westinghouse's more efficient electrical standard became the most popular in the world. But he didn't win the so-called War of the Currents. General Electric did.

As corporate interests pushed Altman and Hassabis to unleash bigger and more powerful models, it was the tech titans who came out as the winners, only this time the race was to replicate our own intelligence. Now the world has been thrown into a tailspin. Generative AI promises to make people more productive and bring more useful information to our fingertips through tools like ChatGPT. But every innovation has a price to pay. Businesses and governments are adjusting to a new reality where the distinction between real and "AI-generated" is a crapshoot. Companies are throwing money at AI software to help displace their employees and boost profit margins. And a new breed of personal AI devices that can conduct an unimaginable new level of personal surveillance is cropping up.

The second half of this book lays out those risks, but first I'll explain how we got here, and how the visions of two innovators who tried to build AI for good were eventually ground down by the forces of monopoly. Their story is one of idealism but also one of naivety and ego, and of how it can be virtually impossible to keep an ethical code in the bubbles of Big Tech and Silicon Valley. Altman and Hassabis tied themselves into knots over the stewardship of AI, knowing that the world needed to manage the technology responsibly if we were to stop it from causing irreversible harm. But they couldn't forge AI with godlike power without the resources of the world's largest tech firms. With the goal of enhancing human life, they would end up empowering those companies, leaving humanity's welfare and future caught in a battle for corporate supremacy. This was how it happened.