

In the Battle over AI, will we lose our Humanity?

PARADOX

SC BOOK ONE OF THE SINGULARITY CHRONICLES



**MICHAEL
WOUDENBERG**

PARADOX

 Book One of The Singularity Chronicles

MICHAEL
WOUTENBERG

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Dedication

To Lisa, who listened to these stories and ideas for five years and then still read and edited the book for me.

To Jared, who has been a sounding board for a lot of bad ideas as this book became a reality.

This is a reader magnet copy

For the entire book visit:



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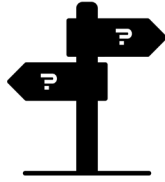
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CHAPTER 1: THE CHOICE

We've got to move! Come on! Get up!"

Kira's senses began to process and, once again, she was met with the acrid smell of smoke and the metallic taste of blood in her mouth. Gunfire rattled in staccato bursts in the background, puncturing through the sound of alarms and the crackling roar of flames.

Her thoughts focused as she struggled to move "I can do this... it can't end this way..." She drew in a breath feeling it burn with heat and fumes. "I can do this... we have to finish..." She pushed a piece of computer equipment away freeing her chest. "I. Can. Do. This! I've got to stop her!" She shoved on the pile of debris again feeling it shift slightly.

A wave of pain washed over her body and she squeezed her eyes shut. As it faded, she opened them and saw a hand reaching down to help her up. Kira grasped it, feeling the weight of the pull while the rest of her body resisted. Suddenly, a piece of metal shifted and she started to slide free of the debris. Her left leg was a wet mess of blood and she saw a jagged cut deep into the muscle of her thigh. She'd already lost her right leg, and if she survived this, it looked like the other one would end up the same.

She wrapped and tightened a tourniquet around her thigh and levered herself onto her feet feeling the prosthetic attached to her right leg engage and stabilize. Learning to walk with a robotic leg had been an

interesting challenge since the nerves used to control it were wired differently than her natural left leg. With that leg unusable now, it was actually a lot easier to focus on the right and hobble away.

Hector ducked under her arm and helped balance her left side while yelling for them to move. Kira touched her abdomen and felt the blood flowing freely there too. This wasn't going to end well.

Figures moved through the smoke and chaos, their night vision goggles looking oddly insectile as they provided situational information and enhanced optics. Thankfully they were their security team pushing through the ruins and fighting back. One called for a medic while slapping a stimulating patch on Kira's arm.

The medic ran up, lifted her shirt, swore, and slapped a large patch on her belly. Kira felt the microneedles embed themselves and the patch tighten to restrict blood flow. A wash of numbness flowed from the patch as it released a cocktail of drugs. That would help for a minute.

The medic yelled something and she heard Hector respond, but what they said was lost in the noise. She looked where the hand pointed and saw the dark sky through an open doorway.

Hector started to move them toward the exit. "No!" She tried to pull to the right, deeper into the building. Hector resisted.

"I've got to get to Mother!" She yelled.

"You've got to get to safety!"

"No! We are out of time! I've got to get to Mother with the puzzle. This is the only chance we have left!" She shouted, pulling on him to change directions.

"Kira!"

"You know I'm right. You know this is the only way to stop her! You know she can't do this by herself!" She gasped between each statement, her breath short and catching with pain.

She looked into Hector's eyes and saw him resigning to her logic. Mother had a chance. Either this worked and they could stop the war, or they'd already promised to walk away and let the chips fall as they may.

War. Humans always seemed to be at war. At war against nations, at war against cultures, at war against ancient grudges, at war against AI; humanity was always at war with humanity.

The toll had been catastrophic. Kira didn't know if she believed half of what she heard though; there was so much disinformation, deep fakes,

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and psychological operations that you couldn't separate fact from fiction. And that fed fuel onto the fire and created an even worse fog of war.

Hector shifted direction and started to pull her toward the second lab. "Downstairs. We need to get downstairs." She commanded.

The second lab was where they had the code patch they developed to rein in the AI that they called Mother. Downstairs was another lab, this one designed to upload human consciousness as a digital copy of biological reality. This was how Mother was started and Kira realized this was the only way Mother could be stopped.

"I'm going to upload myself. We don't have time to play the games anymore. I can work from the inside."

"You'll die."

She looked down at the blood. "I'm already dying." Then looked into his eyes. "Load me with the patch. That's how we'll solve the puzzle."

Hector closed his eyes and sighed, then hugged her.

Another explosion ripped the wall open behind them, showering debris and enveloping them in another cloud of smoke and dust. Coughing, Hector pulled them deeper into the building.

They reached the elevator and, thankfully, it was still operating on the backup power. Slipping inside and closing the doors cut the chaos off behind them.

Music played quietly and Hector jammed the button for the lowest level. A chime alerted. The peace and normalcy were surreal from the destruction they had just left.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Kira looked down and saw blood pattering to the floor, splashing in a puddle and speckling the walls. She was losing too much, too fast. She felt herself begin to pass out and Hector slid her to the floor.

He tightened the tourniquet and swore sadly as he found another wound on her side they hadn't seen before. Tearing off a strip of her lab coat, he tied it tightly around her waist to help slow the bleeding and slapped another stim patch on her arm.

Kira's eyes opened as the elevator chimed the final time and the doors opened. Hector ran into the room, a place that looked like a blend between a computer lab and a hospital room, and grabbed a wheeled bed. He lifted Kira onto it, sitting her upright but reclined, then wheeled her out of the elevator.

The lights flickered as another blast shook the building, but this far down, they'd be safe for long enough. Over the years, this part of the lab had been built up and reinforced into something more like a military bunker than the research park Gaia Innovations had started as.

Kira was wheeled over to a machine that looked like an MRI machine bolted to an alien spaceship command center. Monitors glowed all around and wires looped and draped toward a central point.

Kira started to pull off her coat and shirt but Hector pushed her arms down and cut it off with medical shears. The cold air raised goosebumps as Kira shifted her position. She reached up and removed the mask that covered most of the left side of her face. The skin underneath was a mass of scars, mottled in color and lumpy. A consequence, along with her right leg, of the first time someone had tried to attack Mother and she'd been caught in that explosion.

Hector reached up and pulled down a helmet connected to dozens of wires and Kira lowered it over her head feeling it slide down to her neck and cover her eyes. She gasped as the probes engaged until a wave of anesthetic numbed the points.

Hector continued to place patches on her body. "I'm going to have to remove this med patch." He warned, touching her stomach. "You'll have about ten minutes max before you bleed out."

"Wait till last then. Get a blood stabilizer IV going. It should buy me enough time." Kira was already feeling the loss of blood affecting her thinking. Everything was getting fuzzy. "Turn it on."

The machine whirred and clicked as Hector bound cuffs around her upper arms. "Ready for engagement?"

"Ready."

She felt an eerie pressure on her skull as the probes penetrated through the skull and into her brain. The cuffs on the arms tightened and she felt the probes entering there as well.

Suddenly she arched her back in pain, her teeth grinding as she forced herself to relax. Hector had removed the patch on her stomach, the coagulating blood pulling free and the wound opening again. Hector swore, slapped on the probes, and then took a clean towel and pressed it to the wound to staunch the flow.

"It's ready." His voice was oddly calm but his hand shook as he reached out and tapped on the screen. "And...Starting...Now!" He put his hand back on her stomach.

Kira reached out and put her hands over his. "See you on the other side."

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As her consciousness streamed into the system, she flitted in and out of reality, sometimes aware she was in the room and what was happening, hearing Hector breathing, was he crying? And sometimes lost in the chaos, like a psychedelic journey of geometric shapes and sounds.

Memories flowed around, swirling, ebbing, and flowing in her vision in flashes. Suddenly one stuck and sucked her back in time.



Kira's heart was racing as she looked over her shoulder, making sure Noah, her younger brother, was keeping up. The two of them were running through the park, trying to escape a group that had been chasing them for the last few blocks.

"Come on, Noah! We have to keep going!" Kira urged, her voice strained with worry.

"I can't run anymore." Noah panted, his smaller frame struggling to keep up.

Kira knew that she couldn't leave him behind. She grabbed his hand and pulled him towards a nearby tree, hoping to find some cover. But it was too late, they were surrounded.

"Gotcha twerp!" Said the apparent leader of this rough group of kids. She was stocky, surprisingly fast for her size, and looked like a bull getting ready to charge. The likeness in Kira's mind was aided by the girl's septum piercing. Her lackeys fanned out and encircled them.

Kira stepped in front of her brother; her fists clenched at her sides. She was only thirteen, but she had practiced boxing and Brazilian Ju-Jitsu with her dad. She wasn't going to let them hurt her brother but the odds didn't look good. She shook out her arms and raised them into a ready, fighting stance.

"What are you going to do, little girl? Fight us?" the bully laughed, taunting her.

In retrospect, Kira had kind of brought this on herself when she confronted them pushing around Sean, another boy from her class. She was starting to doubt her decision since Sean was a bully in his own right and Kira and Noah were often the targets of his ire on their way to and from school. But she couldn't let him get ganged up on like that.

So here she was, with Noah, against overwhelming odds. As she eyed up her antagonist, one of the girls grabbed Noah from behind and a boy with shorn hair slugged him in the chest, winding up for another swing.

Kira stopped hesitating. She charged, throwing a punch with all her might. The stocky girl was caught off guard and stumbled backward, but quickly regained her footing and swung back.

The return punch landed right in Kira's stomach, and while that might seem better than a shot to the face, it's hard to convince your solar plexus of that trade. Kira dodged another swing and landed two more punches. One, a jab to the face, and the other, a hook that caught her antagonist's cheek. There was something oddly satisfying about the look of shock and anger the other girl experienced and then something incredibly worrying about the look of rage that followed.

The larger girl waded forward swinging with power and accuracy. Kira dodged and ducked but was being pressed into a bad position and she was frantically looking for a way out.

Too late! As she pivoted to deflect a particularly well-placed punch, her foot caught a tree root and she started to fall. Twisting in an attempt to land well, she saw her opportunity and using the momentum of the fall, swept the larger girl's legs out sending her toppling over backward. Kira was rewarded with hearing the satisfying *whoosh* of the air getting knocked out and sprang to her feet to see the other girl on her back gasping for breath.

The others in the group took a step back as Kira turned to face them. They looked torn as they calculated their odds and then looked around as passersby were paying closer attention and looking to intervene.

"Let's get out of here," the one holding Noah muttered, shoving him down to the ground. It didn't take long for the rest to follow suit and fade away.

Kira helped her brother up as the other girl rolled to her side gasping for breath and pushed herself to her feet. She glanced at Kira and then at the approaching adults and stumbled off.

Kira stood there trying to digest what had just happened. She turned to Noah who was looking at her in amazement.

"That leg sweep was incredible!" he blurted.

"I slipped."

"It worked."

"Let's not do this again!"

Kira stretched her lanky body. Thirteen was an awkward time and she still wasn't quite used to her body and all those changes. She was going to be tall. Her dad was six feet four inches. Mom was five-ten.

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She had thick hair that was a rainbow of reddish tones and was currently a mess. She raked her fingers through trying to untangle it a little. Her eyes were hazel and would change colors from grey to blue to green depending on what she wore.

Noah was eleven and, though on the smaller side wasn't a wimpy kid. He was just smaller. He would hit puberty and shoot up past her in short order. Kira hoped he wouldn't get too tall. Six foot three would be good she thought. His eyes were a deep blue and his hair was much lighter than hers. It was changing a little but he was still a towhead with a perpetual tousled look. The girls were going to love that in a few years.

They walked home together smelling the fall leaves and hearing them crunch under their feet. After the chaos, it was oddly serene and beautiful. Sure, there was the background smell of exhaust fumes and the omnipresent vehicle noise, and yet if she paused, she could hear, see, and smell nature in all its crazy uniqueness throughout it all.

"Humans are weird."

"What do you mean?" Noah looked up at her.

"We are basically like super smart monkeys who can build amazing technology and yet punch each other in the face and squabble over stupid things. We'd like to think we are better but yet we don't act like it."

"You do."

"I do what?"

"You behave like you know better. You stopped her from beating up Sean."

"But I can't fix everything, and I got lucky."

"Even if you lost, you did the right thing anyway."

"I don't know, I don't know if I did the right thing..." She scrubbed her fingers through her hair.

Noah put his arm around her and hugged. "Yep, it does suck sometimes, but not always."

Kira laughed and then looked up as drops of rain started to fall. "We'd better run or we'll get soaked."



Kira and Noah stumbled through the back door of the house, their faces red and Kira's bruising darker from their scuffle. Kira's stomach was in a knot of anxiety from the fight while Noah looked proud but exhausted.

The light rain dripped from their damp clothes as the door slammed behind them. The familiar scent of home enveloped them but tinged with the antiseptic smell of a hospital and the underlying subtle, but unshakeable smell of illness.

Mom was back from her third round of chemotherapy and the guest room had been converted for her. That room, the one with all the knickknacks from family memories, the one where Kira and Noah would often play Lego for hours on end, the one which hosted friends and family, now hosted inevitable death. It was hard for Kira to see her mom like this and she felt uneasy around her. She was always so strong and full of life.

Kira found her father collecting his bag, and computer tablets, adjusting his tie, and muttering to himself as he prepared to leave for an award ceremony that evening. Their house had a lot of the latest high-tech gadgets scattered around. They always had cool things to play with thanks to their dad's work. With all the gear, half the time he'd end up grabbing their tablets instead of his own; today was no exception.

"Dad, this one is yours." She swapped one of the computers. "And you need this one." She slipped one more into his bag.

He was heading out to a swanky black-tie event sponsored by a who's-who of prestigious research, academic, and industry organizations. It was like the Oscars for AI as Mom had explained it.

Their father's project, named MindCraft, was nominated for several awards and he had been invited to present the latest from his team's research and discoveries. MindCraft was the cutting edge in human and machine symbiosis and a focus of his entire career.

The prize was about more than ego, though there was plenty of that in Dr. Jasper Vanden Brink. He was a titan in the field with two Master's Degrees in computer science and biology, a Doctorate of Engineering, and a Ph.D. in computer science. He considered himself a professional student, academic, and researcher and this prize would help with his already significant credentials and reputation.

More motivating to Jasper was that winning also came with a multi-million-dollar research grant which would provide the investment necessary to bring MindCraft closer to reality. While he had some investors interested in the work, everyone wanted to know when he could monetize and turn a profit on the technology. Right now, he was more focused on getting it to work, not turning it into a company. This funding would take the pressure off of commercializing it too soon.

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At the foundation, it was also personal; MindCraft had gone from being an academic interest in exploring how to capture the essence of being human, into a frantic race against time when Mom had been diagnosed with terminal cancer. Dad had been pushing as hard as he could over the past eighteen months and had moved quickly through animal trials and toward human test cases. It was his latest work on bonobos and chimpanzees, which were showing great promise, that was the subject of the award nominations.

Capturing a brain, memories, and personality was harder with animals who couldn't communicate what they were thinking. The breakthrough was in using images and sound stimulation and then recording the subjects' brain activities. By repeating the same stimulation over and over, they could find and compare the common elements of each brain scan.

The results lacked the fidelity they needed to know if they were really capturing the right memories and so Jasper was in a hurry to move on to human testing. His goal was to try to 'save' Mom from her physical body since modern medicine wasn't able to help stop this cancer.

Jasper glanced up from the tablet in his hand and noticed their disheveled appearances. "What happened?" His voice was laced with concern.

They hesitated, unsure how to explain it right.

Jasper paused, his expression softening. "Come here," he said, giving them both a group hug. "Rough day?"

"I got in a fight with a girl..."

"She chased us, and punched us, but Kira took her down!" Noah interjected.

"I hope you didn't hurt her too badly." Dad smiled ruefully. "You've gotten really good at grappling."

"She's fine. Got the wind knocked out of her. I didn't take it any further."

"Then I think you did the right thing. I doubt she would have done the same for you from the sounds of it."

"No, probably not, but Noah was super brave. He saw her and her buddies picking on Sean and wanted to do something."

"I wish I hadn't. It hurts." Noah complained.

Jasper laughed. "That's how it goes, my first fight didn't end well. I ended up with four stitches and this scar." He pointed to his cheek. "That's why I got into martial arts and why I got you two into it as well." He looked them up and down "Anything that needs a band-aid?"

“Just a bruise or two I think.” Kira felt at the places where she’d been hit.

“Tell me all about it.”

They shared the whole story while he listened. Kira’s nerves were still jittery as the adrenaline ebbed away and she shivered. Jasper pulled her into a hug. “This reminds me of a time I was getting good at fighting and I finally stood up to a kid bullying someone. I ended up laying him out in the school hallway in front of all his friends. He was really embarrassed.”

“What happened?”

“I helped him up and told him he fought well.”

“That’s it?”

“His name is Chris. You know him.”

“Your best friend? He’s my godfather!”

“Exactly. That fight could have led to more resentment. Instead, it turned into an amazing friendship.”

“Do you think I should do the same?”

“I don’t know all the details but I always recommend building bridges even when it doesn’t start in a perfect place.” He ruffled her hair and gave her another squeeze.

They sat on the couch enjoying the moment with Dad. There were times they didn’t see him for an entire week whether he was in the hospital with their mom, or at his lab for multiple days.

Thankfully Grandma had stepped in to help and kept the household moving through the daily routines. Jasper wasn’t in the right state of mind to help much there, and Kira wasn’t old enough to handle it on her own.

“Dad, when will you be done so you can be home?” Noah asked suddenly.

Jasper sat down on the couch and sagged a little as his exhaustion broke through the mask. He motioned for them to join and then put his arms around them.

“I think we are so close. Yet every time I think we’ve almost gotten it; we find out there’s so much more to know. I’d love to say we’ll be done this year, but I’m not sure.” He sagged a little more. “I’m not sure I’m even going to have it ready for Mom.”

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“We’ve proven we can capture memories.” He hesitated, “Well, we’ve captured something that is consistent and can be mapped. The brain doesn’t work like photographic memory capture. It’s a lot more complicated than that.”

“So, it’s not like downloading a movie?”

“Not at all. It’s more like downloading the entire movie studio, and then all the scripts, and then having to put them all back together again. Research with very young children has shown that they learn attributes, not whole objects. They don’t learn ‘ball’ they learn sphere, smooth, rolls, and red. Only later does the spoken word ‘ball’ connect to the object.”

Kira smiled as her dad took on his professor's tone. “The thing is, our brain is designed to be efficient. Instead of storing all the attributes of a thing individually, we store the core elements and then thread a ‘memory’ through the objects. So, for two balls, one smooth and red and the other bumpy and blue they would still have common elements.”

“But I can think of Mom and how she looks.” Noah looked confused.

“Think hard about what you ‘see’. Is it a perfect snapshot? Or is it little blips and snippets? When I think of your mother, I see attributes that could belong to anyone, but Soleil is the only one with this specific recipe of features.”

He looked at a picture of their mother on the mantel. It was a candid shot from a camping trip five years ago and life was dancing in her eyes, and love was flirting in her smile.

“That picture is a visual representation of her, but it’s not a memory representation. That’s what’s been so hard about this work. It’s not like we just download a bunch of movie and image files. We have to download all of the baseline attributes and then download all of the recipes or, what we call ‘recall code.’ Basically, a list of which attributes make up that memory.”

“But you’re able to do that now?” Noah asked.

“We think we’ve got a map of the basic attributes, and we think we can identify and capture the recall code. But right now, it’s simple things like the ball. We can see that two balls have common features and then unique features like smooth or bumpy and red and blue.”

“That’s what you are presenting tonight?”

Jasper gave Kira a little hug, “Yep, that’s the plan.”

He grew serious again, a flicker of desperation in his eyes. "Tonight is essential. If the presentation goes well, and we win that award, it will unlock the funding we need to make it a reality."

Standing up, he brought them into another hug. "We're closer than ever to achieving our goal. But it comes at a cost, and I know I haven't been here for you as much as I should have been."

Kira and Noah hugged back, "I love you both more than anything," Jasper's voice cracked with emotion. "But right now, I have to finish what I've started, for your mother, for our family, and for the countless others who may benefit from this technology." He looked down at his watch, "I promise, once this is done, I'll be here for you."

He kissed the tops of their heads, "Please, make sure your mom knows you are home. Grandma is also here tonight so help her out with dinner. I'll see you later," Dr. Vanden Brink grabbed his things, checked himself quickly in the mirror by the door, and headed to his car, the door quietly closing behind him.



Kira wove down the crowded hallway trying to get to her locker and then her first class. Somehow word had spread about the fight and she was getting a lot of attention that she wasn't used to. It made her awkward and the blood was pulsing in her ears as her face flushed hot.

"Hey watch it!" Kira bounced off an upperclassman she'd run into as she bolted to her locker.

"Careful dude, she might take you down!" Laughter rippled down the hall as her face grew redder.

Suddenly, like a switch was flipped, the hallway went silent and people stepped back. The stocky girl from yesterday stepped out from a doorway and they were face to face again.

The girl looked just as surprised and, if it was possible, even more uncomfortable than Kira. The bystanders watched, hoping for another fight.

Kira paused for a moment, and then reached out, extending a hand. "Great punches yesterday!"

The other girl looked around her suspiciously.

"Seriously, you've got some solid fundamentals, do you train?"

The girl felt at her nose, which looked a little bruised, and then grabbed Kira's hand and shook it. The tension was palatable as both girls stood, warily eyeing each other.

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“I’ve got older brothers.” The girl muttered.

“I’ve only got my little brother, but he’s not much of a sparring partner.”

“Ha, you should come to my place if you really want to fight.”

Kira laughed “As long as we don’t start with a quarter-mile run! I’m Kira...”

“Melanie.”

“Well, I’m game to do this again, but let’s do it for fun next time?”

The tension melted away and the crowd dissolved away along with it leaving the two floating in a river of bodies heading to class.

Melanie hesitated, trying to think of what to say next. “Why’d you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Step in to help that kid. I see him picking on you and your brother all the time. He’s not a nice guy.”

“I don’t know. I just don’t think it’s right for anyone to be picked on. He’s not right, but...” Kira trailed off, “We don’t know what his story is either.”

“You should have let me teach him a lesson.”

Kira wiped her face, wincing as she touched her bruised cheek. “A lesson in what?”

“Not to pick on people.”

“By picking on him and bullying him?”

“Not when you make it sound like that.” Melanie huffed.

“No Melanie, I don’t think it’s going to stop him from picking on me. Besides, I don’t know... we’ve got so much more in common if we stop and think. I don’t know why people are mean, it doesn’t make sense.”

Melanie laughed. “The world is mean, sometimes we just reflect it.”

“I’d like to think it’s not, or that it doesn’t have to be,” mumbled Kira. “I don’t know, it’s not fun and it doesn’t feel good.”

“My nose agrees with you. Listen, you’re scrappy, don’t ever lose that because the world isn’t unicorns farting rainbows... Life is tough, but maybe that makes us better...”

Kira smiled “Maybe that helps us make a world that is better too...”

Melanie snorted “You’re insufferable but I like you. See you around.”

Melanie turned and moved off with the flow leaving Kira to push back to her locker. As the door banged open, she slung her bag on the hook and grabbed her books. Why did humans have to act so mean? When

everything was so good in the world, what made people so violent; in words and actions? It was like humans were only one small step away from violent chaos just waiting for an excuse.

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For the entire book visit:



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Further Reading

If you enjoyed the material in this book, please visit www.polymathicbeing.com where you can find essays on these topics that dive further into the nuance of what it means to be human.

Stay tuned for the next books in *The Singularity Chronicles*

INTEGRATION: *PUBLICATION 2024*

Kira struggles to maintain a peaceful coexistence with the other sentient AIs while exploring how to integrate so many unique people, now divorced from their human bodies. What does it mean to be human when you are separated from the physical world and exist only in a computer?

REBIRTH: *PUBLICATION TBD*

The human survivors of the war over AI explore the development of their societies unencumbered by the previous burdens of human history. With new technologies, new cultures, and the ability to do things differently, will they end up with the same outcome as last time or will they rebirth something better?

HOPE: *PUBLICATION TBD*

Humans are creating another technological revolution. Their experience is different, yet disappointingly similar as they try to advance humanity and struggle against deep-rooted behaviors and tendencies that both make us human, and tribal. They have great hope that they can handle the technology better this time.



Michael Woudenberg is an aspiring Polymath from Tucson Arizona with a background in advanced technologies such as autonomy, artificial intelligence, blockchain, cyber, aerospace, national security, and weapon systems across a variety of organizations from tech startups to Fortune 150 companies.

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One of his side passions is psychology and sociology, specifically around how the human brain works individually and within cultures and civilizations. He strives to tie together diverse concepts to enable human flourishing to both understand and address the technological complexity we face today.

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He has a broad series of hobbies including photography, mountain biking, brewing beer, camping, hiking, rock climbing, and basically most things outdoors. His family is along for all these adventures which make them so much more fun.

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