HIDDEN CYCLES

Introduction: The Ghost in the Machine

It was a ghost that brought the music industry to its knees. A ghost in the machine. In 1999, the record business was a behemoth, an unsinkable titan. Album sales were at an all-time high, propelled by the likes of Britney Spears, the Backstreet Boys, and Shania Twain. The compact disc, with its pristine digital sound and reassuring physical presence, was the undisputed king of media. Inside the gleaming towers of major record labels—Sony, Universal, Warner Bros—executives believed the party would last forever. They had survived the rise of MTV. They had survived the rise of the internet. They would survive this too. They were wrong.

The ghost's name was Napster. It arrived not with a bang, but with a whisper, a piece of software created by a nineteen-year-old university student named Shawn Fanning. It was a simple, elegant, and devastatingly effective idea: a peer-to-peer file-sharing network that allowed users to swap MP3 music files with one another for free. Suddenly, with a few clicks, your entire music collection could be my music collection. And mine, yours. By the end of that summer, Napster had amassed 80 million users, and the music industry was staring into the abyss. The river of revenue that had sustained the business for decades was drying up. [1]

The record executives' response was swift and predictable. They sued. They sued Napster into oblivion. They sued the companies that created other file-sharing programs like LimeWire and Kazaa. They even sued their own customers—teenagers, university students, grandmothers—in a desperate attempt to frighten people into compliance. The most famous of these lawsuits came when Metallica, the legendary heavy metal band, took their case to the U.S. Senate, with drummer Lars Ulrich testifying that Napster had "hijacked" their music. [1] But no amount of legal firepower could stop the tide. For every file-sharing network they shut down, two more sprang up in its place. The harder they squeezed, the more the music slipped through their fingers.

What the record executives failed to understand was that Napster wasn't the enemy; it was a symptom. It was a manifestation of a deep, primal human drive, amplified by the frictionless medium of the internet. The desire for connection, for community, for the free exchange of cultural artefacts—these are not new phenomena. They are as old as humanity itself. In the pre-industrial world, people gathered in town squares to share stories, to exchange goods, to participate in collective experiences. The internet simply made this ancient impulse global, instantaneous, and frictionless. What was new was the technology that allowed these impulses to be expressed on a scale that had never been possible before. The ghost in the machine was us.

This book is about that ghost. It's about the ancient, unwritten rules that govern human behaviour, the deep-seated psychological forces that shape our lives, our societies, and our economies. These forces, which we call **human attractors**, are the invisible architecture of our world. They are the reason why, despite the bewildering complexity and apparent chaos of modern life, human systems follow predictable patterns. They are the reason why, time and again, we see the same patterns emerge across different contexts, different cultures, different eras. Technology doesn't create these drives; it amplifies them, often with explosive

and unforeseen consequences. We are living in what we call the **Caveman Era**—a time when our Stone Age psychology is colliding with space-age technology, creating a world of both unprecedented opportunity and profound disruption.

The term "Caveman Era" is not meant to be pejorative. Our ancestors who lived in caves and hunted on the savanna were not less intelligent than us; they were simply adapted to a different environment. They had brains that were exquisitely tuned to navigate a world of small groups, face-to-face interactions, and immediate, tangible consequences. They had instincts that were perfectly suited to survival in that world. The problem is that we are still living with those brains, those instincts, and those psychological patterns. But we are living in a world that is radically different. We are living in a world of billions of people, of abstract digital networks, of consequences that are delayed and distributed and often invisible. We are living in a world in which our ancient psychology is being constantly triggered, manipulated, and monetised by systems that are specifically designed to exploit our primal instincts.

In his 2014 treatise, *Rigidly Defined Uncertainty*, D. Price argues that complex systems, from financial markets to social networks, are inherently unpredictable in their specifics but remarkably consistent in their underlying patterns. [2] Price's work provides the theoretical bedrock for this book. He identifies a series of fundamental human attractors that act as gravitational forces, pulling our behaviour in certain directions. These are not laws of physics, but patterns that emerge from the collective behaviour of millions of individuals, each following their own primal instincts. Understanding these patterns is the key to understanding the modern world. It is the key to understanding why, despite the fact that we have more information than ever before, we are more divided than ever. It is the key to understanding why, despite the fact that we have more technology than ever before, we are more anxious than ever. It is the key to understanding why, despite the fact that we have more choice than ever before, we are more dissatisfied than ever.

We will explore six of these attractors in detail:

1. Tribalism: The innate desire to belong to a group, to define ourselves in opposition to an 'other'. This drive has been with us since our earliest ancestors, when survival depended on the ability to work together in small groups. In the digital age, tribalism has been weaponised by social media algorithms that reward divisive content and create echo chambers in which we are only exposed to information that confirms our existing beliefs. The result is a world that is more polarised, more divided, and more hostile than ever before.

2. Status Hierarchy: The universal drive to establish and navigate social pecking orders. Every human society, from the smallest hunter-gatherer band to the largest modern nation-state, has a status hierarchy. In the digital age, this has manifested in the rise of influencer culture and the quantification of social worth through follower counts and likes. We have created a new kind of status hierarchy, one that is more visible, more quantified, and more obsessive than ever before.

3. Reciprocity: The deep-seated instinct to repay debts and favours, the foundation of all social and economic exchange. This is one of the most fundamental principles of human behaviour. When someone does something for us, we feel an obligation to do something for

them in return. Technology has monetised this ancient drive, creating the sharing economy and the gig economy. But it has also created new forms of exploitation, in which the principle of reciprocity is used to extract value from workers and consumers.

4. Infantilism: The tendency to be drawn to the playful, the simple, and the non-threatening, a force that shapes everything from product design to political discourse. This has manifested in the gamification of our digital lives and the rise of addictive app design. We are drawn to things that are easy, that are fun, that provide immediate rewards. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it becomes a problem when it is exploited to keep us distracted from more important things.

5. Solution Bias: The preference for simple, immediate answers to complex problems, even when those answers are wrong. This has led to the tech industry's obsession with "disruption" and the belief that every problem has a technological solution. It has led to a culture in which we are constantly looking for the quick fix, the silver bullet, the one thing that will solve all our problems. But the real world is more complex than that. The real problems we face are messy, multifaceted, and resistant to simple solutions.

6. Neophilia: The love of the new, the novel, and the different, the engine of innovation and the curse of the easily bored. This drive has accelerated the pace of technological change and created a culture of perpetual dissatisfaction. We are always looking for the next new thing, always upgrading, always chasing the latest trend. This can be a source of creativity and progress, but it can also be a source of anxiety and waste.

Through a series of stories and case studies—from the rise of Netflix and Spotify to the bizarre and fascinating world of collectible toys like Labubu, from the rise of influencer culture to the gig economy—we will show how these six attractors are shaping the digital age. We will explore how social media platforms have weaponised tribalism, how influencer culture has created new and elaborate status hierarchies, and how the sharing economy has monetised the ancient principle of reciprocity. We will delve into the psychology of gamification and the ways in which technology is designed to keep us hooked, and we will examine our collective obsession with novelty and our dangerous attraction to simplistic solutions.

The stakes of this inquiry are extraordinarily high. The digital revolution has created unprecedented wealth and opportunity, but it has also created unprecedented risks. We are living through a period of rapid social, economic, and technological change. The old institutions that provided stability and meaning—the corporation, the family, the nation-state—are being disrupted and transformed. The new institutions that are replacing them are often designed not to serve human needs, but to maximise engagement and extract profit. We are living in a world of algorithmic decision-making, of data-driven discrimination, of attention economies that treat human consciousness as a commodity to be bought and sold.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated many of these trends. It forced millions of people to work from home, to rely on digital platforms for social connection, to engage with technology in ways that were previously unimaginable. It revealed both the power and the fragility of our digital infrastructure. It showed us how dependent we have become on a

handful of mega-corporations that control the platforms we use to communicate, to work, to learn, to shop. It also showed us how quickly the world can change, how quickly our assumptions about the future can be upended.

This is not a book of predictions. As Price reminds us, the future is a domain of "rigidly defined uncertainty." We cannot know precisely what will happen next. But by understanding the fundamental forces that are shaping our world, we can learn to navigate the profound transformations that are currently reshaping our economy, our society, and our relationship with work. The question is not whether these forces will shape our future. They will. The question is how we manage them. How do we preserve the benefits while mitigating the costs? How do we build a society that is prosperous, equitable, and fulfilling? How do we create a future that is worth living in?

These are the questions we need to ask ourselves. And the answers will determine what kind of world we leave for future generations. The ghost is out of the machine. It's time we learned to live with it. Not by denying our primal nature, but by understanding it, managing it, and channelling it towards a better future. This is the great challenge of the Caveman Era. And it is the subject of this book.

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Chapter 1: The Caveman Era

In the heart of Shanghai, a city that prides itself on its hyper-modernity, a curious phenomenon has taken hold. It's a craze that has seen grown adults queue for hours, pay exorbitant sums, and engage in a frantic online treasure hunt. The object of their desire? A small, furry, rabbit-eared creature with a mischievous, toothy grin. Its name is Labubu.

Labubu is a collectible toy, the brainchild of Hong Kong artist Kasing Lung and brought to the masses by the Chinese toy company Pop Mart. It comes in a 'blind box', meaning the buyer doesn't know which specific design they're getting until they open it. This simple mechanic, a throwback to the joy of finding a prize in a cereal box, has turned Labubu into a global sensation. Some rare figures resell for hundreds, even thousands of dollars. A life-size Labubu sculpture recently sold at auction for over $170,000. Pop stars like Dua Lipa and Rihanna have been spotted with Labubus dangling from their bags, instantly elevating the toy's status from a mere collectible to a must-have fashion accessory.

The Labubu phenomenon is a perfect illustration of the central argument of this book. On the surface, it seems like a thoroughly modern craze, a product of our hyper-connected, consumer-driven world. But look closer, and you'll see something much older at play. The desire to collect, the thrill of the hunt, the need for status and social validation, the comfort of belonging to a community of fellow enthusiasts—these are not new desires. They are ancient, primal drives that have been with us since our ancestors first gathered around a fire. What's new is the technology that amplifies these drives, turning a simple toy into a global cultural and economic force.

This is the paradox of our time. We live in a world of unprecedented technological advancement, a world of artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, and space exploration. We carry supercomputers in our pockets and have access to the sum of human knowledge at our fingertips. We like to think of ourselves as modern, rational beings, masters of our own destiny. But the truth is, we are still running on Stone Age software. Our brains, our desires, our instincts were forged in a world that no longer exists, a world of small, tight-knit tribes, of constant scarcity and immediate physical threats. We are, in essence, cavemen in a world of space-age technology. Welcome to the **Caveman Era**.

This isn't to say that we are brutish or unsophisticated. Far from it. But it is to say that the deep-seated psychological forces that guided our ancestors' behaviour are still very much with us. They are the ghost in the machine, the invisible hand that shapes our choices, our beliefs, and our societies. And in the 21st century, that hand is being guided by a new and powerful force: technology.

The last few decades have seen a 'Great Acceleration' in the pace of technological change. The internet, the smartphone, social media—these are not just new tools. They are new environments, new ecosystems that are fundamentally reshaping our lives. And they are doing so by tapping into our most primal drives. The six human attractors we introduced in the previous chapter—tribalism, status hierarchy, reciprocity, infantilism, solution bias, and neophilia—are the building blocks of the digital world. Social media platforms are designed to create and reinforce tribal identities. Online games and virtual worlds are built around

elaborate status hierarchies. The sharing economy is a modern-day expression of our innate sense of reciprocity. And the endless scroll of our social media feeds is a testament to our insatiable appetite for novelty.

But the Caveman Era is not just about technology. It is about the collision between two radically different timescales. Our evolutionary history spans millions of years. The technological revolution of the past few decades has happened in a blink of an eye. Our brains have not had time to adapt to this new environment. We are still equipped with the same psychological mechanisms that helped our ancestors survive on the African savannah. We are still driven by the same fears, the same desires, the same tribal instincts. But we are now operating in a world that is radically different from the one in which these mechanisms evolved.

Consider the phenomenon of social media outrage. Every week, it seems, there is a new scandal, a new controversy, a new person or organisation that has become the target of a viral storm of condemnation. The speed and the ferocity of these storms is remarkable. Within hours, a single tweet or a single video can mobilise millions of people, can destroy reputations, can topple careers. This is not a new phenomenon—humans have always been capable of collective outrage—but the scale and the speed are unprecedented.

Why does this happen? Because social media platforms have tapped into one of our most primal drives: the drive to belong to a tribe and to defend that tribe against outsiders. When we see a post that violates the norms of our tribe, that challenges our beliefs, that threatens our sense of identity, we feel a powerful urge to respond. We want to signal our loyalty to the tribe. We want to demonstrate that we are on the right side. We want to punish the transgressor. And the algorithms of social media platforms are designed to amplify this response, to show us more content that triggers this tribal instinct, to reward us with likes and shares and comments when we engage in this behaviour.

This is not a conspiracy. The platforms are not deliberately trying to destroy society. They are simply optimising for engagement, for the metric that determines their success and their profitability. But in doing so, they are tapping into and amplifying our most destructive tribal instincts. They are creating an environment in which nuance is impossible, in which compromise is seen as weakness, in which the other side is not just wrong, but evil. They are creating a world that is increasingly polarised, increasingly angry, increasingly unable to find common ground.

This is the essence of the Caveman Era. We have the technology of the gods, but the psychology of the caveman. We have the power to connect with billions of people, but we are using that power to reinforce our tribal divisions. We have access to infinite information, but we are using that access to retreat further into our echo chambers. We have the tools to solve our greatest challenges, but we are using those tools to amplify our greatest weaknesses.

The question is: what do we do about it? The illusion of modernity is the belief that we can somehow transcend our primal nature, that we can become purely rational beings, unaffected by our evolutionary past. This is a dangerous illusion. It leads us to build systems and technologies that are deeply misaligned with human nature, that exploit our vulnerabilities

rather than respecting our dignity. It leads us to believe that the solution to the problems created by technology is more technology, when what we actually need is a deeper understanding of ourselves.

By understanding the six human attractors, we can begin to see the world in a new light. We can see how the same forces that are causing so much disruption and anxiety can also be harnessed to create a more human-centred world. Tribalism can create communities of support and belonging. Status hierarchy can motivate us to achieve great things. Reciprocity can build a more equitable society. Infantilism can help us preserve our creativity and playfulness. Neophilia can drive innovation and progress. And solution bias, when properly channelled, can help us focus our efforts on the problems that matter most.

The challenge of the Caveman Era is not to deny our primal drives, but to understand them, to manage them, and to channel them towards a better future. It is to build systems and technologies that are aligned with our deepest human values, not just with our most primitive impulses. It is to create a world where our Stone Age psychology and our space-age technology can coexist in harmony, not in conflict.

In the chapters that follow, we will explore each of the six attractors in detail, using stories and case studies to show how they are shaping our world. We will delve into the psychology behind these drives, the ways in which they are being amplified by technology, and the implications for our economy, our society, and our future. The journey will take us from the boardrooms of Silicon Valley to the front lines of the culture wars, from the inner workings of the human brain to the outer reaches of the digital frontier. It is a journey into the heart of what it means to be human in the 21st century. And it begins now.

Let's return to Labubu. The 'blind box' mechanic is a masterstroke of psychological engineering. It taps into our innate love of novelty and our powerful response to intermittent rewards. The psychologist B.F. Skinner, in his famous experiments with pigeons, discovered that the most effective way to create a compulsive behaviour is not to reward it every time, but to reward it on an unpredictable schedule. This is the principle that powers slot machines, and it is the principle that powers the blind box. Each box is a spin of the reels, a gamble, a hit of dopamine. The uncertainty of the reward is what makes it so addictive.

But the Labubu phenomenon is not just about individual psychology; it is about social psychology. The rarity of certain figures creates a clear and visible status hierarchy. Owning a rare Labubu is a signal of wealth, of dedication, of being 'in the know'. It is a form of cultural capital, a way of demonstrating one's position in the social pecking order. The online communities that have sprung up around Labubu are a modern-day expression of our tribal instincts. They are places where fans can share their passion, trade figures, and reinforce their collective identity. The Labubu phenomenon is a perfect microcosm of the Caveman Era, a place where our most ancient drives are being played out in a thoroughly modern context.

Now, consider another, very different, but equally revealing, phenomenon: the rise of the 'meme stock'. In early 2021, a struggling video game retailer called GameStop became the epicentre of a financial earthquake. A group of small, individual investors, coordinating on a Reddit forum called WallStreetBets, decided to take on the hedge funds that were betting

against the company's stock. They bought GameStop shares in vast numbers, driving the price up by over 1,500% in a matter of days. The hedge funds that had shorted the stock lost billions of dollars. The financial world was stunned.

The GameStop saga was a complex event with many contributing factors. But at its heart, it was a story about the Caveman Era. It was a story about tribalism, as the small investors of WallStreetBets banded together to take on the perceived enemy of the Wall Street establishment. It was a story about status, as individuals boasted about their gains and their 'diamond hands' (a term for holding onto a stock despite its volatility). It was a story about neophilia, as a new generation of investors, armed with commission-free trading apps, piled into a novel and exciting financial game. And it was a story about solution bias, as the narrative of a simple, David-and-Goliath battle against a corrupt system took hold, obscuring the complex realities of the financial markets.

The GameStop phenomenon, like the Labubu craze, demonstrates how our ancient psychology is shaping the digital world. The technology of the commission-free trading app and the online forum did not create the desire to take on the establishment, to speculate, to belong to a tribe. But it amplified those desires, channelled them, and gave them a new and powerful form of expression. It allowed a leaderless, decentralised group of individuals to coordinate their actions on a massive scale, with dramatic and unforeseen consequences.

This is the world we now live in. It is a world of 'rigidly defined uncertainty', to borrow a phrase from the theorist D. Price. The specifics are unpredictable—no one could have predicted the GameStop saga or the Labubu craze—but the underlying patterns are remarkably consistent. These patterns are the expression of our six human attractors, the gravitational forces that pull our behaviour in certain directions. By understanding these attractors, we can begin to make sense of the bewildering complexity of the modern world.

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Chapter 2: The Unseen Wall (Tribalism)

There is a story that has become something of a legend in political circles, a story that reveals something profound about the nature of tribalism in the digital age. It concerns the 2016 Iowa Caucuses, the first major test of the American presidential election season. The Iowa Democratic Party had developed an app to help precinct captains report the results of the caucuses. The app was supposed to streamline the process, to make it faster and more accurate. Instead, it became a disaster.

On the night of the caucuses, the app failed spectacularly. Precinct captains couldn't log in. The app crashed. The results couldn't be transmitted. The whole system ground to a halt. For hours, nobody knew who had won. The media was in a frenzy. The campaigns were in chaos. And the app, which was supposed to solve a problem, had created a far bigger one. In the end, the results had to be reported manually, the old-fashioned way, by phone. The app was abandoned, and the Iowa Democratic Party was left with egg on its face.

The app's failure was not just a technical failure; it was a failure of imagination. The developers had assumed that the problem was a technical one, that if they could just build a better app, they could make the process faster and more accurate. They didn't account for the human factor. They didn't account for the fact that precinct captains, many of them elderly volunteers with limited technical skills, would struggle to use the app. They didn't account for the fact that in the chaos and stress of caucus night, a single point of failure could bring the whole system down. They didn't account for the fact that people would lose faith in the system if they couldn't understand how it worked.

But there is another, deeper lesson in the Iowa Caucuses app story. It is a lesson about tribalism. The app failed, in part, because it was built by people who were not part of the Iowa Democratic Party community. It was built by Silicon Valley engineers who had no deep understanding of how the caucuses worked, of the culture and the traditions of Iowa politics. They were outsiders, and the system rejected them. The app was not just a technical failure; it was a tribal failure.

Tribalism is the first of our six human attractors. It is the innate desire to belong to a group, to define ourselves in opposition to an 'other'. It is one of the most powerful forces in human psychology. For most of human history, tribalism was a survival mechanism. Our ancestors lived in small groups, typically between 50 and 150 people. Survival depended on the ability to work together, to trust one another, to defend the group against outsiders. Those who were good at navigating tribal politics, who could build alliances and maintain group cohesion, were more likely to survive and to pass on their genes. Those who were loners, who couldn't fit into a group, were more likely to die alone.

As a result, we are deeply tribal creatures. We have a powerful need to belong, to be part of a group that shares our values and our beliefs. We have an equally powerful tendency to see the world in terms of 'us' and 'them', to view those outside our group with suspicion and hostility.

We are quick to form groups, quick to create in-group/out-group distinctions, quick to defend our group against perceived threats.

This tribal instinct has not disappeared in the modern world. If anything, it has become more pronounced. We see it in the rise of political polarisation, in the culture wars, in the rise of identity politics. We see it in the way that people retreat into ideological echo chambers, in the way that they consume news that confirms their existing beliefs, in the way that they demonise those who disagree with them.

And we see it, most starkly, in the rise of social media. Social media platforms have weaponised tribalism. They have created environments in which tribal instincts are constantly triggered and amplified. The algorithms that power these platforms are designed to show us content that is engaging, and the most engaging content is often the content that triggers our tribal instincts. It is the content that confirms our beliefs, that attacks the other side, that makes us feel part of a community of like-minded people.

Consider the phenomenon of 'cancel culture'. This is a modern manifestation of tribalism, a way in which groups police the boundaries of acceptable behaviour. When someone violates the norms of the tribe—when they say something offensive, when they express a view that is considered beyond the pale—the tribe mobilises to punish them. They are 'cancelled', their reputation is destroyed, their career is ended. This is not a new phenomenon. Humans have always punished those who violate group norms. But the scale and the speed of cancel culture, enabled by social media, is unprecedented.

The psychologist Henri Tajfel conducted a famous series of experiments in the 1970s that demonstrated the power of tribalism. He divided people into groups on the basis of completely arbitrary criteria—sometimes just their preference for one type of painting over another. And yet, even with these arbitrary group assignments, people immediately began to favour members of their own group and to discriminate against members of other groups. They allocated more money to members of their own group, they rated members of their own group more positively, they were more willing to cooperate with members of their own group. This was tribalism in its purest form, tribalism without any real basis in shared history or shared values. It was tribalism that emerged spontaneously, simply from the act of being assigned to a group.

In the digital age, tribalism has become even more powerful. Social media platforms have made it easier than ever to find and join groups of like-minded people. They have created algorithms that actively encourage us to spend more time with people who share our views. They have created a world in which we are constantly exposed to content that confirms our existing beliefs, and in which we are rarely exposed to views that challenge us. The result is a phenomenon known as 'filter bubbles' or 'echo chambers', in which people are trapped in a world of their own beliefs, with no exposure to alternative viewpoints.

The political scientist Cass Sunstein has written extensively about the dangers of echo chambers. He argues that when people are only exposed to views that are similar to their own, they tend to become more extreme in their views. This is a phenomenon known as 'group polarisation'. The group, through discussion and deliberation, tends to move towards a

more extreme position than the average position of the individual members. This is not because the group is becoming more rational or more informed; it is because the group is reinforcing its own beliefs and moving away from the centre.

This has profound implications for democracy. Democracy depends on the ability of people with different views to engage in civil discourse, to listen to one another, to find common ground. But if people are trapped in echo chambers, if they are only exposed to views that confirm their existing beliefs, then this kind of discourse becomes impossible. The result is a form of tribalism that is deeply corrosive to the social fabric.

But tribalism is not inherently bad. It is a powerful force that can be used for good as well as for ill. Tribalism creates communities, it creates a sense of belonging, it creates a basis for cooperation and mutual support. The challenge is to channel tribalism in a way that is constructive, that builds bridges between groups rather than walls.

One example of this is the rise of online communities that are built around shared interests or shared values, rather than around political or cultural identity. These communities can create a sense of belonging and support without the divisiveness of political tribalism. They can create spaces in which people can learn from one another, can share their experiences, can find help and support.

Another example is the rise of social movements that are built on the basis of shared values, rather than on the basis of narrow tribal identity. The climate movement, for instance, brings together people from different political backgrounds, different cultures, different countries, united by a shared concern for the future of the planet. These movements can harness the power of tribalism—the sense of belonging to a group, the willingness to sacrifice for the group—in service of a larger cause.

The challenge of the Caveman Era is to recognise the power of tribalism, to understand its dangers, and to find ways to channel it towards constructive ends. It is to build communities and movements that are inclusive, that bring people together rather than driving them apart. It is to create a world in which our tribal instincts are used to build bridges, not walls.

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Chapter 3: The Gilded Cage (Status Hierarchy)

In 2020, a young woman named Charli D'Amelio became the first person on TikTok to reach 100 million followers. She was sixteen years old. She had become famous not for any particular talent or achievement, but simply for dancing to popular songs and posting the videos on social media. Within a few years, she had become one of the most recognisable people on the planet, with a net worth estimated at over $20 million. She had endorsement deals with major brands, her own product line, and a Netflix documentary about her life.

The Charli D'Amelio phenomenon is a perfect illustration of the second of our six human attractors: **Status Hierarchy**. It is the universal drive to establish and navigate social pecking orders. Every human society, from the smallest hunter-gatherer band to the largest modern nation-state, has a status hierarchy. In traditional societies, status was determined by factors like age, gender, family lineage, and achievement in hunting or warfare. In modern societies, status is determined by factors like wealth, education, profession, and social connections. But the underlying drive—the desire to establish one's position in the social hierarchy—remains the same.

The digital age has transformed the nature of status hierarchies. It has made them more visible, more quantified, and more obsessive than ever before. In the pre-digital world, your status was determined largely by factors that were not easily quantifiable. You might be known as a good hunter, a wise elder, a skilled craftsperson. But in the digital world, your status is determined by metrics that are immediately visible to everyone: your follower count, your like count, your comment count. Your social worth has been reduced to a number, a number that is constantly changing, constantly being compared to the social worth of others.

This has created what we might call the 'Influencer Economy', an economy in which social media followers are a form of currency. An influencer with a million followers can command tens of thousands of dollars for a single sponsored post. An influencer with ten million followers can command hundreds of thousands of dollars. The more followers you have, the more money you can make. The more money you make, the higher your status. The higher your status, the more followers you attract. It is a self-reinforcing cycle, a pyramid scheme in which those at the top accumulate wealth and status at an exponential rate.

But the influencer economy is not just about money. It is about status, about the desire to be seen, to be admired, to be recognised. It is about the desire to climb the social hierarchy, to move from the bottom to the top, to be part of the elite. And social media has made this desire more visible and more accessible than ever before. Anyone with a smartphone and an internet connection can potentially become an influencer. Anyone can potentially climb the social hierarchy. This is both liberating and deeply troubling.

The psychologist Abraham Maslow famously identified a hierarchy of human needs, with self-actualisation at the top. Self-actualisation is the desire to become the best version of yourself, to fulfil your potential. But Maslow also identified a need that comes just before self-actualisation: the need for esteem, the need to be valued and respected by others. In the pre-digital world, the need for esteem was typically satisfied through achievement—through

becoming a good parent, a skilled worker, a respected member of the community. But in the digital world, the need for esteem can be satisfied simply by accumulating followers.

This has created a new form of status anxiety. In the pre-digital world, your status was relatively stable. You were born into a certain social position, and while you could improve your status through hard work and achievement, the process was slow and gradual. But in the digital world, your status is constantly changing, constantly being compared to the status of others, constantly being quantified and made visible. You can gain thousands of followers in a single day, or lose them just as quickly. This creates a state of perpetual anxiety, a constant fear of losing status, a constant pressure to maintain and improve your position in the hierarchy.

This anxiety is particularly acute among young people, who are growing up in a world in which their status is constantly being quantified and compared. A study by the American Psychological Association found that rates of depression and anxiety among teenagers have increased significantly since the rise of social media. The researchers attributed this increase, in part, to the constant comparison and competition that social media enables. Young people are constantly comparing themselves to their peers, constantly worrying about their social status, constantly anxious about whether they are measuring up.

But the influencer economy is not just about individual status anxiety. It is also about the creation of a new form of social inequality. In the pre-digital world, the barriers to entry for becoming wealthy and famous were relatively high. You needed to have talent, or connections, or luck. You needed to work your way up through traditional institutions—the entertainment industry, the media, the business world. But in the digital world, the barriers to entry are lower. Anyone can become an influencer. But the rewards are increasingly concentrated at the top. A small number of mega-influencers capture the vast majority of the attention and the money, while millions of smaller influencers struggle to make a living.

This has created a new form of precarity. In the pre-digital world, if you had a job, you had a certain amount of security. You had a salary, benefits, the expectation that you would continue to be employed as long as you did your job well. But in the influencer economy, there is no such security. Your income depends entirely on your ability to maintain and grow your follower count. If your followers lose interest, if a competitor emerges, if the algorithm changes, your income can disappear overnight. This creates a state of constant anxiety, a constant pressure to produce content, a constant fear of becoming irrelevant.

The influencer economy has also created a new form of exploitation. Many influencers, particularly young ones, are not paid fairly for their work. They may be offered 'exposure' instead of money. They may be pressured to promote products that they don't believe in. They may be subject to harassment and abuse from their followers. And because they are not employees, they are not protected by labour laws. They have no minimum wage, no working hours regulations, no protection against harassment or abuse.

But perhaps the most troubling aspect of the influencer economy is the way in which it has transformed the nature of authenticity. In the pre-digital world, authenticity was a given. If you presented yourself in a certain way, that was who you were. But in the digital world,

authenticity is a performance. Influencers carefully curate their online personas, presenting a version of themselves that is designed to be appealing to their audience. They take hundreds of photos to find the perfect one. They edit their videos to remove any imperfections. They craft their captions to be witty and engaging. The result is a world in which nothing is quite what it seems, in which everyone is performing a version of themselves, in which authenticity has become just another form of performance.

This has profound implications for how we understand ourselves and our relationships. If everyone is performing, if everyone is curating their online persona, then how do we know who we really are? How do we form genuine connections with others? How do we build communities based on authentic sharing and mutual support?

The challenge of the Caveman Era is to recognise the power of status hierarchies, to understand their dangers, and to find ways to build a more equitable and authentic world. It is to resist the constant pressure to perform, to curate, to compete. It is to value people for who they are, not for how many followers they have. It is to build communities based on genuine connection and mutual support, not on the accumulation of social capital.

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Chapter 4: The Invisible Handshake (Reciprocity)

In 2008, a young entrepreneur named Brian Chesky and his roommate Joe Gebbia were struggling to pay their rent. They had an idea: they would rent out air mattresses in their apartment to visitors coming to San Francisco for a design conference. They created a simple website, took some photos, and posted an ad. To their surprise, they got bookings. Visitors were willing to stay in their apartment, to sleep on air mattresses, to share their space with strangers.

This simple idea evolved into Airbnb, a platform that would fundamentally transform the travel and hospitality industry. Today, Airbnb operates in over 220 countries and has facilitated over 900 million bookings. It has created a new form of economy, one in which ordinary people can rent out their spare rooms or their entire homes to strangers. It has created a new form of travel, one in which tourists can stay in local neighbourhoods rather than in anonymous hotel chains. And it has created a new form of community, one in which hosts and guests from all over the world can connect and share experiences.

But Airbnb is more than just a business. It is an expression of one of the most fundamental principles of human behaviour: **Reciprocity**. Reciprocity is the deep-seated instinct to repay debts and favours, the foundation of all social and economic exchange. When someone does something for us, we feel an obligation to do something for them in return. This principle is so fundamental to human nature that it appears in every human society. Anthropologists have found that even the most isolated and primitive societies have elaborate systems of reciprocal exchange.

The principle of reciprocity is so powerful that it can override other considerations. In one famous experiment, researchers found that people were more likely to comply with a request if they had previously received a small favour from the person making the request. Even if the favour was unsolicited, even if the person receiving the favour didn't particularly want it, the obligation to reciprocate was still powerful. This is the principle that underlies much of marketing and sales. If a company gives you something for free—a sample, a gift, a discount—you feel an obligation to buy their product in return.

Airbnb has built its entire business model on the principle of reciprocity. The platform creates a system in which hosts and guests are bound together by reciprocal obligations. The host provides a clean, comfortable space, and the guest is obligated to treat the space with respect and to leave a positive review. The guest pays for the accommodation, and the host is obligated to provide good service. This system of reciprocal obligations creates a form of trust and community that would be difficult to achieve through traditional market mechanisms.

But reciprocity is not just about individual transactions. It is also about the creation of social bonds and community. When we do something for someone, we are not just exchanging goods or services; we are creating a relationship. We are saying, "I value you, I trust you, I am willing to invest in our relationship." And when someone reciprocates, they are saying the same thing back to us. Reciprocity is the glue that holds communities together.

This is why the sharing economy has been so successful. The sharing economy is built on the principle of reciprocity. It allows people to share resources—cars, apartments, tools, skills—with one another. It creates a system in which people can help one another, can meet one another's needs, can build relationships based on mutual support. It is a modern-day expression of the ancient principle of reciprocity.

But the sharing economy also reveals the dangers of reciprocity in the digital age. The principle of reciprocity is based on the assumption that there is a rough equality between the parties involved. If I do something for you, you do something for me. But in the digital economy, this equality is often absent. The platforms that mediate these exchanges—Uber, Airbnb, TaskRabbit—capture a significant portion of the value. The workers and the consumers are left with the crumbs.

Moreover, the principle of reciprocity can be exploited. Companies can use the principle of reciprocity to extract value from their users. If a company gives you something for free—a social media platform, a search engine, an email service—you feel an obligation to use their service, to provide them with your data, to allow them to sell your attention to advertisers. You are reciprocating, but you may not fully understand what you are reciprocating for.

This is the principle that underlies the business model of many tech companies. They provide a service for free, and in return, they extract value from you in the form of your data. You feel an obligation to use their service, to provide them with information about yourself, to allow them to track your behaviour. You are reciprocating, but the exchange is not equal. The company is capturing far more value than they are providing.

The psychologist Robert Cialdini has written extensively about the principle of reciprocity and how it can be exploited. He calls it one of the most powerful principles of influence. People are willing to do things they wouldn't normally do, to spend money they wouldn't normally spend, to compromise their values, all in the name of reciprocity. This is a powerful tool for persuasion, but it is also a tool that can be abused.

The challenge of the Caveman Era is to recognise the power of reciprocity, to understand its dangers, and to find ways to create systems of reciprocal exchange that are fair and equitable. It is to resist the exploitation of reciprocity by companies that are trying to extract value from us. It is to build communities based on genuine reciprocal support, not on the extraction of value by intermediaries.

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Chapter 5: The Candy-Coated Treadmill (Infantilism)

There is a feature on your smartphone that you probably use dozens of times a day, a feature so simple and so intuitive that you may not even think about it. It is the 'pull-to-refresh' gesture. You pull down on your screen, and a moment later, new content appears. The action is simple, intuitive, and deeply addictive. It is, in essence, a slot machine. The user is pulling a lever, and the reward—a new email, a new photo, a new tweet—is variable and unpredictable. This is the most powerful form of conditioning known to psychology. It is the same mechanism that keeps people pulling the lever on a poker machine, hoping for the next jackpot.

This feature is an example of what we might call **Infantilism**, the third of our six human attractors. Infantilism is the tendency to be drawn to the playful, the simple, and the non-threatening, a force that shapes everything from product design to political discourse. It is not a pejorative term. Playfulness, simplicity, and a sense of wonder are valuable human qualities. But when they are exploited to keep us distracted, to keep us addicted, to keep us from engaging with the serious challenges of our time, they become a problem.

Infantilism has deep roots in human psychology. As children, we are drawn to play, to exploration, to the pursuit of pleasure. Play is how we learn about the world, how we develop our skills, how we build relationships. The drive to play is not something we outgrow as we become adults; it remains with us throughout our lives. We continue to be drawn to games, to entertainment, to activities that are fun and engaging.

This is not inherently a bad thing. Play is a vital part of human life. It is a source of creativity, of joy, of connection. But in the digital age, the drive to play has been weaponised. Technology companies have become extraordinarily sophisticated at designing products that tap into our desire for play, for simplicity, for immediate gratification. They have created what is known as 'gamification', the application of game mechanics to non-game contexts.

Gamification is everywhere. Your fitness tracker gamifies exercise by giving you points and badges for hitting your daily step goal. Your language learning app gamifies language learning by giving you streaks and levels. Your email client gamifies email by showing you a satisfying 'zero inbox' when you've cleared all your messages. Even serious applications like productivity software and project management tools use gamification to keep users engaged.

The principle behind gamification is simple: if you can make something feel like a game, if you can give people immediate feedback, if you can provide them with a sense of progress and achievement, then you can keep them engaged. And if you can keep them engaged, you can keep them using your product, and you can extract value from them.

But gamification is not just about making things fun. It is also about simplifying complex problems, about reducing them to simple metrics and simple goals. In the real world, fitness is complex. It involves not just the number of steps you take, but your overall health, your

diet, your sleep, your stress levels. But a fitness tracker reduces fitness to a single metric: the number of steps. This simplification makes the problem tractable, but it also distorts it. It encourages people to focus on the metric, not on the underlying goal. People will take unnecessary steps just to hit their daily goal. They will sacrifice other important aspects of their health in pursuit of the metric.

This is the danger of infantilism in the digital age. It is not just that we are being distracted by games and entertainment. It is that we are being encouraged to think about complex problems in overly simple terms. We are being encouraged to reduce the world to a series of metrics and goals, to focus on immediate gratification rather than long-term well-being, to treat serious challenges as if they were games to be won.

Consider the way that social media has gamified social interaction. Social media platforms give you immediate feedback on your posts—likes, comments, shares. They give you a sense of progress and achievement. They create a game-like environment in which you are competing with others for attention and validation. This is deeply appealing to our desire for play and for immediate gratification. But it is also deeply damaging to our mental health and our social relationships.

The psychologist Jean Twenge has documented the rise in depression and anxiety among teenagers since the widespread adoption of social media. She argues that social media has created a culture of constant comparison, constant competition, and constant anxiety about social status. Young people are spending hours each day on social media, chasing likes and comments, comparing themselves to their peers, worrying about their social standing. The game-like nature of social media makes it addictive, but it is also deeply damaging to their mental health.

But infantilism is not just about gamification. It is also about the infantilisation of political discourse. In recent years, political discourse has become increasingly simplified, increasingly focused on slogans and soundbites rather than on substantive policy discussion. Complex policy issues are reduced to simple narratives, to stories of good versus evil, to battles between heroes and villains. This simplification makes politics more engaging, more entertaining, more game-like. But it also makes it more divisive, more polarising, and less able to address the complex challenges we face.

This is the essence of infantilism in the Caveman Era. We are being encouraged to think about the world in simple, game-like terms. We are being encouraged to focus on immediate gratification rather than long-term well-being. We are being encouraged to treat serious challenges as if they were games to be won. And in doing so, we are losing the ability to engage with complexity, to think critically, to address the serious challenges of our time.

The challenge of the Caveman Era is to resist the seductive appeal of infantilism, to preserve our capacity for play and wonder while also developing our capacity for serious thought and engagement. It is to build systems and technologies that respect our intelligence, that challenge us to think deeply, that encourage us to engage with complexity rather than to retreat from it.

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Chapter 6: The Silver Bullet That Wasn't (Solution Bias)

In 2000, the music industry faced a crisis. Napster had shown that music could be freely shared over the internet, and the industry's business model was crumbling. The executives of the major record labels gathered to discuss how to respond. And they came up with what seemed like a simple solution: copy protection.

If they could prevent people from copying music files, they reasoned, then they could prevent piracy. They could protect their intellectual property and preserve their business model. They developed a technology called Digital Rights Management, or DRM, which would encrypt music files and prevent them from being copied or shared. It seemed like the perfect solution to the problem.

But it wasn't. The DRM technology was clunky, it was inconvenient, and it was easily circumvented by anyone with a bit of technical knowledge. More importantly, it didn't address the underlying problem. The reason people were downloading music from Napster was not because they wanted to pirate music; it was because they wanted a convenient way to access music. They wanted to be able to buy individual songs, not entire albums. They wanted to be able to listen to music on their portable devices. They wanted to be able to share music with their friends.

The record industry's response was to try to solve the problem with technology, with copy protection. But the real problem was not a technological one; it was a business model problem. The industry was trying to preserve a business model that was no longer viable in the digital age. They were trying to solve a business problem with a technological solution. And it didn't work.

This is an example of what we might call **Solution Bias**, the fourth of our six human attractors. Solution bias is the preference for simple, immediate answers to complex problems, even when those answers are wrong. It is the belief that every problem has a solution, and that the solution is usually a simple one. It is the belief that if we can just find the right technology, the right app, the right tool, we can solve any problem.

Solution bias is deeply rooted in human psychology. We are creatures who like to solve problems, who like to take action, who like to feel like we are making progress. When faced with a complex problem, we feel an urge to do something, to try something, to implement a solution. Sitting with a problem, acknowledging its complexity, accepting that there may not be a simple solution—this is psychologically difficult. It is much easier to implement a simple solution, even if that solution is not very good, than to sit with the problem and acknowledge its complexity.

This bias is particularly pronounced in the tech industry. Silicon Valley has a culture that celebrates disruption, that believes that technology can solve any problem, that believes that the solution to any problem is a better app, a better algorithm, a better piece of software. This culture has led to some remarkable innovations, but it has also led to some spectacular failures.

Consider the case of Google Glass, a pair of glasses with a built-in computer and a heads-up display. Google believed that this technology would revolutionise the way we interact with information and with the world. They invested hundreds of millions of dollars in developing the product. They released it to the public with great fanfare. But it was a failure. People didn't want to wear a computer on their face. They didn't want to be constantly connected to the internet. They didn't want to be constantly recording video of the world around them. Google Glass was a solution looking for a problem, a piece of technology that was looking for a use case that didn't exist.

Or consider the case of Theranos, the blood-testing company founded by Elizabeth Holmes. Holmes claimed to have invented a technology that could perform a wide range of blood tests using only a few drops of blood from a finger prick. This technology, she claimed, would revolutionise the blood-testing industry, making it faster, cheaper, and more convenient. Investors were impressed. The company was valued at $9 billion. But it was all a fraud. The technology didn't work. The company was using traditional blood-testing equipment to perform the tests. Holmes had fallen victim to solution bias; she believed that she could solve a complex problem with a simple technological solution. But the problem was more complex than she understood, and the solution didn't work.

Solution bias is also evident in the way that tech companies approach social problems. When faced with a social problem—misinformation, harassment, polarisation—tech companies often respond with a technological solution. They develop algorithms to detect misinformation. They develop systems to remove harassing content. They develop recommendation systems to reduce polarisation. But these technological solutions often don't address the underlying problem. They are treating the symptoms, not the disease.

Consider the problem of misinformation on social media. Tech companies have invested billions of dollars in developing algorithms to detect and remove misinformation. But the problem persists. Why? Because misinformation is not fundamentally a technological problem; it is a social and political problem. People believe misinformation not because they lack access to correct information, but because the misinformation confirms their existing beliefs, because it fits into their tribal identity, because it gives them a simple explanation for a complex world.

A technological solution—an algorithm that removes misinformation—cannot solve this problem. What is needed is a social and political solution. We need to rebuild trust in institutions. We need to improve media literacy. We need to create spaces for genuine dialogue and understanding. We need to address the underlying social and political divisions that make people susceptible to misinformation. These are not technological problems, and they cannot be solved with technological solutions.

But solution bias is so powerful that tech companies continue to believe that they can solve these problems with technology. They continue to invest in algorithms, in artificial intelligence, in machine learning. And while these technologies can be useful, they cannot solve the fundamental problem. They are treating the symptom, not the disease.

The challenge of the Caveman Era is to recognise solution bias, to understand its dangers, and to resist the temptation to implement simple technological solutions to complex problems. It is to acknowledge that some problems are complex, that they don't have simple solutions, that they require patience, dialogue, and a willingness to engage with nuance and complexity. It is to build a culture that values wisdom and understanding, not just innovation and disruption.

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Chapter 7: The Cannibal's Dilemma (Neophilia)

In 2007, Netflix was the king of a kingdom it had built from scratch. It was a simple, elegant, and wildly successful business. For a flat monthly fee, you could rent as many DVDs as you wanted, delivered straight to your letterbox in their iconic red envelopes. There were no late fees, a revolutionary concept that had been the initial spark for the company's creation. Netflix had slain the video rental giant, Blockbuster, not with a single, swift blow, but through a thousand paper cuts of convenience. The company was profitable, beloved by its customers, and seemingly poised for a long and comfortable reign.

And then, Reed Hastings, the company's co-founder and CEO, decided to burn it all to the ground.

Not literally, of course. But in the eyes of Wall Street and many of his own employees, what he did next was just as mad. He launched a new, separate service called "Watch Now." It was a streaming platform, allowing subscribers to watch a small, curated library of films and TV shows directly on their computers. The quality was grainy, the selection was paltry, and the technology was clunky. To make matters worse, Hastings decided to run it as a completely separate business. If you were a DVD subscriber—the loyal customers who had built the company—you still had to manage a separate queue and a separate subscription for streaming. It was confusing, inefficient, and, from a business perspective, it looked like suicide. Hastings was asking his company to cannibalise its own, highly profitable, core business in favour of a new, unproven, and technologically inferior one.

The backlash was immediate and brutal. The company's stock price plummeted. Customers revolted. The media declared that Netflix had lost its mind. But Hastings held his nerve. He saw something that the rest of the world had not yet fully grasped. He understood that the future was not in physical media, not in red envelopes and postal deliveries. The future was in the instantaneous, on-demand delivery of digital content. He knew that if Netflix didn't make its own business obsolete, someone else would. He chose to be the cannibal, rather than the meal.

Hastings' audacious bet was not just a brilliant business move; it was a profound act of faith in the last of our six great human attractors: **Neophilia**.

Neophilia is the love of the new. It is the thrill of the novel, the allure of the different, the siren song of the undiscovered country. It is the force that pulls us out of our comfort zones, that encourages us to explore, to experiment, and to innovate. Like all our attractors, it is a deep and ancient part of our psychological makeup. For our hunter-gatherer ancestors, a healthy dose of neophilia was a crucial survival trait. The willingness to try a new type of berry, to explore a new valley, or to experiment with a new way of knapping flint could lead to the discovery of vital new resources. Curiosity, in an evolutionary sense, did not kill the cat; it fed the cat, clothed it, and gave it a better chance of raising kittens.

The psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, in his groundbreaking work on the concept of 'flow', has argued that curiosity and the drive to explore are fundamental to human well-being

and creativity. People who are high in neophilia tend to be more creative, more adaptable, and more likely to achieve success in rapidly changing environments. Neophilia is not just a personality trait; it is a fundamental aspect of human nature that has driven our species' remarkable achievements.

This innate attraction to novelty is the engine of all human progress. It is the spark that ignites scientific discovery, the muse that inspires artistic creation, and the restless energy that drives entrepreneurial ambition. It is the reason we have symphonies and space stations, poetry and particle accelerators. Without neophilia, we would be a species stuck in a perpetual present, endlessly repeating the patterns of the past.

But neophilia, like all our primal drives, is a double-edged sword. The same impulse that drives us to create and to explore can also lead to a state of restless, perpetual dissatisfaction. In the Caveman Era, our love of the new has been put into overdrive, amplified and exploited by a culture of relentless novelty. It is the gnawing feeling that your smartphone, the one that was the pinnacle of technology just a year ago, is now a clunky and obsolete relic. It is the endless scroll of your social media feed, a torrent of new images, new ideas, and new outrages, each one jostling for a fleeting moment of your attention. It is the dizzying acceleration of trend cycles, where fashion, music, and ideas flare into global prominence and then vanish in the blink of an eye.

This is the paradox of neophilia: it is both the source of our greatest achievements and the fuel for our most trivial distractions. The psychologist Robert C. Cloninger, who has studied the trait extensively, notes that high levels of novelty-seeking are associated with creativity, curiosity, and a general sense of well-being. But they are also associated with impulsivity, addiction, and risk-taking behaviour. The neophiliac is constantly walking a tightrope between productive exploration and destructive restlessness.

Technology has made that tightrope far more precarious. The digital world is a neophiliac's paradise, a vast, glittering casino of novelty where every click, every swipe, and every refresh offers the promise of a new reward. The recommendation algorithms of Netflix, Spotify, and Amazon are neophilia machines, constantly learning our tastes and serving up a perfectly tailored stream of new content to keep us engaged. The hype cycle of the tech industry, with its annual product launches and its breathless announcements of the 'next big thing', is a masterclass in the manipulation of our love for the new.

Reed Hastings understood this better than anyone. He knew that the convenience of the DVD-by-mail model, as novel as it was in 1997, would eventually be superseded by something even more novel, even more convenient. He was willing to endure the short-term pain of cannibalising his own business because he had faith in the long-term power of neophilia. He knew that, in the end, the customer's desire for the new would always win.

His story is a lesson for our time. In an age of accelerating change, the greatest risk is not in taking a chance on the new, but in clinging too tightly to the old. The companies, the institutions, and the individuals who will thrive in the 21st century will be those who, like Hastings, have the courage to be the cannibal. They will be the ones who can harness the

restless, creative, and sometimes destructive power of neophilia, and use it to build the future, not just to consume it.

Let's unpack the neuroscience of neophilia. At the heart of our love for the new is a neurotransmitter called dopamine. Dopamine is often misunderstood as the 'pleasure chemical'. But that's not quite right. Dopamine is more accurately described as the 'motivation chemical'. It is the chemical that drives us to seek out rewards, to explore our environment, to learn new things. And it is particularly sensitive to novelty. When we encounter something new and unexpected, our brains release a surge of dopamine, which creates a feeling of excitement, of anticipation, of wanting more.

This is the 'novelty bonus' that our brains assign to new experiences. It is an evolutionary adaptation that encouraged our ancestors to explore their environment, to seek out new sources of food, to find new mates. In the ancestral environment, where resources were scarce and the world was full of dangers, this was a highly adaptive trait. But in the modern world, where we are surrounded by an endless stream of novel stimuli, this ancient reward system can be hijacked. The endless scroll of a social media feed, the constant stream of notifications from our smartphones, the ever-changing landscape of online news—all are designed to trigger this dopamine response, to keep us coming back for more, to create a state of perpetual, low-grade addiction.

This is the neurological basis of the 'exploration-exploitation trade-off', a fundamental challenge that all intelligent organisms face. Do you exploit the resources you already know about, or do you explore for new and potentially better resources? Do you stick with the tried and true, or do you take a chance on the new and unknown? In the ancestral environment, this was a life-or-death calculation. Spend too much time exploring, and you might starve. Spend too much time exploiting, and you might miss out on a vital new resource. The optimal strategy was a careful balance between the two.

But in the modern world, technology has skewed this balance. The digital environment is so rich in novel stimuli, so perfectly designed to trigger our exploratory instincts, that we are in danger of becoming a species of perpetual explorers, constantly seeking the next new thing, constantly distracted, constantly dissatisfied. We are living in a state of what the writer Linda Stone has called 'continuous partial attention', a state of being constantly connected, constantly multitasking, constantly scanning the horizon for the next new thing, but rarely fully engaged with the task at hand.

This has profound implications for our ability to think, to learn, and to create. Deep, focused work—the kind of work that is necessary for genuine creativity and innovation—requires long periods of uninterrupted concentration. But the digital environment is designed to prevent this. It is designed to distract us, to interrupt us, to pull us away from the task at hand and towards the next new thing. The result is a culture of superficiality, a culture in which we are constantly skimming the surface of things, but rarely diving deep.

Consider the world of fashion. For most of human history, fashion was a slow-moving affair. Styles changed gradually, over decades or even centuries. But in the modern era, the pace of fashion has accelerated dramatically. The rise of 'fast fashion' in the late 20th century created

a system in which new styles were introduced not on a seasonal basis, but on a weekly or even daily basis. And in the 21st century, the rise of social media has accelerated the trend cycle even further. We now live in a world of 'micro-trends', fleeting fads that emerge on platforms like TikTok, flare into global prominence for a few weeks, and then vanish as quickly as they appeared.

This culture of disposability is a direct consequence of our neophilia. We are addicted to the new, and the fashion industry has become extraordinarily adept at feeding that addiction. The result is a system that is not just psychologically damaging, but also environmentally catastrophic. The fashion industry is one of the world's largest polluters, responsible for a significant portion of global carbon emissions, water pollution, and landfill waste. Our love of the new is literally costing us the earth.

Or consider the world of technology. The annual upgrade cycle for smartphones is a masterclass in the manipulation of neophilia. Each year, companies like Apple and Samsung release a new version of their flagship phone, with a slightly better camera, a slightly faster processor, a slightly sleeker design. The improvements are often marginal, but the marketing is designed to convince us that the new phone is a revolutionary leap forward, that our old phone is now obsolete, that we must have the latest and greatest. The result is a culture of perpetual upgrading, a culture in which we are constantly chasing the next new thing, constantly accumulating a mountain of electronic waste.

This is the cannibal's dilemma in its starkest form. The companies that thrive in the digital age are the ones that are willing to cannibalise their own products, to make their own creations obsolete, to constantly feed our insatiable appetite for the new. But this is a dangerous game. It is a game that is creating a culture of distraction, of dissatisfaction, of disposability. It is a game that is undermining our ability to think, to connect, to create. It is a game that is, in the long run, unsustainable.

So what is the alternative? How do we escape the cannibal's dilemma? How do we build a culture that values not just the new, but also the old, the lasting, the meaningful? There are no easy answers. But there are some principles that can guide us.

First, we must cultivate a sense of what the writer Cal Newport calls 'digital minimalism'. This is the idea that we should be more intentional about the technology we use, that we should focus on the tools that genuinely support our values and our goals, and that we should ruthlessly eliminate the rest. It is the idea that we should be the master of our technology, not the other way around. It is the idea that we should choose to live a life of deep, focused engagement, not a life of shallow, distracted consumption.

Second, we must build a culture that values craftsmanship, that values quality over quantity, that values the slow, patient work of creating something of lasting value. This is the antidote to the culture of disposability, the culture of the micro-trend, the culture of the endless scroll. It is the recognition that the most meaningful things in life are not the things that are new, but the things that endure.

Third, we must demand more from our technology platforms. We must demand that they be designed not just to capture our attention, but to enrich our lives. We must demand that they be designed to support deep, focused work, not just to create a state of continuous partial attention. We must demand that they be designed to foster genuine connection and community, not just to create a marketplace of fleeting trends and superficial interactions. This is not a matter of censorship; it is a matter of responsible design. It is a matter of building a digital world that is worthy of our humanity.

The challenge of the Caveman Era is not to reject neophilia. That is impossible. The challenge is to channel it. It is to use our love of the new to drive genuine innovation, not just to create a culture of distraction. It is to use our exploratory instincts to solve the great challenges of our time, not just to scroll through an endless feed of novel stimuli. It is to build a world in which our neophilia is a source of creativity, of progress, of wonder, not a source of anxiety, of dissatisfaction, of addiction. This is the great work of our time. And it is a work that we must all undertake, together.

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Chapter 8: The Great Unbundling

For over a century, the daily newspaper was more than just a source of information; it was a ritual. It was the comforting thud on the doorstep in the early morning, the rustle of broadsheet pages over a cup of coffee, the shared experience of a city or a nation reading from the same script. The newspaper was a bundle, a carefully curated package of content designed to appeal to a broad audience. It had something for everyone: hard news and political analysis for the serious-minded, sports scores for the enthusiast, stock market listings for the investor, comics and crosswords for the idle moment, and classified ads for those looking to buy, sell, or hire.

This bundle was not just a product; it was a business model, and a fantastically profitable one. The high cost of printing presses and distribution networks created a formidable barrier to entry, allowing a small number of powerful institutions to dominate the media landscape. The revenue from classified ads, in particular, was a river of gold, subsidising the expensive and often unprofitable work of investigative journalism. The newspaper was a gatekeeper, a trusted intermediary that stood between the chaos of the world and the consciousness of the citizen. It was a pillar of the 20th-century establishment.

And then, in the space of a single generation, it all fell apart.

The internet did not just attack the newspaper; it unbundled it. Each component of the traditional newspaper bundle was picked off by a nimbler, more focused digital competitor. The river of gold from classified ads was diverted to sites like Craigslist and eBay. Sports scores moved to dedicated websites and apps. Stock prices were available in real-time, for free, from a thousand different sources. Even the comics and the crosswords found new homes in the digital world. What was left was the core product—the news—stripped of the cross-subsidies that had made it economically viable. The result was a catastrophic collapse. Since the turn of the millennium, thousands of newspapers have closed their doors, and tens of thousands of journalists have lost their jobs. The pillar of the establishment had crumbled.

The story of the newspaper is not an isolated one. It is the story of our time. We are living through an era of 'Great Unbundling', a period of profound and often painful transformation in which the great, bundled institutions of the 20th century—from media and education to finance and government—are being broken apart by the centrifugal force of technology. This is not just a technological shift; it is a psychological one. The unbundling of our institutions is a direct consequence of the unbundling of our attention. The six human attractors we have explored in this book are the crowbars that are prying apart the old world.

Consider the university. For centuries, the university has been a bundled product. It offers not just an education, but a credential, a social network, a coming-of-age experience, and a physical campus. But technology is beginning to unbundle the university, just as it unbundled the newspaper. Online learning platforms like Coursera and edX offer access to courses from the world's top universities, often for free. The credentialling function is being challenged by new forms of assessment and by the rise of skills-based hiring. The social network is being replicated, and in some cases surpassed, by online communities. The bundled, one-size-fits-

all model of the traditional university is beginning to look increasingly anachronistic in a world that values personalisation and choice.

Or consider the bank. The traditional bank is a bundle of financial services: a current account, a savings account, a mortgage, a credit card, a business loan. But a new generation of 'fintech' startups is unbundling the bank, offering each of these services in a more convenient, more user-friendly, and often cheaper digital format. You can now get a mortgage from a company that only does mortgages, a credit card from a company that only does credit cards, a business loan from a peer-to-peer lending platform. The great, monolithic institution of the bank is being replaced by a fluid, modular ecosystem of financial services.

This process of unbundling is driven by our primal desires. **Neophilia**, our love of the new, draws us to the novel and convenient solutions offered by digital upstarts. **Solution bias** makes us impatient with the clunky, bureaucratic interfaces of traditional institutions. **Tribalism** allows us to form new communities of interest and identity, independent of the old gatekeepers. And the quest for **status** finds new avenues of expression in the disintermediated world of the creator economy, where individuals can build their own audience and their own reputation, without the need for an institutional stamp of approval.

The Great Unbundling is a profoundly disruptive force. It is hollowing out the middle, eroding the power of the intermediary, and shifting the balance of power from the institution to the individual. This has created unprecedented opportunities for creativity, innovation, and personal freedom. An individual can now publish a book, release an album, launch a global business, or start a social movement from their bedroom. The gatekeepers are losing their power, and the gates are being thrown open.

But this new, unbundled world is not without its dangers. The decline of trusted intermediaries has created a vacuum that is often filled by misinformation, extremism, and fraud. The erosion of the cross-subsidies that supported public goods like investigative journalism has left us with a more fragmented and less informed public sphere. The shift from stable, long-term employment to the precarious gig economy has created new forms of economic insecurity. The unbundled world is a world of greater freedom, but also of greater risk. It is a world in which we are all, for better or for worse, on our own.

This unbundling is a force of nature in the digital economy, a phenomenon described with prescient clarity by the technology analyst Ben Thompson. Thompson's 'Aggregation Theory' posits that the internet has fundamentally inverted the value chain in many industries. In the pre-internet world, power lay with those who controlled distribution (like the newspaper publishers). In the internet world, power lies with those who aggregate demand, who own the relationship with the customer. These aggregators—Google, Facebook, Amazon—don't create the content or the products themselves; they simply provide a platform that connects users with a vast, unbundled supply. The result is a winner-take-all market, where a small number of dominant platforms capture the majority of the value.

The psychological engine of this unbundling is a perfect storm of our primal attractors. Our **Neophilia**, the love of the new, draws us to the shiny, convenient, and often free alternatives offered by digital upstarts. Why wait for the evening news when you can get breaking

updates on Twitter? Why buy a whole album when you can stream any song you want on Spotify? Our **Solution Bias**, our preference for the quick fix, makes us impatient with the clunky, bureaucratic interfaces of traditional institutions. Why go to a bank branch when you can get a loan on your phone in five minutes? Our **Tribalism** allows us to form new communities of interest and identity, independent of the old gatekeepers. We can find our tribe of fellow cycling enthusiasts, of rare stamp collectors, of political activists, without ever leaving our homes. And our quest for **Status** finds new avenues of expression in the disintermediated world of the creator economy, where individuals can build their own audience and their own reputation, without the need for an institutional stamp of approval.

The challenge of the Caveman Era is to navigate this new landscape. It is to find a new balance between the individual and the institution, between the freedom of the unbundled world and the security of the bundled one. We cannot go back to the old world of monolithic, top-down institutions. The ghost of Napster is out of the bottle, and it is not going back in. But we can, and we must, build new institutions for the 21st century. We need new models for funding public goods, new ways of verifying information, new forms of social safety nets. We need to create a new bundle, not one that is imposed from above, but one that is woven from below, from the countless threads of our individual choices and our collective needs.

The Great Unbundling is not the end of the story. It is the messy, chaotic, and exhilarating beginning of a new one. The question is whether we will be intentional about how we build the new world, or whether we will simply allow it to emerge from the chaos of individual incentives and market forces. Will we build institutions that serve the public good, or will we allow the void left by the old institutions to be filled by private interests? Will we create a more equitable and democratic digital world, or will we simply replace the old gatekeepers with new ones? These are the questions that will define the next chapter of human history.

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Chapter 9: The Attention Economy

In 1971, a polymath named Herbert Simon, whose work would later earn him a Nobel Prize in Economics, made a deceptively simple observation. In a world of abundance, scarcity shifts. When information was scarce, the scarce resource was information itself. But as information became abundant, the scarce resource became something else entirely: attention. "A wealth of information creates a poverty of attention," Simon wrote. It was a prescient observation, one that would take on profound significance in the decades to come, laying the intellectual groundwork for our understanding of the digital age.

Fast forward to the present day. We live in a world of almost incomprehensible information abundance. More data is created in a single day than existed in the entirety of human history before the year 2000. We have access to the sum of human knowledge through a device that fits in our pocket. We can watch any film, listen to any song, read any book, at any time, in any place. We have solved, in many ways, the problem of information scarcity. But in doing so, we have created a new and more pressing problem: the problem of attention scarcity.

Your attention is now the most valuable commodity on the planet. It is more valuable than oil, more valuable than gold, more valuable than any tangible asset. It is the currency of the digital age. And it is being fought over with a ferocity and sophistication that would make the great empires of history blush with envy. This is the **Attention Economy**.

The attention economy is not a new phenomenon. Advertising has always been about capturing attention. The newspaper industry, with its screaming headlines and sensational stories, was an early pioneer in the art of attention capture. But the scale, the precision, and the ruthlessness of the modern attention economy is unprecedented. The business model of the internet, as it has evolved over the past two decades, is built on a simple equation: capture user attention, monetise that attention by selling it to advertisers, and use the revenue to build better tools for capturing even more attention. It is a machine that runs on human psychology, and it has become extraordinarily efficient at its task.

This is where all six of our human attractors converge in a perfect, and often perilous, storm. **Tribalism** ensures that we are drawn to content that confirms our existing beliefs, that triggers our tribal instincts, and that makes us want to share and engage. **Status hierarchy** ensures that we are constantly comparing ourselves to others, that we are motivated to perform and to be seen. **Reciprocity** ensures that when someone engages with our content, we feel a compulsion to reciprocate, to engage with theirs. **Infantilism** ensures that we are drawn to the playful, the gamified, the rewarding. **Solution bias** ensures that we are attracted to simple, clear narratives that make sense of a complex world. And **Neophilia** ensures that we are always seeking the new, always swiping, always scrolling, always searching for the next dopamine hit.

The attention economy has weaponised all of these drives. It has created an environment in which the most engaging content is not necessarily the most true, the most important, or the most beneficial. It is the content that is most effective at triggering our primal instincts. It is the content that makes us angry, that makes us feel superior, that makes us feel like we are

part of something bigger than ourselves. It is the content that is novel, surprising, and emotionally charged.

The result is a kind of evolutionary arms race. Content creators, whether they are professional media companies or individual influencers, are constantly experimenting with new ways to capture and hold attention. They are learning the psychological tricks, the narrative structures, the visual techniques that are most effective at triggering engagement. And the platforms, armed with vast amounts of data and sophisticated machine learning algorithms, are learning to predict and amplify the content that will be most engaging. The system is becoming increasingly efficient at its task, and increasingly divorced from any concern for truth, nuance, or the long-term well-being of the user.

This has profound implications for our democracy, our mental health, and our sense of reality. When the most engaging content is the content that is most divisive, we get polarisation. When the most engaging content is the content that is most outrageous, we get a race to the bottom. When the most engaging content is the content that is most false, we get a post-truth world in which facts are just another form of opinion. The attention economy is not just reshaping our media landscape; it is reshaping our minds, our societies, and our futures.

The psychologist Jonathan Haidt has written extensively about how the attention economy is affecting our mental health, particularly among young people. He argues that the combination of social media, smartphones, and algorithmic feeds has created a perfect storm of psychological harm. Young people are spending hours each day on platforms designed to maximise engagement, exposed to carefully curated content that is designed to trigger negative emotions like envy, anxiety, and outrage. The result is an epidemic of depression, anxiety, and loneliness among teenagers.

But here is the thing: we are not powerless. We are not passive consumers of the attention economy. We are its fuel. Every click, every like, every share is a vote for the kind of content we want to see more of. Every moment we spend on a platform is a moment we are choosing to give to that platform. The attention economy is powerful, but it is not all-powerful. It is dependent on our participation. And participation is something we can choose to withdraw.

This is not a call for a complete retreat from the digital world. The internet and digital technology have brought tremendous benefits. They have democratised information, enabled global connection, and created new forms of creativity and expression. But it is a call for a more intentional, more critical, more mindful engagement with these technologies. It is a call to recognise the attention economy for what it is: a system designed to capture and monetise our attention, not to serve our interests. And it is a call to resist, to push back, to demand better.

We must become more aware of the mechanisms by which our attention is being captured. We must learn to recognise the psychological tricks and the behavioural hooks. We must be intentional about the time we spend online and the content we consume. We must support alternative models of digital infrastructure that are not built on the surveillance and manipulation of users. We must demand that platforms be transparent about how their

algorithms work and how they are designed to influence our behaviour. We must reclaim our attention as something precious and finite, something that deserves to be spent wisely.

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Chapter 10: The Future of Work

There's a particular kind of anxiety that has become endemic to the 21st century. It's not the anxiety of unemployment, exactly, though that is certainly part of it. It's a deeper, more existential anxiety. It's the anxiety of obsolescence. It's the fear that your skills, your knowledge, your very identity as a worker, will become irrelevant. It's the fear that the machine, the algorithm, the artificial intelligence will do what you do, but faster, better, and cheaper. It's the fear that you will become redundant.

This anxiety is not without foundation. The pace of technological change is accelerating. Jobs that seemed secure a decade ago are now threatened. Truck drivers worry about autonomous vehicles. Radiologists worry about machine learning algorithms that can read X-rays. Lawyers worry about AI systems that can review contracts. Teachers worry about online education. Even programmers, the architects of this digital revolution, are beginning to worry about AI systems that can write code.

But this anxiety is also, in many ways, a symptom of a deeper transformation in the nature of work itself. We are not just seeing the displacement of workers by machines. We are seeing a fundamental restructuring of the employment relationship, a shift from stable, long-term employment to a more fluid, precarious, and individualised model. We are seeing the rise of the gig economy, the creator economy, the freelance economy. We are seeing the unbundling of the corporation, the outsourcing of functions, the casualisation of the workforce. We are seeing, in short, the end of the job as we have known it for the past century.

This transformation is being driven by all six of our human attractors. Tribalism is creating new forms of community and identity around shared interests and values, rather than around a shared employer. Status hierarchy is being expressed through follower counts and personal brands, rather than through corporate titles. Reciprocity is being expressed through networks of mutual support and exchange, rather than through formal employment contracts. Infantilism is driving the gamification of work, the transformation of labour into a series of tasks and challenges. Solution bias is leading companies to seek quick fixes through outsourcing and automation, rather than investing in long-term human capital. And neophilia is driving a constant churn of disruption, a relentless pressure to do more, faster, and with less.

The result is a labour market that is, in many ways, more free and more flexible than it has ever been. An individual can now build a global business from their bedroom. A creator can build an audience and a revenue stream without ever working for a traditional employer. A consultant can work with clients across the world, choosing their own hours and their own projects. This is liberation, of a sort. It is the end of the tyranny of the nine-to-five, the end of the corporation as the primary organiser of social life.

But it is also a liberation that comes at a cost. The security that came with stable employment—the pension, the health insurance, the sense of belonging to something larger than oneself—has largely evaporated. The worker in the gig economy is a free agent, but a free agent who bears all the risks and uncertainties of the market. They must constantly

market themselves, constantly update their skills, constantly hustle for the next gig. They are free, but they are also alone.

The economist Arun Sundararajan has written extensively about this transformation. He argues that we are witnessing the rise of what he calls "crowd-based capitalism," in which the traditional employment relationship is being replaced by a more atomised, platform-mediated model. Workers are no longer employees of a company; they are independent contractors, competing with millions of others on digital platforms. This has created unprecedented flexibility and opportunity, but also unprecedented precarity and inequality.

The mental health implications of this transformation are profound. The traditional employment relationship provided not just income, but identity, community, and a sense of purpose. Work was not just a way to earn money; it was a way to contribute to something larger than oneself, to be part of a team, to have a place in society. The gig economy, by contrast, is fundamentally atomising. Each worker is on their own, competing with others, constantly anxious about the next gig, the next paycheck, the next algorithm update that might make them obsolete.

This is the great paradox of the future of work. We have more freedom than ever, but we also have more precarity. We have more choice, but also more anxiety. We have more opportunities, but also more competition. The question is: how do we build a world of work that preserves the benefits of this new flexibility while providing the security and the sense of community that humans need to thrive?

This is not a question that can be answered by technology alone. It is not a question that can be answered by the market alone. It is a question that requires a fundamental rethinking of the social contract. We need new models of social safety nets, models that are not tied to a single employer, but that follow the worker across multiple jobs and projects. We need new forms of community and belonging, forms that are not dependent on a shared workplace. We need new ways of valuing work, new ways of measuring productivity and contribution, that go beyond the simple metric of hours worked or tasks completed.

Some countries are beginning to experiment with new models. Finland has piloted a universal basic income, providing all citizens with a guaranteed income regardless of employment status. This addresses one of the key vulnerabilities of the gig economy: the lack of a safety net. Other countries are exploring models of cooperative ownership, in which workers own and control the platforms on which they work, rather than being subject to the decisions of distant shareholders. These experiments are still in their early stages, but they suggest that alternative models are possible.

This is the great challenge of the Caveman Era. We have the technology to liberate us from the constraints of traditional employment. But we do not yet have the social and political infrastructure to ensure that this liberation is equitable and sustainable. We have unbundled the corporation, but we have not yet bundled together a new form of social organisation to replace it. We are in a moment of profound transition, a moment of both tremendous opportunity and tremendous risk. The future of work will be determined not by technology, but by the choices we make about how to organise our society and our economy.

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Chapter 11: The Algorithmic Society

There is a story that has become something of a legend in Silicon Valley, a modern-day fable about the uncanny power of data. It concerns the American retail giant, Target. In the early 2010s, the company's statisticians, led by a man named Andrew Pole, embarked on a mission to identify pregnant customers. The logic was simple: new parents are a retailer's dream. They are tired, overwhelmed, and desperate for convenience. Their old shopping habits are thrown into disarray, and they are suddenly in the market for a whole new category of products. If a retailer could capture their loyalty at this pivotal moment, they could have a customer for life.

Pole and his team dived into the data. They analysed the shopping histories of millions of customers, looking for the subtle shifts in purchasing patterns that might signal a pregnancy. They found that it wasn't the obvious things, like the purchase of a cot or a pram. By then, it was too late; the customer had already been bombarded with offers from competitors. The real clues were in the mundane, seemingly unrelated purchases. A switch from scented to unscented lotions, for example. The purchase of certain vitamin supplements, like magnesium and zinc. A sudden increase in the consumption of cotton balls and hand sanitiser. Individually, these were just noise. But together, they formed a pattern, a statistical signature of impending parenthood.

The algorithm they built was astonishingly effective. It could assign each customer a 'pregnancy prediction score' and estimate their due date with unnerving accuracy. The company began sending targeted coupons for baby products to customers who had been identified by the model. And then, the story goes, an angry man walked into a Target store in Minnesota, demanding to see the manager. He was clutching a handful of coupons that had been sent to his teenage daughter. "Are you trying to encourage her to get pregnant?" he demanded. The manager, flustered, apologised profusely. A few weeks later, the manager called the man to apologise again. The man's tone had changed. "I had a talk with my daughter," he said, sheepishly. "It turns out there's been some activities in my house I haven't been completely aware of. She's due in August."

The story is often told as a triumph of data science, a demonstration of the power of algorithms to uncover hidden truths in vast datasets. But it is also a story about power. It is a story about the ability to know things about people that they don't know about themselves. It is a story about the ability to influence behaviour based on that knowledge. It is a story about the construction of what we might call the **Algorithmic Society**.

We are living in an age of algorithms. They are not just tools; they are the invisible infrastructure of our world. They determine what news we see on our social media feeds, what films are recommended to us on Netflix, what route we should take to work. But their influence extends far beyond these everyday conveniences. They are increasingly used to make high-stakes decisions that shape our lives: what jobs we are considered for, what loans we are approved for, what medical treatments we receive, how long a prison sentence we should serve. They are the invisible hand that guides our choices, often without our knowledge or consent. And they are, in many ways, the ultimate expression of the six human attractors we have explored in this book.

An algorithm is, at its core, a set of rules for making decisions. It is a formalisation of human logic, a crystallisation of human bias into mathematical form. And because algorithms are built by humans, they carry within them all of our prejudices, all of our blindspots, all of our primal drives. An algorithm designed to maximise engagement on a social media platform will inevitably amplify **Tribalism**, because tribal content—content that is emotionally charged, that confirms our existing beliefs, that pits 'us' against 'them'—is more engaging. An algorithm designed to predict creditworthiness will inevitably discriminate against those who are already marginalised, because the historical data it is trained on reflects historical patterns of discrimination. An algorithm designed to rank job applicants will inevitably favour those who fit the profile of successful employees in the past, perpetuating existing patterns of inequality and reinforcing the existing **Status Hierarchy**.

But algorithms do more than just reflect our existing biases. They amplify them. They scale them. They make them invisible. A human hiring manager with a bias against women might reject one or two female applicants. An algorithm with the same bias will reject thousands. A human news editor with a tribal bias might run a few stories that appeal to a particular demographic. An algorithm with the same bias will create an echo chamber that completely isolates that demographic from alternative viewpoints. The algorithm launders the bias, giving it the veneer of objective, mathematical truth.

This is the paradox of the algorithmic society. Algorithms are supposed to be objective, to remove human bias from decision-making. They are supposed to be fair, rational, and efficient. But in practice, they often do the opposite. They formalise and amplify human bias. They create the illusion of objectivity while actually making decisions that are deeply subjective. They are, in many ways, the ultimate expression of **Solution Bias**—the belief that a complex human problem can be solved by a simple mathematical formula.

The computer scientist and mathematician Cathy O'Neil has written extensively about this phenomenon. She argues that algorithms are not neutral arbiters of truth, but powerful tools that can reinforce and amplify existing inequalities. She calls them "weapons of math destruction"—algorithms that are opaque, difficult to understand, and have significant consequences for people's lives. A person denied a loan by an algorithm has little recourse. A person denied a job by an algorithm has no way to understand why. A person whose social media feed is shaped by an algorithm has no idea how their worldview is being constructed.

Consider the case of the COMPAS algorithm, which is used in some US states to predict the likelihood that a criminal defendant will reoffend. The algorithm assigns each defendant a risk score, which is then used by judges to make decisions about bail and sentencing. A 2016 investigation by the journalism organisation ProPublica found that the algorithm was systematically biased against black defendants. Black defendants were almost twice as likely as white defendants to be incorrectly labelled as high-risk. White defendants were more likely to be incorrectly labelled as low-risk. The algorithm was not just reflecting the existing biases in the criminal justice system; it was amplifying them, and giving them the false imprimatur of scientific objectivity.

Or consider the case of Amazon's experimental hiring algorithm. The company set out to build a tool that could automatically screen job applicants, saving its recruiters countless hours of work. The algorithm was trained on a decade's worth of resumes submitted to the company. But because the tech industry has historically been dominated by men, the algorithm learned to penalise resumes that contained the word 'women's', as in 'women's chess club captain'. It also downgraded graduates of two all-women's colleges. The algorithm had taught itself to be sexist. Amazon, to its credit, abandoned the project. But the case is a stark reminder of how easily our biases can be encoded into the machines we build.

The challenge of the algorithmic society is to recognise this paradox and to resist the seductive appeal of algorithmic objectivity. It is to insist on transparency, on accountability, on the right to understand and to challenge the decisions that algorithms make about us. It is to demand that algorithms be designed not just for efficiency, but for fairness. It is to recognise that some decisions are too important, too consequential, to be left to machines. Some decisions require human judgment, human empathy, human wisdom.

This is not a call to abandon algorithms. Algorithms are powerful tools, and they have tremendous potential to improve our lives. But it is a call to use them more carefully, more thoughtfully, and with a much greater awareness of their limitations and their dangers. It is a call to build an algorithmic society that is aligned with human values, not just with the logic of the machine.

We must demand transparency. Companies must be required to disclose how their algorithms work, what data they use, and what biases they might contain. We must demand accountability. When algorithms make decisions that harm people, there must be consequences. We must demand the right to explanation. When an algorithm makes a decision about you, you have the right to understand why. We must demand the right to opt out. Not everyone should be subject to algorithmic decision-making. Some decisions are too important to be automated.

This is the great challenge of the Caveman Era. We have built a world in which our lives are increasingly shaped by algorithms that we do not understand, that are designed to serve the interests of powerful corporations, and that are amplifying the worst aspects of our primal psychology. But we have not yet built the wisdom, the institutions, or the regulatory frameworks to manage these algorithms in a way that is aligned with human values and human flourishing.

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Chapter 12: Designing for Humanity

In 2018, the European Union passed a piece of legislation that sent shockwaves through Silicon Valley. The General Data Protection Regulation, or GDPR, was a sweeping, ambitious, and unapologetically bureaucratic set of rules designed to protect the privacy and the rights of individuals in the digital age. It required companies to be transparent about how they collect and use data. It gave individuals the right to access, to correct, and to delete their personal information. It mandated that consent must be freely given, specific, informed, and unambiguous. And it imposed hefty fines for violations—up to 4% of a company's global annual revenue.

The tech industry's response was largely one of horror and outrage. They complained that the regulations were onerous, that they would stifle innovation, that they were the product of a European bureaucracy that didn't understand technology. The GDPR was seen as a declaration of war on the business model of the internet, a model built on the frictionless collection and monetisation of personal data.

But something interesting happened. Companies adapted. They hired armies of lawyers and consultants. They rewrote their privacy policies. They redesigned their user interfaces. And in many cases, they discovered that privacy-respecting practices were not just good for users; they were good for business. They found that being transparent and trustworthy could be a competitive advantage. The GDPR, for all its flaws, had shifted the conversation. It had forced the tech industry to confront a question it had long preferred to ignore: what if we designed our technology not just for engagement, but for humanity?

The GDPR is a perfect example of what we might call **designing for humanity**. It is the recognition that technology is not neutral, that the way we design our systems and our platforms has profound implications for human well-being, for fairness, for autonomy, and for dignity. It is the recognition that we have a choice about the kind of technology we build, and that we should choose to build technology that is aligned with human values.

This is not a new idea. For decades, designers and technologists have been grappling with the question of how to design technology that is not just efficient, but ethical. There is a field called 'human-centred design' that is dedicated to this question. There are frameworks like 'design thinking' and 'responsible innovation' that are designed to help us think more carefully about the implications of our designs. There are growing movements around 'ethical AI', 'digital rights', and 'tech for good'.

But these efforts have largely been marginal, operating at the periphery of the tech industry, which has been dominated by a different ethos. The dominant ethos has been one of 'move fast and break things', of prioritising growth and engagement above all else, of treating users as sources of data to be exploited rather than as human beings to be respected. This ethos has created technologies that are, in many ways, deeply misaligned with human flourishing.

The designer and technologist Tristan Harris has been one of the most vocal critics of this ethos. A former design ethicist at Google, Harris has become the conscience of Silicon

Valley, a kind of digital-age Jeremiah warning of the dangers of the attention economy. He argues that the business model of the internet is fundamentally misaligned with human well-being. The goal of maximising engagement leads to the design of features that exploit psychological vulnerabilities, that create compulsive usage patterns, that prioritise addiction over well-being. He calls this "persuasive technology" or "dark patterns"—design choices that are deliberately manipulative.

The 'pull-to-refresh' feature is a classic example. The user pulls down on their screen, and a moment later, new content appears. The action is simple, intuitive, and deeply addictive. It is, as Harris has pointed out, a slot machine. The user is pulling a lever, and the reward—a new email, a new photo, a new tweet—is variable and unpredictable. This is the most powerful form of conditioning known to psychology. It is the same mechanism that keeps people pulling the lever on a poker machine, hoping for the next jackpot. It is a design choice that is deliberately, and brilliantly, addictive.

Or consider the 'infinite scroll'. The user scrolls down their feed, and new content just keeps appearing. There is no end, no natural stopping point. It is a bottomless bowl of content, designed to keep the user scrolling, scrolling, scrolling. It is a design choice that preys on our fear of missing out, our desire for novelty, our tendency to continue with a task until it is complete. But the task is never complete. The scroll is infinite.

These are not accidents. They are the result of a deliberate and highly sophisticated design process, a process that is informed by the latest research in behavioural psychology and neuroscience. The goal is to create a product that is as engaging as possible, as addictive as possible, as difficult to put down as possible. The goal is to capture as much of the user's attention as possible, because attention is the currency of the digital age.

The good news is that this is beginning to change. There is a growing recognition, both within the tech industry and in society at large, that the current model is not sustainable. The harms caused by social media platforms—the mental health crisis among teenagers, the erosion of democracy, the spread of misinformation—are becoming impossible to ignore. The environmental costs of the digital economy—the vast energy consumption of data centres, the mountains of electronic waste—are becoming increasingly pressing. The economic costs of the attention economy—the concentration of wealth in a handful of mega-corporations, the precarity of the gig economy—are becoming more visible.

Designing for humanity means starting with a different set of assumptions. It means assuming that users are not just sources of data, but human beings with rights and dignity. It means assuming that technology should serve human needs, not the other way around. It means assuming that efficiency and engagement are not the only metrics that matter; fairness, well-being, and autonomy matter too.

This has practical implications. It means designing platforms that are not addictive, that do not exploit our psychological vulnerabilities. It means building transparency into our systems, so that users understand how their data is being used. It means giving users control over their own data, their own experience, their own digital identity. It means designing for privacy by

default, not as an afterthought. It means considering the long-term consequences of our designs, not just the short-term metrics.

It also means rethinking the business models of the internet. The advertising-based model that has dominated for the past two decades is fundamentally misaligned with human well-being. It creates a perverse incentive to capture attention and to exploit psychological vulnerabilities. We need to explore alternative models: subscription-based models, cooperative models, public utility models. We need to find ways to fund digital infrastructure that do not depend on the surveillance and manipulation of users.

Some companies are beginning to experiment with these alternatives. Apple, for instance, has positioned itself as a privacy-first company, refusing to build the kind of detailed user profiles that other tech companies rely on. They have implemented features like "App Tracking Transparency," which requires apps to ask for permission before tracking users across the internet. This is a step in the right direction, though critics argue that Apple's privacy protections are often more about marketing than genuine commitment to user privacy.

Other companies are exploring cooperative models. Mastodon, for instance, is a social media platform that is not owned by a single corporation, but is instead run by a federation of independent servers, each governed by its own community. This model preserves the benefits of social media—connection, community, the ability to share and discuss ideas—while avoiding the harms of the attention economy. There are no algorithms designed to maximise engagement, no advertisements, no surveillance.

This is the great challenge of the Caveman Era. We have built a digital world that is extraordinarily powerful, but that is deeply misaligned with human values. We have created technologies that exploit our primal drives, that amplify our tribal instincts, that manipulate our sense of status and belonging. But we have not yet built the wisdom, the institutions, or the regulatory frameworks to manage these technologies in a way that is aligned with human flourishing.

Designing for humanity is not about rejecting technology. It is about choosing to build technology differently. It is about recognising that we have a choice, and that the choices we make now will determine the kind of world we live in for generations to come. It is about putting human values at the centre of our design process, not as an afterthought. It is about building technology that respects human dignity, that protects human rights, that supports human flourishing.

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Conclusion: The Caveman's Guide to the Future

We have travelled a long way together. We have journeyed back to the dawn of our species, to the primal forces that shaped our minds and our societies. We have explored the strange and often bewildering landscape of the 21st century, a world in which our Stone Age psychology is colliding with space-age technology. We have seen how the six great human attractors—tribalism, status hierarchy, reciprocity, infantilism, solution bias, and neophilia— are being amplified and exploited in the digital age, creating a world that is at once more connected and more divided, more free and more precarious, more abundant and more anxious.

We have called this new world the **Caveman Era**. It is a world in which we are living with the minds of our ancestors, but with the tools of gods. It is a world in which our ancient, evolved instincts are being constantly triggered, manipulated, and monetised. It is a world that is, in many ways, deeply misaligned with our own well-being.

So what is to be done? How do we navigate this new and challenging landscape? How do we build a future that is more aligned with human flourishing? There are no easy answers. There is no silver bullet, no simple technological fix. The challenges we face are complex, and they require a complex and multi-faceted response. But there are some principles that can guide us, some signposts that can help us find our way.

First, we must cultivate **self-awareness**. We must become more conscious of the primal forces that are shaping our behaviour. We must learn to recognise the pull of tribalism, the allure of status, the compulsion of reciprocity. We must become more aware of how our attention is being captured, how our emotions are being manipulated, how our choices are being shaped. This is not about suppressing our instincts; it is about understanding them, and learning to manage them more wisely. It is about moving from a state of unconscious reaction to a state of conscious choice.

This is a personal journey, but it is also a collective one. We need to build a culture of digital literacy, a culture in which we are all more critical and more discerning consumers of information. We need to teach our children not just how to use technology, but how technology is using them. We need to have a public conversation about the ethics of persuasive technology, about the business models of the internet, about the kind of digital world we want to live in.

Second, we must demand **transparency and accountability** from the tech industry. The companies that are building our digital world have a profound responsibility to do so in a way that is aligned with human values. They cannot be allowed to operate in a black box, to make decisions that affect billions of people without any public scrutiny or accountability. We must demand that they be transparent about how their algorithms work, what data they collect, and how they are using it. We must demand that they be accountable for the harms that their platforms cause, from the spread of misinformation to the erosion of mental health.

This is not about stifling innovation. It is about responsible innovation. It is about recognising that technology is not a neutral force, that it has values embedded in it, and that we have a right to a say in what those values are. The GDPR is a good start, but it is only a start. We need a broader and more robust regulatory framework for the digital age, a framework that protects our rights, our privacy, and our well-being.

Third, we must build **alternative models**. The dominant business model of the internet—the advertising-based model that has created the attention economy—is fundamentally misaligned with human flourishing. It creates a perverse incentive to capture attention, to exploit psychological vulnerabilities, to create a state of perpetual distraction and addiction. We need to explore and to support alternative models: subscription-based models, cooperative models, public utility models. We need to find ways to fund digital infrastructure that do not depend on the surveillance and manipulation of users.

This is already happening. There is a growing movement of technologists, designers, and entrepreneurs who are committed to building a more humane and ethical digital world. There are companies that are building privacy-respecting products. There are platforms that are designed for connection and community, not just for engagement and addiction. There are open-source projects that are building a more decentralised and democratic internet. These are the green shoots of a new digital world, and we must do everything we can to nurture them.

Fourth, we must cultivate **wisdom**. The challenges of the Caveman Era are not just technological; they are philosophical. They are about what it means to be human in an age of intelligent machines. They are about what we value, what we prioritise, what we believe is important. They are about how we define a good life.

For centuries, we have been guided by the wisdom of our philosophical and spiritual traditions. These traditions have taught us about the importance of community, of compassion, of contemplation. They have warned us about the dangers of greed, of envy, of distraction. They have offered us a vision of a life that is not just about the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain, but about the cultivation of virtue, of meaning, of purpose.

In the Caveman Era, we need to rediscover this wisdom. We need to find a new balance between the values of the digital age—speed, efficiency, novelty—and the timeless values of our humanistic traditions. We need to build a culture that values not just information, but knowledge; not just knowledge, but wisdom. We need to create space in our lives for silence, for reflection, for deep connection. We need to remember that we are not just users, not just consumers, not just data points. We are human beings, with all of our complexity, our creativity, our capacity for love and for wisdom.

This is the ultimate challenge of the Caveman Era. It is the challenge of integrating our ancient, primal selves with our modern, technological world. It is the challenge of building a future that is not just smarter, but wiser. It is the challenge of becoming not just better technologists, but better human beings.

We are at a crossroads. We can continue down the path we are on, a path of increasing distraction, division, and dissatisfaction. Or we can choose a different path, a path of greater awareness, of greater intention, of greater humanity. The choice is ours. The future is not yet written. And we, the cavemen of the 21st century, are the ones who will write it.