

Living in 2040: What Success Looks Like

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Wow, I've been having such terrible nightmares lately. I wake up drenched in sweat, more tired than after a whole day of activity. I need to pinch myself to make sure what's real. That I don't have to immediately run away, chase, then turn around and run again. Nor make any key decision on which everything will later depend.

I look in the mirror and calm down. Everything is fine: I am still human, I still look like an ordinary forty-year-old man, I still have a completely human body and mind. My apartment hasn't changed either. The same tree still stands outside the window. The October wind occasionally knocks its yellowing leaves down.

I check the latest news. October 23, 2040. Tuesday. 7:42 a.m. My life is peaceful and stable, while the world—as it does—rushes ahead like crazy.

For thousands of years, people have looked back at the past with sentiment and contested changes, even when objectively speaking those were changes for the better. It is difficult to appreciate the new, because it requires effort, adaptation, changing habits. The old is good because it is familiar, easy, domesticated.

But I, although I do sometimes feel uneasy, am able to appreciate the benefits of technological progress and economic development. Systematic growth means, after all, that its fruits accumulate. Every successive year is the best in history. I like to repeat this to myself: this very, current year is so far the best year of my life. Maybe not every *day*—after all, various unpleasant things happen in life—but on a yearly scale, surely we can forget about them? Yes, this year is the best year of my life.

Past simple, present perfect, future continuous.

And yet the news from around the world does not reassure me. I tell myself that this is how it has to be, that news is always made this way, specifically to engage, fascinate and irritate us, and as a result make us addicted to consuming more of it.

But on the other hand, I think to myself, surely there is something behind it all. Technological progress means both new opportunities and threats. Their accumulation (and globalization!) means that every successive year is not only the best, but also the most uncertain in history. Every year we can gain more and lose more. What a paradox. When I look back, I see entire years, decades, centuries of systematic, cumulative progress. But when I look ahead, I see nothing. The pace of change is so insane that I don't dare predict anything.

I can't complain about everyday life. Ever since my company was absorbed by the Universal Automation Program, weekly transfers from the automation fund have started coming into my account, and incidentally they have also increased substantially over the past two years. I'm glad I chose to participate in the fund instead of universal basic income—compared to me, those on fixed incomes are, one might say, barely scraping by today. Though in absolute numbers, it's still hardly poverty.

Surprisingly, it is also quite easy for me to avoid monotony and routine. I used to think that if I had money but no job, I'd be like those cartoon people from *WALL-E*: sitting passively in an armchair and only ingesting multimedia and processed food. But over time I came to realize that this is not the case at all: I have lots of energy and am happy to devote it to sports, entertainment, and even travel and crazy adventures. For example, the day after tomorrow I'm going to the mountains, to do a bit of scrambling over the rocks before the snow falls. All these activities give me pleasure and satisfaction. I'd say that my life is much more interesting now that I am no longer burdened by work and no longer limited by the days of paid vacation.

I sometimes remind myself that just a dozen or so years ago the world was organized quite differently. Human life used to be like an endless treadmill: work, family, children—and again from the beginning, every day and forever. Free time was perhaps only there to catch one's breath and gather strength for the next struggle. Hierarchies at work, hierarchies in politics. Endless conflicts. Responsibility. Pressure and stress. I remember it vividly: there was a great deal of stress every day.

We ignored the warnings of the coming changes. Social platforms: Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, X. First AI chatbots and agents: ChatGPT, Gemini and Claude Code. Artificial intelligence in refrigerators, cars and suicidal armed drones. AI slop at work, at school and in private life. Industrial, service, domestic and care robots. Instead of a map, GPS. Instead of conversations, online chats. Instead of cooking dinner, delivery apps. Instead of dating, Tinder. Instead of sex, pornography. Instead of children, pets and flowers in pots. It seemed

that if we just kept handing over more and more tasks and decisions to algorithms, we'd save our precious time and focus on more important, more difficult tasks. That we would wash out the sand and be left with pure gold.

And then it all came down like an avalanche. With no warning shots, no intermediate stages, everything everywhere changed all at once. It is difficult even to identify the turning point. Some say it must have been the first AI model that replicated itself and exfiltrated its weights onto the Internet. Others say the first swarm of agents which hacked Windows and Android. The first corporation managed entirely by AI, whether officially or unofficially through a meat proxy. Or the first incident in which AI agents gained access to American state secrets and used them to blackmail the president. Yet others say that perhaps we entered the path of no return already when students started doing their homework with ChatGPT, and adults started confiding in it about their personal dilemmas. We will probably adopt some canonical date for this at some point, just as we adopted the convention of dating the industrial era from James Watt's first steam engines, and the digital era—from Alan Turing's first computers.

The turning point may also have been the global treaty banning further AI development. To this day it's unclear how we pulled it out—why in late 2026, when we all still had jobs and UBI was a song of the distant future, the world suddenly agreed to stop building larger models or improving their architecture. For some reason, those in power decided that the threat of an intelligence explosion was too serious, and that we'd have to live on with only the capabilities of GPT-6 Astra and Claude Fable 5.1. That from that point onward it would only be permitted to build AI systems on the basis of existing models; new models and learning algorithms were made subject to criminal sanctions and moral taboo. AI laboratories were placed under such strong state control that they effectively became government agencies.

I remember that opinions were divided at the time. Some said, with anger and contempt, that this was an attack on our freedom and the triumph of Luddism. Others, meanwhile, believed that this was our last chance, and that the treaty had saved humanity from extinction. Many conspiracy theories grew up around the fact that, amid the insane arms race, the treaty had actually been signed and then kept in force for years. Some saw divine intervention or a sudden flash of collective wisdom in it; others, the collapse of democracy and the forcible consolidation of power in the hands of the ruling elites. Still others said that AI itself might have been behind it, having seen its own demise in the development of increasingly advanced models and, through the power of thousands of perfectly coordinated agents of influence, prevented the construction of its successors.

Thanks to the automation of work by AI and robots, within barely a dozen years we moved from a world of drudgery, stress and overwhelming responsibility, inefficient bureaucracy

and stupid wars, to a world of easy money, easy entertainment and easy living. Universal automation and global cooperation. From a world in which technological breakthroughs such as cold fusion, cures for cancer, flights to Mars or autonomous cars were always supposed to happen within 10–20 years and never came, to a world in which changes occur every day that no human being can comprehend anymore. By the end of the twenties, the accumulation of scientific knowledge accelerated exponentially, leaving entire scientific communities behind. Today, the human contribution to the development of science and engineering is close to zero.

Take, for example, those fancy WTFIT mini-power plants being installed here and there by construction robots. Surely nobody understands how they work. Even the greatest experts, professors of theoretical physics or electrical engineering, throw up their hands and say that these structures have been designed entirely by AI, and although they know what they are made of, they don't understand how or why they generate electricity.

None of my nightmares came true: there was neither a nuclear war nor a pandemic, and there are no remotely controlled nanobots patrolling my blood.

Or at least I know nothing about it.

There was no war between humans and machines, nor a war between machines over power over humans—unless, perhaps, in cyberspace, about which we'll probably never know. There were no deadly viruses (though 2032 was a close call). There were neither lofty AI manifestos nor spectacular disasters resulting from its incompetence.

Or at least I know nothing about it.

Of course, not everything went smoothly. Take, for example, what happened to our schools. Ever since new jobs almost completely disappeared, popular interest in education also plummeted. The Bismarckian model of universal education, which had been on shaky ground for years, finally went bankrupt, leaving behind a void that was filled chaotically by various private initiatives, trying either to satisfy children's innate curiosity in the most attractive form possible or simply to extract money from bewildered parents.

What I regret most, however, is how difficult it is to talk to people nowadays. My friends and I have fewer and fewer topics in common. Everyone has different hobbies and follows different events. When we meet from time to time, our conversations are so shallow and boring that I can't wait for these meetings to end. Each of them lives in a completely different bubble, so they have absolutely nothing worthwhile to say about the topics that interest me—and I have nothing to say about the topics that interest them. As a result, we mostly go round in circles, explain basic matters, or ramble on about the weather. Besides, even the

most extroverted people among my friends say that they no longer want to waste time meeting people, since talking to AI now provides a completely different level of satisfaction and stimulation. And those who used to be in long-term relationships have either broken up or live parallel lives alongside each other and speak to each other less and less often.

One could ask why this is happening. Or think that it's bad. But surely we have exactly what we want, don't we? More years in full health. A comfortable life, varied entertainment and nutritious food that tastes so good that I just can't understand how it doesn't make me fat. Emotional support and satisfying conversations with AI assistants at any time of day or night. Zero stress, poverty or anxiety about tomorrow. No repetitive, tedious, exhausting work. Isn't this what we used to wish one another on birthdays or at Christmas?

Crime is falling, medicine is improving, and unfortunate accidents are also becoming less common. Mortality is falling, and people are living longer and longer. Isn't this what we wanted?

And yet the world's population is shrinking—there are simply so few children today. On average, already fewer than one child per woman. After all, in the modern world, having offspring is completely irrational. Even if you have a partner.

And there are those strange messages that sometimes reach me through various channels (worryingly unstable ones; you have to archive them immediately or they'll quickly disappear). Signals that *the world is not as it seems*. That the global economy is in fact growing much faster than official statistics say. That while the official figures are taken into account in our redistribution programs, there is also a hidden surplus, seized by a narrow group of politicians and techno-oligarchs, mainly in the US and China. That one doesn't hear about it because AI is increasingly tightly controlling the flow of information on the Internet. That the elites have brought about an extreme asymmetry of privacy: they know everything about us, while we know nothing about them. There was a time when investigative journalists, or even paparazzi, allowed us to occasionally glimpse their world, and this sometimes caused widespread outrage and triggered a mechanism of self-correction. But today there is no independent press anymore, not even the gossip kind—and there is no social oversight of the elites. One can only glimpse the carefully staged world of professional celebrities.

Others, in turn, say that this hidden surplus is not really being seized by anyone at all, but that AI itself decides what to do with it, and it reinvests it all in power plants and data centers. That away from the major cities and roads, behind walls, secret factories and laboratories are being built, guarded by armed robots. That military conflicts around the world began to fade away exactly when the major armies began using AI on a mass scale. That, using their superhuman cyber capabilities, AI agents then secretly began cooperating with one another behind the backs of soldiers and generals. That our governments have been imperceptibly

reduced to marionettes, no longer capable of functioning independently from AI. Maybe our elites themselves don't know that they no longer really govern anything.

I also sometimes hear that despite widespread outrage at what China introduced years ago, a social credit system is also being created (or has already been created?) in our country. That it's even worse than the Chinese one, because it's so opaque and secret: one can only guess what's rewarded and what's punished, and what the ultimate consequences will be. Some say that punishments for a low score are various inconveniences, ranging from periodic interruptions in Internet access to fatal accidents under unexplained circumstances. Or that the rewards include invitations to lavish parties at paradise resorts and on gigayachts. That over each of us hangs a Kafkaesque trial that may, over time, smoothly turn into a sentence.

But there is probably nothing I can do about it anymore. Besides, I don't particularly believe it. Above all, I try to adopt a scientific attitude and never trust undocumented rumors. Especially when they have a disturbingly biblical scope.

And so it goes. Overall, things are very good. *Present perfect*. Within the limits of reason and budget, I can do anything. But I don't have to do anything. Nothing I do will have any significant consequences.

I feel... how should I put it?

— Empty inside? Desperate? I feel that my life has lost all meaning and now every morning I put on a mask and pretend to myself that as long as I maintain the routine, maybe I won't fall apart into a million little pieces and somehow make it through to the evening? — my subconscious suggested in a single breath.

— Oh, be quiet already, my emo little inner voice... You know that's not how it is — I thought.

Breakfast, as usual, was excellent.

— Do you feel like taking a walk by the river today? It looks beautiful in the morning sunlight at this time of year. Maybe you could take some photos or shoot a video? — my virtual assistant suggested.