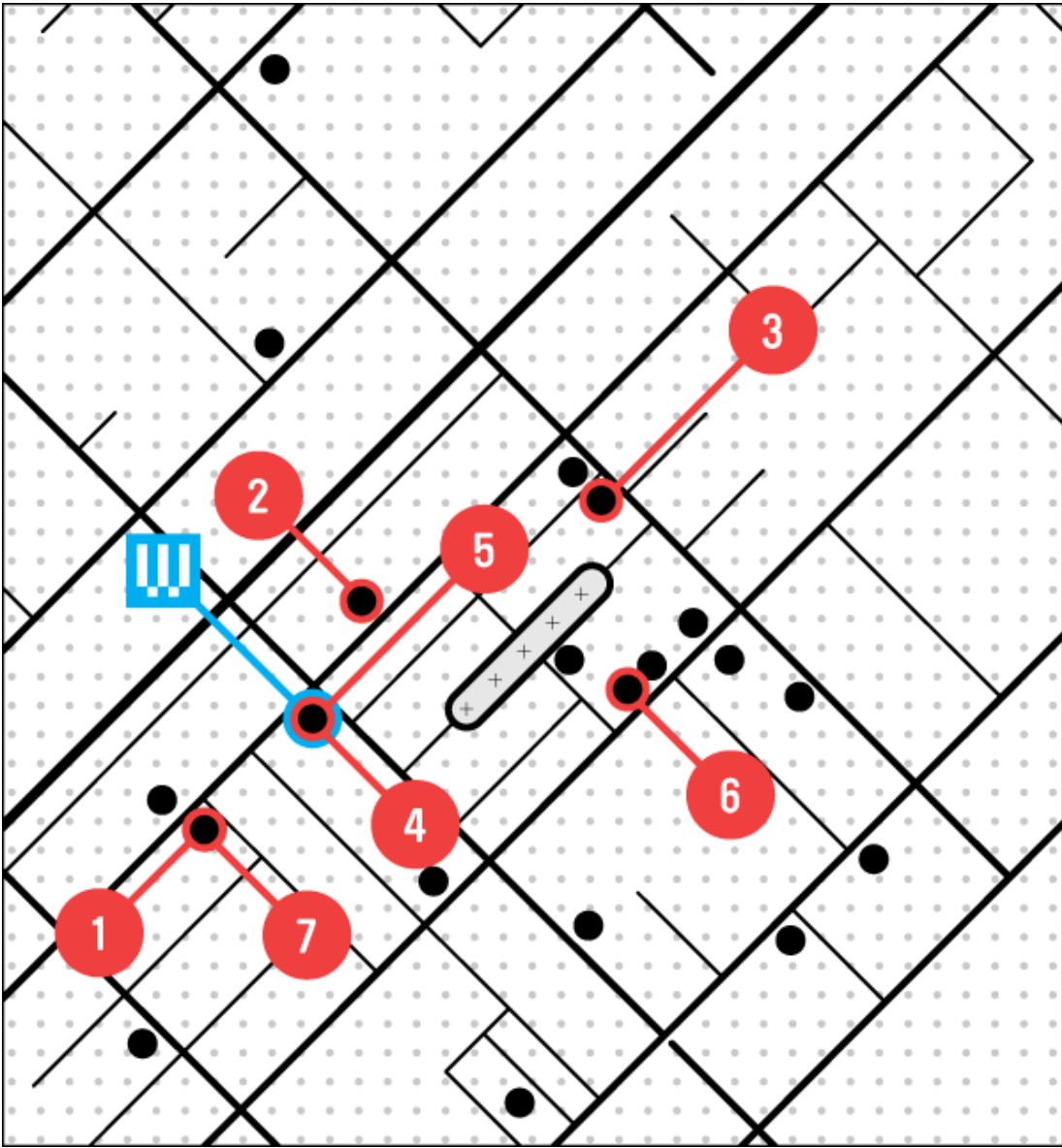


KEVIN KELLY | MAGAZINE 04.16.13 6:30 AM

SOMA DREAMS: YOUR FUTURE IS IN THE HANDS OF WIRED'S ENTREPRENEUR NEIGHBORS

WHEN WIRED FIRST moved into San Francisco's South of Market neighborhood, the old warehouses and lofts were still noisy with the sound of Asian women making garments on clackity sewing machines. Just a few years later, the buildings were filled instead with the humming of Internet startups. In 1998, as the magazine's executive editor, I hatched a plan for a photo essay, one that would take portraits of the people who worked in these tech startups within a block or two of our offices. It was an exhilarating period, overflowing with unexpected possibilities. What did we hope this technology would do? What were our dreams? Our building alone housed several other startups around that time, including Organic, Vivid Studios, eGroups, and Suck.com. I wanted to capture that moment as we realized these possibilities. But the documentary project never came together, and it's a miss I've always regretted.

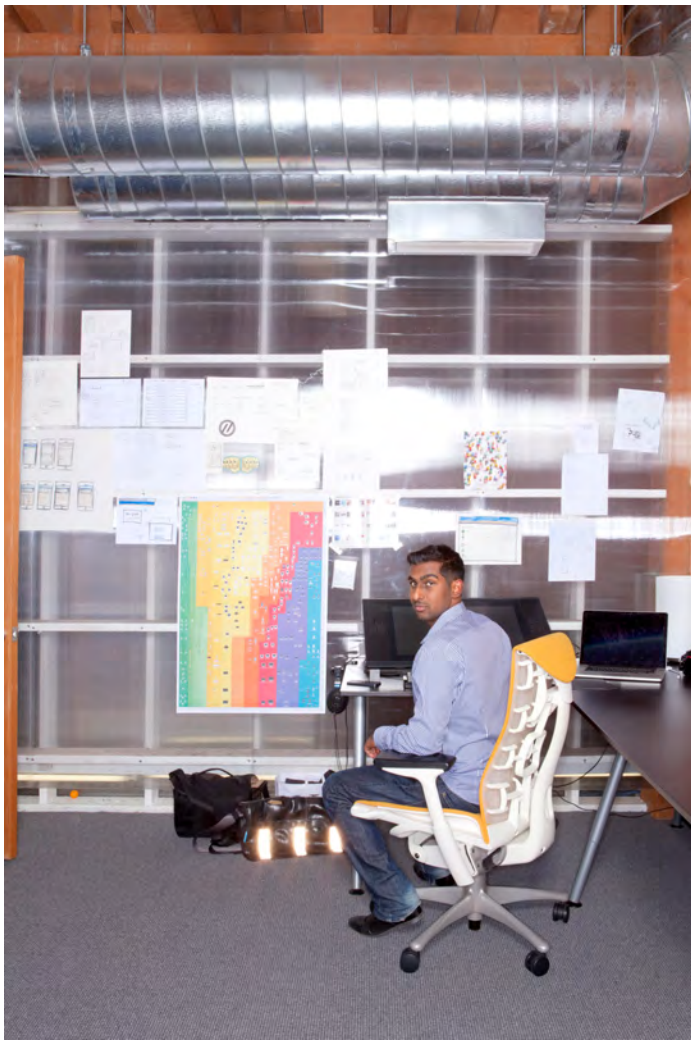




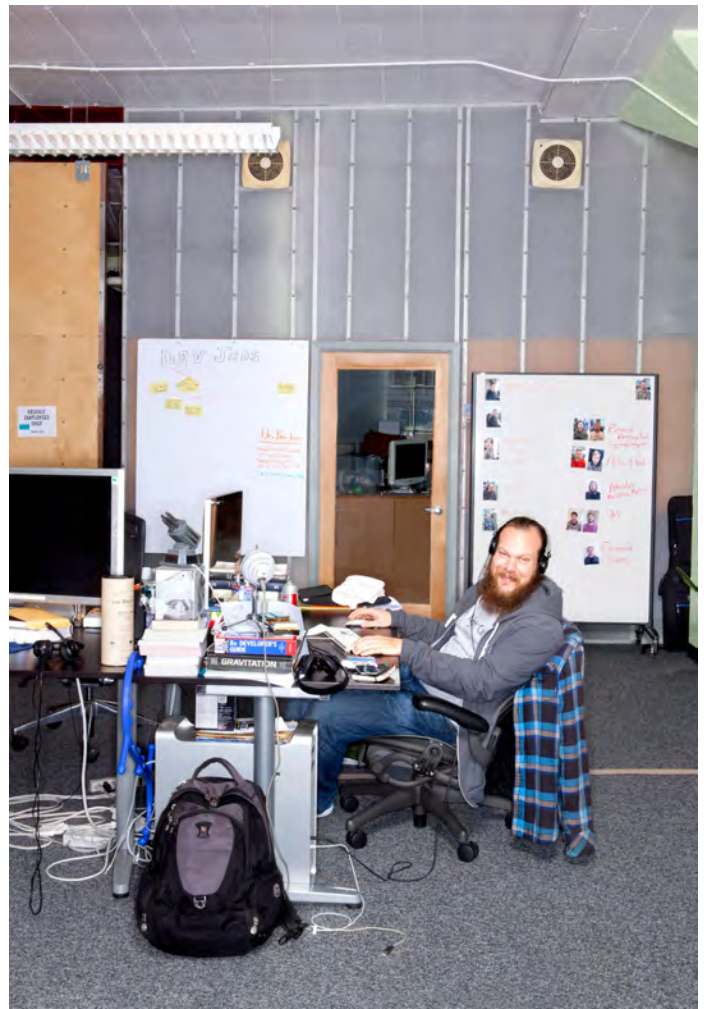
“The next big thing will be a new way of deciding what we innovate.” 1. Michael Glass | Scribd



“Digital battles are going to be more powerful than even physical wars.” 2. Scott Milener | PeopleBrowsr



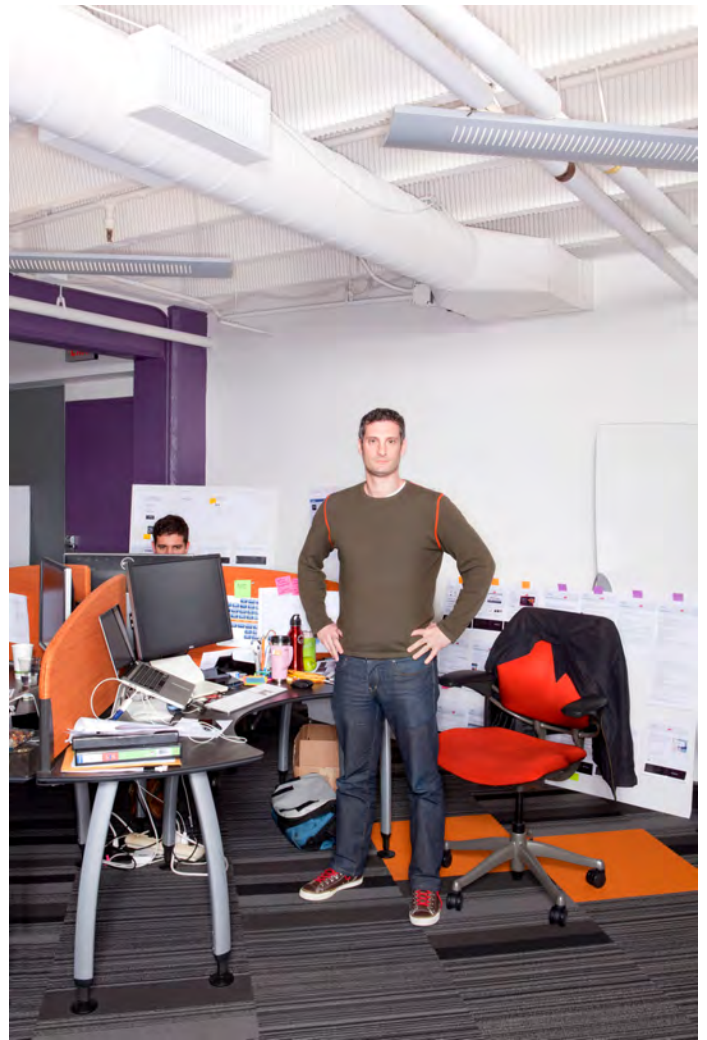
“Things we would think are magical will soon become commonplace.” 3. Anand Sharma | Quizlet



“What surprised me most in the past 20 years? Puberty.”
4. Jon Allen | Grockit



“I’d like us to shift from what we call ‘reality’ to what is really real.” 5. Ashley Bridges | Wikia



“I hope we stop looking so inwardly and build products that change people’s lives.” 6. Zack Gottlieb | ArcTouch

Now, 20 years after *Wired*’s founding, another boom is swelling. An astounding number of startups have launched in San Francisco since 2009, many of them, again, right in our neighborhood. And just as during the first boom, these explosive companies are creating more than mere IPO jackpots: They are the seeds for the next stage of the Internet’s development. This phase promises to be even bigger than the first. It will penetrate deeper into our lives. Citizens in the farthest reaches of the globe will be woven together in real time. The rapid pulse of text messages will be braided with the slow texts of books, the heartbeats of humans synced with the oscillations of machines, the electricity of 80 quintillion transistors merging with the electricity of 7 billion - people. Each step, each gaze, each word, each image of each individual is shared and amplified into a collective planetary organism. The next two decades will be the first time our world will have a comprehensive nervous system.

To mark *Wired*’s 20th anniversary, I finally undertook (with the help of photographer Brent Humphreys and a crack team of *Wired* researchers) the project that I wish I’d carried out back in 1998. A quick survey turned up nearly 100 tech companies within less



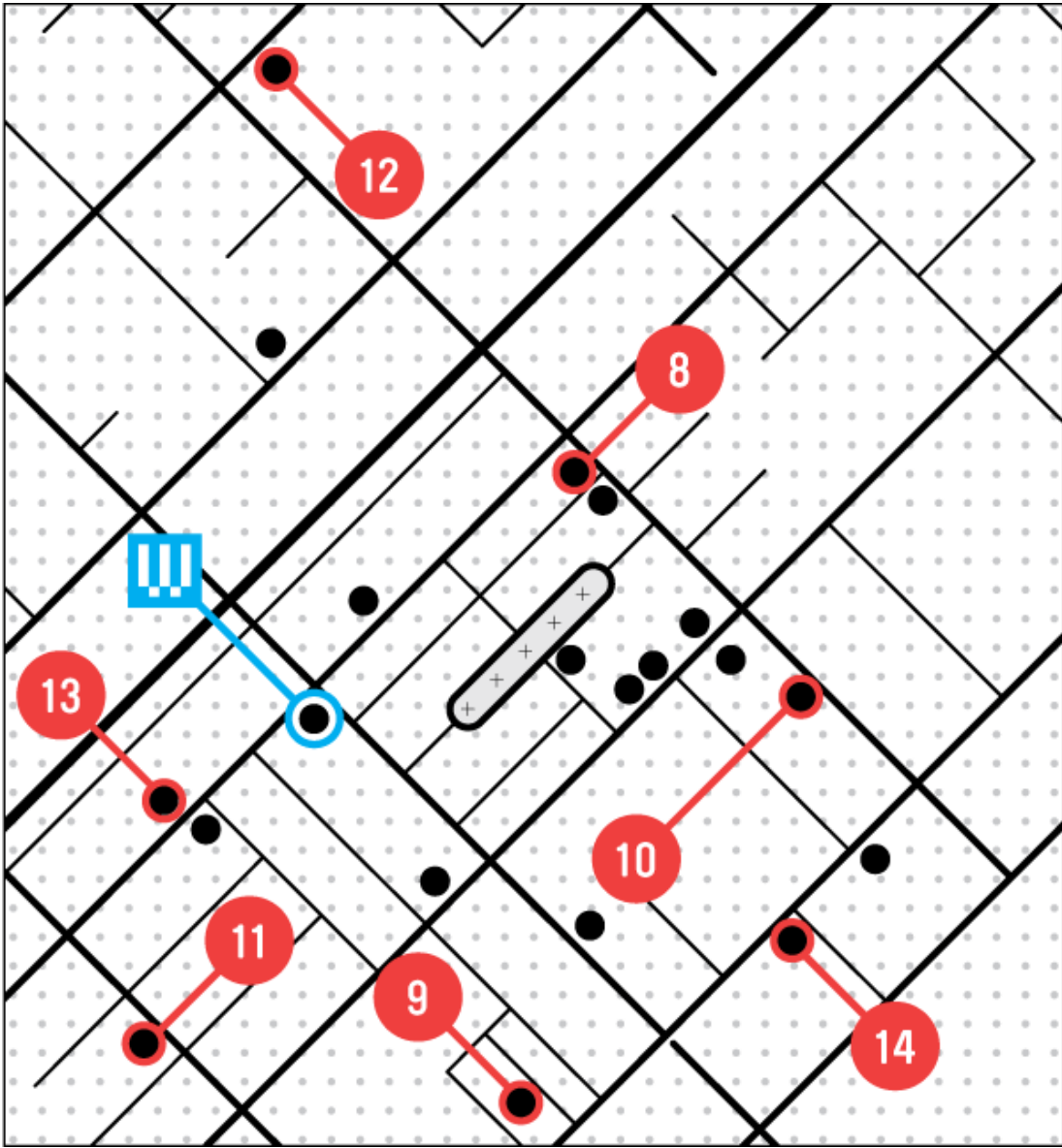
“My dream is to build a future where people can be strange and fun.” 7. Virg Leynes | Awasu Design

generation as they built out the Internet.

You’ll see some of their answers alongside the photos collected here. In the process, over the span of three days, we got to inspect the inside of this next phase of the tech economy. On average, it’s a young crowd—midtwenties. The population tilts male and white, with a liberal sprinkling of recent immigrants. They’re very articulate, often in that hacker way of being precise about their opinions. With a bit of prodding, almost every one of them can say why their work matters and where it fits in the grand scheme of things. Very few mentioned making a fortune. Money and wealth are an attraction but not the main motivator.

than a two-block radius of the magazine’s offices. We picked 30 and asked them to let us photograph employees at their offices on a typical day. Beyond capturing their images, I asked these people about their dreams—not just for themselves but for our connected future.

TELL ME YOUR DREAM. It’s not an easy thing to do at 8 in the morning, or even at 3 pm, when you’re trying to push the weekly build out the door. But as we photographed and interviewed 95 typical tech workers in their office environments in the middle of the largest tech economy in the world, I put that request to them. *What do you hope to make with your hard work? Where are we all rushing to? What is your dream?* More than anything else, our hopes and dreams determine what we invent. We started *Wired*, at least in part, to document the aspirations of a





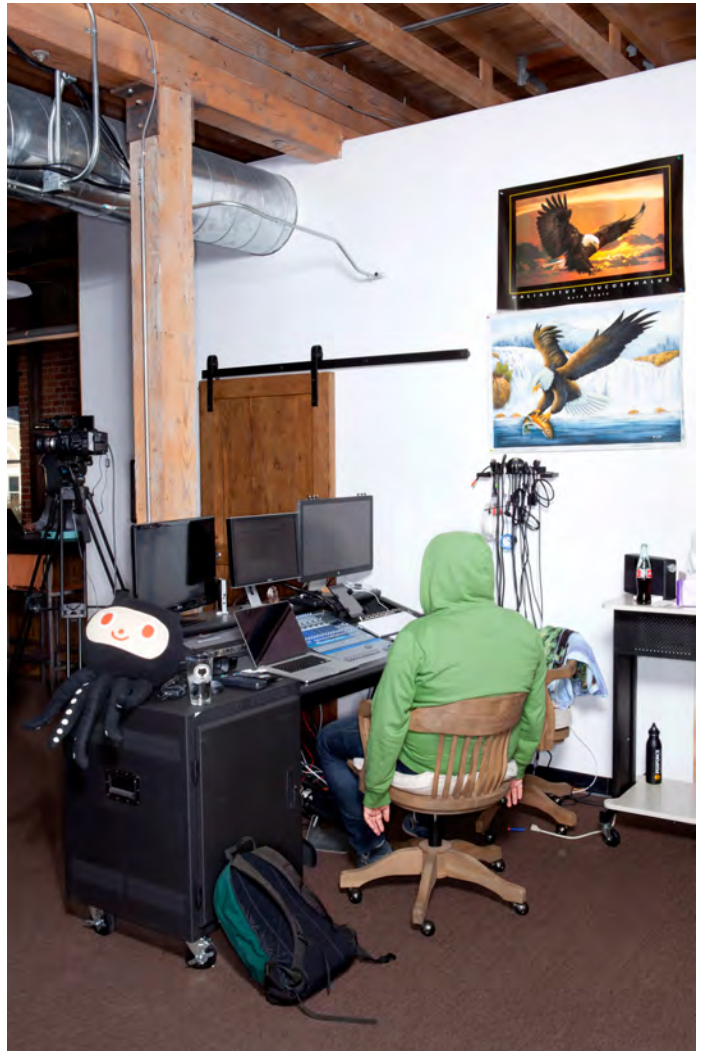
“You should be able to walk away from your devices and not feel like you’re missing out.” 8. Crystal Nero | Wcities



“We are in a creative revolution in how people work.”
9. David Albrecht | Crittercism



“Soon we won’t even have a physical device.” 10. Michael Benna | Mekanism



“As geography becomes less important, there will be regions of thought, not space.” 11. Drew Woods | GitHub



“The neat thing about technology is that one awesome person can benefit us all.” 12. Adam Kelly | BitTorrent



“We are speeding the advancement of society faster than it would like to be advanced.” 13. Eric Stafford | Rough House

Often the workspaces themselves speak louder than the words. We noticed how people adorn their desks, where they sit, what they wear, what tools they use and how. - Cubicles are rare. The typical workspace is open, with simple drawerless desks in a row or small clusters. Most offices have a few giant rubber-ball seats, some standing desks, the occasional treadmill.

There is a stark absence of paper. Often there is not a sheet: no books, no paper on the walls, no binders or pads. The long-prophesied paperless office has arrived. Only toys, beverage containers, keyboards, and headphones sit on the desk. And, of course, Apples: The ratio of Apple products to others appears to be roughly 95 to 1. The typical setup is a thin MacBook Air set on its elevated aluminum stand and docked to one or two oversized Apple display screens. During the workday, the headphones provide a virtual - cubicle to block distractions. In fact, most of these workplaces are eerily quiet; a few blare rock music, but most are as silent as a library. Workers sitting next to one another will trade noiseless emails and text messages rather than talk. Intensely focused on their screens, they dwell in the moment. When they unjacked to speak to me, they were



“No one is looking for incremental change—we want bigger problems to solve” 14. PJ Casey | Osterhout Design Group

quivering with the latest vibrations of the net. Everyone I spoke to was amazingly up-to-the-second. But with an internal switch, they could shift modes in an instant.

And so, when we invaded their space starting at 8 in the morning, they unplugged and answered my questions about what all this means and where they hope their collective work will take us.

They told me the world has shrunk. It feels smaller than before. Once-distant events feel immediate, other people closer; they can feel their pulse in tweet streams, see their tears on [YouTube](#). “We are widening our collective eye,” one worker said.

Sharing is a term I heard a lot. Even though it’s now a buzzword, they use it in sincere ways. The programmers want to share their code, the marketers want to share their good fortune, the CEOs want to share their success. Sharing seems to be another way to say “connect” or “interact” or “engage.”

A common refrain was the wish that all the new opportunities they have gained living here in the “tech bubble” could be spread around the world. One person put it this way: “I hope the freedom to intellectually interact with any fellow human becomes a human right.” It’s as if connectedness has become a social good on a par with clean water, education, and women’s equality. When I asked if technology is making the world a better place, there was almost universal agreement that it is. (There is one lone exception to this unequivocal optimism. After we photographed a fashionably dressed woman sitting in a neat row of desks near a wall of windows, I pulled her away from her work for an interview. When we were in a quiet corner I asked, “What do you hope for

with your work?” Smiling, she replied, “I am working for the collapse of capitalism.”)

One enthusiasm recurred often enough that it formed a pattern: admiration for Bill Gates. This is not the Bill Gates of Windows; it's Gates as philanthropist, eliminating polio, funding clean water and third world innovation. To the mostly younger staff, Gates outranks Steve Jobs. Twenty years ago I would not have guessed that fervent Apple users would anoint Gates as their role model and hero, but his work for the global good was mentioned too many times to ignore. Gates has become this generation's Andrew Carnegie, a man whose reputation as a robber baron has been forgotten in the wake of his largesse.

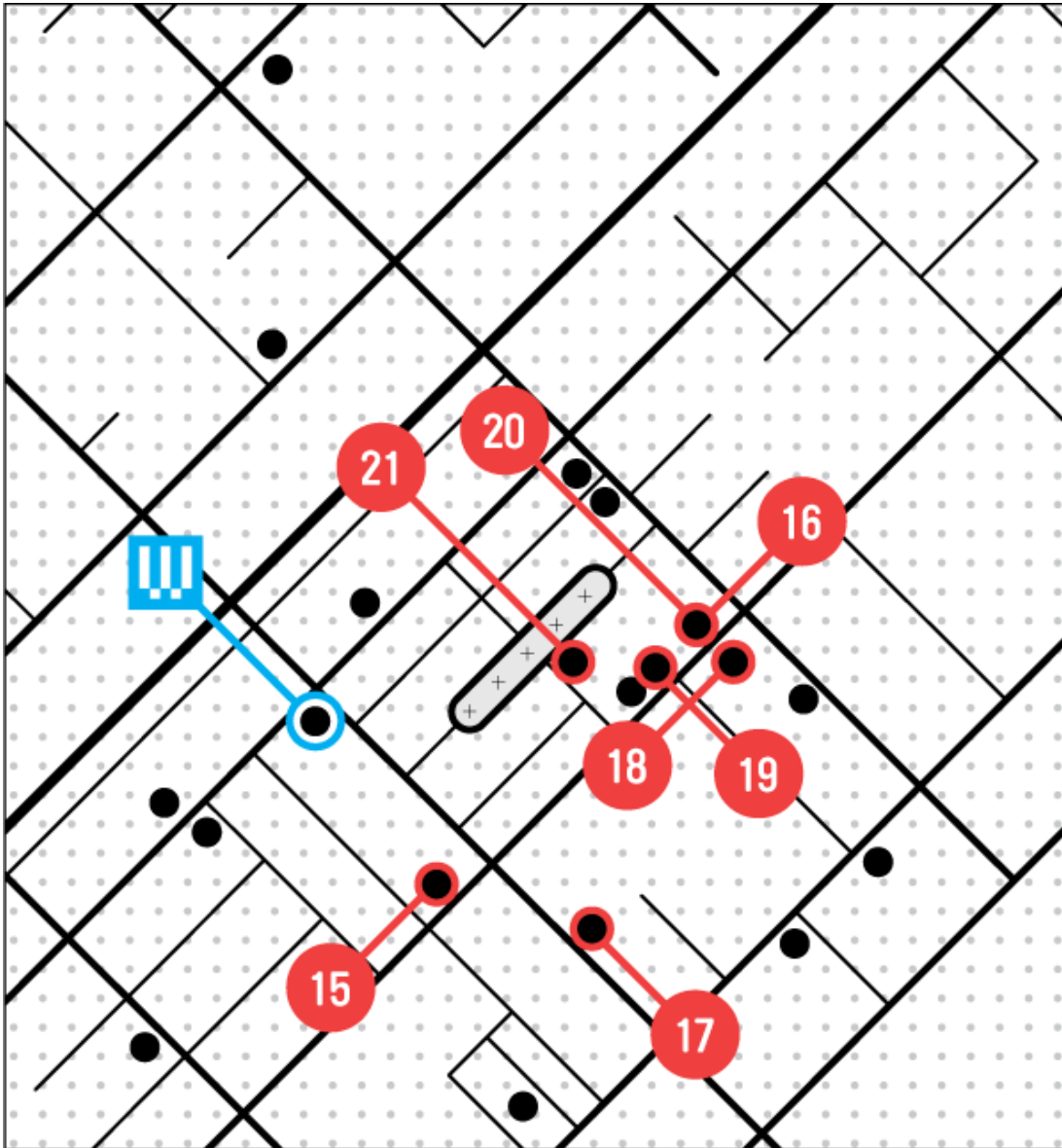
I asked the people who are creating this era to give it a name; what would you call the past decade, right up to today? Their suggestions: the Startup Decade, the Wikipedia Generation, the Connected Decade, the Connected Anywhere Decade, the Age of Mass Connectivity, the Asian Decade, the Global Decade, the Personalized Decade, the Sharing Decade, the Social Era, the Social Age, the Digital Social Era, the Social and Network Decade, the Socialization of Communication, the Decade of the Open Internet, the Mobile Decade, the Age of Equity, the Decade of Apps, and (my personal favorite) the Period of Awesomeness.

THE PERIOD OF AWESOMENESS: It's a good name for the attitude of most of the people I spoke to. Even the youngest, who were just 3 years old when *Wired* started 20 years ago, are full of wonder about the “impossible” things that have happened in only the past five years. I can't say they speak for anyone outside this remarkable two-block radius, but these are the dreams and hopes of some people who are currently remaking the world.

Curiously, despite the forward lean of all these workers, “the future” is no longer fashionable. Of the 95 people I interviewed, only two said they want to plug their brains directly into the Internet as soon as possible; the same two hope for flying cars in 20 years. The rest seem to be suffering from future fatigue. They profess little urgency even to know what life might be like in 2033. “Humans don't have a good idea of where they are going,” one guy told me. Another said, “I want what doesn't exist yet, but I won't know what it is till it exists.” The tech tribe, it seems, has little allegiance to the future per se; rather, its support is for what it sees as *important*. These people migrated to San Francisco to work on important things, and this connected, networked world is important. In fact, they seem to feel it's the most important thing in the world today.

It's unfair to suggest that all 95 of my interviewees spoke with one voice, and equally

specious to generalize from them to the entire tech economy. But in both what they said and what was left unspoken, I believe a clear theme comes through. So let me hazard a manifesto on their behalf:





“Getting feedback on your cooking over Twitter is invaluable-and rare when you work in a restaurant.” 15. Tina Dang | Hattery



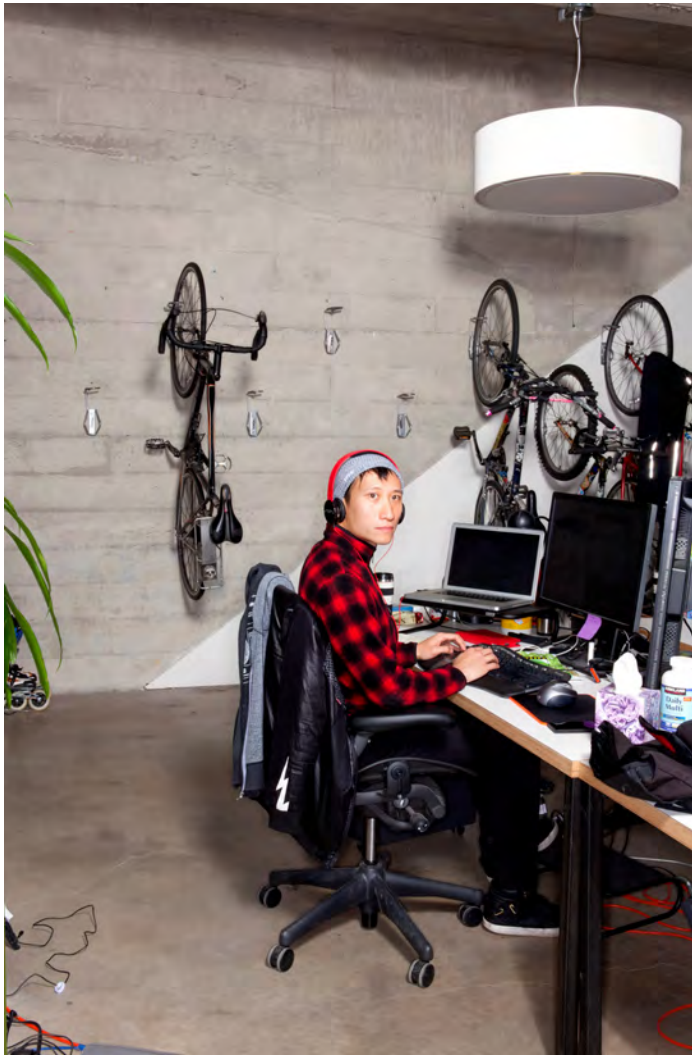
“This is the age of mass connectivity.” 16. Santosh Jayaram | Daemonic Labs



“Our neighborhood is the epicenter of an impact that’s affecting the whole world.” 17. Laurent Detoc | Ubisoft



“My dream is to enable personalization for everyone.” 18. Ulas Bardak | StumbleUpon



“We’re still learning where we’re going as we go.”
19. Howard Lo | BandPage



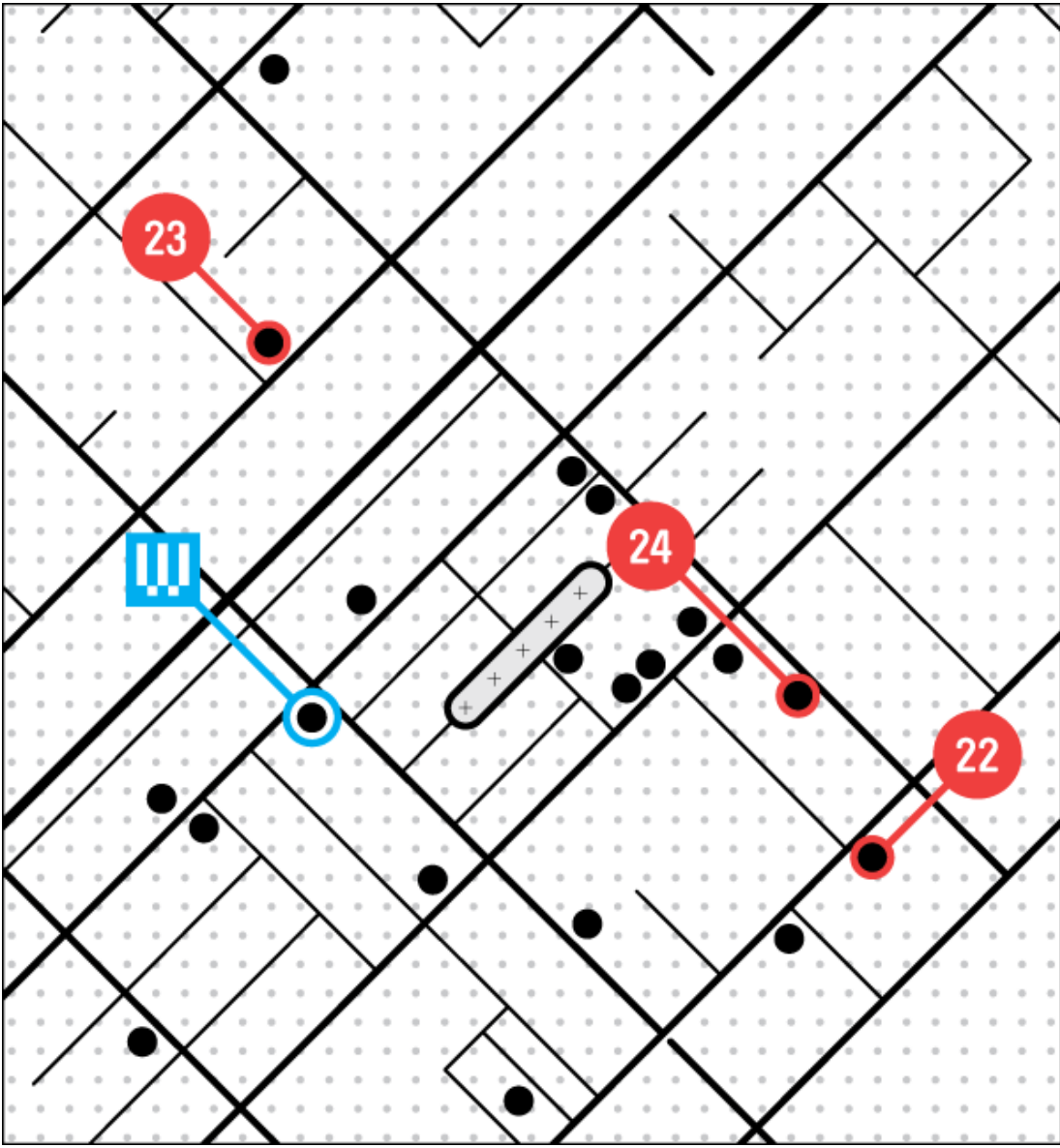
20. Arnaldo Roldan | CloudPrime



“Products are like ideas. I hope we can make them more rooted in meaning.” 21. Marina Guerra | R/GA

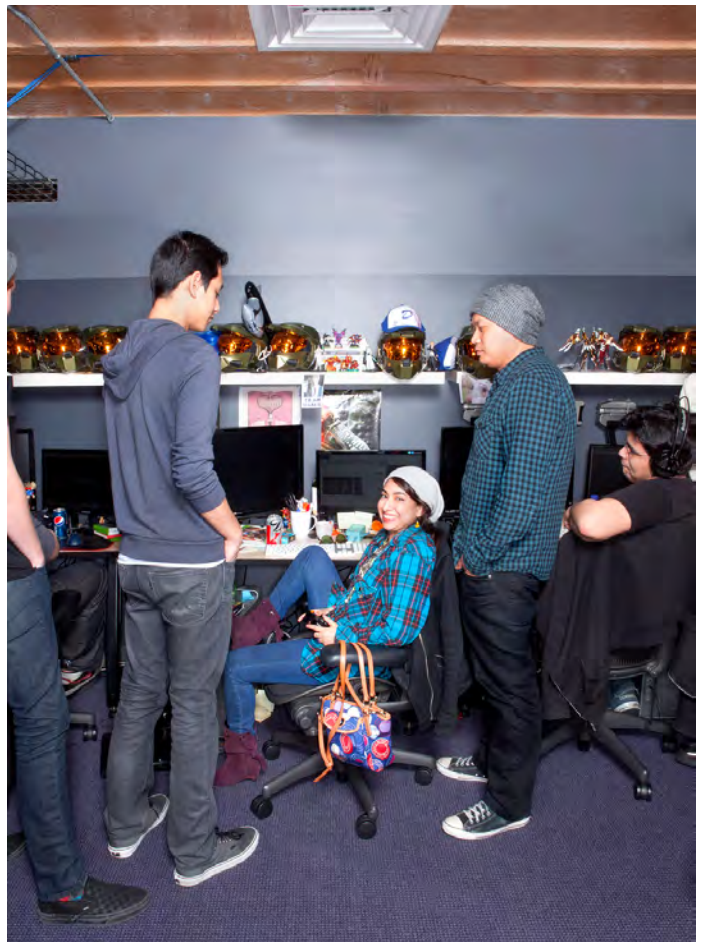


“I hope that in 20 years everything will be simpler.” 22. Doug Cox | Umlaut

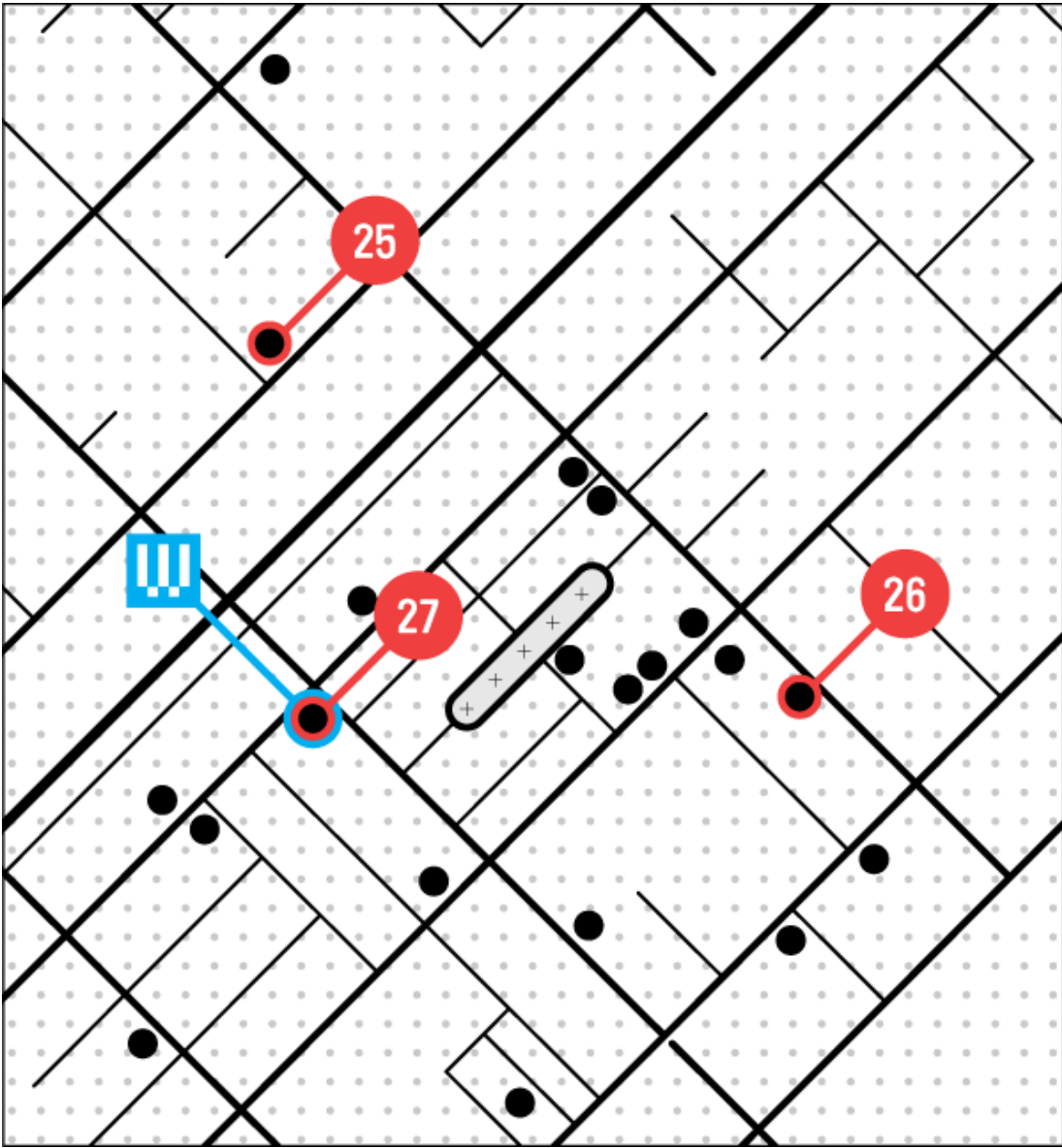


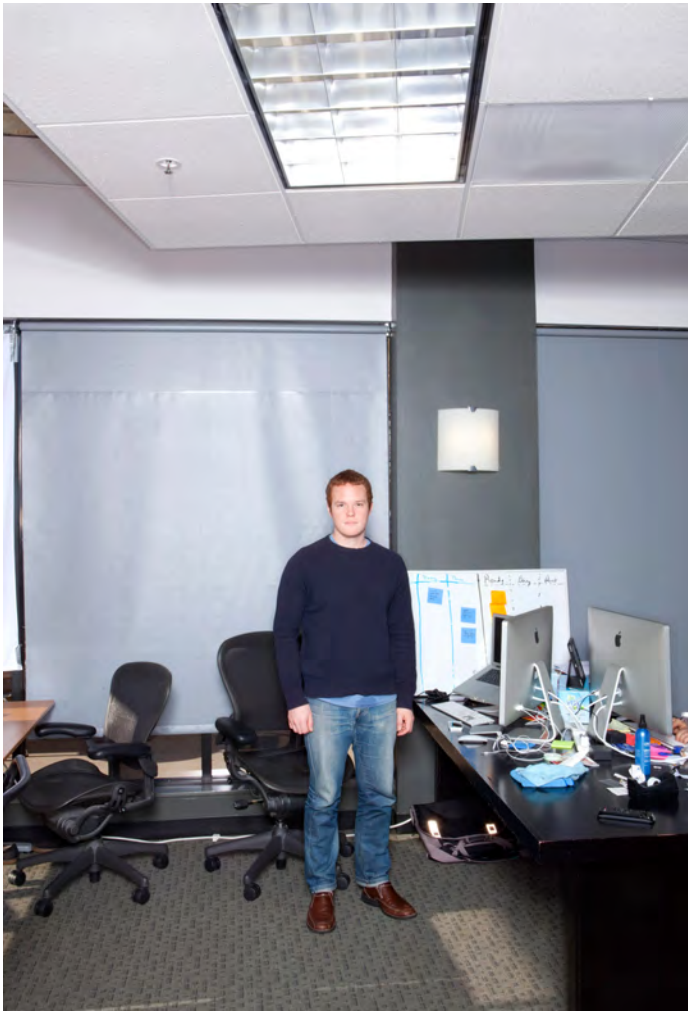


"I'm surprised all the time. Every day I'm like, 'There's no way that can be happening already.'" 23. Puppet Mills | Limelight Networks

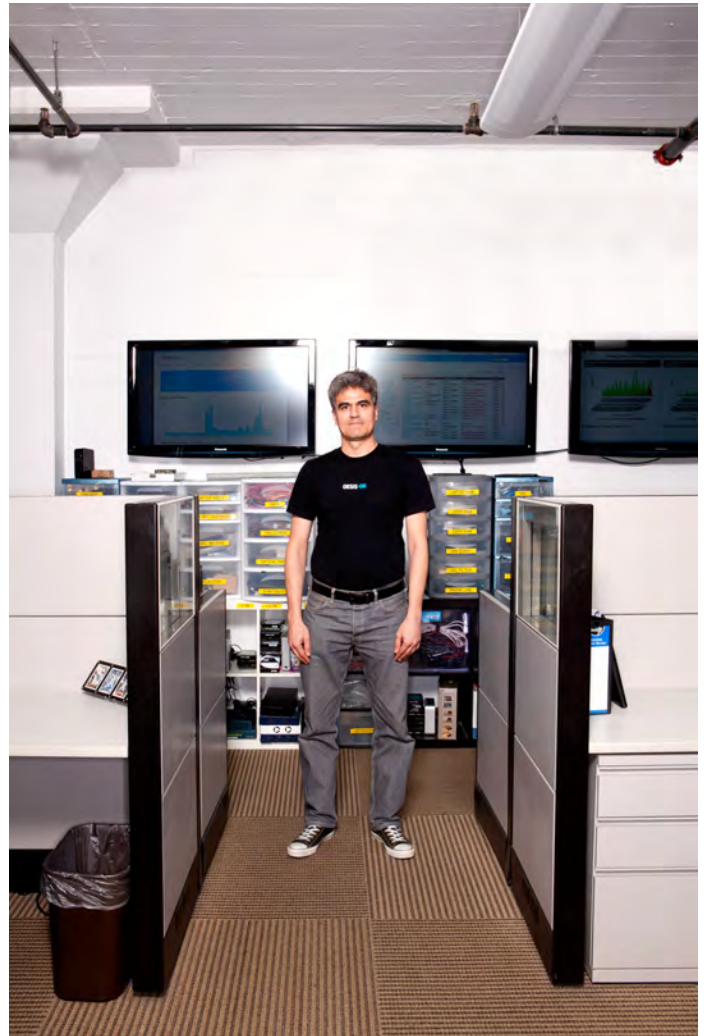


"In the future they will divide human history into Before the Internet and After the Internet." 24. Veronica "Nicky" Silber | IGN





“We’re democratizing information in every single industry.”
25. David Kuchar | LendFriend



“Eventually everything will be automated and we won’t really have to work.” 26. Thomas Pretto | Opswat

We have come to build the most important thing in the world today, perhaps the most important thing ever. It connects us. It widens us. It deepens who we are. We don’t know what it is or what it will be in the future, but we do know it has made us better so far. Our dream is to enlarge it so that all people can join us and share the good in it while ameliorating the bad. This thing we are working on has no borders and—as far as we can see—no end. If everyone can join it, with equal access and no undue ownership, the world will be a much better place. That is why we are working here today.

Senior Maverick **Kevin Kelly** (kk@kk.org) wrote about the robot takeover in issue 21.01.

See more from the first 20 years of Wired