

# The Uncanny Valley of AI: A Visit to the Fast Food Drive-Through of 2035

November 21, 2024 by Dylan Hendricks, IFTF Ten-Year Forecast Director



After five years of virtual gatherings, IFTF returned to San Francisco in person for our annual Ten-Year Forecast Summit. Over two days, we explored **the Uncanny Valley — that unsettling space where familiar systems become alien**. By examining today's transforming technologies, media, and institutions, we sought glimpses of the world taking shape beyond this uncanny period between the world we thought we knew and the one still emerging before us.

## Simulating the Future with a Scenario

One way we can prepare for unexpected futures is to simulate them with scenarios that play out the consequences of today's emerging signals and

drivers. In that spirit, let's explore how generative AI might transform an everyday experience — the fast-food drive-through — through the lens of four key forecasts from this year's TYF.

## **Forecast 1:**

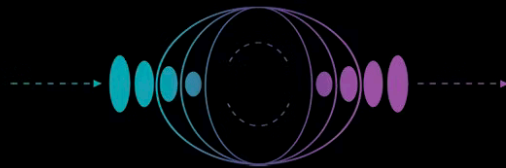
### **By 2035, there will be more AI bots than humans**

On a sunny Sunday in 2035, your car is driving you and the kids to get fast food for lunch. It pulls up to the drive-through ordering display, where Churly, the restaurant's famous digital rat mascot, bounces around the screen like a living puppet. "Good morning kids!" he squawks enthusiastically in his signature raspy rat voice. He makes eye contact with your son and daughter and leans in close to them, speaking almost in a whisper. "You kids wanna see a magic trick?" Your kids squeal with delight — this interactive show is exactly why they beg for drive-through instead of robo-dash delivery. Your AI budgeting assistant hears Churly too, and seemingly roused from its slumber, lights up to show you it's also listening. It always does this when it senses you're about to buy something, and it always fills you with immediate pangs of guilt.

## **Forecast 2:**

### **AI will be able to translate any idea between any language, discipline, or format**

By **translate**, we mean  
synthesize, reinterpret, transmogrify, transmute.



We mean a **transformation** process that is at the core of what humans do. Whenever we're attempting to be productive, collaborative, or creative, we're inherently engaging in one or more acts of transformation.

"Here we go," Churly furrows his wrinkly rat brow, conjuring unseen forces. He reaches out to you, covering the entire display with his rat paw, and when his arm retracts, he's holding a perfect miniature cartoon replica of your family's car in his hand, complete with tiny animated versions of you and the kids. The dolls seem to be having as good a time as their real-life counterparts in the back seat. "Ooh, nice new station wagon we've got here. I must be in esteemed company. Let's see what we have going on inside," Churly says, pulling the digital twin of your son out of the tiny car with his thumb and forefinger. "Oh, don't worry, I got you!" Churly winks. "Oh wow, what a strong kid. I bet you'd eat fifty cheeseburgers, huh?" Churly juggles fifty cheeseburgers one-handed while holding your son's tiny avatar. Your son leans out of the back seat, laughing at the tiny version of himself swinging from Churly's paw. "No, I just want one cheeseburger." "Oh, okay," Churly says, dropping the other 49 cheeseburgers and throwing one into a nearby digital picnic basket. "One's probably better, yeah."

"What about this one?" He grabs the cartoon avatar of your daughter from the back seat of the car. "Oh this is the smart one, I can tell! You're getting the fish sandwich, right? For your brain?" "No!" squeals your daughter. "I

want chicken nuggets and fries! Not fish!" "Chicken nuggets and fries, of course, so much smarter!" Churly chuckles, dumping an armful of flapping fish out of the digital picnic basket and replacing them with chicken nuggets. "And I guess you want fries too, yeah?" Your son nods, and a cartoon truck appears, tipping an avalanche of fries into the basket.

Churly turns to you, smiling and pausing warmly until he makes and sustains eye contact. "What about you, big fella? You look hungry too. What can Churly get for you?"

### **Forecast 3: AI will weirden our relationship with resources**

After taking your order, Churly breaks into a personalized jingle about your family — complete with oddly specific details about your car model and what everyone's wearing. As his song fades out, the car pulls forward in the drive-through. You join a short line of cars in a tunnel of seamless digital displays, like a high-tech car wash. As you wait, a dynamic animation of ingredients and spices swirl around the car in the digital tunnel, tracing their journey from global sources to the kitchen where the food is being prepared. Happy chickens leap enthusiastically through magic portals that transform them into delicious healthy nuggets. The car dashboard lights up as it connects with the restaurant's system and begins presenting choices to you. This is where the negotiation starts.

In 2035, AI systems track supply chains for basic resources like food and energy. Global wars and climate shocks have made resource availability wildly unpredictable; it's impossible to know what's in abundance today that might be gone tomorrow. Prices for almost every commodity fluctuate in real-time. Your dashboard presents you with pricing trade-offs, each choice affecting your meal's final cost. Would you like real chicken, or cell-based? The restaurant's running on its own micro-grid today due to recent flooding — would you like to pay an energy surcharge or transfer a little electricity

from the car's battery back to the restaurant instead? Would you like to pay for water recycled on site, or shipped in from Canada? Premium flour or lil' lobster (cricket) flour?

Of course, you let your AI budgeting assistant handle the negotiations, while you laugh with the kids about the in-jokes slipped into the animated tunnel experience.

## **Forecast 4: In an AI-soaked world, there will be a premium on human interactions**

As you emerge from the tunnel, the car dashboard pings, signaling the completion of the financial transaction. On the curb, an older woman rocks in her chair, holding a picnic basket just like Churly's digital one. Her name is Miss Baker. You see her at the restaurant, but also at school pickup, the occasional PAC meeting, and at the mall during holidays. She lives in your community, and her job is mostly to be familiar with her presence. The kids don't like going to the other drive-throughs — they all have a magic show, but only this one has Miss Baker.

"Hi there, Gabby and Summer! Aren't you a sight for sore eyes? How's the improv class going?"

"Hi Miss Baker!" they yell enthusiastically. You briefly catch the reflection of the personalized teleprompter script in the lenses of Miss Baker's smart glasses.

"Smells like a great picnic you've got here," she smiles as she hands you the picnic basket. "Oh, and Churly told me he had something for you," she says, turning back to the kids. "Oh yeah, he heard that you were missing the last action figures from your Peacekeeper Force set. Maybe these ones?" She hands the kids two 3D-printed figures molded in their exact likeness. They're thrilled to receive them.

“Have a great day! We’ll see you next time!” “Bye Miss Baker!” The kids wave as they marvel at their doppelgänger toys and the enchanting aroma of the magic picnic basket.

The car pulls away, and as you hand the kids their food, you idly wonder how long it’ll be before they’re begging to come back. One day, maybe two? Your budgeting assistant is reminding you it should probably be less frequently than once a week. As you start to dig into your falafel burger, you suggest to her that maybe she could help you find some more wiggle room on that. For Miss Baker. The picnic basket, overhearing the conversation, chirps, “Yeah, for Miss Baker,” in a cartoon squirrel voice.

You’re not confident, but you’re pretty sure you hear your assistant let out a brief sigh of capitulation before going back to sleep.

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