EX SQuared

Insights from Digital Anthropology:

How to take a participant-observer approach on your digital transformation journey

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In the last 10,000 years, which innovation has been more responsible for human progress and development than any other? Was it the invention of the wheel? The discovery of metal? Democracy? The printing press? While all of these things were important, the case could be made that something you might not have considered is even more important.

Beer. Yes, beer.
Let's examine the possibility.

1. Prologue

Archaeologists recently discovered the remains of an ancient temple that's thought to have been created as a gathering place where communities could come together — and drink beer. Beer is a social lubricant, and in past civilizations that lived in fear of war, the wilderness, disease and other unknown threats, beer was what bound groups into communities. Individuals could set aside their differences and connect; when small groups grow larger, cultures and communities evolve. This allows for the development of specialized professions such as farming, blacksmithing, military work, building and so on. Beer enabled our ancestors to come together in a way that they never had before…and nothing has ever been the same since.

> **But what is it about beer that makes it so important? The: great flavor? Sales of non-alcoholic beer last year were $188 million — compared to $120 billion for regular beer. Doesn't seem like it's the taste.**

If we look at this question through the lens of the Hierarchy of Needs, as developed by one of the most famous experiential psychologists in history, Abraham Maslow, we can better understand why beer has had such an impact. Beer wasn't fulfilling a bottom-of-the-pyramid need like a physiological or safety need. Instead, beer provides a sense of belonging. Ancient civilizations built temples to bring beer drinkers together, much as bars and Oktoberfest do today. Our ancestors didn't drink beer for nourishment. They drank it because it creates relationships and social cohesion — so that people could be part of something much bigger than themselves, a need that's more akin to self-actualization than anything else.

Academics might argue about whether or not beer was the most important development during the course of human evolution, but this debate misses the point. The point is that thinking like an anthropologist, as we're inviting you to do here in our discussion of beer, will also help you along the path to digital transformation.
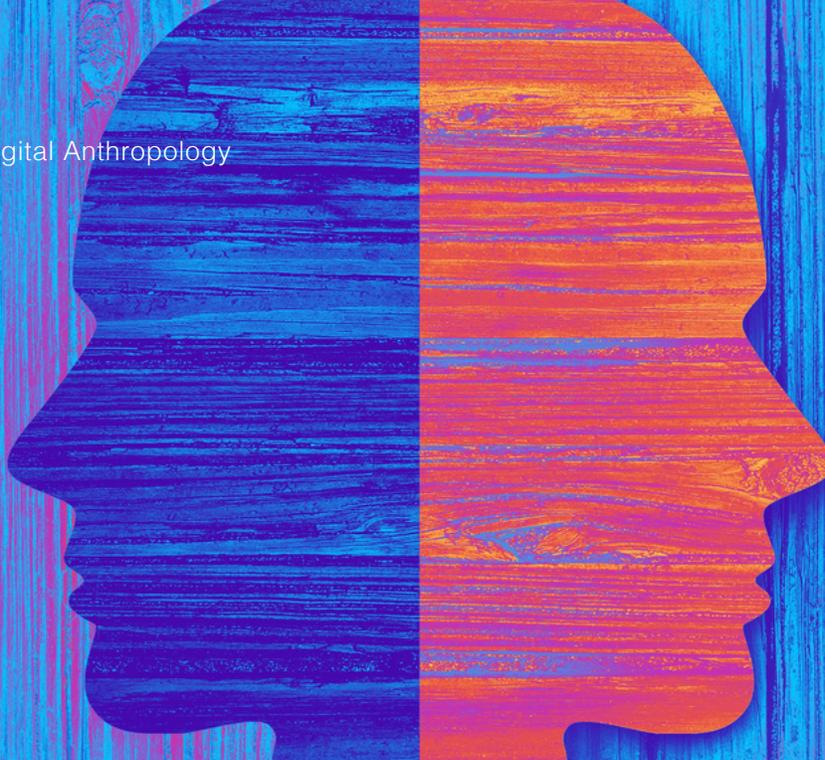
In our last white paper, we took a close look at Maslow's foundational theories, which are still widely applied to help researchers understand why humans do what they do. In particular, we examined how Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs can serve as an illustrative roadmap to guide organizations who are striving to maximize the transformative potential of digital technologies today.

In this paper, we'll go a step further. We'll explore how the discipline of anthropology, which has adopted and built upon Maslow's ideas, can provide a relevant framework for thinking about issues and challenges that will likely arise over the course of digital transformation projects. We'll delve deep into the emerging field of digital anthropology to investigate how it can provide insights that can help us build new technologies that reflect and meet our core human needs.

And we'll explore how adopting digital anthropology's methodology and approach will enable us to understand the purpose and meaning of the digital products and solutions we're creating.

This approach asks us to set aside our usual assumptions and prejudices and take an unbiased view of the existing evidence. Anthropology invites us to see the world through a different kind of lens — one that's grounded in extensive research, validated by logical thinking and informed by a rigorous and systematic methodology — to help us uncover truths that we might otherwise never have recognized. It opens our eyes to new insights and our minds to new ways of thinking.

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2. What is Anthropology?

Anthropologists strive to understand the human subjects of their research in a way that's as unbiased as possible. Following the seminal work of Franz Boas in the early twentieth century, cultural anthropologists endeavor to study cultures within their own contexts, not by comparing them to Western traditions or ways of life.

Accordingly, cultural anthropologists developed the participant-observer research methodology. In this approach, the anthropologists spend an extended period of time within the cultures that they're studying. They live alongside their research subjects, joining group activities and participating in social rituals, in order to become intimately familiar with the common behavior patterns and practices within that culture.

The underlying idea behind the participant-observer method is to be in proximity with the culture that's being studied. The method insists that research is intimate and all-encompassing by nature, in opposition to the notion that research is an inherently distanced activity (like an astronomer gazing at stars through a telescope).

Cultural anthropologists' scholarship usually takes the form of thick description, a kind of heavily detailed, qualitative narrative that's published in monograph form. As you might imagine, it's typical for a thick description to be very long.
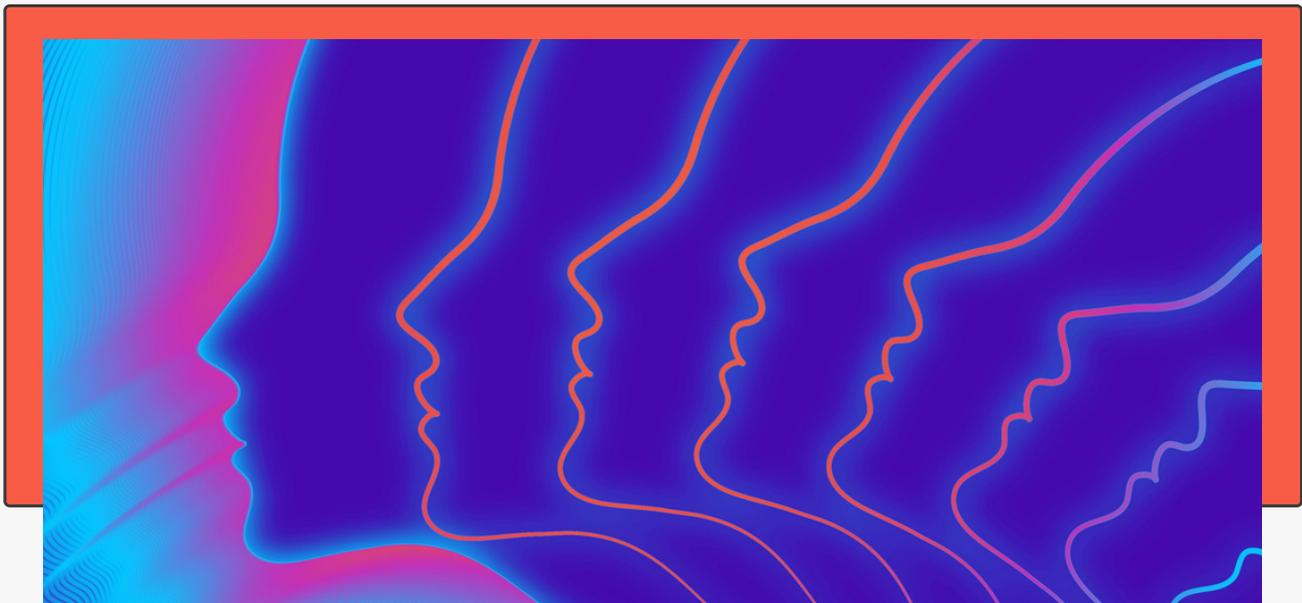
Technology — along with its evolution and development — is a natural subject for the participant-observer research methodology. In today's world, it's an intimate part of our lives that's deeply embedded in how we form relationships, our cultures and rituals and nearly every aspect of our communal and social existence (in fact, some people's technology usage is just about all-encompassing).

When novel technologies are first introduced, their shape is largely determined by engineering and mechanics as well as what's cheapest and easiest to mass produce. Consider, for instance, Henry Ford's famous assertion that "any customer can have a car painted any color he likes, so long as it is black." In the early days of the automobile, the market was (pun intended) largely driven by the technology. If you wanted a car, there weren't many options to choose from.

As the market evolved, things changed. For buyers, today's cars aren't as much about providing transportation as they are about expressing personality or asserting social status. Modern automobiles fulfill a completely different human need than their predecessors did.
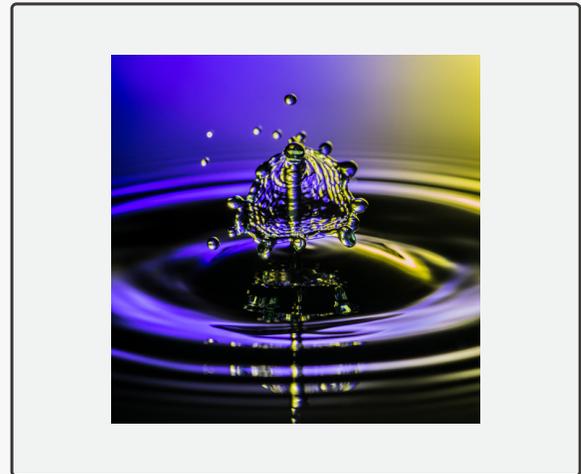
If you want to succeed at selling cars in this day and age, you need to know more about human psychology and motivation than you do about the inner workings of a combustion engine.

Technology has developed along similar lines. What was once the domain of geeks and nerds is now widely used by the masses. Digital transformation isn't about the powerful hardware or lightning-fast processing speeds or coding prowess, it's about people. Just as succeeding in the automotive market requires a new set of skills, so does building technologies. Thinking like an anthropologist provides a great guide for technology professionals, who are just embarking on, or proceeding along, their digital transformation journeys.

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3. Why Digital Anthropology?

According to Wikipedia, a news article discusses current or recent news of either general interest or of a specific topic.

As we move deeper into the twenty-first century, digital technologies are becoming ever more pervasive across societies around the world and have evolved into a fundamental part of human experience. In the discipline's early days, cultural anthropologists tended to study small scale social groups that were considered "traditional" or "indigenous," and were thought to operate outside of state institutions and to only change very slowly. By applying the tenets of cultural anthropology to the digital realm, digital anthropologists are expanding what was once assumed to be the definition of their field. Along the way, they're seeking a more balanced and nuanced understanding of what it means to be human today

By definition, the "digital realm" encompasses everything that was built using binary code. This includes objects, systems, software and other artifacts.

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"Digital anthropology is the very best way to understand the consequences of technology usage for people,"

Daniel Miller
Professor of Anthropology at
University College, London

It's an expansive category that can incorporate just about anything — from industrial robots to laptop computers, from mainstream social media to underground cybercriminal discussion forums and from wearable medical devices to the concept of ubiquitous computing. Of course, digital anthropology's objects of inquiry include algorithms, data and the internet, but they also span a broader set of media and technologies as well as the consequences of their usage.

Digital anthropology's goal is to apply a well-established research methodology to a set of new phenomena in an emerging domain.

The discipline attempts to situate technology within a broader social and cultural context and to tease out the contradictions and complexities associated with its use. Taking a comparative perspective is fundamental to this approach: Digital anthropologists understand that different social groups behave differently, use technology differently and have different aims and objectives. The goal is always to move away from generalizations and toward more specific and immediate insights.

"Digital anthropology is the very best way to understand the consequences of technology usage for people," says Daniel Miller, professor of anthropology at University College, London, and one of the most seminal scholars in the field. "Anthropology has always been interested in the ways people socialize and communicate. We've always studied people as social networking sites, so we felt a responsibility to do a genuine kind of scholarship to accurately determine the consequences of the rise of social media and digital communications."

Often, digital anthropologists work to dismantle stereotypes. For instance, it's commonly assumed that social media platforms invite cyber bullying. In fact, it's likely that such aggressions were just as prevalent in early adolescent relationships before the advent of Instagram and the internet, but now they're more publicly visible and easier to document and preserve. Similar debates have taken place around the question of mobile device use and children's attention spans: It's clear that little rigorously designed, formal research exists to back up the claim that multitasking or social media usage negatively impacts young people's ability to focus.

Digital anthropologists are also interested in better understanding how we use technology so that we can optimize it. Ultimately, their work may help us see that it's not so much that technology is taking over our lives or changing us, as it is that it's giving us new places where we can have conversations and perform cultural functions that are both valuable and familiar. Its role in our lives may be less disruptive than we think.
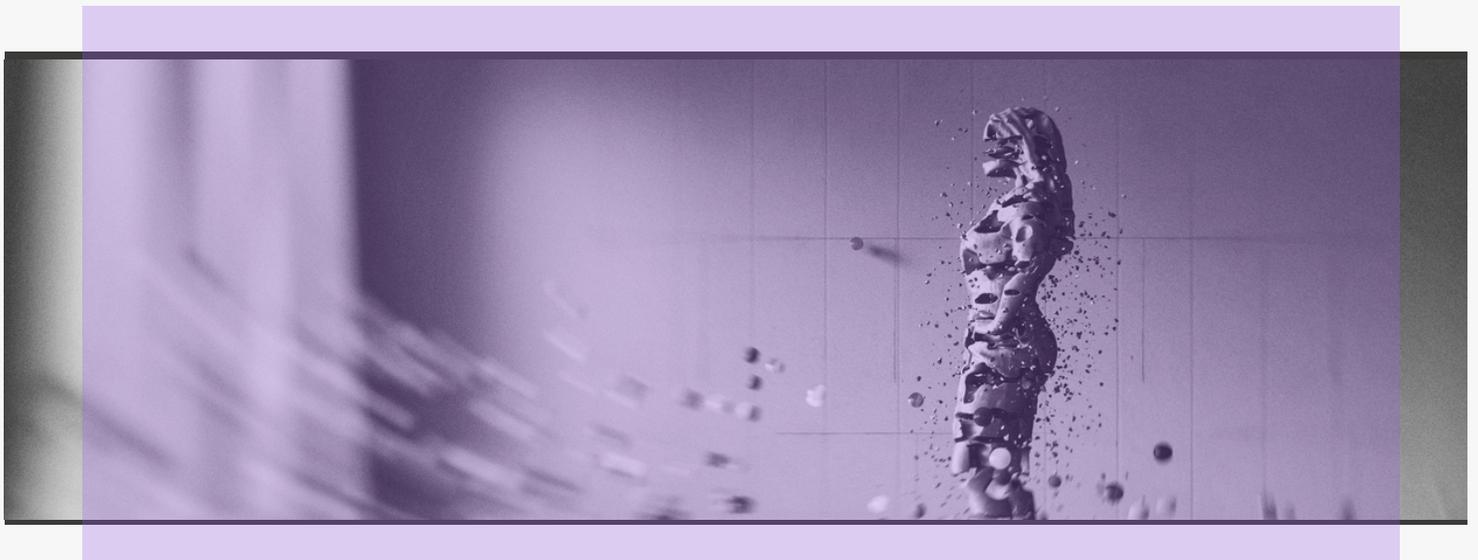
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4. Lessons from Digital Anthropology

Think like an Anthropologist

FOR YOUR DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Technology is a tool

Technologies make new ways of relating, networking and connecting possible for humans. They're a reflection of our core human needs, not a distraction or detraction from them. Focus on the human need and outcome.

01

Be a Participant Observer

02

It is easy to remove yourself from the user and their experience. Empathy requires more than surveys and metrics. Take the time to immerse yourself in the experience of the user.

Data Driven is a Cultural Shift

Implementing software and technology is the easy part. Getting the buy-in, adoption and engagement of the organization is the more difficult change. Ensure that the technology supports the process; and the process supports the user.

03

04

Focus on Outcomes

Seek to understand how underlying human, relational and cultural needs interact before starting a project. They'll be interested in how tools help people socialize, communicate and get work done. Remember, "people do not want a quarter-inch drill. They want a quarter-inch hole."

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Thinking about digital transformation

All of these theories took shape within the hallowed halls of academia. How can we apply them to real-world business issues in the fast-paced realm of digital product development?

Far too often, digital transformation initiatives fail and projects falter because stakeholders make decisions based on assumptions or "gut feel." Instead, digital anthropology teaches us to look through the clear lens of careful analysis and rigorous objective inquiry. Digital anthropology asks us to put aside our prejudices and instead focus on how people (including customers and prospects; employees and partners; and business leaders and frontline workers) are actually using technologies. And digital anthropology invites us to investigate the cultures, narratives, beliefs and symbols that surround our digital experiences in order to improve them — for everyone.

Here are the top four lessons that we can draw from digital anthropology's insights:

1

Stop thinking about technology as "things." They can be powerful sites of self-expression or extensions of group identity.

Many people harbor a conventional and dramatically oversimplified understanding of what technology means or how it works. A commonplace assumption is that the "real world" is preferable to the "virtual" one, relating to others in person is always better than interacting online and digital experiences of relationships are inherently inferior to analog ones. The reality, in most cultures, is far more complex. Technologies make new ways of relating, networking and connecting possible for humans. They're a reflection of our core human needs, not a distraction or detraction from them.

Digital transformation has the power to address innate human needs, changing how we relate to ourselves, others, groups and organizations. This means that digital platforms are a new kind of space where it's possible to build new kinds of relationships, including with companies and brands. It's no longer just about selling products to people. Instead, businesses can leverage digital technologies to become more human, more individualized, more empathic and more caring. They can harness the enormous reach of digital communication platforms to become powerful forces for social good.

To do so, companies must think about solving people-centric problems and meeting core human needs, not just about computing performance, speed or new features. User experience testing shouldn't merely consider whether a platform functions well, but instead should ask what kinds of communication and collaboration it makes possible. The focus must shift from quantitative concepts, like error rates and page load speeds, to qualitative accounts of experience. Stakeholders must learn to ask: What relationships and group identities does this solution make possible? What new ways of communicating are now available to its users?

2

Act like a digital anthropologist to better understand your customers and users: Take an unbiased and objective stance in your research.

Market research has its place, and there's no doubt that surveys can provide valuable feedback in certain situations. Nonetheless, these methods of "listening" have sharp limitations. For one, they're distanced, drawing a sharp line of demarcation between the researcher (who simply reads the completed surveys) and the end users (who may not fully understand their own current or future needs).

Remember another famous quotation that's been attributed to Henry Ford? "If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses," he said. While the actual source of this quote is the subject of endless debate, the relevance of its underlying message is not: We need to remove the lens of culture when studying a group, audience or user base. In the case of the early days of the Ford Motor Company people expressed their desire for quicker and more reliable transportation the only way that made sense to them: No one had ever traveled any distance overland by any means other than the horse at that time, so their cultural conditioning led them to articulate their need for speed in equine terms.

A participant-observer, who approached the question without this cultural bias, would have been able to understand the underlying requirements in more objective and abstract terms and, with this in mind, begin to engineer a solution that would be novel, different and better able to meet real world needs than more horses ever could.

3

Becoming data-driven is more of a cultural shift than a technological one.

Though platforms and systems can readily be changed, getting stakeholders across an organization to change how and why they make a decision is much harder. But at its core, building a data-driven culture is precisely this: getting people to place evidence (and especially quantitative evidence) at the heart of every decision-making process that's undertaken within a business. This requires changing hearts and minds while encouraging people to become more introspective and questioning, but also more demanding of greater certainty.

It also means getting people to ask, "How do we know what we think we know?" at every turn and "What evidence do we have that this is the best choice?" become every decision. Because digital technologies empower stakeholders to access more information and have more granular and relevant data than what was previously available, they make new ways of thinking possible. It's not just that we should build --technological tools that support productivity and enable better ways of working (though we should), nor should we change how we work and think to better take advantage of what digital solutions are made available (though this is also desirable). It's that both processes must be undertaken in tandem.
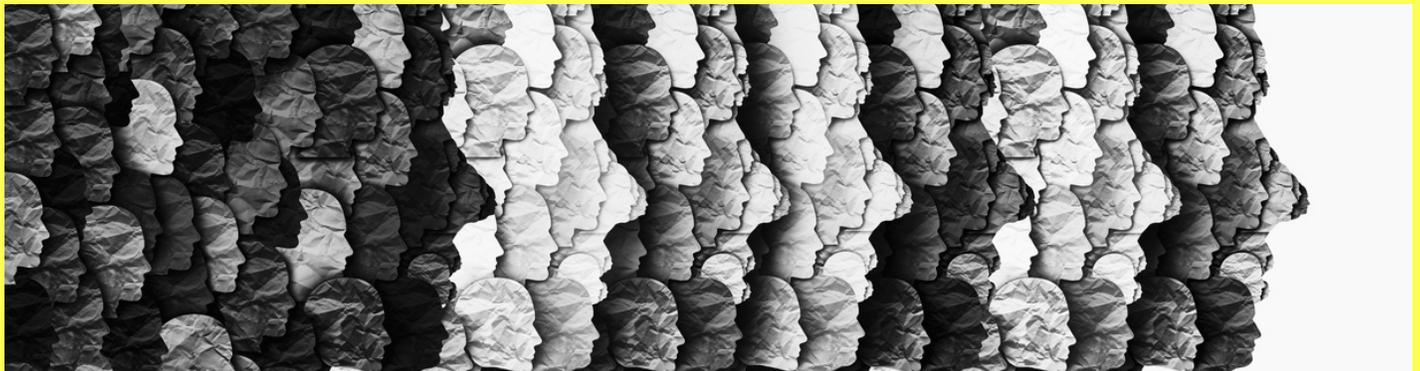
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Keep the focus on outcomes — not the technological path you follow to get there.

As famed Harvard marketing professor Theodore Levitt often told his students, "People don't want to buy a quarter-inch drill. They want a quarter-inch hole!" Let that sink in. Unless they are specialized drill collectors, most people don't care about the features of the individual drill. It could be yellow or red, plug-in or cordless, silent or noisy, etc., but if it makes a right-sized hole, and does so quickly and effectively, they'll be happy.

A digital anthropologist will be aware of this tendency. They'll seek to understand underlying human, relational and cultural needs before starting a project. They'll be interested in how tools help people socialize, communicate and get ' t work done. And they'll consider how well technologies support hoped for, wished for and necessary outcomes. They'll place meaningful outcomes above engineering.
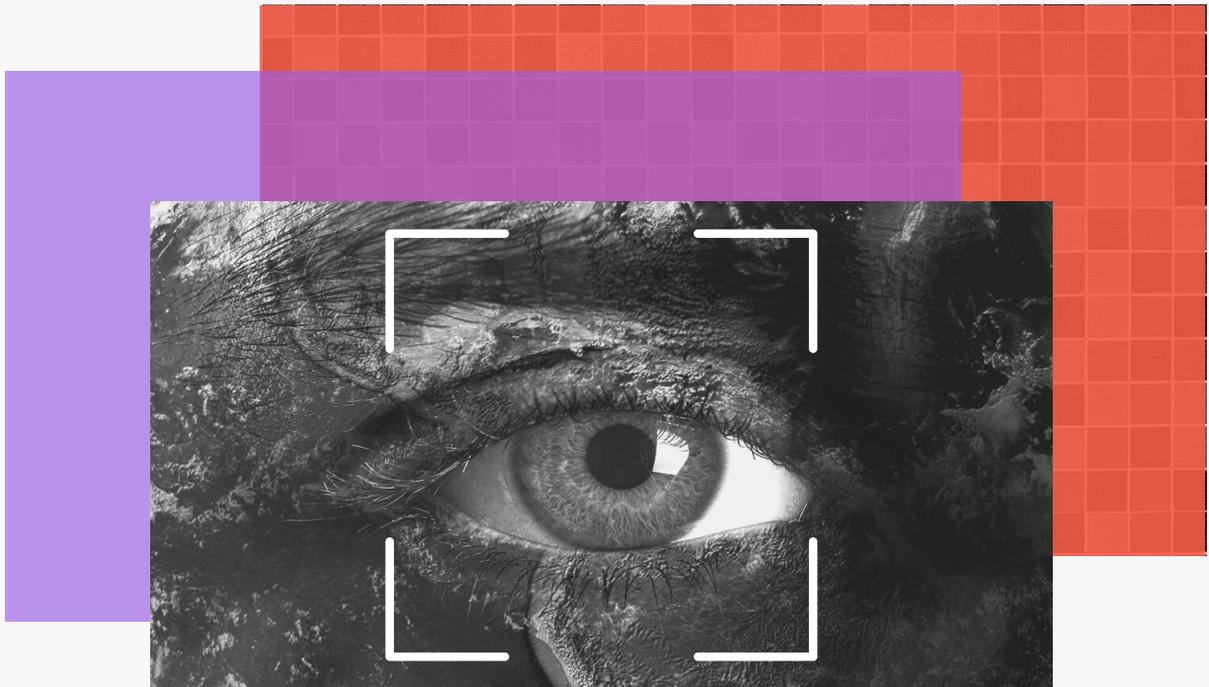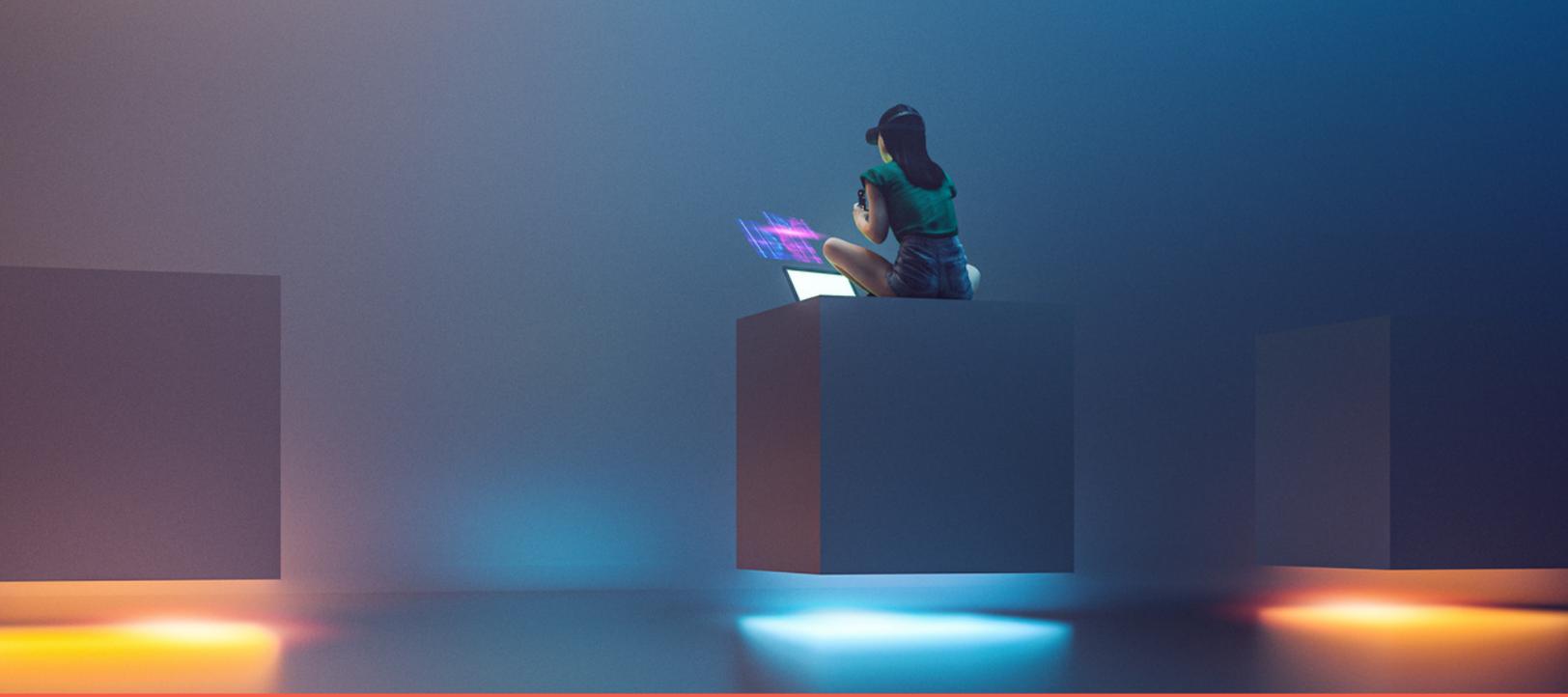
Conclusion: Applying Digital Anthropology's Insights for Real-World Results

Digital anthropologists like Miller have taught us that our relationship with technology is more complex, more nuanced and more interdependent than we may have previously imagined. Customers have a multitude of needs that they themselves haven't yet recognized, and, of course, businesses that can leverage the power of digital technology to transform and meet those needs stand to win profits and market share. But they're also poised to enable bigger changes — possibly even to alter humanity's very nature, or to redefine the limits of human potential.

If this sounds like a tall order — and an undertaking of the deepest consequence — that's because it is. We at EX Squared are excited and humbled by all the opportunities that digital technologies and digital transformation have the power to realize, both now and in the years and decades to come.

To learn more about how we think and how we work, <u>contact us</u>.

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