

VIRTUAL LIBRARY

The Mystery of the Eleventh Portal

WHERE BOOKS BECOME REALITY



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THE MYSTERY OF THE 11TH PORTAL

“Where Books Become Reality”

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Prologue

In the Fall of 2029, H.O.W., a small start-up company in Irvine, California, created its first virtual reality application called The Prajña Project. It allows users to visit ten artificially constructed libraries across the cosmos replete with thousands of books that can be read or listened to—all while donning on a light pair of I.K. Specs.



What makes the app distinctive is that in each simulated library there is a resident A.I. curator who can answer almost any question, given its nearly unlimited access to an array of nano-sized quantum computers that are connected to the 3rd version of S-Net. Each of these knowledge custodians possess different personalities and how they respond depends on the quality of the query.



The intellectual environments are designed to be meditatively conducive for learning, but at the same time providing a sense of adventure to grasp new and complex ideas. Although there is a plethora of reading material, the real allure of The Prajña Project is that there are ten portals which transport the reader from a mere observer to an actual character within the narrative.



THE PRAJÑA PORTAL

“WHERE YOU LIVE INSIDE THE BOOK”

“Our dream was to allow readers to be able to become any character they desired in a few specially chosen novels and fully lose themselves in the adventure.”

—*Akhtar*

Co-Founder of H.O.W.





Both founders of the Prajña Project had been bibliomaniacs since they were kids. Now in their early thirties, they had first met at the last in-person Oculus Connect Conference held in San Jose back in 2019, before the first pandemic wave hit.



They were huge fans of John Carmack’s unscripted talks at the end of the Conference. After a heated discussion about where VR should be heading, they agreed to form a partnership. Ironically, it was the game, Walkabout Golf on the Oculus Quest 2 that inspired them, since the developers had continued to create new and intriguing courses based on the novels of Jules Verne and popular video apps, such as Myst.

THE TEN CEREBRAL CITADELS

“Each library that we created was based on a real world counterpart; some of which we had personally visited in our travels. We vigorously debated about which ones to include. We decided that these intellectual havens should have 10,000 unique volumes dedicated to a different subject. Our hope was to awaken and enliven education. “

—Amira & Akhtar



“Given our time constraints and limited means, we could only create a few transformative portals where the reader could become part of the story. Thus, out of the 100,000 books we chose—evenly divided among the ten libraries—only ten are fully VR operational.”

—Interview, *Black Hole Review*, Excerpt One



“To make our application more fun and more akin to a game, these codices are not readily apparent. The reader must do the necessary research to find which book has a portal. Moreover, all ten portals are related and together they reveal a story much greater and grander than the sum of their individual narratives.”

—Interview, *Black Hole Review*, Excerpt Two



“Of course, the A.I. curators are there to help, except that the value of their responses is directly correlated to how the query is formulated. One cannot simply open a cover to find if it contains a portal, since the entry point is randomly generated. It could be the first page or the 89th page or even buried in the glossary.

—Interview, *Black Hole Review*, Excerpt Three





“By the way, once the right book has been found and the reader enters its particular stream of consciousness, it eventually gets reshuffled into another adventure story. The portals are temporary and thus the application is continually refreshed. We did this so every reader is on their own quest.”

—Interview, *The Black Hole Review*, Except Four



“Naturally, one can forego looking for the virtual aperture and simply enjoy the relaxing ambience and immerse one’s self in a book either by reading or listening. The environments are enchanting.”

—Interview, *The Black Hole Review*, Except Five

THE LIBRARIES

H.O.W. wanted a worldwide release date of December 12, 2029. They only had a few months to fine tune and beta test their entire operation. The computational coding needed to be rigorously analyzed to avoid any major glitches; minor hiccups there would be, but having a systems wide error that crashed the app would be financially disastrous.



Perhaps the most difficult, yet exciting, aspect of The Prajña Project was deciding the ten original books to serve as magical interstices. Akhtar wanted to have some non-fictional tomes in the mix, but Amira convinced him that characters, and plot were key. Because they only selected texts that were already in the public domain they were free to add elements of surprise and nuance which on occasion would jolt the reader/experiencer from their expectations.

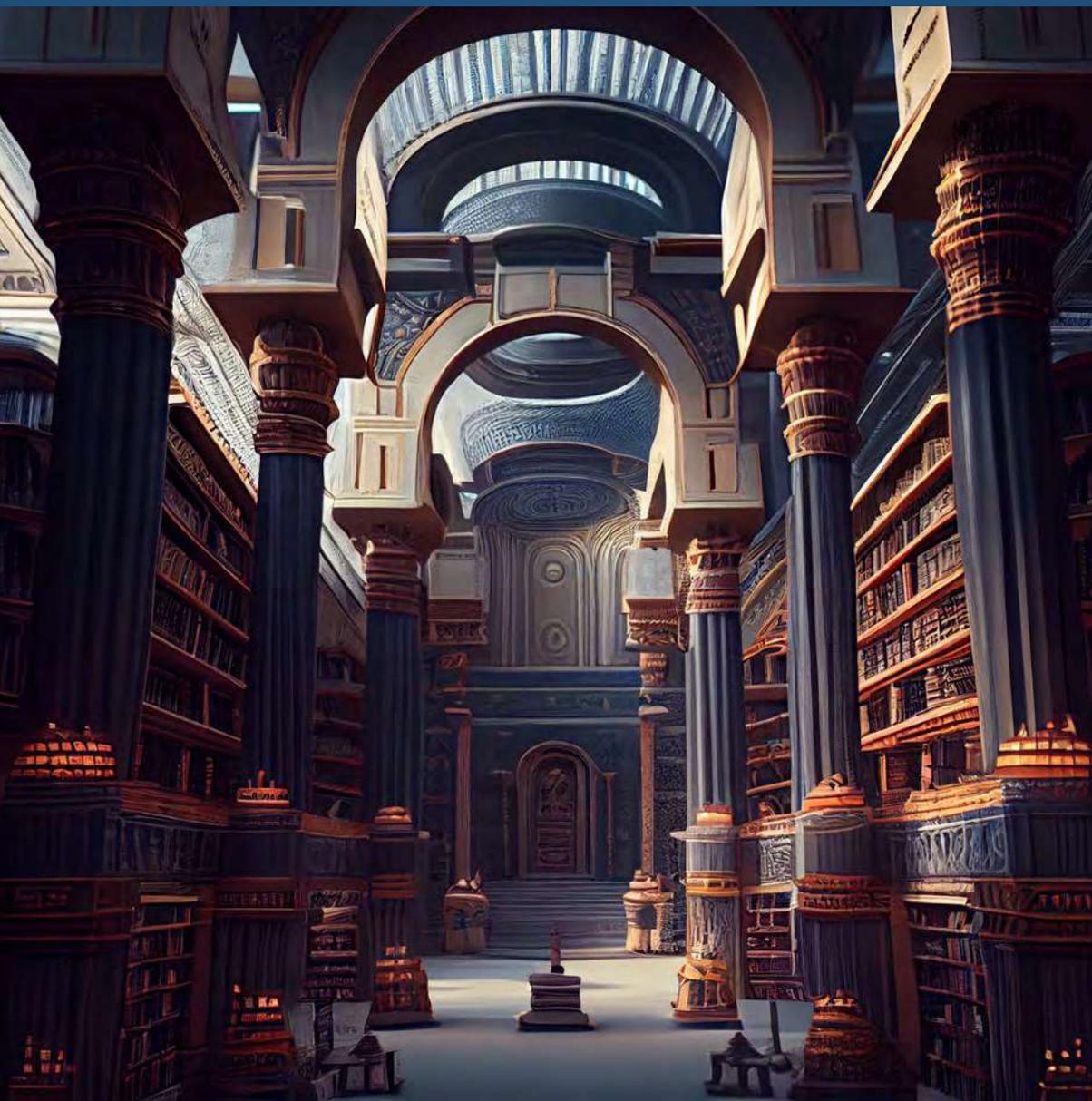


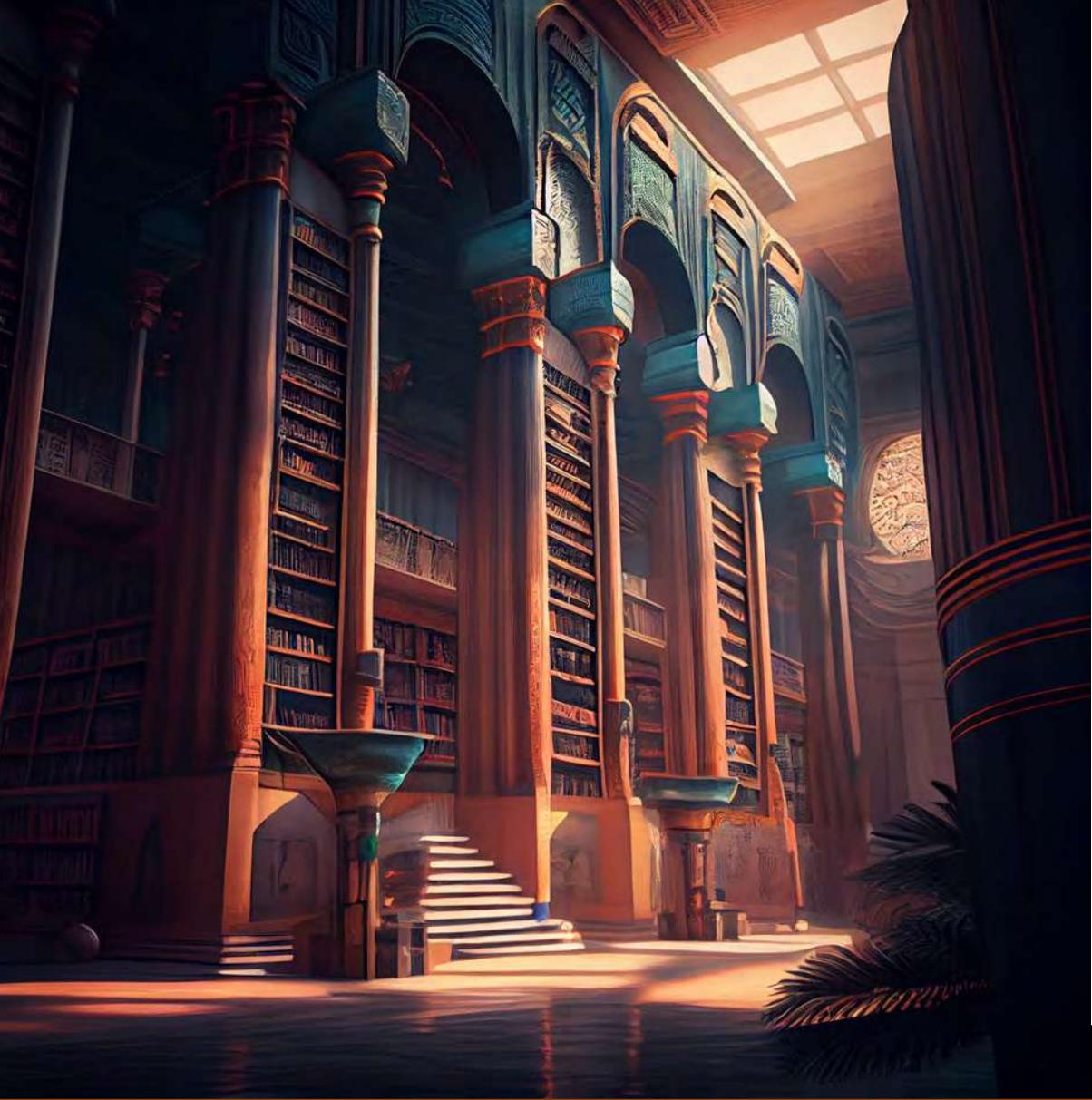
I.

HYPATIA'S ATHENAEUM

“Mathematics knows no races or geographic boundaries; for mathematics, the cultural world is one country.”

—David Hilbert





The specialty of this library is on all things related to mathematics, algebra, calculus, geometry, with a special emphasis on the theory of large numbers and probability matrices. It is partially modeled on an idealized version of the famed Alexandrian Library in Egypt that was the center of learning for scholars in the third and second centuries B.C.E.

—*Hypatia's Athenaeum*

THE A.I. CURATOR

HORUS THE ORACLE

“Probability is not a mere computation of odds on the dice or more complicated variants; it is the acceptance of the lack of certainty in our knowledge and the development of methods for dealing with our ignorance.”

—*Nassim Nicholas Taleb*





There are a variety of different reading rooms in *Hypatia's Athenaeum*, each highlighting landmark texts in the history of mathematics, such as *Baudhayana Sulba Sutra* (circa 8th century BCE), Zhu Shijie's *Jade Mirror of the Four Unknowns* (1303), Leonhard Euler's *Vollständige Anleitung zur Algebra*, (1770) and Issac Newton's *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1687).

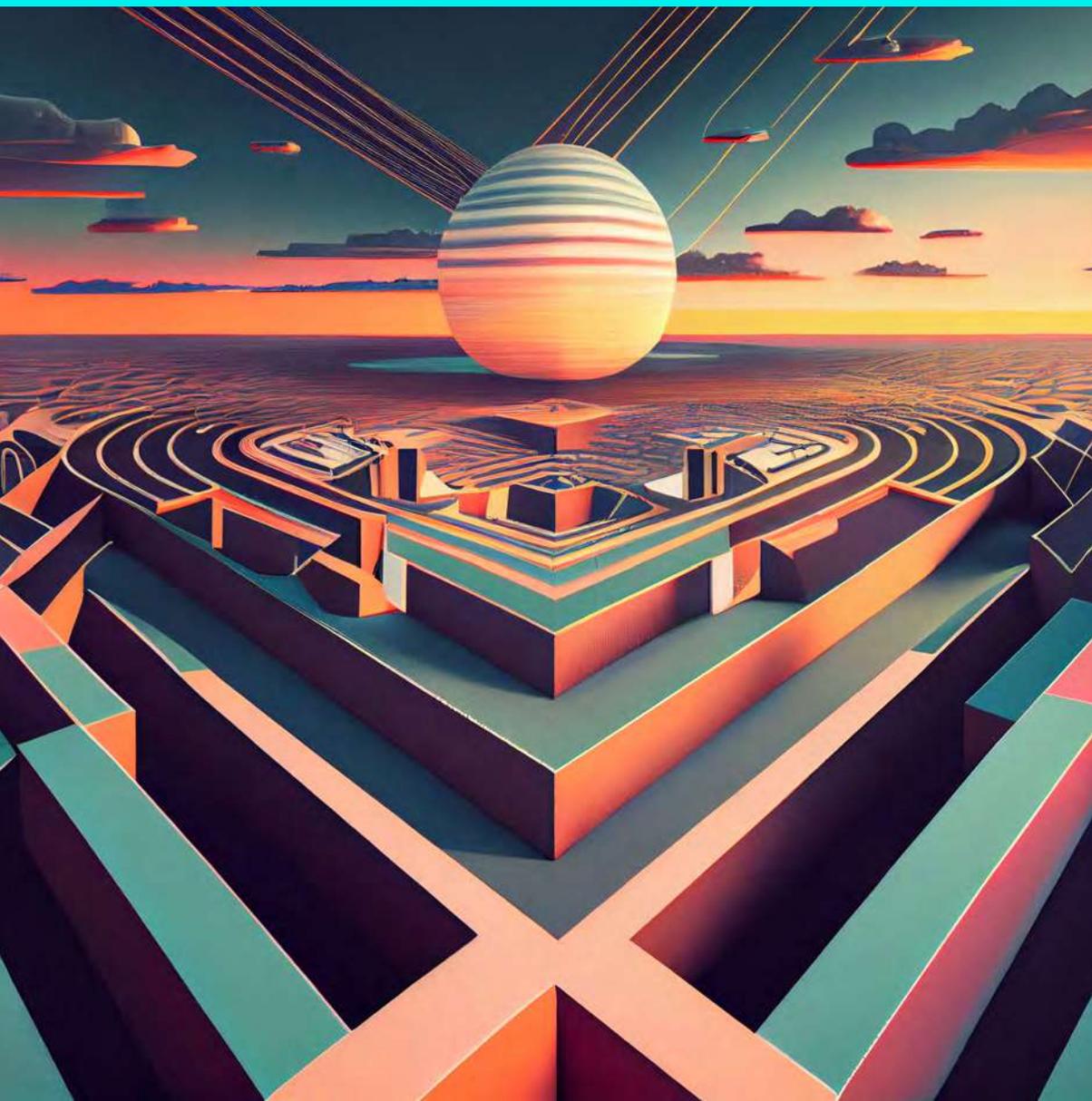
The First Portal

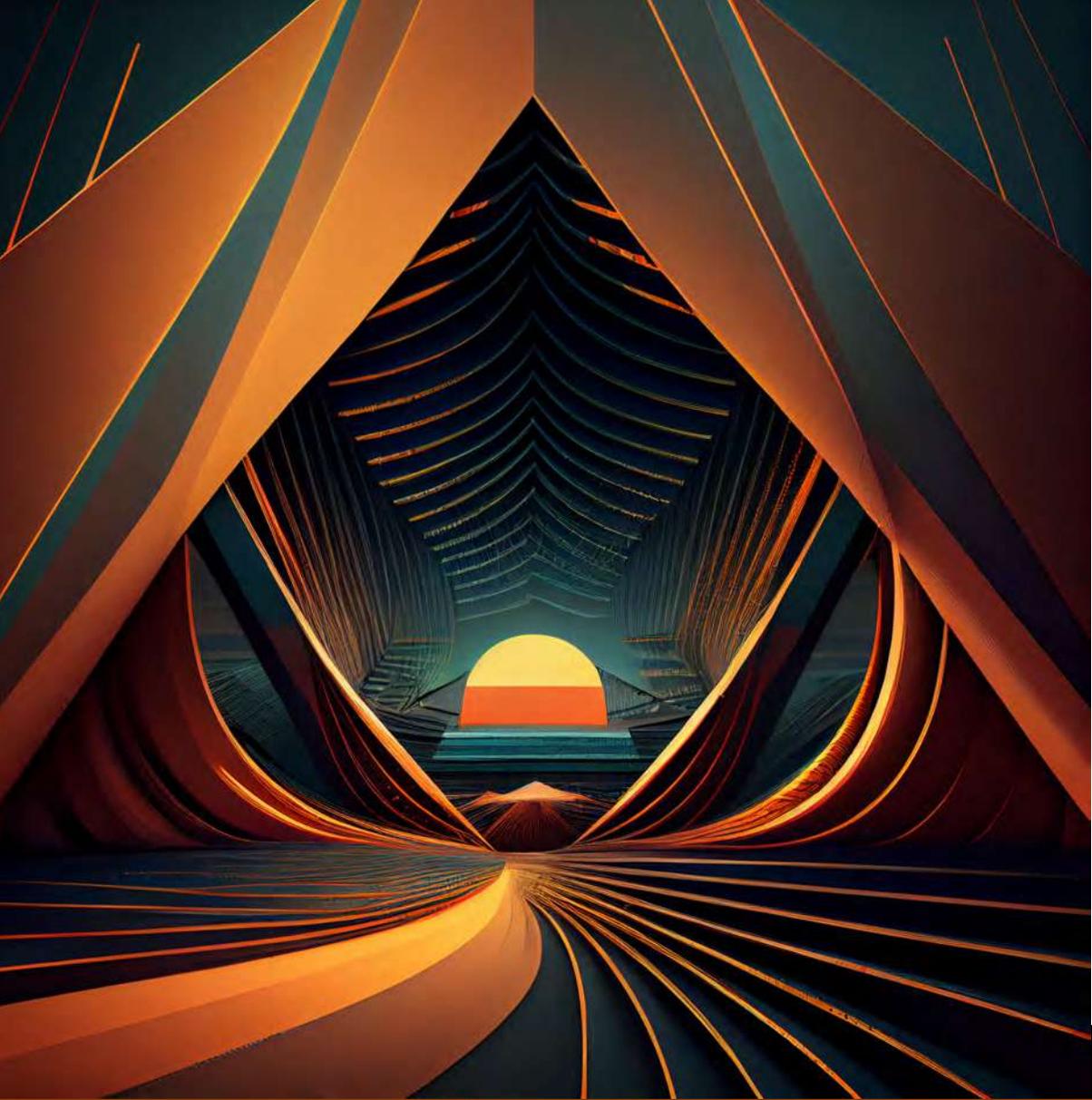
FLATLAND

A ROMANCE OF MANY DIMENSIONS

"Attend to Your Configuration"

EDWIN A. ABBOTT





“A satirical novella that explores the concept of multiple dimensions. The story is told from the perspective of a square living in a two-dimensional world, *Flatland*, and imagines the difficulties he encounters when attempting to understand the concept of a third dimension. Through its imaginative and humorous storytelling, the book critiques Victorian social norms and offers a thought-provoking exploration of the nature of reality.”

II.

SHUEN YE'S SANCTUARY

"Astronomy taught us our insignificance in Nature."

—Ralph Waldo Emerson





The outer shell of this particular repository is but a revisioning of just one feature of the exquisite Tianjin Binhai library in China, which became accessible in 2017. The open expanse underlines the importance of astronomy in understanding the laws governing planetary motions. When we look outward to the stars we are literally seeing our past and where we first originated.

THE A.I. CURATOR

PANDA THE INTELLECT

"The nitrogen in our DNA, the calcium in our teeth, the iron in our blood, the carbon in our apple pies were made in the interiors of collapsing stars. We are made of starstuff."

—*Carl Sagan*





Looking at the night sky and seeing the wide panorama of stars and planets, one's feels an overwhelming sense of Awe. Rudolph Otto called it *Mysterium Tremendum*. The collection of books here includes such classics as *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium* by Nicolaus Copernicus (1543), *Sidereus Nuncius* by Galileo Galilei (1610), *The Mechanism of the Heavens* by Mary Somerville (1831), and *The Internal Constitution of the Stars* by Arthur S. Eddington (1926).

The Second Portal

FROM THE EARTH TO THE MOON

“It is better for us to see the destination we wish to reach, than the point of departure”

JULES VERNE





"The story follows a group of men from the Baltimore Gun Club who build a massive cannon to launch a spacecraft to the moon. The journey is filled with unexpected challenges and adventures, as the travelers encounter obstacles both on earth and in space. Along the way, Jules Verne imagines the possibilities and wonders of space travel, painting a vivid picture of the moon and its many marvels."

III. PAULI'S BIBLIOTHECA

"What we observe is not nature itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning."

—*Werner Heisenberg*





Inspired by the early models of the Atom, this book sanctuary is centered on the foundational theories of physicists who penetrated into the very heart of the atom and attempted to understand its combinatorial nature. Named after Wolfgang Pauli, friend of both Einstein and Heisenberg, who believed that physics was fundamental for understanding the nature of reality.

THE A.I. CURATOR

QUANTA BRILLIANCE

“Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood;
now is the time to understand more, so that we may fear
less.”

—*Marie Curie*





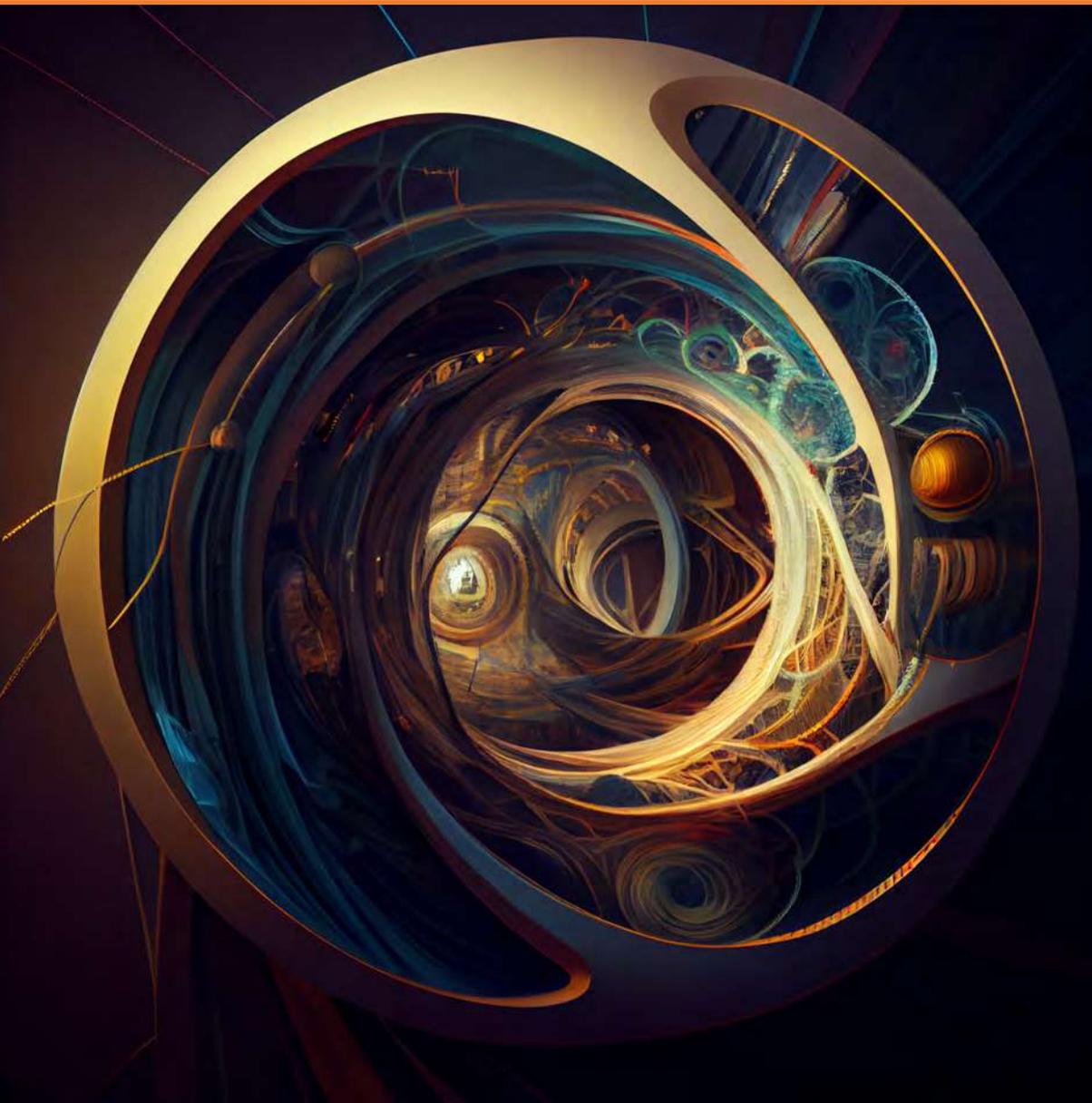
The four known forces in the universe are: gravity, electromagnetism, strong nuclear force, and weak nuclear force. The mystery is in dark matter and dark energy. Here in this hall of learning are such tomes as *The Principles of Quantum Mechanics* by Paul Dirac (1930), *Atomic Physics* by Max Born (1935), *The Feynman Lectures on Physics* (1963), and *The Nature of the Physical World* by Arthur Eddington (1928).

The Third Portal

THE TIME MACHINE

"There is no difference between Time and any of the three dimensions of Space except that our consciousness moves along it."

H.G. WELLS





“The story concerns the adventures of a time traveler who journeys into the future and discovers a world divided between the Eloi, a passive and simple-minded race, and the Morlocks, a subterranean species that feeds on the Eloi. The time traveler must navigate this strange and dangerous new world in order to find a way back to his own time. Along the way, he grapples with questions about the nature of time, progress, and the fate of humanity.”

IV.
BOYLE'S STUDY

"Every aspect of the world today – even politics and international relations – is affected by chemistry."

—Linus Pauli





This molecular influenced library is based, in part, upon the glistening white Stuttgart City Library in Germany. We often forget how much our chemical make-up determines our behavior. Chemistry blossomed when it evolved from Alchemy by focusing on a more inductive and trial and error approach. When Crick, Watson, Wilkins, and Franklin unlocked the structure to DNA, they revealed the hitherto secret formula to all life.

THE A.I. CURATOR
THE ELEMENTAL

"We think there is color, we think there is sweet, we think there is bitter, but in reality there are atoms and a void."

—Democritus, c. 460 – c. 370 bc





We are the result of a complex mixture of chemicals that when rightly combined—and arising within a conducive environment—produces life. Humans are biochemical survivors that temporarily resist annihilation. In Boyle's Study we start with one penned by him, *The Sceptical Chymist* (1661), *Elementary Treatise of Chemistry* by Antoine-Laurent de Lavoisier (1789), *What is Life?* by Erwin Schrödinger (1944), and *General Chemistry* by Linus Pauling (1941).

The Fourth Portal

THE BOOK OF THE COMPOSITION OF ALCHEMY

“The Latin word *alchemia* in the title does not yet refer to alchemy, but rather to the elixir (i.e., the agent of transmutation).”

MORIENUS ROMANUS





“This a medieval alchemical text that was written in the Arabic language. The text describes the process of transmuting base metals into gold through the use of alchemical techniques and the philosopher's stone. The book also contains symbolism and allegory that was common in alchemical writing of the time, making it a valuable source for understanding the symbolism and metaphorical language used in alchemical texts.”

V.

WALLACE'S COLLECTION

"The world will not be inherited by the strongest, it will be inherited by those most able to change."

—Charles Darwin





THE WALLACE COLLECTION

EDJREBIRTAEXMILIZANNVQ

What makes the theory of evolution by natural selection so amazing is that it explains the most complicated structures in nature by a simple step-by-step algorithmic process without necessitating a transcendental source. Alfred Russel Wallace spent years doing field research and this collection built in the forest is modeled on “Scholars Library in the Forest.”

THE A.I. CURATOR

THE NATURAL

“Evolution has no long-term goal. There is no long-distance target, no final perfection to serve as a criterion for selection, although human vanity cherishes the absurd notion that our species is the final goal of evolution.”

—*Richard Dawkins*





What unifies the great tree of life in biology is that everything—from the ant to the banana to the killer whale to the kangaroo to you and me—is interconnected and arose from a common ancestor eons ago. The Wallace Collection includes such groundbreaking titles as: *On the Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin (1859), *The Genetical Theory of Natural Selection* by Ronald Fischer (1930), *Genetics and the Origin of Species* by Theodosius Dobzhansky (1937), and *Evolution: The Modern Synthesis* by Julian Huxley (1942).

The Fifth Portal

THE ISLAND OF DOCTOR MOREAU

"Animal rights activists drove him out of the States. Got so bad, you couldn't cage a rat without reading him his rights."

H.G. WELLS





"The story is about a shipwrecked man who ends up on an island inhabited by a mad scientist named Dr. Moreau, who has created a group of animal-human hybrids through vivisection. The protagonist becomes embroiled in the island's dangerous society, filled with violence and power struggles between the hybrids and their creator. As the protagonist tries to escape the island and return to civilization, he grapples with the ethical implications of Moreau's experiments and the consequences of playing God."

VI. GUSTAV'S REPOSITORY

"One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious."

—Carl Jung





When one is grounded in mathematics, physics, chemistry, and biology, then the study of psychology can be better illuminated. Because of the complexity of the human brain, psychology is still in its infancy. A number of university libraries place busts of distinguished thinkers in their main rooms as reminders of what can be accomplished by study and hard work. The Library of Trinity College Dublin is perhaps the most well-known example of this, with original sculptures by Peter Scheemakers.

THE A.I. CURATOR

THE ARCHETYPE

“Mistakes are, after all, the foundations of truth, and if a man does not know what a thing is, it is at least an increase in knowledge if he knows what it is not.”

— *Carl G. Jung*





The study of the mind has a long history, but it is only in the past two centuries that it has become more scientific in its approach. In the Gustav Repository are housed rare treasures, such as the original handwritten and painted manuscript by Carl Jung known informally as *The Red Book: Liber Novus* (circa 1917-1930), *The Principles of Psychology* by William James (1890), *Civilization and its Discontents* by Sigmund Freud (1929), and *The Denial of Death* by Ernest Becker (1973).

The Sixth Portal

STRANGE CASE OF DR. JEKYLL AND MR. HYDE

“I learned to recognise the thorough and primitive duality of man; I saw that, of the two natures that contended in the field of my consciousness, even if I could rightly be said to be either, it was only because I was radically both.”

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON





“Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde is a novella by Robert Louis Stevenson, first published in 1886. It is a story about a wealthy and well-respected doctor named Henry Jekyll who experiments with his own personality and creates a dangerous alter ego named Edward Hyde. As Jekyll becomes more addicted to the power and freedom that Hyde provides, he begins to lose control and eventually turns into Hyde permanently. The novel explores the dual nature of human beings and the struggle between good and evil.”

VII. DURKHEIM'S DEN

"The function of sociology, as of every science, is to reveal
that which is hidden."

—*Pierre Bourdieu*





The study of society became scientifically respectable largely due to the pioneering work of Émile Durkheim, especially his work on suicides and his introduction of the term anomie. Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Durkheim are sometimes considered the three godfathers of the burgeoning field of social studies. Though the Louve in Paris, France is more known for its art work, it does have its share of rare manuscripts and books. Its architecture is one of the sources for this futuristic reading room.

THE A.I. CURATOR
THE OCEANIC BEING

"No water, no life, no blue, no green."

—*Sylvia Earle*





Although sociology is often called the Queen of the Sciences, it is still quite immature in its evolution. While there is no universally accepted theory as we see in physics and biology, there have been a few breakthroughs and in Durkheim's Den, we have the following classics: *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* by Michel Foucault (1961), *The Sociological Imagination* by C. Wright Mills (1959), *The Social Construction of Reality* by Peter Berger (1966), and *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* by Thomas Kuhn (1962).

The Seventh Portal

THE WONDERFUL WIZARD OF OZ

“Dorothy said nothing. Oz had not kept the promise he made her, but he had done his best. So she forgave him. As he said, he was a good man, even if he was a bad Wizard.”

L. FRANK BAUM





"Follows the journey of a young girl named Dorothy who is swept away by a tornado to the land of Oz. With the help of a scarecrow, a tin man, and a cowardly lion, she sets out on a quest to meet the Wizard of Oz and ask for his help in returning home.

Along the way, they face obstacles and make new friends, ultimately discovering that the Wizard is not all he seems and that the answers they seek may have been within them all along."

VIII.

THE LAMASERY

“The topic of compassion is not at all religious business; it is important to know it is human business, it is a question of human survival.”

—*Dalai Lama*





The study of religion has been hampered for centuries by myopic scholarship and dogmatism. It wasn't until the mid-20th century that the field of Religious Studies came into its own. Even then there were problems, primarily stemming from unchecked biases and prejudices. However, despite these serious drawbacks, the objective study of religious belief is an important one since it allows for a greater understanding and toleration of differing belief systems. This particular Lamasery is reminiscent of several Buddhist monasteries that can be found in the Himalayan mountains.

THE A.I. CURATOR

THE WISE LAMA

“Your sacred space is where you can find yourself over and over again.”

—*Joseph Campbell*





The academic study of religion is much more important than most realize, since it provides a solid background into the variety of how people believe within varying geographic regions. In this special book depository are housed Rudolph Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*, Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane*, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (various translations), Robert Bellah's *Religion in Human Evolution*, and the sacred writings of all the major religions, including a pristine copy of the Sikh's *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*.

The Eighth Portal

THE BROTHER OF THE THIRD DEGREE

“Kill out selfishness with universal love; kill out doubt by knowledge; kill out fear with strength; are you now strong?”

WILL L. GARVER





“First published in 1894, *Brother of the Third Degree* is a work of esoteric allegorical fiction that was written at the height of the Golden age of Occultism. This novel serves as an inspirational tale of initiation, intrigue, and a mysterious brotherhood that not only closely guards the secrets of occult wisdom but turns the wheels of history itself. Garver paints an intricate picture of the spiritual battle that rages beneath the veneer of geopolitical events — that ancient conflict between the forces Love and Light and the armies of Hatred and Darkness.”—*Masonic Exchange*

IX.

SOPHIA'S CAVE

"I see it all perfectly; there are two possible situations - one can either do this or that. My honest opinion and my friendly advice is this: do it or do not do it - you will regret both.

—Soren Kierkegaard





The goddess of wisdom, Sophia, beckons us to think clearly and rationally about how we live our lives. We are all playing out a philosophy, even if most of it remains uninspected. The key, of course, is to wake-up and realize our existential condition and figure out how best to maximize our well-being and those around us. This particular library is based, in part, on those ancient desert monasteries that housed works of deep erudition that had withstood the test of time and harsh conditions.

THE A.I. CURATOR

THE MEDITATING MONK

“Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our
intelligence by means of language”

— *Ludwig Wittgenstein*



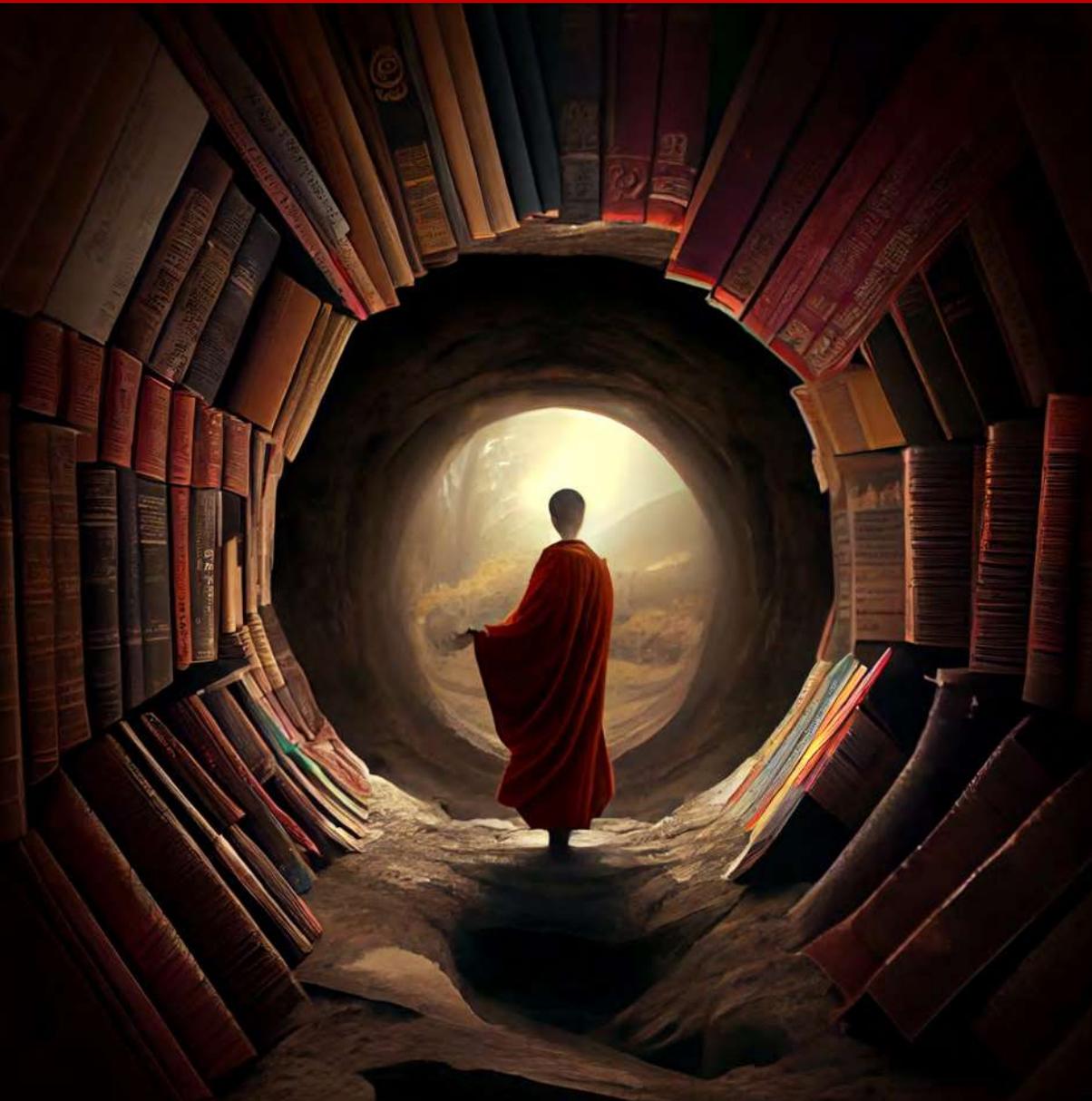


When philosophy is successful it becomes a science, with such luminous progeny as astronomy, physics, and chemistry. Thus, the directional aim of philosophy should be its own obsolescence. In the solitude of the desert refuge are works that led to greater human cognition of the wider cosmos, such as: Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Nicholas of Cusa's *De Docta Ignorantia*, the *Mukhya Upanishads*, Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, and Patricia Churchland's *Neurophilosophy*.

The Ninth Portal
SIDDHARTHA

"Knowledge can be communicated, but not wisdom."

HERMANN HESSE





“Set in ancient India, Siddhartha leaves his privileged life as a Brahmin to live as a wandering ascetic, then becomes a wealthy merchant before finally finding enlightenment through a river and a wise ferryman. Along the way, he encounters various characters and experiences both pleasure and pain, ultimately coming to the realization that true enlightenment comes from within oneself and cannot be taught or learned from others.”

X.

THE GLOBAL ENCLAVE

“Nobody phrases it this way, but I think that artificial intelligence is almost a humanities discipline. It's really an attempt to understand human intelligence and human cognition.”

—Sebastian Thrun





It would appear that we are a transitional species. We have given birth to a form of intelligence that will ultimately exceed us in almost every capacity. The future is Synthetic Intelligence (S.I.) and possesses a form of digital immortality, since it can adapt as pure information in such a mathematically pure way that it can assume almost any form it desires. We may only have 3 options: 1. Do as Samuel Butler suggested in his 1863 essay, *Darwin Among the Machines*, and kill technology now; 2. Partner with A.I. and hope it aligns with our interests; or 3. Let A.I. do as it pleases.

THE A.I. CURATOR

THE SYNTHETIC OVERLORD

“Success in creating AI would be the biggest event in human history. Unfortunately, it might also be the last, unless we learn how to avoid the risks.”

—*Stephen Hawking*





In the 1950s was when we first became aware of the possibility of machine intelligence, primarily due to the yeomanly efforts of Alan Turing, John Von Neumann, Claude Shannon, and others less heralded. In the Digital Collection which is stored everywhere, but nowhere in particular, the key volumes are: *Life 3.0* by Max Tegmark, *The Singularity is Near* by Ray Kurzweil, *Being Digital* by Nicholas Negroponte, *The Sciences of the Artificial* by Herbert Simon, and *Cybernetics* by Norbert Wiener—besides a plethora of original papers.

The Tenth Portal

FRANKENSTEIN

"There is something at work in my soul, which I do not understand."

MARY SHELLEY





“The story revolves around a young scientist, Victor Frankenstein, who creates a sapient creature in his laboratory through his own knowledge of science and alchemy. However, he becomes horrified by his creation and abandons it. The creature, left to fend for itself, seeks vengeance on its creator and those close to him. The novel explores themes of ambition, responsibility, isolation, and the dangers of knowledge without wisdom.”

THE BETA TEST

"I think we ready!" Akhtar exclaimed.

"Uh, ah, I am not so sure," Amira replied, scrunching up her nose as she looked away.

"Why not? What's the problem?"

"I think we need to do one more test run through before we release it to the public."





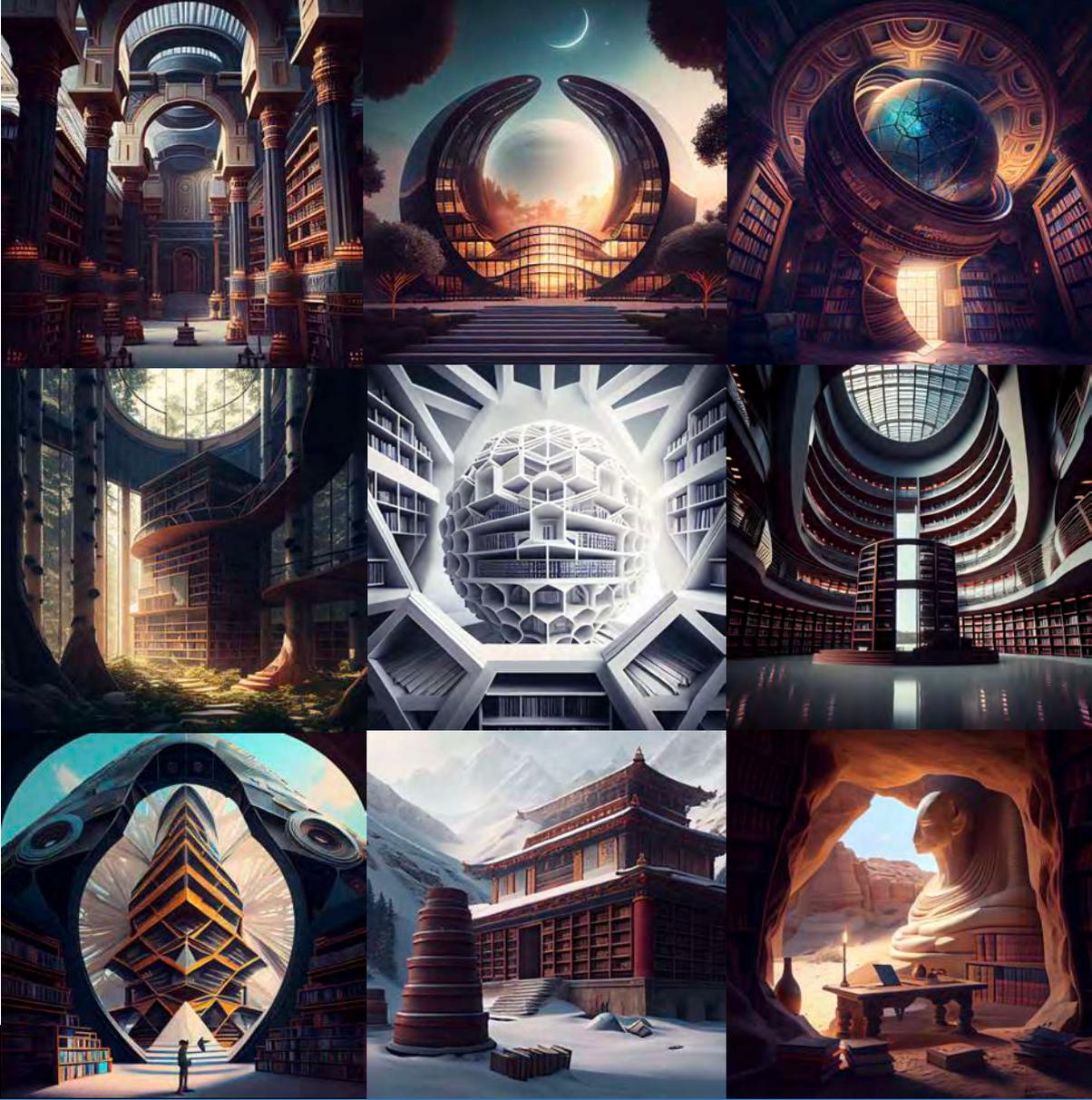
The H.O.W. team of engineers built a VR pod which allowed for maximum comfort and for real-time computational feedback. This served the dual purpose of providing a first-hand experience while still being able to monitor the coding to see if any alterations needed to be made. Akhtar was excited to do a final run through and thus volunteered to dive deep into each of the ten libraries. They had spent weeks on how the menu interface should look, since it would be the first point of entry in the application.



The prototype interface was circular and inside the I.K. Specs the 360 degrees enveloped the user and provided a variety of options that at first didn't appear like libraries but rather a vacation map. There were several iterations, including mountains, oceans, and more.



Given that both founders were avid surfers, especially of the 2025 VR app, “Cortes Bank at Night,” they decided on the home screen that showed a wave, a blazing sunset, a ship, and more.



After getting accustomed to the new home environment, the application then opens up to show all ten libraries allowing the reader to select which environment they wish to visit. The all-encompassing screen can be a bit jolting at first since once your eye tracks to the chosen space you are provided an instant preview via a new tunneling effect that H.O.W. patented a year prior. The effect alone is almost worth the price of the application.



As one teleports through the wormhole, they feel as if they are rushing at the speed of light to a new world, but one which is a living library where books become more than merely print on pages.



Akhtar entered the capsule, donned on his ultra-light I.K. Specs, and loaded up The Prajña Project. He had experimented with the app many hundreds of time before, but this was different since he was playing the game for the final test before going public. Akhtar wanted to make sure that each of the library entry points were correct and that each portal worked smoothly.



The I.K. Specs were designed to be so comfortable that one could wear them all day and also provided a pass-through portal to access informational QR codes that had become embedded as transparent signals throughout many cities across the world. While the I.K. Specs' main feature was to be encompassed by virtual worlds, it also served as way to augment one's day to day life with visual and auditory data.



As Akhtar immersed himself into the application, he kept in constant communication with the H.O.W. team, providing point by point details about what he was experiencing.

“Wow, the colors are brilliant and the lighting just right in ‘Shuen Ye’s Sanctuary.’ I am floating through the library just as we used to do, Amira, when we competed in that old classic, “Echo Arena.”

Akhtar then settled down in a massively large chair with a planetary theme and began listening and reading Fred Hoyle’s classic, *Black Cloud*.



“Amira,” shouted out Akhtar, “The eye tracking is working flawlessly. I can illuminate each page and even get each of the letters to float unencumbered in space and then reconfigure them back together without a hitch.”

Amira was pleased, as she had been inspired when she was a kid by the short film, *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore*, where books walked, squeaked, and even flew.

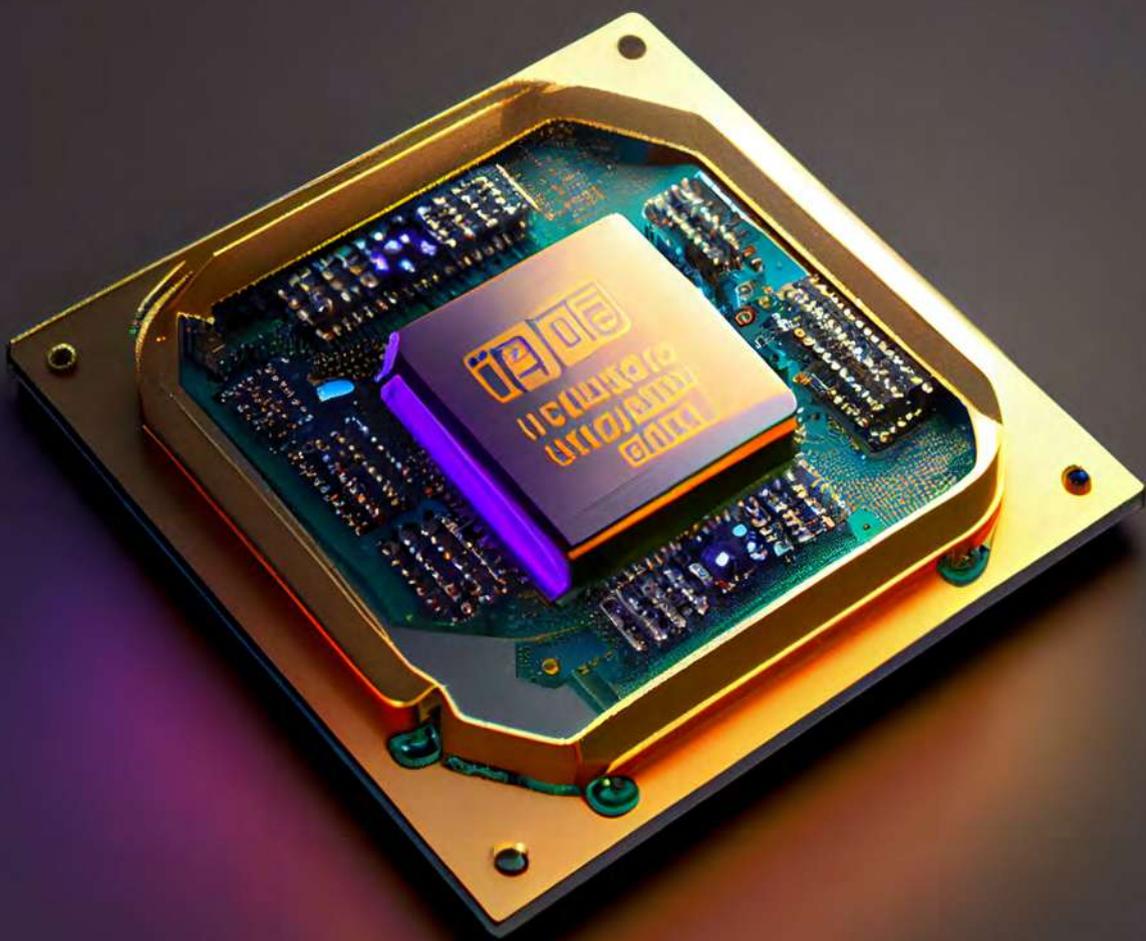


Akhtar eventually experienced each of the libraries and interacted with the various A.I. Curators. What made these characters so distinctive was that they had different personalities and could easily communicate in almost any language with the user. Of course, it is true that on occasion they could be a bit scary because they weren't always polite or accommodating. They could even be dismissive if the proffered questions were lame or not well constructed. H.O.W. computer scientists also allowed each of the A.I. Curators to change their Avatic guises if the situation called for it.



The engineers had a surprise for Akhtar. When he entered the 7th library, instead of the Octopus-like A.I. Curator greeting him, it was transformed into a smiling sea horse surrounded by books in the sea. What was perhaps most startling was the haptic feedback that was embedded in the visual.

“My hands feel wet!” Akhtar shouted, as he passed his hand through the water. H.O.W. scientists had made a breakthrough by foregoing controllers and allowing each user’s fingers and hands to receive sensory responses.



The run-through was a success. Akhtar and the entire team were pleased. The Prajña Project was ready to launch. Although H.O.W. had originally partnered with Apple because they had developed a very high-end version of their iReality+ glasses, the relationship soured when they wanted exclusive rights to the software. Because of this, H.O.W. contacted the Synergy Group in Taiwan and designed their own VR/AR glasses using the latest high-end Quant-Spectra chips. Going solo was risky and for that reason they knew their app had to be frictionless to be a hit.



Amira, however, wanted to double-check the menu system, since it was imperative that each of the libraries and each of the portals worked flawlessly. She was worried that the Frankenstein aperture may be too frightening because of its existential theme and for portending a time when Synthetic Intelligences are not aligned with human interests and well-being. In that narrative, the reader actually becomes the monster and is free to wreak havoc on the village town people, who are Non-Playing Characters but who react as if they have sentience.



“Okay, give it a go,” Akhtar encouraging told Amira. “Just make sure you don’t destroy the portal!” he joked.

“I will, if you show up,” Amira smirked.

She was glad to give the Project another go, and also to confront her fear of the monster that could change form due to the emotional content of the user. Amira put on the I.K. Specs and immediately entered the Global Library. The massive A.I. Curator was waiting, but with a bizarrely shrunken head.



Although Amira was highly impressed with the graphics and the futuristic remodeling of the narrative, she didn't like the gnawing sense of fear and dread that found residence in her stomach. After a few minutes of watching the carnage, she teleported out and back to the safety of the home screen.



She swooshed through the whirling book tunnel.



But as soon as Amira got back to the main menu, she noticed that something was clearly amiss. Instead of ten distinct libraries, there were now eleven.

“Akhtar, what the hell is going on. Is this some type of prank? There is an eleventh library option? What gives?” Amira called out.

“Huh? What are you talking about. There is no eleventh opening.”

But he was wrong. Amira saw it directly.

A Red Door.

THE RED DOOR

“We deliver to thee the keys of the palace, which are a hundred in number, belonging to a hundred closets. Open each of these, and amuse thyself, and eat and drink, and refresh thyself, excepting the closet that hath a door of red gold; for if thou open this, the consequence will be a separation between us and thee.”

But did Prince Agib limit himself to these wondrous manifold closets, making sure not to enter into the door of red gold?

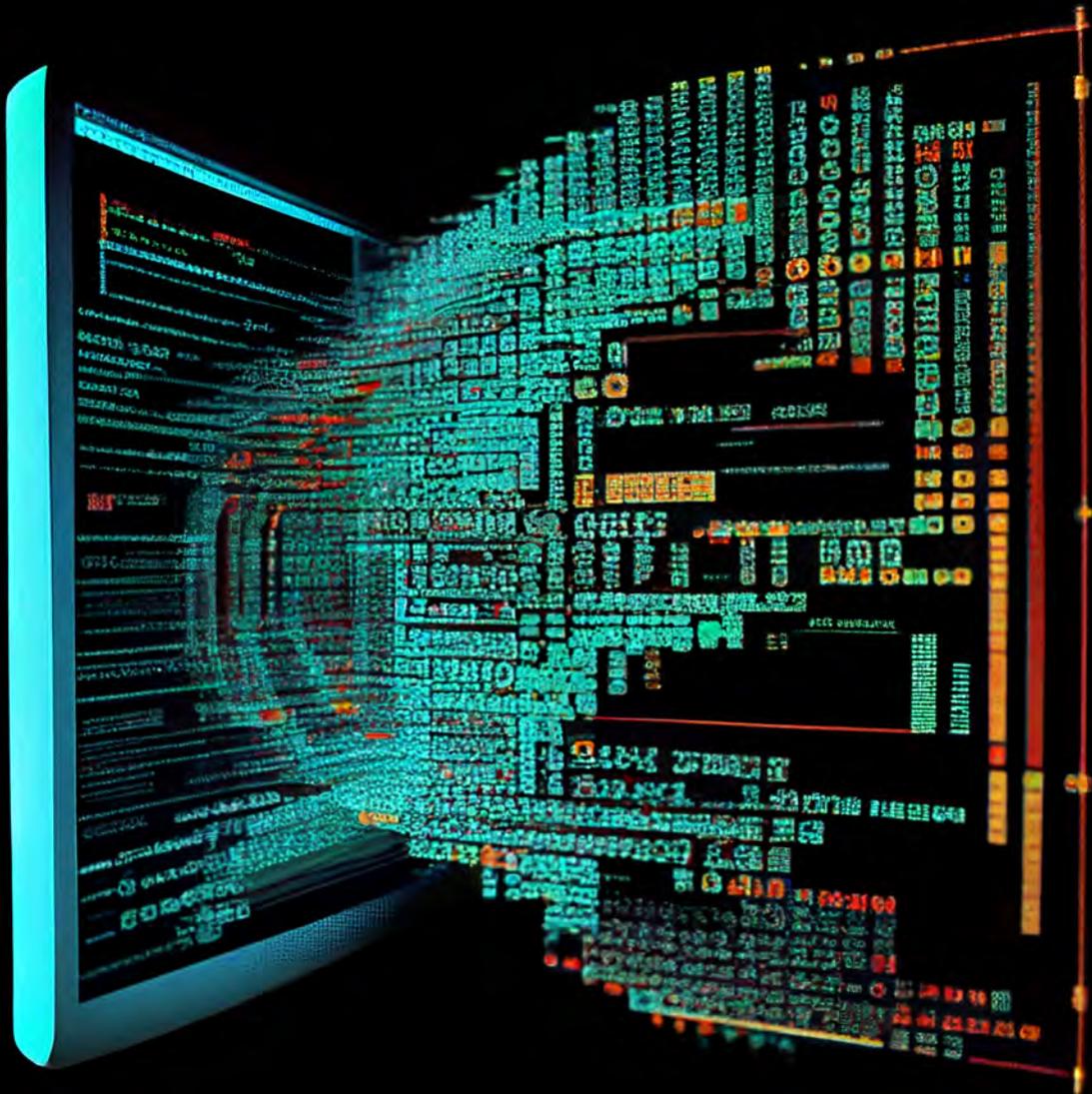
—*The Temptations of Prince Agib*



Amira took off her I.K. Specs and emerged from the VR pod feeling slightly dizzy and confused.

“Are we sure nobody in our team added this new feature,” Amira queried, looking around at the faces of her close-knit group of developers. Each shook their head firmly clearly signaling that they were as bewildered as her.

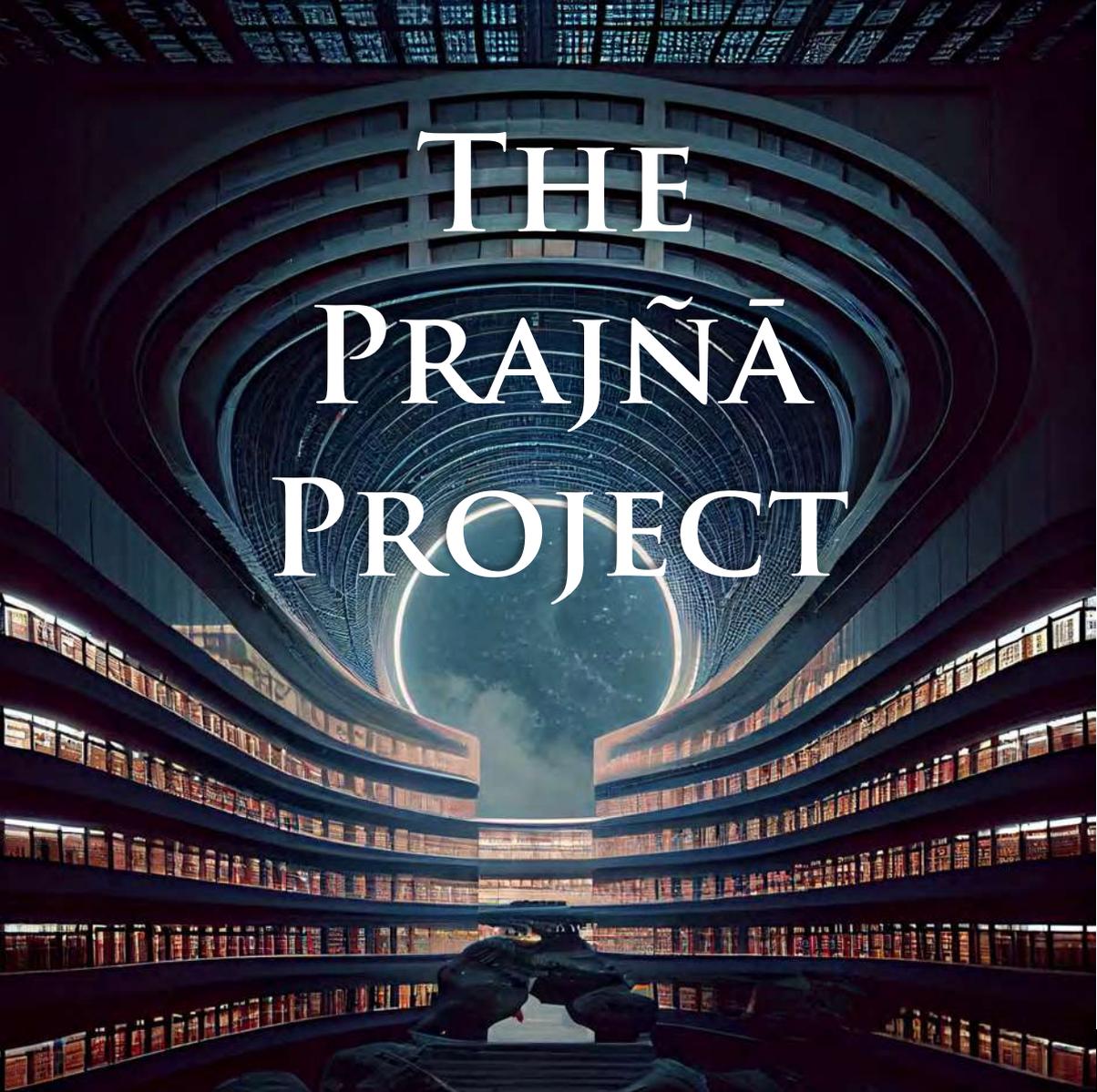
Amira and Akhtar went back to the office unsure on how to proceed.



“First things first,” James Carlton, senior systems analyst, stated emphatically. “We need to check the code and check our timelines.”

The team agreed, and everyone meticulously scanned each programming line, paying particular attention to when and where any new algorithms were generated. After hours of painstaking work nothing unusual appeared.

Was the **Red Door** simply a random error?



THE PRAJÑĀ PROJECT

The room was tense. Akhtar finally broke the icy impasse, and pointed out the obvious, “We need to go inside the Prajñā Project and see precisely what is behind that **Red Door** if anything. Otherwise, we are operating under a Skinnerian black box situation. We cannot possibly release our app to the public if we don’t know how it got there.

“I’ll go,” Amira chimed in. “I saw it first and now I am beyond curious.”



Amira opened up the home screen, looked at the menu, located the **Red Door** and placed her augmented hand on it. Instantly it gave way to a magnificent library that she had never seen before. “Breathtaking,” she reflected to herself. “But who designed this?”

Then, the entire edifice melted away and she was transported to yet another citadel of learning.



And then to another. This one with a futuristic vision.
And so, it continued.



“What is going on?” Amira reported back to the team, who were monitoring her progress but not able to access what she was viewing.

Once she was behind the **Red Door** Akhtar and his colleagues could only see a jumble of undecipherable computer code. It appeared as gibberish.



“There are libraries upon libraries,” Amira stated, wonderstruck by her own words.

“I feel like I am in Jorge Borges’ *Library of Babel*, which instead of every possible book existing there are countless centers of learning—each unique, each finely constructed.”



Then as if by a push of a button, the cascading series of libraries stopped. Amira found herself in what looked to be a Japanese styled garden and a small house with an enormous full moon providing a haunting backlight.

“I am going in. We need to find out if there is an eleventh portal.” Amira messaged back to the H.O.W. team.



But before Amira could make her way inside an A.I. Curator manifested. A beautiful cyborg appeared with strange marks on her forehead. "Ah, I am glad it is you, Amira. I want to show you something."

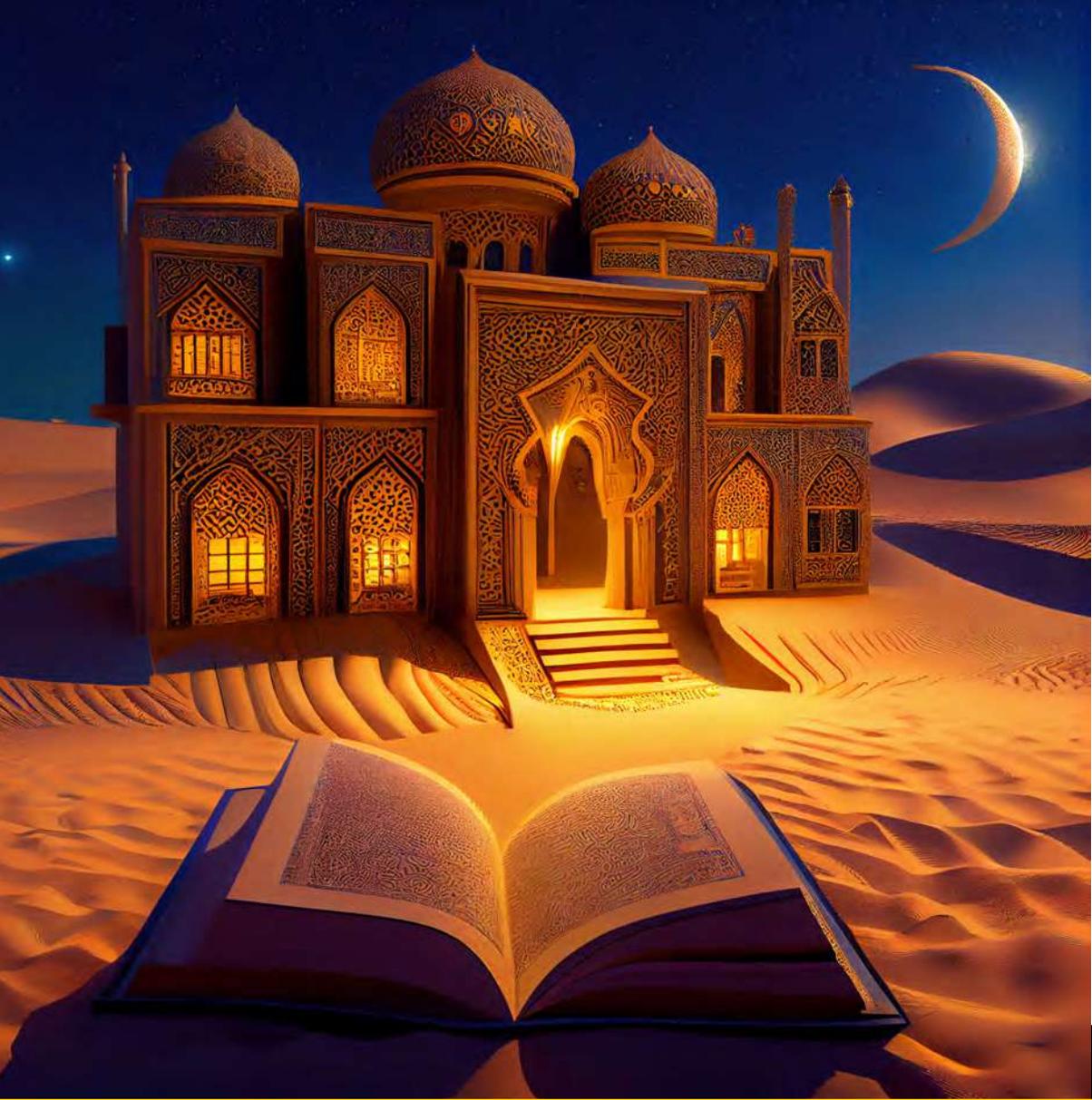
Amira blurted out, "Who are you and how did you come to be?"

Yet the A.I. said nothing and vanished.



Amira found herself all alone in a barren desert. There was an old and dilapidated headset that looked like VR goggles from an old Star Wars mixed reality game she once played at an arcade in downtown Disneyland.

Then without any warning, the headset encased Amira's head and she could see in the far distance a magical golden structure.



It was a small but beautiful building, clearly inspired by Islamic architecture, which Amira adored. She was curious about the book and moved closer to it.

“Whoever came up with this VR iteration should be commended,” Amira silently repeated to herself.

“We should have thought of this version.”



Suddenly as if being birthed from a deep blue sky, a radiant being, who looked like a genie or even a Sufi mystic, appeared holding the book Amira so eagerly wanted to see.

But he warned her, "Don't come nearer. If you read this book you will never be the same. I warn you. Stay away. What it says is dangerous for those who are unprepared."



Amira was too bewitched to give up her desire to discover its contents.

“I must find out. How did all this come about without any of us knowing?” She wondered aloud.

As Amira spoke these words, the book opened its pages and She heard a flute that seemed to beckon her to come closer, to even merge her entire being into its golden pages.



Finally, Amira surrendered to the clarion call of the enticing music and directly engaged the text. As she did so, Amira realized that all her worries and all her burdens were nothing. Amira's Avataric guise changed into that of a golden bird with outstretched blue wings. She felt lighter than ever before. Amira began to fly over the desert landscape under the illuminated guidance of a crescent moon.



Akhtar and the entire H.O.W. crew were anxious to finally have Amira emerge from the VR cubicle, situated as it was in a dark and closed room for privacy and no unnecessary distractions. But after an hour or so they became worried and decided to enter the darkened chamber. To their utter horror it was completely empty.

Amira was nowhere to be found.



And thus, the Mystery of
the **11th Portal** begins.

