10 ways technology will change travel by 2020

**by**[**JASON WIRE**](http://matadornetwork.com/community/jwire/articles/)**on MARCH 14, 2012 -**[**41 COMMENTS**](http://matadornetwork.com/bnt/10-ways-technology-will-change-travel-by-2020/#comments)



Photo: [euzesio (seldom here)](http://www.flickr.com/photos/22857615%40N03/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)

**The way you travel today will not be the way you travel tomorrow.**

IT WAS 2006. I was a freshman. Facebook was huge. Full-length movies streamed instantly to my computer. My cell phone took 1.2 MP pictures.

In other words, technology had never been more advanced.

And that’s just it: by any measurement, we’re constantly living within the most advanced technological era of all time. Yet by the long list of aspirational technologies you’re about to read, you’d never know it.

To an outsider, it must seem like 21st-century humans believe they’re always living a decade or three in the past, and that the future and its inevitable entourage of flying cars, teleportation, and other really cool stuff we haven’t even thought about is as much a part of the human narrative as the fireplace, the automobile, and the internet. Because we believe that the future must bring more powerful technologies (and so far, we’ve been right), the future plays as much a role in how we understand ourselves as the past.

Some of these technologies you may have heard of. Others might seem incredibly far-fetched. But the important thing to realize here is that regardless of whether they ever come to fruition, the mere fact that many people around the world believe these things to be inevitable illustrates just how discontent technology makes us with the present — and also how much we long for constant interaction.



**2012**  Photo: Terrafugia

**Flying cars** – Yes, as in cars…that can fly. Okay, while *you* might not be the one piloting (or even passengering) the flying car, the engineers at [Terrafugia](http://www.terrafugia.com/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) have long been busy perfecting their Lightweight Sport Aircraft (LSA) concept and are currently accepting buyers to the tune of $270,000.

 “The whole idea is to address the gap in travel between 100 and 400 miles,” [said Cliff Allen](http://overheadbin.msnbc.msn.com/_news/2012/02/06/10333680-flying-cars-roll-a-little-closer-to-take-off), Terrafugia’s vice president of sales. “You could leave your home or office, drive to the nearest GA [General Aviation] airport, convert over to the aviation mode, fly to the airport nearest your destination and drive the last 10 or 15 miles.”

No word currently on whether you’ll actually be able to drive/fly (I prefer “flive”) your Terrafugia Transition by year’s end, but you can certainly obtain ownership — and odds are good that you’ll be airborne within the next few years.

**2013**

**Speech-to-speech translation** – Imagine you’re in India (or, if you *are* in India, continue being in India). This is a place where foreign languages and dialects are constantly coming together and increasingly demand a translation service. Now imagine that when someone speaks to you in a foreign language, an audio receiver automatically picks up their speech, translates it into your language, and plays it back for you. [This is already a reality](http://grasshopper.com/blog/2011/09/are-speech-to-speech-translation-apps-in-our-future/).

What this means is that within a year or two, you’ll be interacting with foreign languages in an unprecedented way — as puzzles to solve rather than pictures, whole stories to understand. I’m not going to be the one to decide if seamless translation is a good thing…but I do know that no matter how good the technology may be, there will always be that person who has trouble using it.

**Superspeed rail more convenient than planes** – Planes travel fast. Hundreds of miles per hour. But getting there, checking in, boarding, waiting…I’m not even going to run through it all. Point is: since rail is more efficient, if you could ride an incredibly fast, comfortable train and your door-to-door time was about the same, wouldn’t you prefer it?

Photo: [Mikelo](http://www.flickr.com/photos/mikelo/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)

That’s about to be what happens when Deustche Bahn completes and begins its service from London to Germany. Currently, you either need to book a flight from England or take a zig-zagging rail route to get to Berlin. Given the amount of business traffic between London and Germany, it’s likely that other large hubs will begin to see rail as the preferred method of mass transportation — just look at what’s coming in year 2020.

**2014**

**Solar flight** – Less than 100 years ago, Charles Lindbergh captured the entire world’s imagination like never before when he completed the first non-stop transatlantic flight from New York to Paris. In two years, we’ll see the completion of the [world’s first circumglobal flight](http://www.solarimpulse.com/) powered by nothing more than energy harnessed from the sun. Will anyone notice?

I doubt it. But what happens if the technology becomes cheaper? What if at some point, you can buy your own solar-powered personal flying machine that will get you a few hundred miles for the cost of a Buick?

**2015**

**Self-charging holographic mobile phones** – That’s a mouthful. Let’s simplify: first of all, we have had, for a long time, wristwatches that power themselves by the regular motion of the wearer. Today, cell phone companies are already unveiling kinetic motion-powered cell phones…meaning the scourge of battery life may plague you no more.

As for holographic phone calls, this is something [just about every major cell phone player is putting R&D money into](http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2010-12-23/ibm-predicts-holographic-calls-air-breathing-batteries-by-2015.html) — I guess people just love that Star Wars scene with Obi-Wan coming out of R2-D2 too much not to make it happen.

So, to recap: charger-free cellphones that project a holographic video of you and the person you’re calling. So what does that mean for travel? Well, let’s say you’re on vacation in Dubai, and your office calls and needs you in a meeting — you won’t go, but your holographic self will. The more we can connect the physical world — even if it’s just a lifelike representation — the less influence geographic boundaries have over us all.

**Serious space tourism** – The concept of “space tourism” is about as cutting edge as “social networking” these days — we’ve been there, talked about it. But still, we haven’t really seen it aside from Richard Branson’s crazy-billionaire aspirations of taking slightly less wealthy people into space with him.

That’s all definitely going to change, though, because Boeing — an aerospace player who doesn’t mess around — [announced](http://travel.usatoday.com/flights/post/2010/09/boeing-space-flight/114561/1) that it will bring passenger service into the final frontier beginning 2015.

**2016** Photo via [Pocket-lint](http://www.pocket-lint.com/news-gallery/36474/vuzix-wrap-920ar-hands-on/3)

**Augmented reality everything** – By the end of this year, [Google will begin selling](http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/02/21/google-to-sell-terminator-style-glasses-by-years-end/) augmented reality glasses that stream information in real time onto a user’s eyeball. Which means that finally, you’ll never have to remove your eyes from your Twitter/reddit/Facebook news feed.

Assuming our appetite for more information, more often, as fast as possible doesn’t start to diminish, we can only expect that our visible realities will inevitably become subject to the changes we choose to make upon them. Probably the biggest proponent of this idea is [Ray Kurzweil](http://www.good.is/post/going-down-the-rabbit-hole/), who discusses how in the future our entire realities will be created through nanobots that “re-engineer” our perceptions of the world around us by communicating directly with the brain.

**2017**

**The locationless classroom** – Some of the younger readers might not fully agree with me here, but it’s true: school is awesome. However, the current model of getting dropped off at a turning circle to “learn” between the hours of 8am and 2pm is probably not the end-all-be-all of scholastic efficiency — especially when you consider that nearly 10% of all highschoolers drop out.

Given our steady progression to locationless communication, it only makes sense that we’ll eventually take our schools into the cloud and digital classrooms will be come, at least in some part, the norm. This already happens in towns like Branson, CO, where the official population is only 100 but [850 children actually attend the local school](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18664322/#.T006j_EgfKe) via the internet.

When you combine this idea with the aforementioned holographic cell phone technology, one can envision a future where going to school involves projecting yourself into a virtual classroom environment to study with your other holographic classmates. I’ll say that’s at least a few years down the road, though…

**2018**

**Biometric and electronically enhanced passports** – Perhaps the biggest factor keeping people where they come from is not geography, not nostalgia, nor family, but passports. Human will can overcome nearly any physical obstacle — but no amount of wanting can overcome a denied passport at a political border.

So, what will the passport of the future look like? We’ve already begun incorporating RFID chips and other technology into passports — is biometric data the next logical carrier of our identification? And as human screening becomes replaced by technology, we can expect [waiting times at passport controls](http://www.physorg.com/news/2011-10-future-airport-passport.html) to become incredibly diminished.

At the same time, though, this may be a slippery slope: no data is invulnerable to hacking and manipulation, and as history has unfortunately shown us, an individual’s biological and physical makeup is often the first to become discriminated against.

**2019** Photo via [Mental\_floss](http://www.mentalfloss.com/blogs/archives/70536%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)

[**Self-driving cars**](http://news.discovery.com/autos/how-google-self-driving-car-works-111018.html) – Every time I mention this to someone, they don’t believe me. And then I show them the video of [Google’s self-driving car](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9Fxp3HK6DI). And mention the fact that the UK has already begun [building private roads and corridors](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/road-and-rail-transport/6926514/Self-drive-cars-on-roads-within-10-years.html) for self-driving cars.

Obviously, the main motivation here is safety. It’s the primary difference between cars of today and those of even 10-15 years ago: our cars are immensely more self-aware, and anything that can be done to reduce the more than 30,000+ deaths caused by automobiles (annually in the U.S.) will be a welcome addition to our traveling lifestyle.

**2020….and beyond**

**London to Beijing by rail** – About two years ago, [China announced](http://www.popsci.com/science/article/2010-03/china-plans-beijing-london-high-speed-rail-link) plans to develop a rail system to link Beijing with London — thousands and thousands of miles [covered in just two days](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/7397846/Kings-Cross-to-Beijing-in-two-days-on-new-high-speed-rail-network.html).

**The elevator into space** – The Japanese engineering and construction firm Obayashi [announced this year](http://www.greenfudge.org/2012/02/28/space-elevator-36000-km-into-space-in-a-week/) that they have the ability and intention to set in motion a 36,000km elevator into space, [to be completed within forty years](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/02/28/a-space-elevator-by-2050-_n_1307268.html).

Today, this sounds impossible. We have never, ever seen a 36,000km structure — manmade or otherwise. But the same was once true for so much of our world that now seems commonplace: skyscrapers, highways, hydroelectric dams. Truly, the past century and a half of unprecedented technological innovation has done more for our imagination than it has for our productivity. For the more we build and achieve, the more we feel inadequate and strive for what was impossible yesterday, but today seems all but inevitable. 