

Move Slow and Upgrade

For far too long, tech titans peddled promises of disruptive innovation – fabricating benefits and minimizing harms. The promise of quick and easy fixes overpowered a growing chorus of critical voices, driving a sea of private and public investments into increasingly dangerous, misguided, and doomed forms of disruption, with the public paying the price. But what’s the alternative? Upgrades – evidence-based, incremental change. Instead of continuing to invest in untested, high-risk innovations, constantly chasing outsized returns, upgraders seek a more proven path to proportional progress. This book dives deep into some of the most disastrous innovations of recent years – the metaverse, cryptocurrency, home surveillance, Covid-19, online proctoring, AI, and cybersecurity – while highlighting some of the unsung upgraders pushing real progress each day. Timely and corrective, *Move Slow and Upgrade* pushes us past the baseless promises of innovation, toward realistic hope.

EVAN SELINGER is a Professor of Philosophy at Rochester Institute of Technology. His research focuses on the ethical and privacy dimensions of emerging technology. Selinger’s previous Cambridge University Press books include the co-authored *Re-Engineering Humanity* and co-edited *The Cambridge Handbook of Consumer Privacy*. He is a contributing writer at *The Boston Globe*.

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“In this wise and timely book, Evan Selinger and Albert Fox Cahn offer an incisive critique of the ‘move fast and break things’ ideology of innovation that has done such harm to society in recent years. But they do something more: they provide a practical alternative, an approach to technological progress that aims not to disrupt people’s lives but to make them richer and more fulfilling.”

Nicholas Carr, author of *Superbloom* and *The Shallows*

“Selinger and Cahn have written a tour de force – a stirring indictment of many of the techno-utopian promises that have never fully come to fruition. *Move Slow and Upgrade* provides an urgent blueprint for policy-makers and citizens alike to thoughtfully and collectively improve our society.”

Cyrus Farivar, author of *Habeas Data*

“We find ourselves at a moment where technological hype dominates narratives about who we are, who we should be, and what is possible. In this landscape, *Move Slow and Upgrade* is a crucial text, for layperson and expert alike, to help us understand how we got here and how to recognize innovation boosterism. Perhaps most importantly, through detailed case studies, the book shows us that another way is possible – that carefully upgrading rather than recklessly innovating is the key to addressing the problems we face as a society. *Move Slow and Upgrade* will be a foundational text at the intersection of tech and public policy for years to come.”

Chris Gilliard, Co-director of The Critical Internet Studies Institute

“‘Move fast and break things’ has left us with a society that is collectively winded and flat broke. In *Move Slow and Upgrade*, Selinger and Cahn take stock of all the destruction and folly and then point us towards a better way. Their upgrader approach is a better way to build software products, companies, and ultimately, society.”

Dave Karpf, Associate Professor of Media and Public Affairs,
George Washington University

“Selinger and Cahn make a compelling and riveting case for what seems like it would be the most boring of arguments: that we should

be more contemplative and recursive in how we deploy new innovations. It's an overdue, sharp, and thoughtful rebuke to tired but dominant theory driving technological development and markets. *Move Slow and Upgrade* isn't just the perfect title, it's a mantra we should shout from the rooftops."

Kate Klonick, Associate Professor, St. John's Law School

"*Move Slow and Upgrade* is a book at once cuttingly critical and wise. Selinger and Cahn take no prisoners in their debunking of fads like the metaverse and trends like AI job interviews. But they are also keenly aware of the many ways technology properly bounded and understood can make our lives better. They make incrementalism exciting in this fast-paced, enjoyable, and deeply edifying read."

Frank Pasquale, Professor of Law, Cornell Tech
and Cornell Law School

"With a sure hand and clear voice, Selinger and Cahn share a revolutionary new approach to the automated age: patient, mindful, and deliberately incremental development. In an age when our leading technologists seek to crash the systems by which we live, here's a hopeful and actionable path to a human-centered future."

Douglas Rushkoff, author of *Team Human* and *Survival of the Richest*

"An inciteful response to the culture of innovation at all costs, and to the many ways many innovators misunderstand technological change."

Bruce Schneier, author of *A Hacker's Mind*

"*Move Slow and Upgrade* is the perfect book for our high-tech moment: an ode to the joys and power of carefully and meticulously improving our high-tech systems, instead of lunging for the latest shiny toy. It's also a fun read – crammed with fascinating stories. Read it and upgrade yourself."

Clive Thompson, author of *Coders: The Making of a New Tribe*
and *the Remaking of the World*

Evan Selinger
Albert Fox Cahn

Move Slow and Upgrade

The Power of
Incremental Innovation



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For those who do the hard work, walk the long path, even as others
seek shortcuts.

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Foreword

Justin Hendrix, CEO and Editor of Tech Policy Press

If you are ever invited to write the foreword to a non-fiction book that describes phenomena in the recent past, one thing you may observe in your reading is how the assumptions and assertions in the text have aged in the few short months since the authors put down their pens or entered their last keystroke before sending the final draft to the publisher. One of the dangers any author faces is that events will overtake them and that their words will seem, at best, stale or feeble or, at worst, plain wrong. The inverse of this danger is the possibility that events will reinforce the author's conclusions.

The book you are holding is an example of the latter scenario. While Selinger and Cahn completed their work just after the November 2024 US election, from my temporal vantage, only three months into 2025, many of their conclusions speak directly to the events of recent weeks. As the world's richest man – a technologist who, perhaps more than any other person, is the archetype of the disruptive innovator – proceeds to wage a “war on bureaucracy” in his bid to purportedly reduce the size of the US federal government and increase its efficiency, the dangers of setting disruptive “innovation” as the North Star have never been more apparent. Elon Musk's chaotic project to install artificial intelligence in place of institutions, to pool data once kept in siloes out of fears over the despotic power that might come from combining it, and to make government ever more reliant on a handful of big technology firms has put these dangers in stark relief.

This book gives us the tools to evaluate such dangers and more. Yet it primarily offers us an alternative to the Silicon Valley brand of innovation that has produced them. The authors urge the reader to adopt an “upgrade mentality” rather than the “innovation mentality” or the “casino

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mentality” favored by so many of today’s technologists and capitalists. The upgrade mentality does not mean deference to or preference for the status quo, but it is a rejection of the solutionist approach of today’s technology industry. Rather than putting our faith entirely in the next technological marvel, Selinger and Cahn propose an “evidence-based, sustainable pathway to progress that addresses our society’s most intractable issues.”

It is not that there is no room for disruptive innovation. The authors do not argue for stopping the advancement of new technologies. Instead, they call for more care and judiciousness in their application. “Wisdom,” they write, “requires admitting that innovation’s shortcomings have not been widely enough acknowledged, and a combination of arrogance and ignorance has led to tremendous overinvestment in it.” The internet, they argue, may be one example: it is dawning on many that the version of the internet we have arrived at a quarter way into this century may present more obstacles to human progress than it does advantages.

This caution seems particularly necessary when government leaders worldwide appear eager to collaborate with the tech elite to invest heavily in the development and adoption of artificial intelligence. On some level, who can blame the politicians? With democracy in decline and trust in institutions plumbing new lows, the magic elixir on sale from firms such as Google, Microsoft, Meta, and OpenAI must have an intoxicating aroma to politicians desperate to solve complex, interconnected problems that are increasingly beyond their control. But the promise of artificial intelligence, as sold by figures such as Elon Musk and OpenAI CEO Sam Altman, goes beyond solving today’s challenges. In the near term, we are told, tech firms will achieve artificial general intelligence – the ultimate innovation. Our economies, our politics, and the very nature of our existence are poised for disruption, they say. The challenge of separating hype from reality when it comes to artificial intelligence is a test for the authors’ focus on “effective and responsible upgrades that address genuine problems.” Yet the path forward through the marketing haze is in some ways straightforward: prize evidence, prize outcomes, prize humanity.

The core argument is that those who adopt the upgrade mentality “begin the process of sustainable change-making with a focus on what changes are needed, whereas innovators too often start by asking what

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solutions can be readily offered.” Centering technology and innovation for the sake of it “perverts the entire process, sending companies and countries alike chasing after changes that won’t serve their interests at all.” The authors are encouraging us to adopt a more humane, mature approach. This may be a generational project; as the effects of climate change, inequality, and geopolitical conflict bear down on people over what appear to be quite difficult years ahead, the necessary wisdom may come through more suffering that is, on balance, exacerbated rather than alleviated by technology.

At a time when speed is mistaken for progress and novelty is prized over good judgment, it can be hard to see through the fog of meme coins and metaverses and Musk. Yet it’s possible to imagine, as Selinger and Cahn do, a more just and sustainable future ahead. Let this book guide your path.