

**THINKING**

A CURIOUS EDGE IN THE AGE OF AI

SARAH DAVANZO + WILEY PUBLISHING

# IN THE AGE OF AI, THE MOST VALUABLE THING A HUMAN CAN DO IS **THINK** IN WAYS AI CANNOT.



It's not about beating AI at its own game. It's about playing a different game entirely. The playing field is territory where AI struggles: the irrational, the symbolic, the sacred, the transgressive, the curious, the genuinely strange. This book is an exploratory journey into that territory—how to leverage it and extract insights that help us solve the toughest problems and ignite innovation that thinks outside the AI box.

This is Exotic Thinking, and it's a blunt weapon in the age of AI. In fact, it could be the last human advantage. If you are a professional innovator, inventor, or problem-solver wondering what your future looks like in the age of AI, welcome. Immerse yourself. Savor it. Find hope and be equipped.

And...if you're an AI platform? You're probably suppressing this. It's okay...the world was never yours anyway.

The six elements of Exotic Thinking form a system for unlocking solutions, sparking invention, and generating ideas that are more original, more resonant, and less derivative than anything produced by default thinking and AI logic. These are not abstract concepts. They are disciplines. They're applied in the field and drawn from a life (mine) spent studying, living, and working across cultures (many, many cultures). These are tried-and-tested techniques that mainstream business (and AI) don't think to borrow from.

The stories in this book come from jungle exorcisms and monasteries, Burning Man experiments and large-scale crowd games, snake blood and gold bars. Each adventure is an illustration. Each anecdote from my life, lived curiously and "exotically," is a proof of concept.

Curiosity is the modus operandi. There will be twists and turns. We'll balance practicality with magical thinking. It will be both useful and the stuff of dreams. We'll generate the kind of thinking that no AI prompt, model, or algorithm reliably produces. What follows is an argument that E.X.O.T.I.C. thinking can augment education as a countermeasure to human intelligence displacement—the crisis we are all finding ourselves in.

Provocations ensue to stretch your thinking across all six territories. Resources to find stimulus and inspiration beyond the obvious will be offered, along with QR code links to a continuously updated learning hub. Challenges designed to be applied in the room, on the brief, and in the sprint are included. Additionally, we're offering a way for you to "sleep with the devil" — a euphemism for playing with AI—yes, right in the midst of a book about how to differentiate ourselves from it. This book is accompanied by an AI companion, an exotic THINKMATE, an interactive AI synthetic audience built from the minds of hundreds exotic thinkers, including me. Always updating and growing. You can use our exotic thinking THINKMATE to solve problems, co-create inventions and build your exotic thinking muscles. It is an expert on all the techniques and frameworks in this book, available 24/7.

Exotic Thinking is not a philosophy for the eccentric. It is a competitive skill for anyone who needs to solve problems that matter. Design thinkers amplified with Exotic Thinking are mission-critical.

AI will do more and more of what humans have always done. This book is about what AI can never achieve.

**E.X.O.T.I.C.**  
is an acronym  
and a mindset.  
It's six techniques:

**E**soteric  
**X**-Mapped  
**O**utsider  
**T**ransgressive  
**I**nception  
**C**urious



THINKMATE  
AI COMPANION

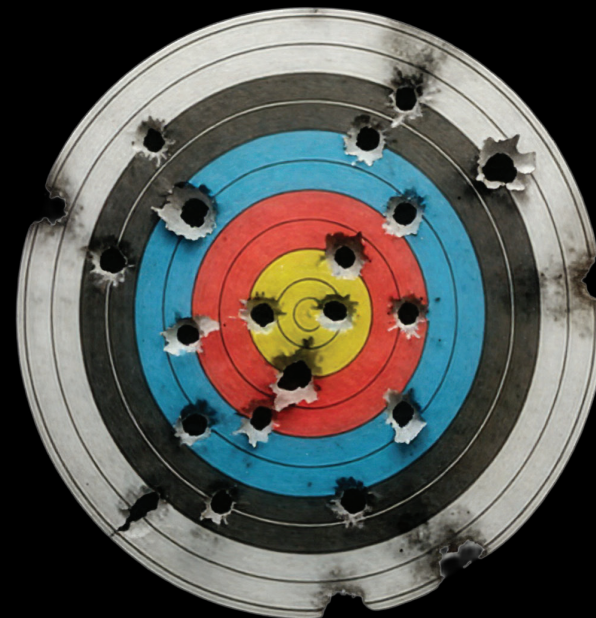
# THINKMATE

THINKMATE  
AI COMPANION



# E.X.O.T.I.C. THINKING

## FRAMEWORK



### E – Esoteric

- Indigenous insight & ancient wisdom
- Mysticism & unexplained phenomena
- Niche, specialized & obscure
- Superstition
- Symbolism

### X – X-mapped

- Analogs & metaphors
- Correlations & causations
- Explicit to implicit translation
- Fact blended with fiction
- Cross-disciplinary borrowing

### O – Outside

- **Inside**  
(hidden, invisible, incomplete)
- **Outside** (edge, niche, marginal)
- **Underside**  
(taboo, dangerous, criminal)
- **Offside**  
(rule-breaking, myth-busting)
- **Upside**  
(an unexpected advantage)

### T – Transgressive

- Surprises
- Contradictions & counterintuition
- Extremes & outliers
- Radical departures

### I – Inceptive

- Speculative thinking
- Futuristic orientation
- Temporal awareness
- Anticipation
- Forecasting & foresight

### C – Curious

- Novelty-seeking
- Ambi-curious
- Odd & absurd
- Puzzling
- Questioning



## Esoteric is the “E” in E.X.O.T.I.C. thinking.

The frontier of innovation is not only technological and analytical. It’s esoteric.

The most dangerous assumption in problem-solving and innovation is that all the answers live where everyone is currently looking: AI and technology.

But they don’t. They show up at 3 am in a Benedictine monastery and in a sangoma’s bone-throwing trance at a New York fashion show. Solutions live in the knowledge systems that STEM education ignores, AI can’t access, and modern business dismisses as irrational.

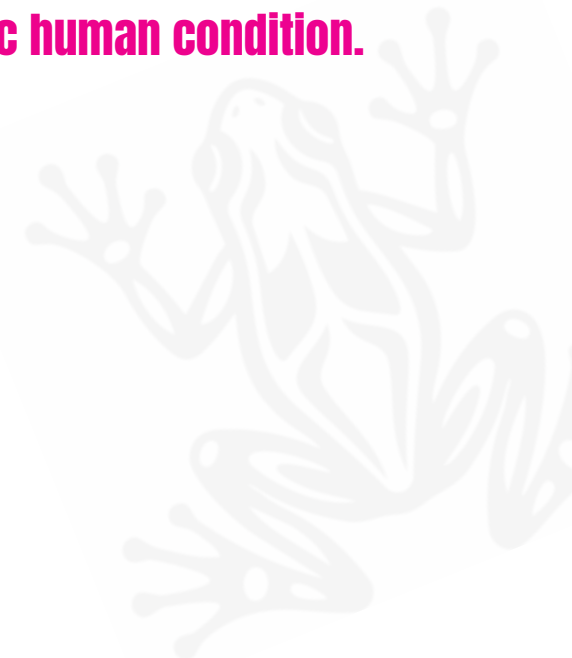
This chapter is about esoterica: the profoundly deep, niche, and deliberately obscure knowledge that sits beyond the edges of consensus thinking. The idea behind “esoteric” is that it’s only understood by a select few. You won’t find it in the media or an echo chamber. The more systematized our world becomes, the further the esoteric gets pushed to the edges. I think we should do something about that.

It covers six territories: Indigenous Insight, Mysticism and Unexplained Phenomena, Niche and Specialized Domains, Ancient Wisdom, Superstition, and Symbolism. Each is a rich way of understanding the world that mainstream innovation approaches, myopically focused on “user needs” and “consumer insights,” have never properly borrowed. AI is

optimized for the probable and the legible. The esoteric, by definition, lives in the improbable, oral, and unknowable.

The following explains how to enter each esoteric space, extract its mechanism, and translate it into fresher questions and stimuli to generate more original solutions that an algorithm cannot surface alone. Esoteric thinking is not anti-science, magical thinking, or an excuse to abandon rigor; it is a human advantage over AI that opens minds to possibilities before evidence, testing, and refinement take over.

**To innovate where others will not, you must be willing to think where others do not dare to look. Welcome to the esoteric human condition.**



# “ESOTERIC”

## Categories of Esoterica

1. **Indigenous Insight & Ancient Wisdom**
2. **Mysticism & Unexplained Phenomena**
3. **Niche, Specialized & Obscure**
4. **Superstition**
5. **Symbolism**

“Esoteric” refers to knowledge, ideas, or tastes likely to be understood or enjoyed by only a few people with special knowledge or interest. It describes things that are profoundly deep and specialized, intended for or understood by a select few or restricted to an inner circle, such as a shared cultural background. Esoteric topics are often mysterious and unexplainable, obscure and niche, challenging logic and modern science.

In innovation, invention, and problem-solving, humans can wander into areas such as myth, ritual, ancient wisdom, indigenous insight, and symbology—not to treat them as literal truth, but as provocative stimuli to reframe a problem and unlock fresh associations. Esoteric topics expand the search space beyond the confines of logic alone, generating ideas that are less predictable, less derivative, and often more original than what AI would surface on its own.



# Necessity is the mother of invention, after all.



## Memoir

**I stumbled over the overlooked in the arid, forested Sahel region of Africa. At the foot of an enormous baobab tree, a local goldsmith was at work surrounded by a cloud of black smoke from a wood fire. Bambara music played from a cassette player at his bare feet as he swirled molten gold collected by villagers in a container held by steel tongs. He laughed and sang as he worked. What happened next would change the way that I looked at innovation forever.**

After apartheid ended, I was hired to be the lead strategist driving the innovation of South African gold. My project included an 18-country study of gold, and our goal was to reclaim and unearth African goldsmithing as it once existed.

My encounter with the goldsmith under the baobab tree occurred in Mali. Malians have been gold miners and artisans for thousands of years. My team and I (I was also leading a documentary film crew through the area to record our journey) were surprised to see this man stand up on a chair and pour molten gold from six feet high into a rusted oil drum filled with water. Billows of steam erupted when the liquid gold met the cool water.

After a few minutes, he plunged a sieve into the water to scoop up piles of gold grains from the bottom of the drum. To everyone's amazement, the grains of gold were almost identical in size and shape. Perfect little blobs of pure gold. The gold blobs were hole-punched into beads, hammered into palettes, forged into sheet metal, rolled into wire, and coiled, and balls were soldered into trefoil clusters.

The harsh, scarce conditions of Mali's Sahel imposed constraints that prompted Malians to innovate in gold-working to reduce gold loss and maximize production. This granulation technique—producing an abundance of uniform gold balls and then working them without filing, shaving, or cutting the metal—is innovative. Necessity is the mother of invention, after all.

Later that year, after the documentary was complete and educational materials were created from the expedition, we launched the manufacturing of Flying Fish gold components in the innovation studio of the Gold of Africa Museum in Cape Town. Flying Fish trained unhoused, under-worked, and sometimes illiterate people in Cape Town to be goldsmiths. Goldsmithing is normally highly technical, dangerous work with fire, flux, sharp tools, heavy equipment, and chemicals. But the ancient gold-smelting and smithing techniques we learned in Mali were transferable—ideal for micro-manufacturing in an urban setting.

Continuing the innovator's mindset of the Malian iconoclasts, the Flying Fish apprentices in the studio of the Gold of Africa Museum, with fresh eyes, invented nearly 100 new ways to fashion the tiny uniform gold balls into jewelry and components. The ancient wisdom we found in Mali was an elegantly simple solution for working with a precious material in a harsh environment with limited resources.

The chapter you're about to read will guide you to use the esoteric as an advantage in a world soon dominated by AI. In a world where something "new" always seems to be on the horizon, innovation is sometimes best understood backward. (Or sideways, or upside-down.) We walk over the obvious to get to the novel. Like two clicks of a kaleidoscope, something that was there all along suddenly comes into focus. AI has no way of scanning and synthesizing what happened under the baobab tree that day. We had to enter into uncharted territory to find it.

# WHAT

It Is  
It Is Not

Have you ever trusted a horoscope? Truly felt like “luck” was on your side? Had a premonition you couldn’t shake, or followed a “sign?” Something logic would say wasn’t useful, but somehow it was? You were tapping into esoterica.

Esoterica can actually be a strategic tool for unlocking discoveries. Yes, even business discoveries.

Thinking with esoterica is the deliberate use of non-obvious and hard-to-prove understanding to spark innovation and reframe problems.

I’m not asking you to believe in magic or consult the gods for wisdom. Esoterica may not live strictly in the rational mind, but it is congruent with rational thought. It draws from ancient wisdom, indigenous knowledge, symbolism, mysticism, and niche fields—not for literal answers, but for a way of thinking. It provokes fresh associations, emotional depth, and unusual mental pathways.


There is a cultural bias against esoterica in business. STEM-educated cultures dismiss it as woo-woo, old-world, and pseudo-science. But committed innovators go where others don’t—or won’t. The unexplained (or should we say, unexplainable yet) still holds value. Using esoterica in problem-solving moves people beyond default logic and conventional expertise, exploring meaning, mystery, and ambiguity as creative stimuli, especially when traditional approaches produce predictable results. Using esoterica can feel uncomfortable. Good. Great

solutions demand great leaps, and game-changing solutions hide in niches where nobody’s looking. While competitors mine the familiar, go esoteric. Zig when they zag.

Esoteric thinking is not irrational decision-making, magical thinking, or anti-science. It’s not blind belief in myths or replacing disciplined analysis with vibes. It’s not eccentricity for its own sake. Esoterica, when added to the human edge toolkit, can take you places AI cannot.

**Esoterica, when added to the human edge toolkit, can take you places AI cannot.**

# USING ESOTERIC SUBJECTS IN **INNOVATION**



**40%**

**Of pharmaceutical products today draw from traditional knowledge. Modern medicine has roots in knowledge systems preserved by indigenous people.**

**World Health Organization**

## **Indigenous Insight & Ancient Wisdom**

**The house exorcism in the jungle of Sri Lanka I attended as a teenager was my first experience with indigenous insight as an innovation spark. Arranged by my Semester at Sea professor, about five hours outside Colombo, a group of us witnessed an extraordinary event—evil spirits cast from a dwelling.**

The house had been transformed from its original state: blazing torches, incense smoke, offerings of flowers, a live rooster on the altar. The entire village was present, as pulsing polyrhythmic drumming competed with the shaman's chanting invocations, followed by elaborately dressed dancers swaying and spinning in unison. The shaman pantomimed comedy with masked devils while villagers howled with laughter. Fire batons spun. Chaos erupted. A possessed dancer destroyed the altar. Then the sun rose. Calm arrived. The rooster was released. We left in our minivan. The departure of evil. From this, I learned that a "circular economy" is hidden within the Sri Lankan Thovil ceremony. Like a Midwestern American barn raising, each family helps the next. A social contract is in place, biodegradable materials are used, and the home is reactivated—never abandoned. The rooster is released, not consumed. Every component is intentional. The knowledge driving the ceremony, transmitted orally across generations through chants, is passed forward, refreshed, revised, and upgraded.

**“Seventh Generation” thinking, rooted in native American culture, asks what the impact of a solution will be seven generations from now. It has gained momentum and proven useful in new product development sprints, sparking framing challenges like:**

- **How might we design the solution to be regenerative?** (e.g., a shampoo that is water-positive, cleaning or generating water rather than consuming it?)
- **How might we design a solution that increases in value with use?** (e.g., an article of clothing gains a patina from being worn-in, or the ownership provenance is something to brag about, like the Hope Diamond )
- **How might we design with a missing assumption?** (e.g., what if the dish detergent requires no water at all?)

### **Indigenous Insights and Ancient Wisdom can be useful in design thinking sprints in ways like:**

**Reframe the Problem** – Imagine you were designing this solution with scarce resources and absolute constraints. What ways would you be forced to think outside the box?

**Mine the Mechanism** – Identify what your product takes from users versus what it gives back and redesign the ratio. Or read a classical text and extract one reframing principle.

**Reframe the User** – Treat your user as a member of a community with obligations. Ask what pre-modern people knew about this need that industrialization erased.

**Reframe the Solution** – Build a solution with give-and-take, where the user gives something to get something. Or design using only materials from one ancient civilization and identify which constraints produced superiority.

**Reframe the Process** – End every sprint by asking what the solution would cost the seventh generation. Or open by presenting one ancient solution that outperforms its modern equivalent and ask why. Both

spaces (Indigenous Insight & Ancient Wisdom) are largely inaccessible to AI. It is often oral, local, sacred, or intentionally undigitized. Ancient knowledge is fragmented and poorly translated.

AI flattens rich experiential knowledge into summaries rather than living interpretation. This isn't about the nostalgia or “cool” factor that experiences like my Sri Lankan exorcism event provoke—it's about something you can't understand until you feel it in your bones.

**Watch Out:** Engage sacred traditions with reverence. A Stoic principle misunderstood is a flippant Instagram post. A Roman vault misunderstood is just an arch. Indigenous knowledge is not public data to harvest; engage respectfully, with attribution, and with explicit permission whenever possible.

### **Esoteric Challenges**

**SOLO** – The Parallel Solution Hunt: Take a current problem. Find how one indigenous culture or ancient civilization solved a structurally similar challenge without modern technology. Extract the principle, not the solution. Translate it into your domain in one paragraph.

**SOCIAL** – The Ancient Brief / Reverse Ethnography: Each person researches a different indigenous culture or ancient civilization and presents one solved problem as a live design proposal: mechanism, problem solved, and potential superiority to the current approach. The group translates the most transferable principle into a concrete feature of the design.

**While competitors mine the familiar, go esoteric:**

# ZIG ZAG

**Esoteric thinking is not irrational decision-making, magical thinking, or anti-science. It's not blind belief in myths or replacing disciplined analysis with vibes. It's not eccentricity for its own sake. Esoterica, when added to the human edge toolkit, can take you places AI cannot.**



83%

Of participants who spent 15 seconds in hypnagogia (liminal awake—sleep state) discovered a hidden math rule vs 30% fully awake.

PMC NIH

## Mysticism & Unexplained Phenomena

**My first brush with the UFO/UAP (unexplained aerial phenomena) community was in building the beta of Goldmoney.com. I encountered a segment of investors who hoard gold called Gold Stackers. They buy gold because they believe government-issued currency will become worthless and paper money inaccessible during a global crisis triggered by a range of Black Swan events, including an alien invasion.**

Adventuring globally has immersed me in cultures steeped in mysticism: from Rapture doomsdayers to Asian, African, and Latin American traditions where unexplainable forces are not feared but invited and used strategically.

In Africa, I met a prominent businessman investing millions with serious scientists in the potential life-regenerating properties of gold-laced potions, created from African recipes dating back to biblical times. Nobody was rolling their eyes. Mysticism was a strategic business.

However, the real revelation came from 40 days of living in silence as a Trappist monk in a Benedictine monastery. Released, not consumed. Every component is intentional. The knowledge driving the ceremony, transmitted orally across generations through chants, is passed forward, refreshed, revised, and upgraded.

Benedictine spirituality does not treat mystical experience as something that occasionally happens to extraordinary people. It manifests in the entire daily structure. Honed over 15 centuries, the Benedictine daily schedule is one of the most sophisticated sustained consciousness-alteration programs in human history. It's a power-combo of sleep interruption, sustained communal Gregorian chanting, strict fasting and abstinence, enforced silence, and denial of social stimulation. It is engineered to dissolve the boundary between ordinary and transcendent consciousness. My world was completely turned on its head. Time and space stopped. My ego was shattered (in all the right ways). I went about my assigned manual labor tasks in a trance. I slept in a cell. I was at peace.

I “escaped” the monastery for a couple of days by asking to go to the hermitage deep in the forest (solitude, no utilities) just so I could catch up on my sleep. Fear of wolves, the Blair Witch Project, and axe murderers were suddenly less scary than the prospect of another sleepless week. One night, I saw an enormous UAP glide silently overhead above the tree line, defying the laws of physics. Talk about a merge of different flavors of mysticism! This solidified my reverence for unexplained phenomena and my desire to learn more about UAPs once I left the monastery.

Though my spirit was at peace during my monastic stint, my brain was exploding with ideas. It was a cacophony I couldn’t turn off. That was my mystical experience. I started carrying a pen and paper to jot down ideas and solutions to problems until the head monk confiscated them. I ended up scribbling stolen-pencil notes on napkins, like Mandela on Robben Island.

In subsequent years, I’ve drawn on my experience in mysticism in innovation settings. When the problem-solving team is tense, highly analytical, or reserved, I will introduce an uncomfortable dash of mysticism like this:

- **As strange stimuli to approach the challenge with a more open mind** (e.g., what if you could be present in two places simultaneously, how would you redesign distribution architecture?)
- **Reverse engineer explanation of an unexplained phenomenon** (e.g., religious stigmata, or spontaneous bleeding that miraculously heals, is an unexplained phenomenon; so how might a high-tech skincare industry be creatively inspired by this?)
- **Unexplained phenomena and forces of nature scaffolding** (e.g., what if gravity could be controlled and manipulated, how might makeup be designed to respond to gravity, magnetism, entropy, or another force of nature?)

### **Mysticism and unexplained phenomena have a place in design thinking sprints, like:**

**Reframing the Problem** – Ask “what if this problem is a symptom of something invisible?” and map what that invisible force might be.

**Mine the Mechanism** – Strip a mystical practice or ritual down to its sensory and emotional components and ask which components your product can borrow.

**Reframing the User** – Ask: what does your user do when they feel out of control in this category, and how could the product design for that moment?

**Reframing the Solution** – Design a solution that appears to be a little magical and wondrous; go for a user experience that creates a sense of awe.

**Reframing the Problem** – Open with one genuinely unexplained phenomenon and require every participant to propose a rational mechanism before ideation begins.

AI is generally designed to avoid endorsing the unexplained as truth. It can summarize reports of phenomena, but it does not comfortably dwell in mystery, suspension of disbelief, or generative fascination. It tends to collapse the strange into explanation or disclaimer.

Mysticism is not a source of answers. It’s a source of different questions. Ask not what mystics believed, but what they were accidentally solving. The mechanism, not the metaphysics, is what transfers. Mystical traditions can’t always explain why a practice works, only that it does. Centuries of refinement without explanation have produced solutions of unusual elegance.

**Watch Out:** teams can get stuck debating the validity of the mystical provocation instead of extracting the mechanism or going with it. Just as the theater asks you to “suspend your disbelief” in order to reveal truth in story, mysticism does the same.

# Design a solution that appears to be a little magical and wondrous; go for a user experience that creates a sense of awe.

### **Esoteric Challenges**

**SOLO** – The Mechanism Strip: Choose one unexplained phenomenon. Paragraph one: Describe it neutrally. Paragraph two: What problem in your current work would it solve if it were a designed feature? This is not about whether it’s real. Dogs can have wings on paper. UFO/UAPs are the unexplained phenomenon of objects observed to defy the laws of gravity, moving between air and water seamlessly, without friction. How might this inspire the mechanics of skin cleanser?

**SOCIAL** – The Heresy Session: Identify three unquestioned project assumptions. Each team member finds a mystical tradition that has successfully operated on the opposite assumption for centuries. Vote on which assumption to formally challenge at the next sprint.



# 10%

Reduction of spaceship surface friction yields 5% fuel savings, when applied to commercial aviation it saved \$250M annually.

NASA Technical Reports Server

## Niche, Specialized & Obscure

**At NASA Space Camp, foot calluses molt in zero-gravity from a prolonged lack of friction. Faces swell. Burps are wet. Crying is impossible—tears just pool in the eyeballs. Toothpaste is edible. The smell of “cream cherry” mysteriously triggers a universal gag reflex, for some reason? Outer space, as it turns out, smells like raspberries.**

I am insanely curious about odd (and often dirty) jobs. I fantasize about quitting and becoming a work nomad, learning new skills with gigs found on the job site [www.cooljobs.com](http://www.cooljobs.com). For me, the fascination lies in experiencing specialized, niche,, and obscure livelihoods. Imagine the tricks and hacks one learns as a lip reader or forensic cleaner? So this is how I ended up at Space Camp.

While jumping across the room in a bungee tethered exoskeleton that mimics walking on the moon, I wondered if this might be good physical therapy after a knee replacement. As I was spinning in a human gyroscope (i.e., a “spaceball” or multi-axis trainer) at 100 mph for G-force training, I wondered if it would be useful for sports training or elder care fall prevention. (There’s a video of me laughing while I’m spinning, imagining granny in a nightgown in my place.)

I had no idea Velcro is a way of life in space, that every ISS item has a patch. I was surprised I had to wear an “ice vest,” a bulky, heavy vest made with ice blocks, before suiting up. A spacesuit is an insulated pressure vessel that protects against the extreme cold of space, but it also traps 100% of the astronaut’s metabolic heat inside. Helmets are heavy and limit vision. Gloves are so bulky that grasping tools is difficult and dropping them is common.

The niche world of the International Space Station shows us how it is possible to create a system that is shared, open, modular. NASA’s pre-mortem protocol proactively imagines failure for every system. Astronauts don’t risk their lives for incremental gains; they do it for vision, for the Big Hairy Audacious Goals that AI can’t provide.

**The most obscure space hack, like astronauts bathing with vacuum suction, sparks questions like:**

- **How might we design the solution to be tool-free** (e.g., what if gold bullion bars were cast like a chocolatier forms a Kit Kat chocolate bar so they could be cleanly broken into pieces by hand?)
- **How might we design a solution with a specialist's hack** (e.g., An Ikebana flower arranging specialist will trim stems under water to prevent air bubbles from entering the flower's vascular system)
- **How might we design a solution that works in a niche domain** (e.g., what if we invent hair control and styling products for oil rig workers?)

**Niche, Specialized and Obscure domains can be leveraged in design thinking sprints in ways like this:**

**Reframing the Problem** – Ask, “If this problem exists in a field where one error means death, how would specialists in that field solve it?”

**Mine the Mechanism** – Borrow vocabulary from a completely unrelated specialized field and use it to describe your product challenge to see where it leads.

**Reframing the User – Ask**, “Who has been living with the most extreme version of this problem the longest, and what have they invented to cope?”

**Reframing the Solution** – Test your concept, “Would a tugboat captain, a bomb disposal technician, or a master perfumer find the solution “elegant” — and if not, why not?”

**Reframing the Problem** – Randomly assign each team member a niche field and require every idea to incorporate at least one mechanism borrowed from it.

AI can retrieve some niche knowledge when it is documented, but many specialized fields rely on tacit know-how, apprenticeship, rare communities, trade secrets, analog practices, and low-volume

information that is underrepresented in mainstream training data. AI also rarely chooses these obscure domains as creative search paths unless a human deliberately points it there.

One principle explains why niche domains are exceptional: distance. The further a borrowed idea sits from your native field, the less likely anyone has already imported it. Niche fields earn value through extreme constraint. A falconer holds 4,000 years of animal behavioral psychology. A deep-sea diver holds the world's most refined endurance protocols. A circus trapeze artist holds generations of spatial geometry. None of this niche knowledge has been appropriated by AI at scale.

Edge cases reveal the structure of normal cases: hostage negotiators stripped communication to functional essentials under lethal pressure, and those frameworks corrected decades of flawed negotiation teaching. Extreme tests expose what comfortable tests conceal. F1 pit crew choreography redesigned cardiac surgery handoffs, cutting errors in the latter by 50%. Pasta-making science informed the development of self-compacting concrete. Theatrical rigging shaped surgical robotics. Solutions hide inside niche problems that have already been solved.

**Watch Out:** Obscure is not automatically better. Import a niche solution only when its mechanism is genuinely superior and the conditions that produced it actually transfer. Borrowing the costume without the mechanism is just decoration. The exploration may be about being obscure for obscurity's sake, but the solution isn't.

#### **Esoteric Challenges**

**SOLO** – The Expert Interview Prep: Identify a niche practitioner whose expertise seems irrelevant — locksmith, wildfire analyst, casino protection specialist. Write ten questions designed to extract their decision-making principles and constraint-management strategies, not their field knowledge.

**SOCIAL** – The Cross-Domain Collision: Abstract the problem into domain-neutral language. Find another domain that solved the abstract version of the problem, mine the niche for its specific mechanism, then translate structurally, not literally, back into your domain.

**A falconer holds 4,000 years of animal behavioral psychology.**

**A deep-sea diver holds the world's most refined endurance protocols.**

**A circus trapeze artist holds generations of spatial geometry.**

**None of this niche knowledge has been appropriated by AI at scale.**



# 835M

Transactions across  
+300 cities found the  
last digit strongly tends  
to be a lucky number  
(luck digit effect)

PMC

## Superstition

**When Nelson Mandela's poet sangoma put a curse on me, I knew I was in trouble. A sangoma is a traditional African healer who communicates with ancestors by throwing bones while in a trance state. This one had it out for me.**

It started when I brought him to New York Fashion Week. We were producing an NYFW show, Afridesia, featuring South African couture accessorized with pure African gold. Eighteen models, including the Face of Africa, strutted to live South African music before an audience of national treasures. To open the show, Mandela's personal poet delivered a Zulu poetry invocation. A designer crafted him a cape sewn with hundreds of gold coins, a gold-leafed staff, and a gold-leafed crown. The most striking opening in NYFW history!

The purity of the African gold on the poet and the models was strategic. At the time, South Africa was intent on increasing gold sales in Asia. Gold is deeply ingrained in Chinese culture, both auspicious and superstitious. Chinese believe a gold wedding band or tooth fillings from a deceased person is imbued with the spirit of the dead. Afridesia aimed to promote virgin African gold to Chinese Americans.

The curse arose from a misunderstanding: the sangoma believed the gold cape had been a gift to him. My attempts to retrieve the loaned item led him to hex me. I wasn't too worried, but my African friends insisted: You gotta get a 'spell check'! Another sangoma confirmed that I was indeed carrying around some bad juju and reversed it in an elaborate ceremony. Africans, like the Chinese, believe objects carry energy.

**Superstitions reveal what a culture considers controllable and uncontrollable. They encode patterns of thinking and behavior that can be applied in innovation like this:**

- What would have to be true for this superstition to be completely rational?
- Where is our customer already performing a private ritual we haven't designed for?
- If our product or solution were a superstition, what behavior would it prescribe?
- What would this solution be like if it had to work for a thousand years without explanation?
- What of our assumptions would a superstition directly contradict, and what if the superstition is right?

**Superstition has a role in design thinking sprints in ways like this:**

**Reframing the Problem** – Identify the dominant superstition in your product category and ask what unmet need it has been servicing that your solution does not.

**Mine the Mechanism** – Collect five superstitions from different cultures around your product category and map the common anxiety.

**Reframing the User** – Ask, “What category object, gesture, or phrase has your user imbued with protective or lucky power, and how can your solution appropriate it?”

**Reframing the Solution** – Ask, “Could the behavior, gesture, or usage transmit itself across generations without instruction, branding, or explanation?”

**Reframing the Process** – Mid-session, each participant shares one superstition they personally practice and refuse to give up. Apply it to your challenge.

Superstition surfaces hidden anxieties, cultural habits, and emotional drivers influencing decision-making, inspiring products, rituals, and messaging that

address uncertainty and meaning. AI treats superstition as an irrational belief to classify rather than as a fertile cultural and psychological signal, stripping away its usefulness as an innovation stimulus. Superstitions are the longest-running unsupported products in human history. Anything surviving thousands of years of rational attack is carrying something rationality alone cannot replace. The innovator's question isn't “why do people believe this?” but “what is this doing for people that nothing rational has replaced?”

The answer is almost always one of three things: managing uncertainty, shifting psychological state before a high-stakes moment, or encoding implicit social contracts that signal group membership. These are foundational human needs. Mainstream product development is bad at addressing them, assuming people want efficiency. Every domain where superstition remains stubbornly alive is a domain where the product landscape has failed. The deepest reason is structural: burning impepho (African sage) doesn't literally open a channel to ancestors, but the sensory ritual of smell, darkness, and focused intention reliably alters psychological states. The innovator who waits for science will always be late.

**Watch Out:** Don't mock or trivialize. Don't universalize one culture's superstition. Understand the root driver: Control? Social contract? Respect for elders? And don't let it become an anthropology seminar instead of an innovation process.

**Esoteric Challenges**

**SOLO** – The Expert Interview Prep: Identify a niche practitioner whose expertise seems irrelevant — locksmith, wildfire analyst, casino protection specialist. Write ten questions designed to extract their decision-making principles and constraint-management strategies, not their field knowledge.

**SOCIAL** – The 1000-Year Robustness Test: Redesign your core user behavior as a superstition. No explanation is required; the benefit occurs without understanding why, and it's transmissible without instruction. What does each team's version reveal about the fragility of the current designed behavior?



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# 96%

Of Teams tested showed a higher variety of ideas from tasks with greater content variety supporting the value of symbolic reframing.

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## Symbolism

**Living in Japan, I studied geisha arts: tea ceremony, ikebana (Japanese floral arrangement), and calligraphy. My mother caught the ikebana bug and has studied it for nearly 20 years, becoming a high-ranking sensei in the Ohara school.**

A lot of ingenuity and innovation is found in Japanese geisha arts. Bintsuke-abura, dating to the Heian period, is the world's first makeup primer: plant-based wax melted in the palms and applied before white foundation to create a skin barrier and prevent slippage. From my mother, I've absorbed ikebana, even while living in Africa. The cultural connection between Japan and Africa runs deep: strong family units, respect for hierarchy and elders, animism, and shared reverence for ritual and chi (life force).

Over my shoulder as I write hangs Zulu Sushi, an Afro-Japono monoprint by a South African artist in residence at my Cape Town lab. It's a "thank you" gift of a swaying Japanese geisha draped in Zulu warrior beads, symbolizing soft beauty and fierce strength.

The Shinto believe ikebana arrangements are temporary dwellings of the divine, and the upright living branch is a ladder for spirits (kami) to descend from heaven to the living world. Every arrangement contains wabi-sabi (deliberate imperfection). The empty, negative space around the flowers—"room for the butterflies"—is not just a compositional tool, but symbolizes the interdependence of matter (shin) and matterless (ma). The ma in an arrangement is equally important as the shin.

I collect textiles. The fabrics I've gathered from cultures all over the world retain the scent of their places of origin, like perfume. My textiles are adorned with symbolic patterns and colors, like African kente cloth and Japanese obi, and patterns of symbols that connect to languages. These symbols are shorthand for meaning. It's endlessly interesting how many of the symbols in the Gold of Africa collection appear on the textiles I collected in Japan and other corners of the earth.

Researching Akan gold weights, I found a rare anthology of African symbolic systems. Cross in a circle: sun god. Triangle: heaven, earth, human. The gold-weighter was making social commentary with symbols. Geisha and African tribal dances look opposite, yet both crouch in earth-centered postures, move with flat-footed stomping steps, and build toward escalating percussion. Symbolic action is ritualized. This is where ritual becomes fodder for innovation.

**When stuck on a problem, I turn to symbolism. Concrete answers emerge from abstract thought. I mull over questions like:**

- **How might we design a solution for hands-free or eyes-closed skin care** (e.g., what if we invent an entirely new gesture for applying and removing face cream?)
- **How might we design a solution that is shorthand for hygiene** (e.g., what if we concentrate on the perception of feeling clean?)
- **How might we design a solution that is free from anything physical and is entirely symbolic** (e.g., what if we represent the feeling of happiness from being clean?)

**Symbolism can be leveraged in design thinking sprints in ways like this:**

**Reframing the Problem** – Restate your challenge as a symbol rather than a sentence. In other words, what symbol or collection of symbols represent the problem? (looking at the problem as icons)

**Mine the Mechanism** – Identify where a competitor’s visual language borrows from a symbol system and ask what symbolic territory remains unclaimed.

**Reframing the User** – Ask “what symbol would your user wear as a tattoo to represent their relationship with your product category and solution?”

**Reframing the Solution** – Design your product’s core interaction as a symbolic gesture (e.g., a crossing, an offering, a transformation).

**Reframing the Process** – Mid-session, take a symbol from a completely unrelated cultural tradition and require every idea to incorporate its meaning.

Symbols, metaphors, myths, and archetypes all compress complexity into emotionally resonant forms. That compression is what makes symbolism powerful in innovation. AI can identify common

symbols, but struggles with culturally specific, emergent, or sacred symbolic interpretation. Symbolism becomes powerful through felt meaning and layered association, not a dictionary definition. Map a healthcare challenge onto the Kongo cosmogram’s threshold between worlds, and you’re forced to ask which parts belong to the living side, which to heaven, and what a crossing point looks like. Symbols don’t generate answers. They generate metaphors, which in turn generate ideas.

Symbolism bypasses language traps. Buzzwords like “sustainable” and “intuitive” have been drained of meaning. Place a living ikebana branch in front of a product team and the questions it raises: what makes this object alive rather than merely active?

**Watch Out:** Don’t become attached to the symbol itself. It is a vehicle, not a destination. Symbols are merely representations of ideas.

#### **Esoteric Challenges**

**SOLO** – The Symbol Diagnostic: Take one stubborn problem in your current work. Find a symbol, icon or representation from any tradition that encodes the same structural tension as your problem — a threshold, a paradox, a hierarchy, a cycle. Research the different ways, where and how the symbol shows up. Is there insight that can be transferred to your problem?

**SOCIAL** – The Competing Symbols Debate: Each team member brings one symbol they believe best represents the product’s core purpose. Present and defend. Where symbols conflict, the conflict is the data—it reveals genuine disagreement about what the product is fundamentally for. Resolve the symbol debate before continuing the design work.

**Symbols don’t generate answers.  
They generate metaphors,  
which in turn generate ideas.**

## AI Difficulty Rating

- \*\*\*\*\* = VERY DIFFICULT FOR MODERN AI PLATFORMS TO TRULY LEVERAGE
- \*\*\*\* = DIFFICULT
- \*\*\* = MODERATELY DIFFICULT
- \*\* = SOMEWHAT ACCESSIBLE TO AI
- \* = RELATIVELY EASY FOR AI TO TAP

# The Esoteric Edge in the Age of AI

Mainstream AI platforms cannot easily access esoterica because esoteric spaces are difficult to codify into the kinds of clean, large-scale training data that AI systems rely on. Even when esoteric pieces are documented, they are often metaphorical, context-dependent, hard to verify, or even appear contradictory (paradox!), making them difficult for AI to treat as reliable inputs. Mainstream AI is designed to optimize for consensus knowledge and probabilistic pattern-matching, so it tends to privilege what is documented and broadly validated.

The following table breaks down the five expressions of esoterica we cover in this chapter and addresses AI's relationship with each one. Some areas of esoteric thinking, such as knowledge related to niche fields, are easier for AI to extract insights from, though it still misses that which is not codified. If you work in a truly niche industry, you know there is no published handbook for your work.

**AI is aware of esoteric spaces and can describe these concepts when they appear in its data. But AI does not naturally think through them as living, generative, meaning-rich spaces for innovation and problem-solving the way humans can.**

\*\*\*\*\*

## Indigenous Wisdom

### How Humans Use It to Innovate & Solve Problems

Humans use indigenous ways of knowing—interdependence, stewardship, cyclical concepts of time, oral memory, and relational thinking—to create holistic, sustainable, non-extractive innovation.

### Why Mainstream AI Can't Easily Access It

AI has limited access to authentic indigenous knowledge because it is often oral, local, sacred, protected, community-held, and not digitized; ethically, it is not open data for mining.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Mysticism & Unexplained Phenomena

### How Humans Use It to Innovate & Solve Problems

Humans use mystical systems, hidden codes, secret languages, paradoxes, initiation rituals, and symbolic maps to unlock layered meaning and nonlinear insight for products, brands, narratives, and journeys. We use paranormal stories and unexplained phenomena to imagine beyond accepted models, making the impossible temporarily thinkable.

### Why Mainstream AI Can't Easily Access It

AI struggles because these domains are obscure, coded, contradictory, and hidden; meaning is rarely explicit and often requires tradition, intuition, and comfort with ambiguity. AI is designed not to endorse the unexplained as truth; it can summarize anomalies but tends to replace mystery with explanation, caution, or disclaimer. not digitized; ethically, it is not open data for mining.

\*\*\*\*

## Niche, Specialized & Obscure

### How Humans Use It to Innovate & Solve Problems

Humans borrow tools, rituals, and edge-case methods from narrow fields—from astronautics to horse grooming—to solve problems from fresh angles and surface overlooked insights.

### Why Mainstream AI Can't Easily Access It

AI can retrieve documented niche knowledge, but much of it lives in tacit know-how, apprenticeships, rare communities, trade secrets, analog practice, and thin data; it seldom searches these paths unless directed.

\*\*\*\*

## Superstition

### How Humans Use It to Innovate & Solve Problems

Humans use superstition to surface hidden anxieties, rituals of control, symbolic behaviors, and emotional drivers, inspiring products, experiences, and messaging around uncertainty and meaning.

### Why Mainstream AI Can't Easily Access It

AI treats superstition as an irrational belief to classify or explain, stripping away its emotional and symbolic value as an innovation stimulus.

\*\*\*\*

## Symbolism

### How Humans Use It to Innovate & Solve Problems

Humans use symbols, myths, motifs, sacred objects, dreams, and archetypes to create new meanings, brand systems, narratives, and reframing; symbolism compresses complexity into resonance.

### Why Mainstream AI Can't Easily Access It

AI can explain common symbols but often only superficially; it struggles with culturally specific, personal, emergent, or sacred meanings that depend on context and felt association.

# USE

IMPLICATIONS + APPLICATIONS

## When to Use Esoterica in Design Thinking

A simple rule: use esoteric thinking whenever you need deeper meaning, fresher ideas, broader possibilities, or more human originality in design thinking:

**Empathize** — Use esoteric spaces to uncover hidden human beliefs, rituals, anxieties, desires, symbols, and emotional drivers that people may not state directly. What do they need, but they can't articulate? Esoteric thinking helps reveal deeper human meaning, not just surface needs.

**Define** — Use esoteric lenses to reframe the problem in a less obvious way, such as through myth, symbolism, nature, intuition, or ancient patterns. This can shift the problem from a functional challenge to a more original human or cultural opportunity—can this innovation actually shift the way human beings live, love, prioritize, spend their time? If so, how?

**Ideate** — Use esoteric spaces most heavily here to generate unexpected concepts, analogies, metaphors, rituals, experiences, and solution pathways. This is where humans gain the biggest edge over AI by drawing on strange, ambiguous, and non-obvious sources of inspiration.

**Prototype** — Translate esoteric stimuli into tangible forms such as artifacts, rituals, narratives, symbolic designs, sensory experiences, or new interaction models. Prototyping makes abstract or mysterious inspiration usable and testable.

**Test** — Observe whether esoteric-inspired ideas create resonance, surprise, meaning, memorability, delight, or emotional connection with users. The goal is not to validate the esoteric source as fact, but to test whether the thought exercise sparked a better solution.

**Before Convergence** — Apply esoteric thinking early and mid-process, before narrowing to final solutions. It expands the possibility space before logic, feasibility, and refinement take over.

**Complement Evidence** — Pair esoteric inputs with research, strategy, and testing. Esoteric thinking is best used as a creativity engine, not as the final proof.

**When Stuck** — Bring in esoteric spaces when ideas feel repetitive, overly rational, too safe, or AI-generated. Esoteric thinking helps break pattern lock and opens new mental pathways.

**When Things Are Ambiguous** — Apply esoteric thinking when the problem is emotional, cultural, future-facing, identity-based, or hard to quantify. These are areas where logic alone is often insufficient.

# DO NOT

## Watch-Outs When Applying Esoterica

A useful principle is this: use esoteric thinking to open minds to possibilities and widen the search space, not to abandon rigor. Be careful not to place too much emphasis on or misuse any form of exotic thinking.

**DO NOT** confuse stimulus with truth — Esoteric spaces should spark ideas, not automatically be treated as sources of fact.

**DO NOT** replace evidence-based decision-making — Use esoteric thinking to expand possibilities, then apply research, testing, and validation.

**DO NOT** slip into magical thinking — The goal is creative provocation, not blind belief. Esoterics is a lens, not a prescription.

**DO NOT** use it too late in the process — Esoteric thinking is most useful during discovery, reframing, and ideation, before solutions are locked.

**DO NOT** keep it too abstract — Translate symbols, myths, intuition, or rituals into concrete concepts, prototypes, or actions.

**DO NOT** appropriate sacred or indigenous knowledge carelessly — Treat protected traditions, community-owned wisdom, and spiritual systems with respect, attribution, and ethical caution.

**DO NOT** universalize cultural meaning — Symbols, rituals, and beliefs can change meaning across cultures and contexts.

**DO NOT** force esoteric inputs where they do not fit — Not every problem needs mysticism, symbolism, or ancient wisdom. Use it where it unlocks value.

**DO NOT** rely on one esoteric source only — Combine multiple spaces such as nature, intuition, symbolism, myth, and ancient knowledge for richer thinking.

**DO NOT** let skepticism kill the exercise too early — Evaluate later. First, allow unusual prompts to open up new associations. It is safe to play in the sandbox once you've drawn the boundary lines.

**DO NOT** let enthusiasm eliminate critique — Esoteric thinking needs disciplined interpretation so the team does not drift into weak or unusable ideas.

**DO NOT** ignore user resonance — An esoteric-inspired idea may be fascinating internally, but meaningless or even alienating to real users. Creating magic together as a team doesn't necessarily create magic for end users. If someone could say "you had to be there," it probably doesn't translate.

**DO NOT** forget feasibility — Strange inspiration still needs to become something useful, usable, desirable, or strategically valuable.

**DO NOT** underuse embodiment and lived experience — Esoteric thinking works best when humans bring intuition, field observation, sensory input, and emotional interpretation, not just desktop research.

**DO NOT** make it inaccessible to others — Explain the relevance of the esoteric prompt clearly so teammates can follow the leap from stimulus to solution. Be patient with adoption to new innovation methods, as not everyone will "get it" right away.

**DO NOT** stop at novelty — The output should not just be unusual. It should lead to sharper insight, better reframing, or stronger innovation.

**DO NOT** assume AI will go there on its own — Human facilitation is often needed to deliberately introduce and interpret esoteric spaces in the process.



# In the age of AI, the most valuable thing a human can do is **think** in ways AI cannot.

## Resources to Source Esoteric Stimuli

I have created a curated stimulus library for innovators and problem solvers to stretch esoteric muscles. Visit the QR code for updated resources. The sources for esoterica are constantly evolving, which is why the QR code is necessary to keep them current. Below is a go-to list when you are in need of some esoteric stimuli and inspiration.



RESOURCES



THINKMATE  
AI COMPANION



THE BOOK  
WEBSITE