

# Futures

## Seams

Making connections. By Freya Masters

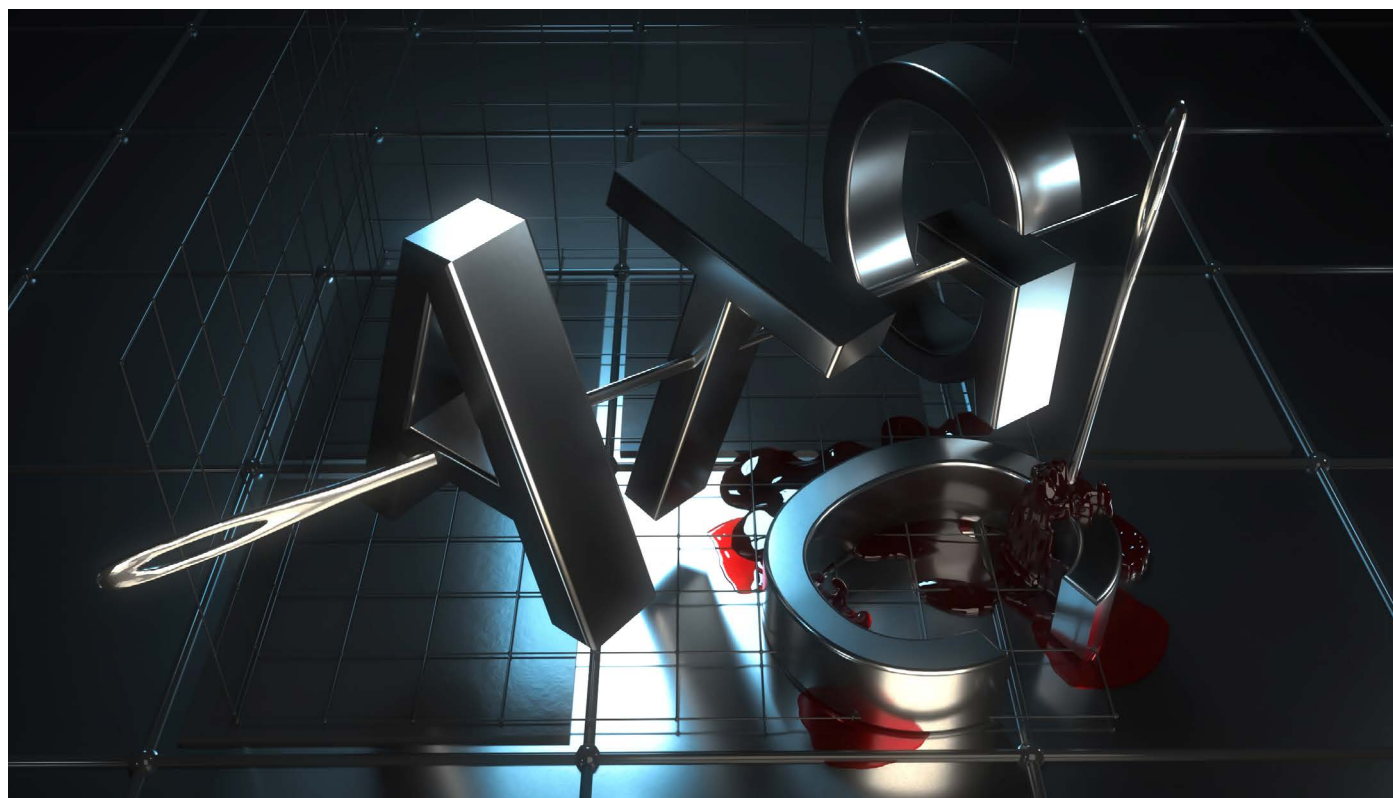


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

**T**he needle gently thrums between my fingers.

I feel I am thrumming too – like the needle is an extension of all I am, all I will ever be. A singular component of this humming network. Tiny vibrations resonate through my hands each time I touch the needle to the screen, my material. I dare to glance up, my gaze flickering, yet I never cease my task. There are countless rows of others sat like me, dressed in the same rags, stretching far in every direction. Sewing, sewing. Each day is the same since *they* came.

At the back of my screen is a wire, trailing down and disappearing under the seat in front. Hundreds and hundreds of screens and wires feeding into one another. I sit at the end of my row. Seat 498. I know my number; I know my place.

One row down, *they* move in to inspect. A trembling of air to the right. Quickly, I fix my gaze firmly on my work, my hands moving flawlessly. I hold my breath as I feel the air

swirling just behind my neck and I dart the needle across the screen, joining the two columns of letters to one another. *Draw two lines between A and T. Three lines between G and C.* My hand falters for a brief second and I feel the trembling air still behind me. A quiet hiss sounds in my ear. Still the streaming columns of letters flow across the screen. *This is it. This is the end.* I brace myself for the inevitable.

It doesn't come.

There is the familiar sound of a klaxon – harsh, grating. Our screens go black. Behind me, I hear it withdraw. There is a whoosh as it shoots away down the line. Air amalgamates and ripples around the formless being. A dynamic entity. I breathe a sigh of relief, closing my eyes. A hand on my shoulder. I turn to the girl sitting next to me. She tries to offer me a smile, her face pallid with fear and exhaustion. I smile back weakly. The moment is fleeting. We must not be seen to be communicating. *They* understand what it is to communicate.

Shakily, I reach down and clasp the bowl beneath my seat then draw it to my lips, gratefully gulping as much of the broth as I can. It is cold. Tomorrow it will be our row's turn to make it, in vast vats. When tomorrow is, I do not know. I used to picture time as a long black line in my mind. Now I cannot picture time at all.

The klaxon sounds again. I hastily place the bowl under my seat as the screen before me lights up, rapidly calibrating. The stream of letters appears once more and I resume my needlework. Sewing, sewing. Every line I draw is a seam. Thrumming, thrumming. *A with T. G with C.* On and on and on. I sink down into myself. I am the needle yielding the thread.

A frantic beeping sound starts up to my left, perhaps 20 people away from me. There is a moment in between. A moment lasting as long as it takes for my needle to lift from the screen. Then there is a sound like a roaring wind as *they* come. I do not look, I do not stir. I have seen this countless times before. A mismatch made. A blundering mistake. The man is ripped

## Futures

upwards from his seat, 10 metres into the air and taken. We know not where. He was simply here for a while and now he is gone. I resume my sewing.

*Perhaps a day later.*

The klaxon sounds. I turn to see the girl next to me, then stop myself as I remember. She was taken. Instead, an old man sits beside me. He painfully reaches down to retrieve his broth, but he spills it as his hand trembles. Swiftly, I still his hand and raise the bowl up myself, handing it to him.

“Thank you,” he whispers softly. I start, having breathed in silence for so long. I nod my

response, drinking my own broth.

“You know, I used to be a scientist,” he continues, his whisper broken, hoarse. I listen to his words with horror, prepared to feel a change in the air. The man continues, oblivious.

“What they are doing here, it is quite remarkable. Perhaps it is humanity’s fault for searching too far, too wide ... *something* was going to find us. They studied us from afar before this, mark my words. They enslaved us. Every line you draw on that screen – the AI *we* invented – translates to a hydrogen bond between DNA bases. Data transmitting through these countless wires, forming millions of physical human

genomes simultaneously. Then, they mix our DNA with theirs to achieve what they desire most ... *form*.” His voice trails away.

There is a change in the air. At first, a near-imperceptible shimmering. I brace myself. *They have heard him. It is over.*

Instead, they pass us by. Row upon row of entities. No longer formless. The klaxon sounds, our signal to resume. My gaze falters as I see them. The needle trembles in my hand.

**Freya Masters** is a graduate from the University of St Andrews with a strong interest in science communication and a passion for science writing.

## THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

**Freya Masters reveals the inspiration behind *Seams*.**

Throughout my time as an undergraduate at the University of St Andrews (BSc biochemistry (Hons)), I became fascinated with the sheer necessity of science communication — so much so that I am now completing a master’s in science communication at Imperial College London.

In science, it is often thought that, until we reach a certain level of capability in an endeavour such as genetic engineering, there is no need to address its potential implications. Thus, by the time the technology is successful, it might be too late for diverse groups to engage in the rich complexity of conversation needed to discuss both the direction of research and its limitations.

*Seams* is a commentary on this crucial need.

For all the wonder and intrigue of science, the DNA of scientific research should not be sewn without this conversation. It does not seem fitting that, in innovative research, the societal and human implications might remain as elusive, unnamed and formless as the alien entities depicted here — until, catastrophically, one day they are quite real indeed.

