



D/2021/45/582 – ISBN 978 94 014 7210 4 – NUR 801

Cover and interior design: Peer De Maeyer  
Cover illustration: Axelle Vanquaille  
Back cover portrait: An Clapdorp  
Ecosystem Canvas visuals (p. 226 / fragments  
on p. 246-249, p. 263, p. 283, p. 329 /  
p. 318 / p. 330 / p. 332 / back cover):  
Tim Tondeleir | Big Boom

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**RIK VERA**

# **The Guide to the Ecosystem Economy**

*Sketchbook for Your  
Organisation's Future*

**Lannoo  
Campus**

***"Start as a brush  
and become the canvas."***

Dendermonde, 18th June 2021

(I almost wrote the year 2 AC, C designating Corona)

# Intro

## Damned hard work

The most difficult part of writing a book is (surprise) actually writing the book; the second most difficult part is finishing it.

In my younger days, I enjoyed painting. I remember that every time I painted, there came a moment when I could say: this is it. One more stroke of the brush would ruin the whole thing. It is what it is; let us call this a finished painting. I had absolutely no problem with stepping back, leaving the painting on its own, out there in the open, naked and vulnerable, to be seen, perceived and judged by others.

Writing a book seems to be more difficult. If I had to guess why, I would say that it has something to do with the overview. One can take a step back and look at a painting. Squinted eyes, a frown on your face, head tilted a little to the left, leaning backwards, your right hand under your chin and a brush held in your left. In that moment, you can almost trade places with the person who will see the painting – you are no longer the painter. But you can't do that with a book. I can't in any case. I don't see the whole book. I see fragments, bits and pieces, extracts and ideas. (If you asked me where I refer to antifragility, my best estimate would be that it is somewhere in Chapter 5.) I can't step into the shoes of the reader. Whenever I try to see it through a reader's eyes, I am inclined to write some extra lines here and there. It seems like a book is never ready to be perceived and judged by the wild wide world out there.

But you can't keep on writing. About a week ago, I called *The Guide to the Ecosystem Economy* a book. I said it was done. I had it printed in the format of a book, smiled, relaxed and promised myself that this was it. I would not touch it any more.

The only thing I still needed to do was write a foreword. You know, the "thank people introduction" to the book where you have to credit everybody who contributed to the book and try not to forget anyone.

In other words: that minefield of human interaction. The book itself was finished, I pressed "send" and the manuscript was in the book publisher's inbox. That was it. A heavy weight fell off my shoulders. I had not slept much in those last few weeks. A few days after saying "here you go" to the book, my body told me that it had been a hell of a journey and stole my most important instrument for a couple of days: my voice. For a while, I was the voiceless keynote speaker. Nature always wins.

## Hurricane

Today, on 18<sup>th</sup> June 2021, I had a conversation about ecosystems with Nina at nexxworks, Jeroen and Esther at Bol.com (a company I refer to in this book) and Matthew Brennan, a renowned speaker and writer focusing on Chinese mobile technology and innovation. His book, *Attention Factory* (the story of TikTok & China's ByteDance), is a must-read. You can try to draw links between my view on ecosystems and that "attention factory". It is an overwhelming illustration of the building blocks and dynamics I describe.

It was the type of conversation one could have recorded to be viewed by the whole world, because it grew organically into a deep and profound session on all things related to big data, AI, algorithms, the potential creepiness of being too close to customers (who want to be treated like an individual), double flywheels, partnerships, engaged customers, user-generated content, the building blocks of an ecosystem and of course how to build one. We were five like-minded souls with the same drive and passion, inspiring one another.

For the duration of that conversation, I knew I had to hold my horses. I told myself: "Rik, your book is finished. You are not going to touch it any more. Don't even think about it. No. No. No." It was a perfect storm inside my head, but in some way I could find the very eye, the place full of calm. I was pretty proud of myself. I would not have to run to the publisher and shout out loud: "Stop the printing process, I have some new stuff that needs to be in the book no matter what."

But just when I thought I had survived this hurricane of thoughts, ideas and insights, Matthew said one thing, one little thing, that was enough to push me out of the eye of the storm and into internal mayhem. I was dragged into the danger zone, my head spinning, my feet unable to

stay on the ground, my body being lifted into the air to be thrown down to earth, bruised and battered.

What he said felt like the very summary of my book. It was the key to my struggle in chapter 9. I admit that I had originally envisioned chapter 9 as a manual, a recipe, a step-by-step guide on how to build an ecosystem. But building an ecosystem is not about following a recipe. Matthew was talking about TikTok and said: "They started like the brush, and evolved into the canvas."

### The summary

And I just knew: that is the summary. That is what my book is all about: why and how to evolve from being a simple brush into a canvas on which anything can happen.

As you might have guessed, seeing as you are reading this in my book, I shouted: "Dear publisher, stop for a moment! There is something that needs to make the book no matter what."

I told Matthew Brennan that, by providing me with this metaphor, I had to thank him for ruining and making my day at the same time. "Can I quote you on this?" I asked. "I will refer to you and your book," I said. (I almost said please, a word I hardly ever use.) He agreed. In my head I was dancing.

Straight after this energising conversation, I grabbed my computer and started doing what I had sworn I wouldn't do: I wrote a few hundred extra words for the book that was supposed to be finished. While I was writing I received an email from Matthew.

Before I turn to the quote itself, I have to share something else that struck me in his email: "It's in Chapter 5 somewhere."

This quote by Alex Zhu, the former CEO of TikTok, is exactly what the over 250 pages of my book are all about: *"When you want to grow early on, you want to be a brush, meaning you have to be very specific; you have to solve a specific need very well... Later you want to be a canvas; you want all kinds of things to happen on this blank canvas."*

## Preface

I bring good news for companies big and small. If, after reading the first chapters, you want to become an ecosystem, a canvas on which all types of stuff can happen (business models that bring money), or you want to become some of that stuff that happens on the canvas, the simple message is this: yes, you can. Is there a better way to open this book than by saying that you can do it?

Because right now, you are a brush.

Read the book, get to know and understand the building blocks and the dynamics of an ecosystem and then... just start building it. Like a surfer riding one of those gigantic waves in Nazaré, there is no stopping halfway.

This is a preface, so I need to start to thank people.

As I said in the preface of my first book, I am a dreamer. Writing *The Guide to the Ecosystem Economy*, I have not only been writing about crazy surfer dudes, I have been one myself.

*Managers The Day After Tomorrow* was a calm sea when I compare it to the content and dynamics of this book. I have had the guts (and the complete and utterly stupid craziness) to surf this gigantic wave of platforms, ecosystems, canvasses, big data, AI, customer-centricity, engaged and empowered people and their impact on people, business and society and I have to admit that there have been many moments when I thought "What the heck was I thinking?", but I knew I had to surf that whole wave. There was no giving up.

I am a dreamer. When dreamers want to realise their crazy dreams, they need warmth, love and support. Many people have been patient enough to live with the many mood swings of a writer, which are worse than four seasons in one day (or they have just ignored them), and have not stopped pampering me with warmth and love: my wife Christel (who is also kind of acting as the CFO of my business) and my children Lisse and Lore. Without Stephanie, who is running my company as if it were her own, I would have been drowning in all the practicalities that are part of being a keynote speaker, off- and online; and without Alanah



(only she knows how important she has been in the writing process), this book would have been finished in 2035 (that is: never).

If I had never met Peter and Steven sometime in 2015, my business life might have taken a completely different direction, I guess. They were, and still are, my heroes and role models. Thanks buddies, and thanks to the whole nexxworks crew and community. Speaking of communities: in January 2021 I wrote a white paper called *2020. The year of inspiration*, which you can still download from my website [www.rikvera.com](http://www.rikvera.com). That led to a tsunami of online events, webinars, jam sessions or whatever we called those digital meetings. I have to thank all those who participated and shared ideas, challenges, questions and remarks, as all of them contributed to my writing process.

Finally, I want to repeat the words I used in the preface of *Managers The Day After Tomorrow*, which is a long version of the preface of this new book.

*"We have a crushing responsibility. We need to shape the world for the sake of our children and grandchildren. All of us. Including the managers of today and tomorrow. I hope they will do so with The Day After Tomorrow in mind. I hope that they can help their companies adapt to the new world in which my grandchildren will grow up."*

*With this in mind, I dedicate this book to Sam, Line and Nout, my grandchildren.*

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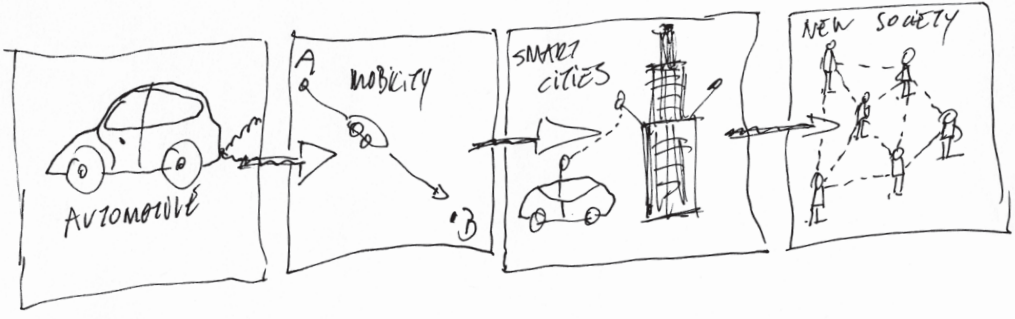


He is silent for a minute, sipping his drink and ~~me~~ <sup>me</sup> ~~there~~ <sup>there</sup> he continues:

"How many rows 1. I have not noticed that there is quite a lot I didn't know I didn't know. # all.

There is a whole new world happening here; it has been happening for years and I had no clue. What I have learned is ~~that~~ <sup>later</sup> ~~automobiles~~ <sup>about automobiles</sup> in it is not even clear ~~automobile~~ <sup>automotive industry</sup>, it is about smart cities and another society in which all industries will melt down into... some thing that we have never seen before. And it is not going to happen. It is happening. Right here. Right now.

He went from 'The money drive' then, what we've done was a dead-end street. We don't know so much. When one business model or one industry, we have to invent a new paradigm to find a new meaning. We will not be able to do that if we don't embrace the technology that we have discovered or the way we do it.





1

# Reality

“Either you deal with what is the reality,  
or you can be sure that the reality  
is going to deal with you.”

ALEX HALEY

---

*featuring:*

*a black swan*

*the end of horse(-)power*

*a broken system*

*the gift of time*

*a metal burden*

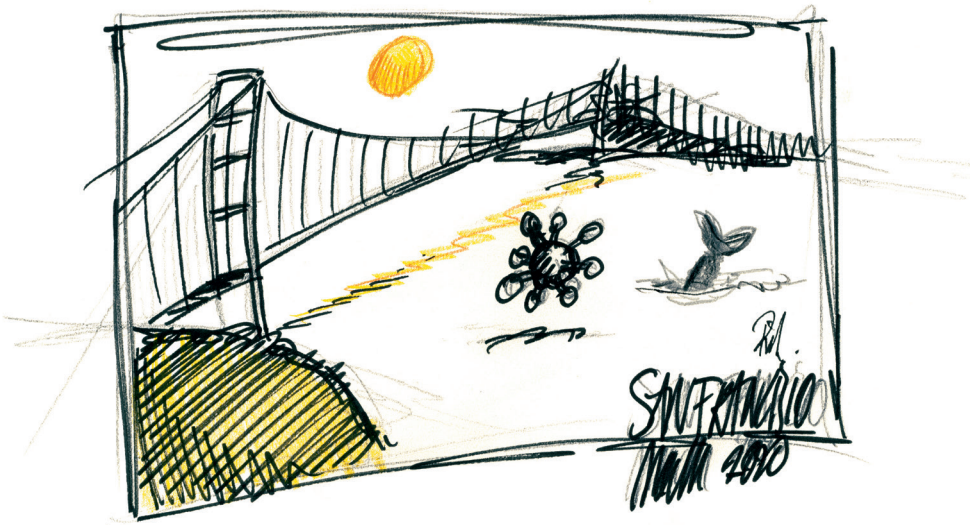
*the chicken or the egg*

*a dead-end train*



## San Francisco, March 2020

It's the first week of March 2020. I'm on a ferry in San Francisco Bay. As the day draws to a close, the air is calm with hardly any wind. The water in the bay is as dark and flat as a black mirror. It's getting cold out on the upper deck where we are drinking that Mexican beer, the one with the same name as the virus that has just escalated to a pandemic. We are laughing and having fun. In that moment, we don't realise how serious this big virus with a little name is nor how devastating it will be for people, society and business. How could we know that this thing would change our world and have such an overwhelming impact?



The sky is blue and as the sun sets over the Golden Gate Bridge to our left, we take pictures with our smartphones. No social distancing yet. No masks. Just a bunch of people having fun, enjoying the moment and the stunning view. The boat leaves a V-shaped wake behind it, stark white in the dark blue ice-cold water. In the distance, San Francisco bathes in the waning orange glow of the sun. As we celebrate this powerful moment, a whale's tail fin breaks the surface of the water. We have another beer and realise that this may be our last trip for a long time. Since 2015, I have travelled to this vibrant city a few times a year. It's like my second home. I am in love with the spirit of the Valley

and the no-nonsense attitude of the people who live here – how conquering the world and beating old and sleepy companies and business models is just what they do. It hurts to know I will not be back before summer. Little did I know at the time that it would end up being much longer than that.

### **Dendermonde, December 2020**

I am rewriting this first chapter for the seventeenth time just before 2020 turns into 2021. Since March, I have barely left the house, making only one trip to Vienna. Yesterday we started the first round of vaccinations in Belgium. I built a studio at home so that I could continue giving my keynotes. My words and ideas are travelling the planet, but my body is locked inside this small bubble. Sometimes I feel as restless as a lion in a zoo. I have nothing to worry about, but I miss the thrill of survival.

### **San Francisco, March 2020**

Two days ago, I celebrated my 57<sup>th</sup> birthday in San Francisco. This evening, however, we are having dinner at a small harbour on the other side of the Bay. We enjoy our aperitifs on the restaurant's terrace overlooking the harbour and San Francisco in the far distance. This evening,

