Grey Mirror resources

Some background on whether deep uncertainty about the future is also an opportunity for more people to write it

Jess Bland
Here are some things that are lurking in the back of my mind when talking to Aarathi Krishnan and guests about this lecture on 11 October 2022. Reading it back, there's definitely bias towards UK projects from people who might be in the room on the day. Let me know what I've missed via @pesska on Twitter or you can find my email on the CSER site.

Decolonising methods for imagining the future

Start with Aarathi Krishnan's recent chapter on "Unsettling the Coloniality of Foresight" from Sacred Civics and her paper on decolonial governance of digital technology in the humanitarian sector. Recently, seven authors working inside and outside global organisations like the OECD and UNESCO challenged thinking about the future to be more inclusive in this LinkedIn post. An episode of the Long Time Academy podcast gives a great introduction to people working to decolonise the future. OCAD University in Canada has recently started an event series on decolonising futures, in person and online.

It feels more common now to see these critiques, but I first really started to grasp this when I read what Tegan Bristow wrote about curating an exhibition in Johannesburg called Post African Futures in Critical African Studies , Vol 9, 2017. If 2017 is the beginning, then the end of that arc has been some exciting participatory practices with young people. It was a pleasure to see the ground-breaking work done by ex-colleagues at School of International Futures, in their workshops in North, West and East Africa to support young participants to create stories about the digital futures they want.

Vivid, creative futures with aspects of participation

In 2016, Stuart Candy and Jake Dunagan summarised the move amongst those thinking about long term futures towards creative, speculative practices in a very short article called 'The Experiential Turn'. Their participatory approaches gave designers and curators recognition in the more formal foresight community for the immersive future environments they create to work with large scale audiences.

Successful, thoughtful design studios emerged in that era including Near Future Laboratory and Superflux, who describe their process for carefully developing alternative views of commonly discussed technologies in this post about a film called the Intersection they made in 2021.

Moving into more mass media inventions, filmmaker Matt Golding wrote a post recently arguing that important changes in the world won't happen without more people having

agency over the future, including how he's thinking about [imagined futures as part of our social media and virtual reality creations](#).

In [this FuturePod episode, Kristin Alford](#) reflects on using foresight methods as a way of designing exhibitions for children in the Museum of Discovery in Australia.

There are also relevant ideas from artists thinking about how audience participation disrupts their future making. The theatre company Blast Theory thinking has written about [what happens when there is spontaneous participation](#) in the alternative worlds they create.

The connection between narrative theory and building future worlds

Similar reflections on how to manage and encourage disruption to a performance or exhibition come into Paul Graham-Raven and Johannes Stipple's [evaluation of their work on the exhibition 'The Museum of Carbon Ruins](#)'. Their hope was to create the opportunity for citizens to critique the post-fossil fuel futures that are embedded in government policy. Using insights from the history of literary utopias, they make a useful comparison with schemes a decade or so ago for [creating science fiction prototypes](#) for large tech companies, which were rarely about encouraging disruptive or radical ideas.

Genevieve Lively, Will Slocombe, and Emily Spiers argue that our ubiquitous storytelling skills will be vital for the widest participation in developing new futures. Yet the limits of stories and narrative also limit the kinds of stories we're likely to tell. Their article is behind a paywall: ['Futures Literacy through Narrative'. Futures 125 (2021): 1-9](#) (pay wall). A related recent conference on bringing [storytelling about the future into policymaking is available in full on Vimeo](#). I particularly liked the account of the [RAF Stories of the Future](#) in the final session, describing how the stories allowed people to speak more freely outside their usual strict hierarchies.

When I was at Nesta, we supported a fantastic [working paper from Caroline Bassett (now also in Cambridge), Ed Steinmueller and Georgina Voss](#) connecting the stories in science fiction and their real-world influence on technology. The stand-out story was the relationship between the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy and the development of the iPad. I also often return to the section on fanfiction that makes the point that many authors can successfully write from the same fictional future.

Colleagues at the Leverhulme Centre for the Future of Intelligence in Cambridge make the case that the dominance of particular narratives can also make us less imaginative about the technologies we create. [Stephen Cave and Kanta Dihal's work on the Whiteness of AI](#) demonstrates this very clearly.

Charities and third sector interest in democratising decision making by listening to a range of views about the future

The Joseph Rowntree Trust's emerging futures programme using alternative visions of the future to help drive what they fund.

Cassie Robinson has had a hand in lots of similar projects now and and in the past, including supporting philanthropy towards a set of more transformative goals. I can't keep up with all she's doing, so check her Twitter for the latest. The other excellent (related) portal is Careful Industries Civil Society Foresight Observatory. And of course Geoff Mulgan's new book Another World is Possible.

Nesta's work on Our Future: by the people, for the future offers an analysis and explanation of different tools that can be used for supporting views of the future developed through collective processes. There are detailed exercises you could use in the Long Time Academy toolkit.

Why some of the CSER team are concerned with thinking about the long term

There are members of the CSER term that are motivated by the strong Longtermist argument for prioritising a better future over a better present, articulated succinctly in a post from Will MacAskill.

Others are interested in how imagining a catastrophic scenario in the future can help us avoid it today, whether through playing out the decisions that governments and companies in a role play game will need to make or developing better disaster response mechanisms. These exercises deliver on that goal in different ways. The expert game master is vital to creating the highly informed futures in the Intelligence Rising game and the planetary defence exercises focused on participants observing a pre-scripted scenario.

Some of us recently took part in a worldbuilding competition to develop optimistic but plausible futures for AI. With entries from around the world, each with their own detailed timeline for their future, the finalists show how the competition encouraged highly structured but independent future-making.

For me, many of these discussions come back to one question: can we harness the mechanism that gives us a Netflix success to provoke large scale retellings of the future, splintering off in many directions, or will the tools of mass media only ever lead to a massive but passive audience?