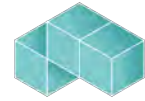


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BACKCASTING [BETTER] FUTURES



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ABSTRACT

The need for radical transformation of human practices to be more just, inclusive and sustainable is undeniable. This workshop seeks to trouble the role of design world-making efforts in the transformation process. Through a 4-step process, the workshop considers ways of moving from the rich imaginaries that often result from such world-making, to implementable transformations of situated practices for today. This conceptual and methodological re-scaling extends existing design efforts in two ways. First, we aim for desirable ‘implementable nows’ that carry the magic of unconstrained futures – fantastical, multi-species, situated and delightfully strange fabulations that are restorative and inclusive – yet are realisable today. Second, we borrow the notion of backcasting from futures-oriented studies. We investigate the potential of collectively casting back from design fabulations, so that we might (re-)narrate and thereby (re-)envision radical pathways for design in societal transition today.

INTRODUCTION

Experimental design research has long recognised the conflict between the need for new visions and the seeming impossibility of leapfrogging what Kelly (2010) describes as the *adjacent possible*: that which

sits just outside what exists, and is possible because we can envision the pathway that may take us there, by making small adjustments, extensions or divergences in existing pathways. Kelly explains: “[a]n invention or discovery that is too far ahead of its time is worthless; no one can follow. Ideally, an innovation opens up only the next adjacent step from what is known and invites the culture to move forward one hop” (2010:153). From a pragmatic perspective, this proposition seems logical. However, it risks driving iterative development, and ignores the ways that design is complicit in creating many of the problems we face today (Papanek, 1972).

We can no longer deny the need to radically and rapidly transform human practices to be more just, inclusive and sustainable. The World Economic Forum *Global Risks Report 2021* maps out intersecting risks from social fractures and environmental degradation, with which we must grapple if we are serious about resilience (WEF, 2021). In particular, the report argues that sustainability will only be achieved through drastic lifestyle changes. Wiedmann, Lenzen, Keyßer, et al. (2020), similarly identify affluence as the greatest threat to humanity, and stress that “if we are to solve existential environmental problems – like climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, we must change our affluent lifestyles and reduce overconsumption, in combination with structural change (UNSW Newsroom, 2020).” Such changes require bottom-up action, new visions, new values, new practices.

This workshop embodies a shared aspiration to expand the ways that experimental design research steps into this problem space. The work is led by *a desire*, a recognition of *a challenge*, and *a hypothesis*. The desire is to find ways of moving from future visions to new methods for formulating and infrastructuring practices today, while espousing values of inclusivity, equitable access to opportunities for flourishing, and multi-species justice. The challenge is to retain the magic of these future fabulations as we re-scale our vision to

pragmatic, situated concerns. The hypothesis is that the approach of backcasting, reinterpreted through means of experimental design methods, may provide some clues for how we might do this.

BACKCASTING

Backcasting originated in Future Studies, is integral to Anticipation Studies, and has been applied in Sustainable Development (Dreborg, 1996; Holmberg & Robèrt, 2000; Poli, 2017). It is an explicitly normative approach that lends itself extremely well to collective research into high-complexity, long-term sustainability issues (Dreborg, 1996). At its core, backcasting enables researchers and stakeholders to collectively consider common but complex issues and scale-shift – move from concepts that are almost impossible to usefully grapple with, to practical steps towards futures in which today's concerns have been dealt with in some way.

CASTING BACK THROUGH DESIGN

Significant efforts have been made in design research to envision new futures and infrastructure new possibilities (Auger & Encinas, 2017; Björgvinsson, Ehn & Hillgren, 2012; Blythe et al., 2016; DiSalvo, Redström & Watson, 2013; Dolejšová, Wilde, et al., 2020; Escobar, 2018; Irwin, 2015; Le Dantec & DiSalvo, 2013; Light, 2019; Margolin, 2018; Wilde, 2020, etc.). Building on this foundation, we aim to broaden the scope of design's capacity to respond to existential challenges such as societal and ecosystem collapse, by suggesting radical, yet actionable design interventions, then rescaling them to become implementable in the now. This process involves developing strategies for scaling *out* – envisioning desirable interventions which might succeed replication through their iterative and situated duplication in different sites (Bauer, et al., 2020). Our workshop scales out our prior efforts (e.g. Dolejšová et al., 2020). It involves a hybrid launch and four online sessions that draw on experimental design research methods to grapple with the *challenge* part of our *desire|challenge|hypothesis* formulation. To operationalise our efforts, we use participatory research through design and narrative design techniques to remodel backcasting and rescale it for reconsideration *through* design.

To seed the workshop, we ask participants to bring a short but rich vignette of a preferable future that considers multiple aspects of the world they wish to portray. One way of approaching this thickening of ideas is to use a STEEP analysis, in which Sociological, Technological, Economical, Environmental and

Political factors are examined along with their mutual dependencies:¹ (Szigeti et al., 2011). Other methods and approaches are equally welcome. What is important is that the futures are rich, complex and deeply considered. To afford common ground, we encourage participants to find inspiration in the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (MUFPP²) and approach this policy initiative as an enabling constraint. The MUFPP proposes a range of actions that can be undertaken by cities today to transform their food system to be more sustainable. These include 6 categories of actions in governance, sustainable diets and nutrition, social and economic equality, food production, food supply and distribution, and food waste. The human food system impacts all 17 of the UN Global Goals (United Nations, 2019) and pressures all 9 planetary boundaries (Rockström et al., 2009; Willet et al., 2019). It is global in scope, yet plays out in intimate everyday actions; shapes and reflects our cultures, identities, interests and concerns. It thus embodies the scalar tensions inherent in the socio-ecological crises, which are impactful across personal, social, political, ecological and planetary scales. By relating future vignettes to one of the MUFPP focus areas, we can be sure to range across these scales as we focus our matters of concern.

During the workshop, we encourage the use of experimental, participatory, performative, poetic means to bring the futures to life. Short facilitation sessions will enable collective deepening of each vignette. Then four 2hr online sessions will focus on casting back through design, as follows:

SESSION 1: WORLDBUILDING:

In this session, participants work together to converge and develop their preferable futures, asking questions such as: *Which aspects of these futures can co-exist, and how? What are the conflicts, and complications of converging them?* The goal is to congeal 3-5 future worlds that will be collectively developed over the following sessions.

SESSION 2: CASTING BACK TO MOVE FORWARD:

Having built their enriched future world, participants work in small groups to identify 3 major pivot points that led to the development of that world: crucial events, social movements or environmental circumstances that prompted a reorientation. This work should be done from 3 perspectives: that of i) a human actor, who might plausibly exist today, ii) a human actor who would NOT plausibly exist today, and iii) a non-human actor from any timeframe. One pivot point should be common to all three points of view.

¹www.designmethodsfinder.com/methods/steep-analysis

² <https://www.milanurbanfoodpolicypact.org>

SESSION 3: (RE-)NARRATING:

The focus of this session is on (re-)narrating the story of *living through* one of the pivot points in the history leading up to the envisioned future. A first narration unfolds the subjective perspective of one of the three actors developed in session 2. The aim is to convey: *How it felt to live through the pivot point; the actors' motivations and actions during the event; and the challenges they have overcome in their journey to today.* The story of this pivot point is then (re-)narrated from the perspective of a different actor, then another, and so on. These narrations can be supported by any medium or combination of media. The aim is to engage a multiplicity of views, and to demonstrate the lived subjectivities of these events. As the work unfolds, groups may form and re-form, scaling up or down, in and out in size, focus and concern. The aim is to (re-)personalise, (re-)invest, and (re-)generate other perspectives on pathways, as a way to thicken the understanding of the futures in question.

SESSION 4: MAKING IT TANGIBLE:

In the final session, groups articulate design actions that can be (or are being) embarked on today that will reorient situated local practices towards the envisioned futures. The aim of this work is to make tangible our thinking around how design can be instrumental in instantiating steps towards envisioned futures or exert influence on crucial pivot points such that they move from being preferable or even possible, to being plausible (Voros, 2003). Participants then reflect on the potential of *casting back through design*, and how this work may be developed. This reflective discussion is pivotal to the workshop, and we hope will result in action points for furthering the collective inquiry.

AFTER THE WORKSHOP

Backcasting [better] Futures forms part of an interdependent series of experimental design research inquiries, co-authored by a shifting collective of researchers. We invite fellow travellers to join these collective efforts (Feeding Food Futures³ n.d.). In the tradition of previous workshops (e.g. Davis et al., 2020; Dolejšová, van Gaalen, et al., 2020; Dolejšová, Wilde, et al., 2020), we envision a collective publication in which we might gather the futures, reflect on the process and insights derived. The purpose would be to extend the reflective process so we might further scale the project of transitioning society forward in ways that are richly informed by critical experimental design processes.

³ <https://foodfutures.group/>

CONCLUSION

Rather than proscribe how backcasting should be done in design, the purpose of this work is to experiment with a proposed model for *casting back through design* to preserve radical ways of imagining in what we do to move forward. We approach this effort from a range of scales, building on the hypothesis that casting back through design, through (re-)narration and world-making, can assist us in operationalising societal transition. People recognise themselves in stories, not in theories or diagrams. By developing – and not only backcasting, but recasting – personal stories using experimental design methods, we can a) build nuanced, context-situated perspectives that are relatable to preferred future visions, and b) make first moves in infrastructuring pathways towards them. This combined process of world-making and narrative recasting is designed to give rise to scalable experimental design research methods, that might serve as tools for responding to the urgent, complex, and highly situated challenges we face.

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