

TIME MACHINE / REVERSE ARCHAEOLOGY

Create an experience or artifact from the future

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1. Description

How can artists and designers help to shape the future? Over a decade in the foresight field, I have learned that a key to impactful exploration of possible futures is to bridge between abstract thought and concrete experience. Artists and designers can build bridges of imagination between these registers to take people into alternative futures – or at the very least, to visit there and bring amazing things back.

This assignment offers two versions of a single creative process. The task in **Reverse Archaeology** is to *make an artifact from the future*. Archaeologists use found fragments of earlier eras to deduce a portrait of the vanished world which produced them. Here the process goes in the opposite direction: you will use a future scenario to generate a fragment from a world to come. The slightly more comprehensive challenge of **Time Machine** is to *put audiences into a situation from a future world*. On both tracks, Prototype and Performance respectively, the underlying goal is the same: to tell a compelling story through an experiential encounter.

Both variants represent a breed of emerging hybrid practice where strategic foresight meets design, art and performance idioms; immersive "experiential futures" and tangible "design fictions" in which elements of future scenarios are manifested here and now. The process developed independently of experience prototyping, roleplaying and bodystorming methods, but bears some resemblance to each of these. Its pedagogical innovation consists less in technological novelty than in a choreography of creative thinking calculated to bring deeper awareness of possible futures systematically into conversation with current artistic practices.

This design-led framework for *rigorous imagining* (a wonderful phrase from UNESCO futurist Riel Miller) expands the horizons of practitioners and of their audiences. It helps develop a capacity for strategic foresight (or *la prospective*) which will prove essential in 21st century education.

2. Materials/equipment

You will need to find a **Future Scenario** – a brief textual story about the future – to explore. Instructors/facilitators guiding a group may find it helpful to identify this ahead of time (see Step 3). The project can incorporate whatever media and tools are at hand, but it requires nothing more than ink and paper.

3. Instructions

Step 1. Choose your mission

Reverse Archaeology involves making an artifact, a Prototype - generally a 2D design using paper, because it's fast and cheap. However virtually any medium could work - clay, painting, video, 3D printing, etc. This track is a good option for those tackling the assignment solo. **Time Machine** involves creating a Performance to bring people into a future. This is a more comprehensive task as performance often incorporates tangible artifacts for props and set dressing, so may be more suited for work in small teams.

Step 2. Form teams and plan timing (if applicable)

If opting for group-based work, form teams of 2 to 5 members. If Performance is the plan, then the instructor/facilitator should allow time for the culminating show. Naturally mileage will vary, but e.g. 20 players = 5 teams of 4 people, and 5 mins performance per group = 25 mins at least. Have team members sit together.

Step 3. Adopt a scenario (up to 20 mins)

At this point instructors may distribute scenarios to the teams and continue on to Step 4. (If scenarios are selected in advance, consider assigning teams to alternative futures for a single domain of interest shared across the group.) Otherwise, search online, in teams if applicable, for a scenario worth diving into more deeply. Look for:

- A topic that all team members can relate to will serve best, e.g. scenarios for your city or country.
- A narrative between two paragraphs and two pages of text; short enough to come to grips with quickly, but long enough to get your teeth into.
- A time horizon 10 to 50 years out; distant enough to challenge, close enough to connect.
- Scenarios which stretch plausibility, but don't break it, are most interesting. Dator's second law of the future: "Any useful statement about the future should at first appear to be ridiculous."

Step 4. Visit the world (20-30 mins)

Silently read through the text. Assume this scenario has in fact come to pass, and that you are looking at things from this future point in time. As you read keep an eye out for intriguing “what-ifs” or hooks to consider more closely. What are the main things that have changed in this future? No scenario is exhaustive, so you’ll need to flesh out some details creatively. Use these questions:

- What problems have lessened or gone away? Which have newly appeared or worsened?
- What activities have stopped or diminished? What has increased?
- What are some of the surprising new things in this world that don’t exist today?

Step 5. Generate candidate premises for an artifact/experience (5 mins)

Reverse Archaeology: What remarkable object, product or communication from this future would most help a visitor from the present to understand the scenario? It might be a very mundane or typical thing in that world, but should be very striking to the rest of us. Possible artifacts include Postcards, Posters, Packaging, or Periodicals (e.g. a newspaper or magazine front page).

Time Machine: Confirm the length of your visit to the future (performance) with the instructor, or choose one (e.g. 5 minutes). In that window, what specific situations can you transport us into? What skills can team members contribute? You could co-create a Presentation, Program, or Public service announcement. Anything that brings the whole group into your future for the duration is fair game.

Step 6. Choose your premise (5 mins)

Of the premises generated, what’s the most captivating “tip of the iceberg” you can create to conjure the larger scenario world, within the time and with the resources (tools, materials, people, space) available? What will capture an audience’s imagination and lure them into imagining the rest? Make it fun and playful, but not a throwaway line. Distil and concentrate the richness of the scenario into an experience.

Step 7. Craft your artifact/experience (1-2 hours)

Diegesis is the technical term for a story world. What you’re seeking here could be called *diegetic integrity*: put us in the world of the scenario, and keep us there. Don’t break the universe!

Reverse Archaeology: Whatever you make should be *from* the future, not *about* it. Make something that looks and behaves as if it had just been zapped back in time through a wormhole. Evoke the story as concretely and compellingly as possible.

Time Machine: Do you have a projector and laptop with presentation software at your disposal? Could you add background music or sound effects? (Only if it will help!) Might you create signs or handouts to “dress” the room like a movie or theatre set? If you’re presenting to a roomful of people, where in the scenario is this room, and what are all the people doing there? There’s no “fourth wall” so the more ingeniously you can incorporate your surroundings, the less suspension of disbelief you are demanding of people, and the more they can focus on your story.

Step 8. Showtime (30-45 mins, if applicable)

Dig up the artifacts and fire up the time machine, it’s time to visit the future! Whatever you end up making, there’s a growing community who will be delighted to hear about it. Feel free to get in touch* and I will happily link to images, video and blog posts towards this fast-evolving practice in design fiction and experiential futures.

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