

The Thing From The Future

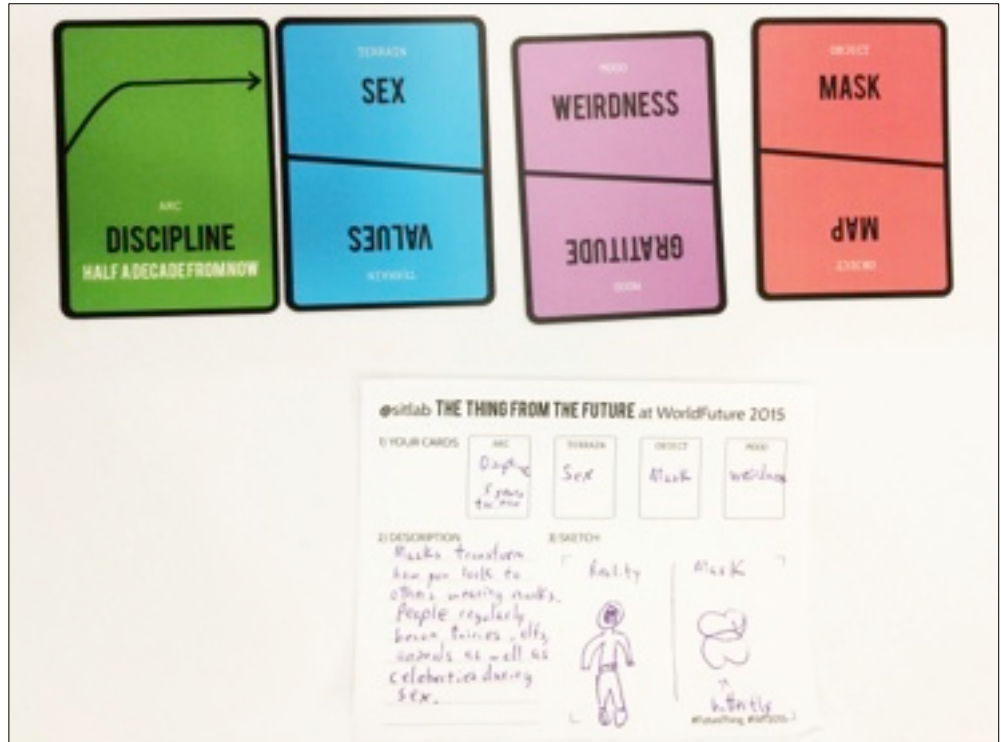
by Stuart Candy

Over the past decade there has been a surge of activity at the intersection of futures and design.¹ The term Experiential Futures refers to the gamut of approaches involving the design of situations and stuff from the future to catalyse insight and change.² With the maturation of this practice come new frameworks and tools that promise to make operating in this vast and still relatively unexplored design space easier than it has been to date.

The Thing From The Future offers one such framework. It is a card game that scaffolds imagination, strategic conversation and storytelling about possible futures. One part scenario generator, one part design tool, and one part party game, it lets players collaborate and compete to describe, sketch, and even physically prototype artifacts that might exist in alternative futures, based on a wide array of creative prompts.

Co-designed by the author, a professor in Strategic Foresight and Innovation at OCAD University, and Jeff Watson, a professor in the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts, the game was published in March 2014 by Situation Lab, which the two jointly run from Toronto and Los Angeles.

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Prompt and Playsheet from World Future Society Conference, San Francisco, July 2015. Photos by Stuart Candy, unless otherwise stated.

Here is how it works. There are 108 cards in the deck, in four categories or suits, to kindle and guide players' imaginations. The suits are Arc (the applicable time horizon and type of future, building on Jim Dator's framework of four generic futures³), Terrain (the context for the object), Object (the hypothetical "future thing" for which players will generate a description, ranging from Device, to Headline, to Monument), and Mood (how it feels to interact with that thing, lending an "interior" inflection to the other three more external elements). Either alone or in a group, players can make a creative prompt by combining any set of four cards from each suit.

A prompt offers the requisite "enabling constraints," in Katherine Hayles' phrase, for a player to describe a specific cultural

fragment from a possible future. Just as history leaves behind innumerable traces—in attics, museums, and other treasure troves—and these can speak volumes about what has happened in the past, the card deck is intended to help players to imagine evidence from the countless scenarios that *could* happen.

The artifact generation process is a sort of "reverse archaeology"⁴: whereas from a found artifact, an archaeologist infers the world that produced it, here, one creatively infers a specific artifact from a brief description of "the world".

The "artifact from the future" conceit dates back at least as far as *Wired* magazine's long-running back-page feature "Found" (ca. 2002-2013), but also finds precedents in work at Institute for the Future by Jason Tester

and others; in Jake Dunagan and Stuart Candy's FoundFutures initiative; and not least, in the accelerated spread over the past five years of popular futures-inflected design practices, including design fictions and speculative design⁶.

In its first eighteen months *The Thing From The Future* has had a productive career. It has been used as the ideation engine for several "speculative design jams" (mostly in collaboration with New York design collective The Extrapolation Factory), where we facilitated participants in generating artifact ideas through gameplay, then helped them bring these to life. Outcomes have included popup design fiction shows, such as street merchandise from the future made at New York University and put up for sale on the corner of Canal St and Broadway in Manhattan; and an exhibition about future live music performances, created by Stanford d.School students and mounted at the Tech Museum of Innovation in San Jose.

The game was also an Official Selection at international games festival IndieCade 2014. It has been played by thousands of people worldwide in settings ranging from the United Nations Development Programme's Annual Strategy Meeting in New York City, to NESTA's FutureFest in London; the Asia Pacific Foresight Network conference in Taiwan; the Toronto Maker Festival; Amplify Innovation Festival in Sydney; the IRAHSS symposium in Singapore; and the 5D Institute's transmedia storytelling event "The Science of Fiction" in Los Angeles.

Generating ideas for physical things is just the beginning. Originally the Object suit focused on small-scale,

Playing a film-themed version of the game at Hot Docs documentary film festival, Canada, April 2014. Photo by Joseph Michael Howarth, courtesy of Hot Docs.



"Futurematic" vending machine installed at OCAD University, Toronto, after the game's first deployment, March 2014

tangible items such as Wallet, Postcard, and Toy. This reflected the game's origins as a tool created for the first "Futurematic", where participants filled a vending machine with future artifacts produced in a single day using the game as the ideation engine. In the revised edition, released October 2014, "Object" expanded to encompass other forms of cultural output, such as Ritual, Festival, and Building.



The game has been

likened to Oblique Strategies, Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt's creativity-boosting card deck from the 1970s, as well as to the Kickstarter phenomenon, *Cards Against Humanity*. It has been covered by media ranging from *Forbes* to Discovery Channel to *La Repubblica*. Part of the reason for this widespread interest may lie in the game's flexibility: it turns out to serve equally well as a group icebreaker, ideation engine, and imagination gym.

In mid-2015 *The Thing From The Future* was recognised by the Association of Professional Futurists as a Most Significant Futures Work in the methodology category. But how does it actually work—what does this game bring to the table, so to speak?

Certainly the generative card deck is not a new phenomenon. One can find numerous antecedents ancient and modern, from tarot and playing cards, to a parade of more recent creations with generative properties, including IDEO's Method Cards, Art Center College of Design's Mobility VIP, and Near Future Laboratory's Design Fiction Kit.⁷

Still, the design of *The Thing From The Future* may be especially relevant to the foresight community as an encapsulated

methodology because it tackles something that to date has tended to be a specialist task (generating ideas for future artifacts), and makes that task easier.

Having served for a time as an advisor to editor Chris Baker on *Wired's* “artifacts from the future” I can attest to the challenge of generating new ideas from scratch every month.

Similarly, not long after he successfully crowdfunded (but was yet to start writing) his book *A History of the Future in 100 Objects*,⁸ I met with Adrian Hon in early 2011 and suggested that devising satisfactory descriptions for that many future artifacts might take longer than the single year he expected at the time. (In fact, Hon managed the feat in about two and a half years, which is still an excellent effort!) With a playful structure to scaffold imagination (or “choreograph attention” as creativity consultant Edward de Bono might say), such thinking can become faster, more systematic, and more accessible.

To get technical for a moment, *The Thing From The Future* exemplifies what my co-designer Jeff Watson calls a combinatorial prompting system.

The deck’s possibilities are practically inexhaustible, with dozens of options in each of the four suits multiplying out, in the revised edition, to yield over 3.7 million permutations, any of which could inspire countless artifact ideas.

The key to its generative potential is in the relationship between the deck’s four suits. It is a typology splitting the attributes of a future artifact into three complementary levels of abstraction that the player is offered as disparate elements to synthesise. These are the macro (type of scenario; Arc), meso (geographic or thematic area of interest; Terrain), and micro (the unit of cultural output, and focal point of the description you create; Object), and an interior state (Mood). In each round of gameplay, then, it could be

said that player is descending a sort of “abstraction ladder”, a notion I have adapted from linguist S.I. Hayakawa and developed into a design aid called the *Experiential Futures Ladder*.⁹

Here the climb is a rapid descent from high-level, abstract descriptors of possible futures—Grow, Collapse, Discipline, Transform—to multiple ground-level ideas for future artifacts expressing this grand narrative premise, and that often invite further exploration of a longer story en route. (In terms of the *Experiential Futures Ladder*, players move quickly from broad “Settings” down to specific “Stuff”, in such a way as to invite further exploration in the narrative-rich middle rungs of “Scenario” or “Situation”.) The Mood card brings in an unusual generative parameter, an emotional spin on the rest of the prompt that helps take gameplay out of mere thought-experiment territory and into a more resonant register.

Happily, a player need not

know or worry about such details in order to play, much as one need not understand precisely how an internal combustion engine works in order to drive a car safely to any number of destinations. The playful interface of a card game may conceal considerable complexity. Indeed, the offer of *The Thing From The Future* as a method could be said to consist in the way its design and storytelling engine works, mostly unseen, “under the hood”. The power to scaffold coherent prompts in large numbers depends on what might be called typological complementarity, where all members of each card category are conceptually compatible with all the others.

Another way to state this in relation to futures methods that the deck provides a



Artifact created as part of *Futurematic*: Canal Street, New York, June 2014



Playsheet from Toronto Maker Festival launch party, July 2015

means of exploring a combinatorial possibility space that is similar to morphological analysis, but a lot less scary¹⁰. While this may be at first a near-invisible (and admittedly pretty geeky) aspect of the game's design, the result is that, without great effort, players can engage in quite a sophisticated form of integrative, imaginative thinking, embedding abstract future-narrative notions in particular concepts for future things—all while actually enjoying themselves.

Continual feedback helps

to refine the game's contents, and extension sets or "Hackpacks" have also been created by Situation Lab to adapt the game for various audiences. Typically it does not take long for players and facilitators to get how the suits work, from which point it is straightforward for them to augment or adjust the contents, leaning exploration into specific subterritories in the future's vast and ever-expanding cone of possibilities. Ultimately, those who grasp this structure may find themselves equipped with an infinitely extensible,

customisable, layered way of using their imagination, with or without cards in hand.

The Thing From The Future (or #FutureThing on social media) has already generated a variety of narrative and making activity that cuts across the futures, design, gaming and transmedia storytelling communities, and it looks set to continue enabling surprising conversations and creations. Experiential Futures, it would appear, is going mainstream. All of this is an encouraging sign that designing playfulness into our professional practice as futurists, without sacrificing rigour, can help foresight have greater impact by making it more accessible—as well as more fun. ◀

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