

Notes from the sea: Promoting critical cultures of anticipation using posthuman scenarios and participatory design methods

Even as we anticipate the future, we are bound by our current beliefs about the world. We risk ignorance of these constraints because our beliefs are often deeply held. The need to examine these beliefs grows ever more urgent as we increase our knowledge of the interconnectedness of nature. As we strive to “consider and evaluate the present in light of the way [we] imagine the future,”¹ we can bring these constraints to the surface through critical cultures of anticipation. These cultures extend anticipatory work beyond our own, limited perspective into an expansive worldview that takes the complex adaptive systems of the future into account.

“Notes from the sea, 2218” is a speculative and participatory design project created to engage designers with these questions and to identify the anticipatory narratives that they usually take for granted. Participants took on specific perspectives that shifted their thinking from a dominant, human-centered paradigm to a posthuman counter-narrative that raised questions about humans’ place in the natural world and the morality of anticipatory exercises.

A dominant narrative goes like this: Humans showed up, screwed up, and now must clean up their mess by inventing new technology and drastically altering their behavior... or suffer the consequences. The popular view holds up a static and “pure” vision of nature, untouched by human intervention, as a state to which we ought to try to return.² Nature “waits” for a solution to human harm, and if we cannot deliver, it withers and dies. But this mainstream discussion is entirely human-centric. Humans have long accepted that it is wrong to destroy the environment, but is it wrong “simply because a sustainable environment is essential to (present and future) human well-being?”³

Potential counternarratives focus on the natural world as a complex adaptive system that responds to change by changing in turn⁴ or center non-human entities rather than human ones. “The challenges of environmental and socio-technical

change” present us with both the opportunity and the necessity to reexamine the dominant narratives that shape our thinking about the world.⁵ But how can we step outside our own limited perspective? We created an opportunity for critical conversation about the way we view the future, by building a fictional—but not impossible—world, employing creativity and logic, and reasoning together through dialogue.

To make this space for critical conversation, we employed both an artifact and a game. First, a fictional future marine biologist’s field journal introduced the audience to the idea that some species will adapt and even thrive in an altered environment. Then, a card game invited the audience to participate as “future biologists” by imagining adapted species and adding them to the field journal.

Marine biology served as an entry point for our audience of designers, to ensure that our thinking would be speculative but not fantastic: imaginative and future-thinking, but grounded in reality. The journal allowed the audience see through the eyes of a biologist.⁶ As a speculative object, it aimed to be “inspirational, infectious, and catalytic, zooming out and stepping back to address values and ethics.”⁷ In the card game, participants used prompts to imagine and sketch the way that a species might adapt to an altered environment. The game helped participants’ own values to emerge through the process;⁸ the cards themselves were a tangible and familiar way to engage the audience.⁹ After the participants had interacted with the notebook and cards, we joined them in conversation about their thinking.

Through the activity and discussion, the presenters and the audience together drew awareness to our preconceptions about a “natural” state, challenged a human-centered approach to anticipation, and discussed the moral implications of provoking conversations that question humans’ role in potential futures.

Participants examined the point of view from which we assign moral value to human actions: whether, from the perspective of certain species (as they currently exist or as they might evolve in the future), an altered environment might be “good.” This created some tension for the audience; the positive view felt dangerous and

irresponsible. However, we feel that this tension is evidence of success. A challenge to one's core beliefs is inherently uncomfortable. On the whole, the group responded positively to the experience and credited the participatory and speculative nature of the activity with enabling them to expand their thinking.

When we challenge mainstream narratives, we find ourselves free to consider problems in a different light. We are seeing signals of a willingness to adopt a posthuman view of the world in the private and public sector: Perdue Foods, the US-based food and agriculture company, has begun to consider what its chickens want from their living conditions.¹⁰ A Māori tribe sought and won legal recognition for the Whanganui river, ensuring that the river has “all the rights, duties, and liabilities of a legal person,” instead of being seen as a resource to be owned and managed.¹¹ We hope that by introducing posthuman futures with participatory design methods, we can build critical cultures of anticipation that lead to new perspectives on the problems of the present.

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³Brennan, A et al. Environmental Ethics. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2016).

⁴Fox, G A. Tinkering with the Tinkerer: Pollution versus Evolution. *Environmental Health Perspectives* (1995).

⁵Forlano, L. Posthumanism and Design. *She Ji* (2017).

⁶Canfield, M. *Field Notes on Science & Nature* (2011).

⁷Dunne, A et al. *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming* (2013).

⁸van der Velden, M et al. Participatory Design and Design for Values. *Handbook of Ethics, Values, and Technological Design* (2014).

⁹Wölfel, C et al. Method Card Design Dimensions: A Survey of Card-Based Design Tools. *Lecture Notes in Computer Science* (2013).

¹⁰Samuels, A. What a Chicken Wants. *The Atlantic* (2016).

¹¹Roy, E A. New Zealand River Granted Same Legal Rights as Human Being. *The Guardian* (2017).