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How can we imagine alternative futures for journalism? This is the question that drove a 4-month exploratory diploma project at the Oslo School of Architecture and Design. The result of this design process was Futures Compass: a collaborative futures game that combines design practice with storytelling and futures studies, with the goal of building Futures Literacy.

Fundamental to the creation of Futures Compass was an embedded design process, based on ethnographic research practices that have been characterised as ‘deep hanging out’ (Geertz, 1998). Over the course of the 4 month diploma project, the author worked alongside product teams building the next generation of publishing platforms at Schibsted Media Group, conducting interviews, workshops, daily observations and play tests. The goal of this embedded process was to cultivate “an attitude toward ‘being there’ sufficient to experience the mundane and sacred, brash and nuanced aspects of socio-cultural life and, through observations, encounters and conversations, to come to an understanding of it” (Lewis & Russell, 2011).

During this research and design process the central aim of the project moved from imagining alternative futures to focus on building futures literacy within Schibsted’s teams. Futures literacy is outlined by Riel Miller as “the capacity to explore the potential of the present to give rise to the future” (Miller, 2007). This shift in focus was strategic, in that it became apparent that Schibsted’s teams did not need an alternative or inspirational vision, but rather needed the tools and language to engage with the future in the course of their daily work.

With this goal in mind, Futures Compass was developed as a collaborative futures game designed to help creative teams build their futures literacy. Combining elements of design practice, creative storytelling games, and existing futures methods and card games, such as those outlined by Stuart Candy (2018), Futures Compass is a fully-realised prototype that arose out of a hybrid design process. This process bridged product design, service and user experience design, with a foundation of systems oriented design.

What makes Futures Compass distinct as a futures game is the inclusion of uncertainty in the scenarios trends lead to – do they decline, increase, mutate, etc. – followed by a selection of different outcomes the team might achieve in their future scenarios – did they lead, fail, adapt, etc. This means that teams can face challenging and provocative scenarios and outcomes, rather than the traditional binary of utopias and dystopias.

While Futures Compass was initially delivered in the spring of 2018, its development is not over. Even though the process of developing this project led to changes and new capacities within the teams at Schibsted, the process was not widely adopted after key internal stakeholders left the organisation. Continued play tests with groups both within and outside of Schibsted are fuelling a continued design process, one that needs grapple with making Futures Compass more accessible to unexperienced players in a broader range of industries and focus areas. Further research and development will also need to focus on whether this process works better as a facilitated workshop, rather than as a standalone game.

References

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