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PROBING THE FUTURE, ACTING TODAY

a workshop into learning from the far future and its possible consequences for the present

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Introduction

In today's rapidly changing world, organizations and societies are struggling with the complexity and uncertainties of emerging issues and challenges in the current dynamic environment (Conklin, 2005; Snowden & Boone, 2007). Designers have a strategic role in helping organizations to deal with this complexity and uncertainty by developing artefacts that help experiencing possible futures (Maessen, van Houten, & van der Lugt, 2018). Preliminary findings from our research showed that people with some help readily engage in exploring far futures, yet have difficulties afterwards to distill next steps for the near future while resisting the dominant collective pull to the comfort zone of current paradigms and daily routines (Maessen, 2019). We therefore developed a workshop format, containing a set of interventions and tools to guide people to engage in exploring far away possible futures and link these back to anticipating actions in the present.

Theme

We are coming together at the conference Relating Systems Thinking and Design, where we share knowledge, and build upon each other's insight to create new knowledge together, while building and maintaining relationships among peers. The present workshop will use this theme of 'conferencing' to explore possible futures and how we could adapt to these possible futures. Themes like sustainability, inclusivity, open data sourcing, technological developments, and decreasing funds, all could influence the way we will be conferencing in the future.

Just suppose:

1. What if governments and universities develop goals for conference-sustainability footprints?
2. What if peer pressure makes attending a conference is seen as morally reprehensible?
3. Or what if a colleague is for ethnic or religious reasons not welcome to the organizing country?
4. What if the university will only fund conferences for experienced and highly specialized scientist, that will hinder creativity and emerging cross-over knowledge?
5. What if all data from scientific research will be open sourced by law?

These kinds of themes, and many others, could affect our current way of conferencing. Then how could we shape our need for jointly developing knowledge and building and maintaining relationships?

Proposed activities

Besides a check in and check out of the workshop, the activities are divided into three parts with a different focus in time, namely present – future – back to the near future, as is illustrated in figure 1.

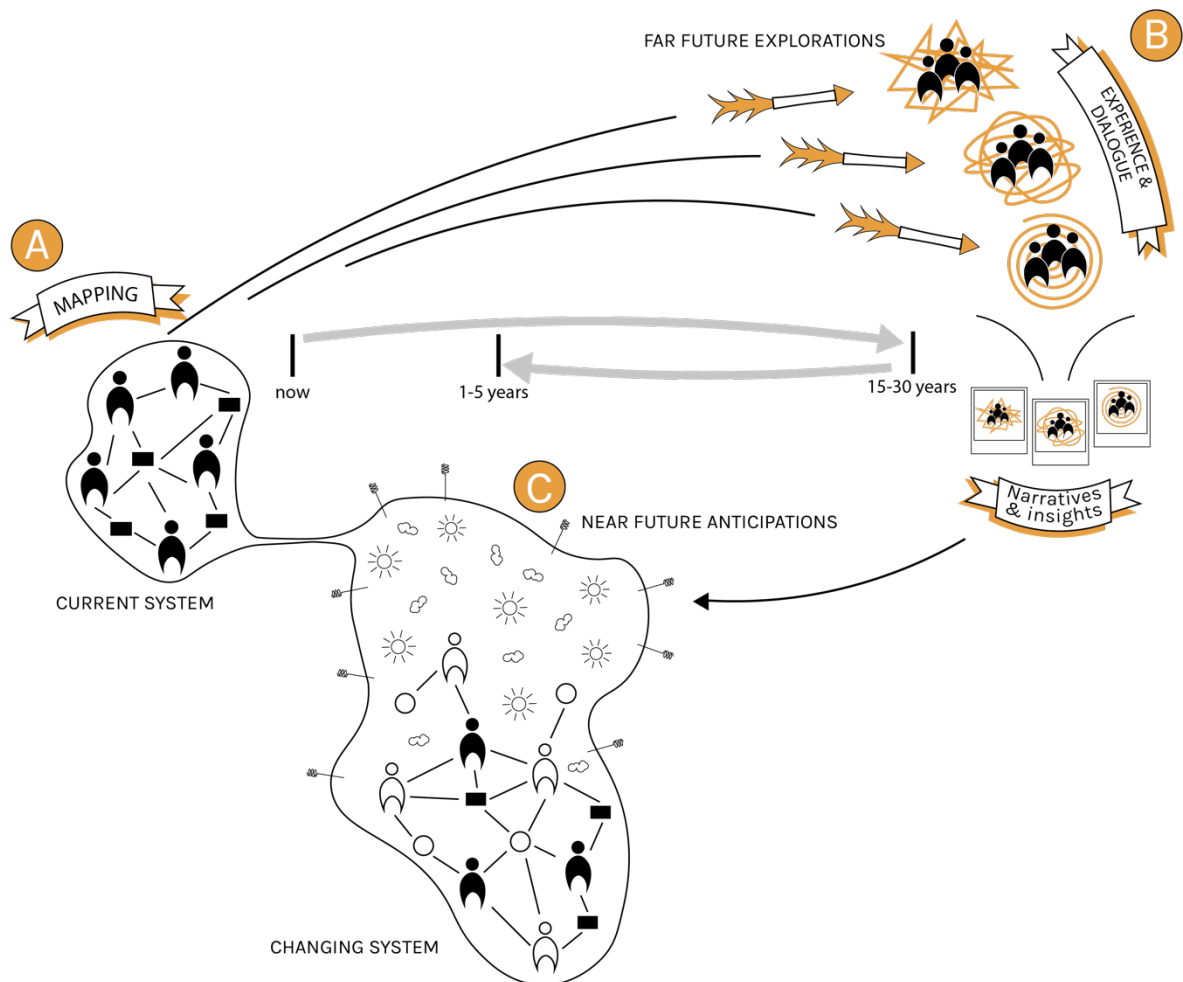


fig. 1: Probing the future, acting today – iterations across three horizons (present, far future and next future)

A Present: Mapping the current system

We will lead the participants into the topic by sharing a narrative about the history and how we came to where we are today. Based upon that narrative, and the existing knowledge and frames people have about the topic, participants will create a visual map that encompasses the current situation. People are encouraged to use tools of developing socionas (van Gessel, van der Lugt, de Vries, 2018) visually or in a narrative form, to capture variations in prototypical dynamics in social systems. How to use these tools will be explained and guided during the workshop. Participants will rate their current stance towards the topic.

B Far future: explorations

Then the participants (or teams of participants) are asked to develop a concept about the future over a time frame of 30 years (2050). Next step is to visualize and build that future in a tangible 'probe' (see fig. 2). Following, we will have a dialogue to share the probes of each participant(-team) and the story behind, and ask each other clarifying and deepening questions.



fig 2. Building probes with brown paper and scrap materials

C Back to the near future: Anticipations

In the final two steps we will bring the future back towards today or next to today. What do participants propose to take as next step and write a short narrative to inspire others to take these steps (Enninga, 2018; Enninga & van der Lugt, 2016). We will close the workshop by discussing if and how participants developed a change in stance towards the future and in their possibilities to be actively involved in that future.

Format

We propose a half day workshop with active cooperation of the participants. We will use tools and techniques that we have developed to enable probing the future and that we use in our research to guide this process of probing the future in order to develop anticipating actions for the near future.

Workshop goals and outcomes

The aim is to share and use the set of tools we have developed to use to adapt to the explored future(s). The aim is also to create a shared understanding on how we want to continue conferencing in a changing world towards a more sustainable one and what are the first steps to get there. Preferable already some goals for next year are set.

Workshop requirements

We will bring our own tools for the workshop. Preferably the following materials could be provided on site:

- re-usable waste as scrap materials
- (brown) paper
- markers and colored pencils
- (old) magazines, pairs of scissors, glue, tape
- post-it notes in different colors

References

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