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Making Futures Present: A postcard from the future clears up your vision of the horizon

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Relating Systems Thinking and Design
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Making Futures Present: A postcard from the future clears up your vision of the horizon

Maggie Greyson

[Futures Present](#)

Is what's over the horizon a bit blurry for you? The future presents a greater feeling of certainty when you hold a piece of it in your hands.

Making Futures Present is a one-hour personal experiential foresight and design thinking workshop that helps to review and rethink the future by co-creating multiple scenarios.

It is very tempting for us to turn our gaze away from the future when it looks blurry, seems unknowable, and feels menacing. However, strategic foresight is a practice of low-risk thought experiments to reflect on the capacity to manage complex and turbulent scenarios. This is an experiential learning workshop to help us envision preferred futures via design fiction objects. As a result, participants will increase their comfort level with uncertainty and take steps in the present toward the future that they want.

Making Futures Present was awarded the Next Generation Foresight Practitioner award from the School of International Futures in 2018. It was also awarded the Most Significant Futures Work by the Association of Professional Futurists in 2019. It has been adapted for high school students, seniors, artists, writers, journalists, and people who are in career transitions. In 2020 it was adapted for youth anti-vaping research with the University of Toronto School of Public Health and recreated as an online research tool called [Nod from 2050](#) in 2021. Most recently, it was adapted again for anti-vaping training onsite at a high school in

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Toronto. The facilitation instructions will be available free via a Creative Commons license soon.

KEYWORDS: futures thinking, strategic foresight, design fiction, scenarios, research technique.

RSD: Learning and Education, Methods & Methodology

Workshop description

Attendees of this workshop will experience a futures thinking technique that can be used in the workplace and for personal use. Spend 45 minutes with a postcard-from-the-future style activity online using Zoom video conferencing and a whiteboard platform.

- Gain new perceptions of how to think about the future.
- Consider the pace of change.
- Explore systems thinking through the lens of the UN SDGs.
- Discover values by thinking about their future self.

Participants of the Making Futures Present workshop report an increased comfort level with uncertainty and plan steps in the present toward the future that they want.

“Having seen this methodology in practice in the higher education environment, I wholeheartedly believe foresight has the potential to shape a learner’s educational journey positively.” Chris Fernlund, Lead, Student Supports for eCampusOntario

“The workshop was a brilliant experience. It uncovered my assumptions of the future. Understanding my expectations felt great, and it helped me to reconsider my career.” Deb Lima, Urban Planner

“The future is many. Looking at it that way helps me to respond strategically instead of reacting to the moment or environment.” Eric Kamphof, Entrepreneur

Background

Designers, architects, and engineers prototype products or services that do not exist. Maybe not now, maybe never. Systems designers can use those skills and outputs to

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render a speculative vision about systems decades or centuries from now. Systems that may not exist now or ever. One helpful way to envision variants of a system in a dynamic state is to use techniques from strategic foresight. Strategic foresight is a professional practice of low-risk thought experiments that help clients and researchers to reflect on complex and turbulent scenarios.

As a field, many techniques in strategic foresight value uncertainty about the future as a gift for transformation. The gift is an imperfect narrative that is simultaneously recognizable and unrecognizable. This narrative is a construct prioritizing robust research of emerging trends and drivers of change. A narrative about any system with forces acting upon it can be rendered as a sketch, a newspaper headline, or a design fiction object. Participants interact with future prototypes, a stimulus for new thoughts and questions.

Making Futures Present is a personal ethnographic experiential futures technique helpful in introducing participants to futures thinking, systems thinking, design thinking, scenario generation, and behavioural economics. Experiential futures are an excellent prompt for provocative conversations. In the case of recent versions of Making Futures Present, the artifact is a postcard from one's future self in 2050.

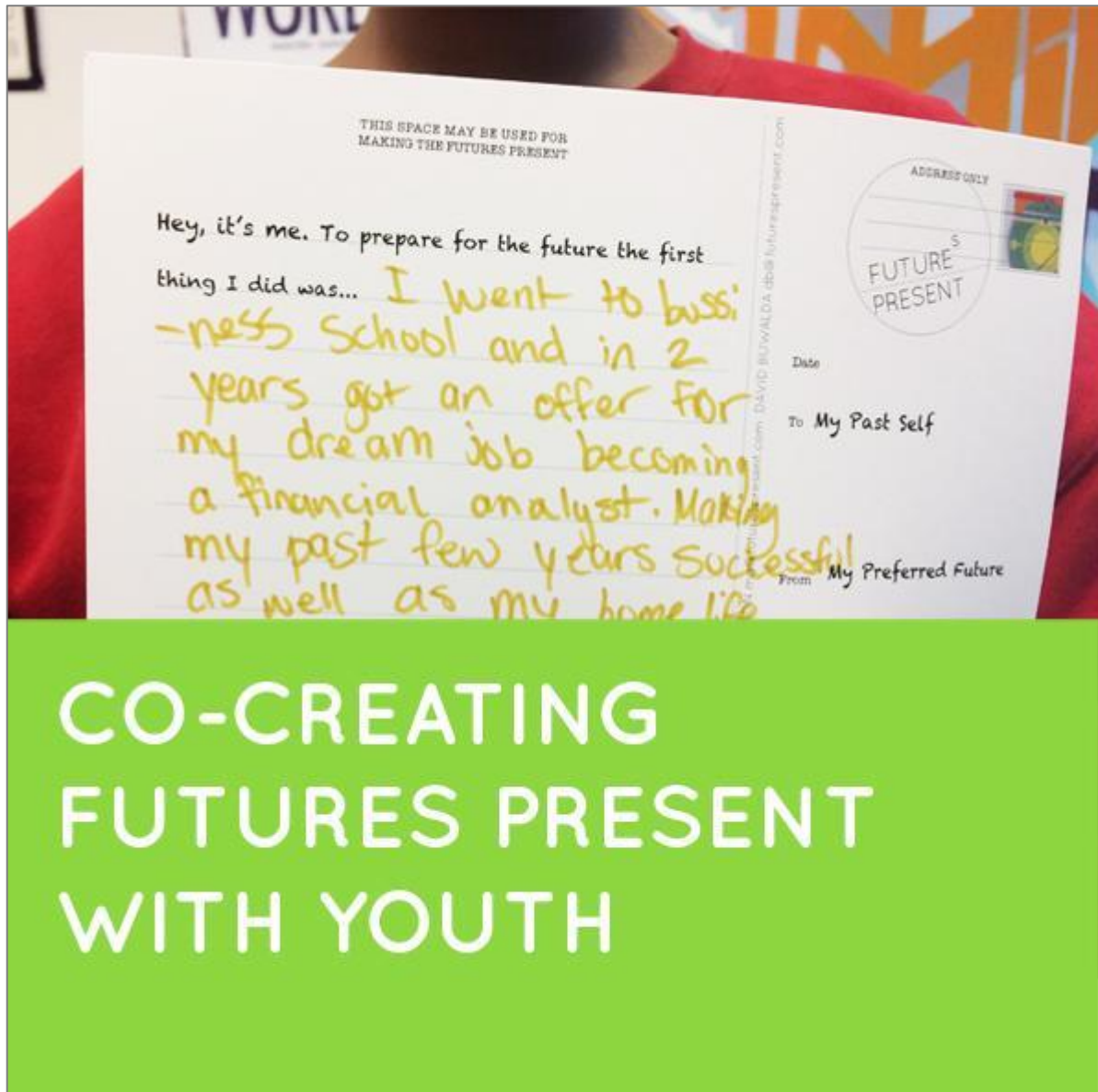
People tend to have a lens on the present that is highly mediated through their experiences. Using the future is a shortcut to envisioning one's bias about the present. Tools from the process of strategic foresight help individuals recognize why and how they think about what will happen in the future. It becomes easier to explore multiple scenarios about the future once these assumptions or desires have been declared. Participants interact with self-authored futures that initially look blurry, seem unknowable, and feel menacing. Through a facilitated workshop, the participants are comfortable describing what they expect or think is unlikely to happen in the future. In systems design, we now have a "sandbox of futures" to play with the impacts of policy, investments, and change in a low-risk environment.

Profiled: Design Develop Transform, Wired Magazine, Tehran University, Carnegie Mellon University.

Workshops: Ontario College of Art and Design University, Pathways to Education, eCampusOntario, Centennial College Center for Entrepreneurship, Square Circle social

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circus, The Association of Professional Futurists Futures Festival, Toronto District School Board, Government of Canada.



About Making the Futures Present

Making the Futures Present is a technique designed to help futurists to demonstrate foresight to potential clients. The combination of activities helps individuals feel the

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agency they have in the future. In addition, the attached document contains images and descriptions of several prototypes built during the research.

Making Futures Present was awarded the Next Generation Foresight Practitioner award from the School of International Futures in 2018. It was also awarded the Most Significant Futures Work by the Association of Professional Futurists in 2019.

Here is a 3-minute [“teaser video”](#) from 2018.

Please also find links to descriptions from two workshops to provide context for the workshop for RSD11.

[Marc Garneau Collegiate Institute anti-vaping training and facilitation](#)

[Centennial College “Start-Me Up Centennial”](#)

[Nod from 2050 online research tool](#)

References

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