Who will Engage in Scenario Planning Ten to Twenty Years from Now?

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I'd like to take the title of Graham Molitor's article, and change it slightly to read 'Scenarios: are they worth the effort, now?' In posing the question whether scenarios are worth the effort, Molitor replies, "Not as much as scenario-using futurists like to think." But what about the people who will engage in scenario planning exercises ten to twenty years into the future? Future decision-makers will have one thing in common that will set them apart from today's groups. They will have grown up playing with scenarios in the various shared worlds of computer, video and online games.

Shared world stories and games are defined as stories written by different hands but sharing a setting. Often the setting is given to the participants, but increasingly world and reality creation is being placed in the hands of writers and players. Games such as LittleBigPlanet give players the tools for on-line world creation. The multiplayer on-line role-playing game World of Warcraft has more 11 million players worldwide. Players collaborate with each other and develop tactical skills in play, though in worlds largely structured for them.

I am prompted to comment on Molitor's article following a conversation with a video-games creator who says that in ten to twenty years time, the leaders of most countries in the world will have something new in common. They will have grown up playing "shooter" games. I was rather alarmed at this. Shooter games? Will that make them more trigger-happy than current world leaders? Leaving that speculation to one side, I think it is worth pursuing the intersection of the real and the virtual worlds that will be part of our common future. Future scenario-creating exercises may well take place in blended realities of digital and physical environments, where people meet and communicate in new ways.[1] The 'alternative reality' game designer Jane McGonigal applies games to the real world in projects such as Superstruct (2008) about global extinction, and World without Oil (2007) a collaborative simulation of global oil shortage.[2] Her games involve tens of thousands of people.

As someone who herself doesn't play these collaborative or competitive on-line games, but has observed members of her family at play and at work in the industry, I comment from the outside. But it seems reasonable to suppose decision-makers in the future will bring to any round-table discussions a facility in scenario elaboration and development learned from childhood though the medium of play. Decision-makers will bring with them a different kind of legacy from the past, one that may both help and hinder, when they engage in futures scenarios.

How it might help is that future practical-minded senior managers may come to the discussion more familiar with scenario creation? How it might hinder is that they may call on clichéd shared legacies from popular culture? Writer and futurist Ken MacLeod says: 'Most of us have default images of the future that come from Star Trek, or 2001 or 1984 or Dr Who or disaster movies or computer games.'[3] Futurist Jamais Cascio cites the legacy futures in business from old business strategies and plans, legacy futures in politics from old budgets and forecasts, and legacy futures in environmentalism from earlier bits of analysis.[4] The notion of 'legacy futures' has its origins in the concept of legacy code in computer programming.

The work of Jane McGonigal for the Institute for the Future takes the scenario workshop and turns it into 'Blended reality crowd-sourcing experiments'. A feature of her games is that they engage large groups of people in forming collaborative communities, 'crowd-sourcing'. In one recent experiment she 'crowd-sourced' five questions about the future in 2019, via Twitter, blogs, email, and SMS, and collated over 500 replies received within 24 hours. There is nothing new in collating responses to questions about the future, but the technologies used to reach out to a potentially far larger group of people show promise for what McGonigal calls the newly emerging field of collective intelligence.

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Notes

1. 'Blended Reality: reports from the digital/physical future'. Conference November 18-19, 2008 organised by the Institute for the Future, California.
2. Jane McGonigal. Retrieved September 5, 2008, from http://www.avantgame.com/bio.htm. Eliza Strickland, 'Forecasting the future may be a matter of fun and games', discovermagazine.com
3. Ken MacLeod, 'All your firewall are belong to us', from his blog, 'The early days of a better nation'. Retrieved December 2, 2008, from http://kenmacleod.blogspot.com
4. Jamais Cascio 'Legacy futures', from his blog, 'Open the future'. Retrieved December 8, 2008, from http://openthefuture.com