

FuturesLab: Anticipatory Experimentation, Social Emergence and Evolutionary Change

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Journal of Futures Studies
Australia

Introduction

I started a project called FuturesLab in late 2015 as an experiment in the way in which I bring forth ideas and projects.¹ I was guided by my experience developing the Footscray Maker Lab,² where I learned about the role of tinkering and play in respect to creativity. My work in Action Foresight had tended to be on the professional end of service delivery, and there was a feeling that it was difficult to experiment in professional settings because of the expectation to deliver mature thinking, frameworks and processes. After letting go of a role on the board of the maker lab, I had new energy to put into something new. There was an opening to play with ideas and with my life.

FuturesLab emerged as an experimental process to help me to test, refine and innovate next generation foresight products and social innovations, including games. Over the course of 2015-2017 FuturesLab experimented with approximately 10 projects and ideas. FuturesLab has been a powerful experiment for me, and has shown me the importance of open experimentation for driving learning and co-creation. Overall FuturesLab fits into a larger process where ideation is infused by transformational foresight. From my work using the Futures Action Model, I've realized that in fact, if our assumptions / images of the future remain undisturbed, unchallenged, and uninspired, then the ideas and conceptual prototypes that are produced reiterate business as usual and used futures.

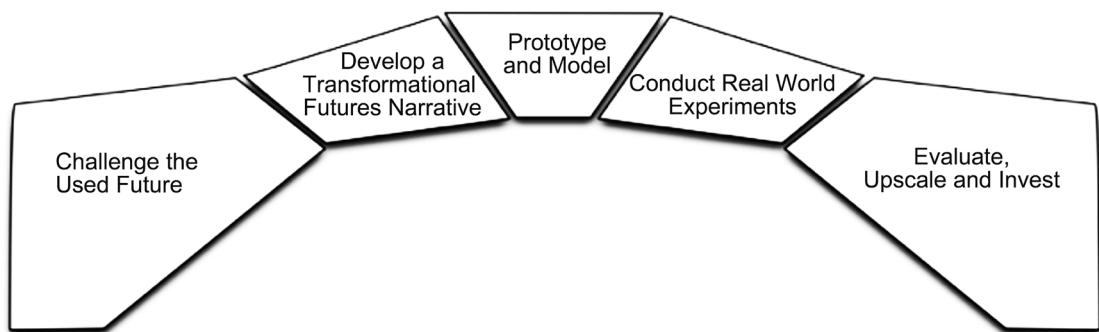


Figure 1. Anticipatory experimentation method (AEM) / bridge method

Overall FuturesLab fits into a more comprehensive social change process I've come to call the Anticipatory Experimentation Method (AEM) or "Bridge Method", which has five stages.

1. First, explore the assumptions and images we have about the future, where ultimately the used future is challenged, a form of unlearning. This also entails learning about the emerging issues, trends and weak signals that can also transform our understanding of social horizons.
2. Secondly, once unlearning has happened, an integrated vision can be developed based on this new understanding of the future.
3. Thirdly, once a transformative vision had been created, the next step is to conceptualize project ideas, models and prototypes that are based on this new vision, by using creative thinking techniques, for example the Futures Action Model. The task is to bridge the transformational vision with actionable prototype ideas.
4. Fourthly, real-world experiments (e.g. using the FuturesLab approach) can be set up based on the best prototype ideas. An experiment here is a small 'piece' of the transformational vision brought into the present. The experimentation drives learning, skill and confidence that builds-in renewed capacity.
5. Finally, experiments can be evaluated to see which ones show the most promise and are best aligned to enact the vision. These can then be up-scaled and invested in to accelerate the movement toward enacting the vision.

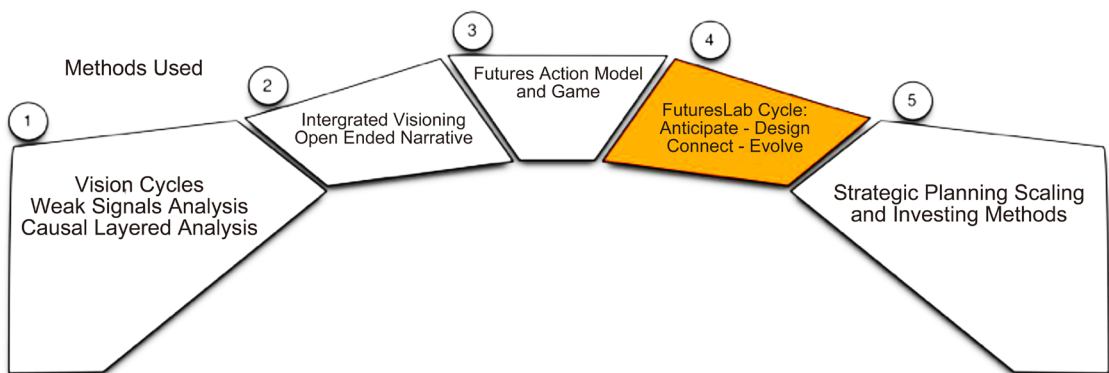


Figure 2. Techniques in anticipatory experimentation method (AEM) / bridge method

Overall FuturesLab fits into AEM as the fourth step in a five-step process. The first and second steps rely heavily on Six Pillars methods (Inayatullah 2008). The third step relies on the Futures Action Model and game. The fifth step is outside of the foresight field (e.g. strategic planning, evaluation, management) but logically follows experimentation, as this is where the potentials within the experiments can be scaled.

FuturesLab guidelines

As part of the FuturesLab experiment I set up a number of guidelines that would guide what I did.

1. Create a safe space within which we can experiment. First of all this safe space is created in our own hearts and minds. We need to let go of the expectation that what we create (ideas, designs, prototypes) must succeed. Actually to succeed we need to create an energy of play. This means letting go of internalized expectations of success, or in terms of the theory of multiple selves / voice dialogue this means letting go of the voice of the pusher, perfectionist

and achiever (Stone and Stone, 1989). Instead we need to cultivate an understanding that there is neither success nor failure in an experiment, there is simply learning that leads to the next possible experiment.

2. Ideas or designs or experiments are put out into the world as if they belonged to no one and everyone, letting go of the burden of ownership, and releasing ideas into the public. The idea behind this is to engage ‘network problem solving’, as the solutions to certain problems we have don’t necessarily exist in us or even in the people that we know. This is to say that the problem is bigger than us, we are part of it and a larger field. This is also a commitment to open source, to contribute to the global knowledge and design commons.
3. As we push ideas out through social networks, and learn as much as possible from people’s feedback, attempt to let go of biases, and discover blind spots. Within us is already a bias for a particular direction with relationship to an idea or project. Can we let go of this and let other people guide how that project develops? Can we learn from collective intelligence, rather than pushing our own ideas despite receiving contrary feedback? Ultimately this also means that it is the social network and extended world that can chose the project to work on. I may have a bias for one project, but if my social network and the extended world is more excited about another idea then, perhaps, I should go with that.
4. Cultivate a community of co-creators. The aim has been to keep opportunities for collaboration open. When a meeting is taking place presenting one of the ideas, I have tried to keep it open to the public. I have also experimented with a membership base, both through using Meetup.com as well as enlisting a group of friends as nascent members (see acknowledgment at end). If somebody wants to collaborate on something, I attempt to be open-minded about working with them. If it is not possible to work with someone, that is okay, FuturesLab ideas remain open for either person to take that idea forward.
5. Document each project and the various stages of the project on the website. It is important that different projects and ideas are accessible to people, and that the various iterations of a project or idea are documented. This is both for internal rigor so that thinking can develop based on experience, but this is also valuable for those who want to draw on the ideas and develop them further. If we want to practice open source principles, we also need to document well enough so that ideas can be adopted by others.

FuturesLab Cycle

I have tried to follow a four step process for FuturesLab projects. A project could start at any point in these four steps, but it has been important to have a structured process by which to proceed.

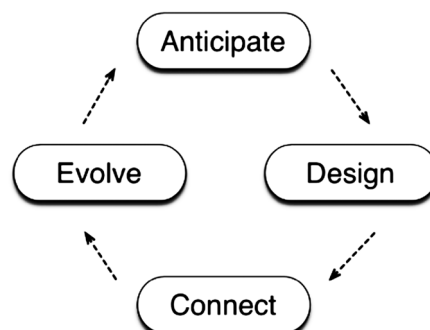


Figure 3. FuturesLab Cycle

1. **Anticipate** – this is about connecting the transformational vision with the idea.
2. **Design** – this is about differentiating the elements, relating the parts, and proposing a first conceptual model or iterative working models.
3. **Connect** – this is about testing, sharing, speaking and promoting the design. Connect is similar to David Kolb's stage of 'experience' where the planned experiment is applied and experienced / observed (Kolb 2014).
4. **Evolve** – this is about adapting it; changing it; revising it and reconsidering assumptions for the next iteration.

This approach is informed by work across both Action Learning / Action Research and the nexus of futures and AR (Inayatullah 2006; Ramos 2005).

Learning from FuturesLab Projects

FuturesLab projects have taken place over an 18 month period (September 2015 to May 2017). Here I outline some points of learning from a selection of the projects.

1 - The network chooses what to work on

I had done a project in my local community using online editable maps (using Open Street Maps and the Umap interface).³ With a number of colleagues I had started a maker lab in the Footscray community in Australia. One of the things that we had always wanted to do was to map the maker resources in the region, the people involved in the maker movement, spaces and locales for recycled materials, etc. So we ran a small project called the Maribyrnong Maker Map (M3).⁴ After doing this project and after getting experience with the map, I realized that such open editable online maps could be suitable for visioning processes used in strategic foresight. I put out an outline of what this might look like, for example if we applied appreciative inquiry, causal layered analysis or the futures action model to mapping processes.⁵

I had no real intention of making this a core part of my prototyping work, it was just an idea. However when I put the idea out I began to get interest from colleagues and friends. One friend put the idea into proposal for a research grant. A close friend, Darren Sharp, was working with the city of Melbourne, who were looking for innovative approaches to visioning for their Future Melbourne 2026 process, and suggested vision mapping.⁶ From this he got a formal contract to run vision mapping for the city of Melbourne, whereupon we began developing the workshop and prototyping its use with appreciative inquiry. The workshop was then run over two half days with approximately 40 key stakeholders and residents.



Figure 4. A vision mapping workshop with the city of Melbourne

After this I ran several other experimentation sessions. One used Causal Layered Analysis with a very small group of four people, two associates in the futures studies and two others who were local residents of Melbourne's west.

The proposed idea was that CLA could provide a way for participants to move quickly from the sound bites and trivial stories about a particular place, into a more comprehensive understanding of the social forces impacting and shaping a place, and then deeper into the perspectives and cultures that imbue a locale. Finally, participants might get a sense of the narrative that has guided the development of a place over time. Rather than just abstract ideas, the online map would allow these four layers to be embedded into the map itself, in geographically specific ways, so that the sources of each data point are geographical as well as qualitative.

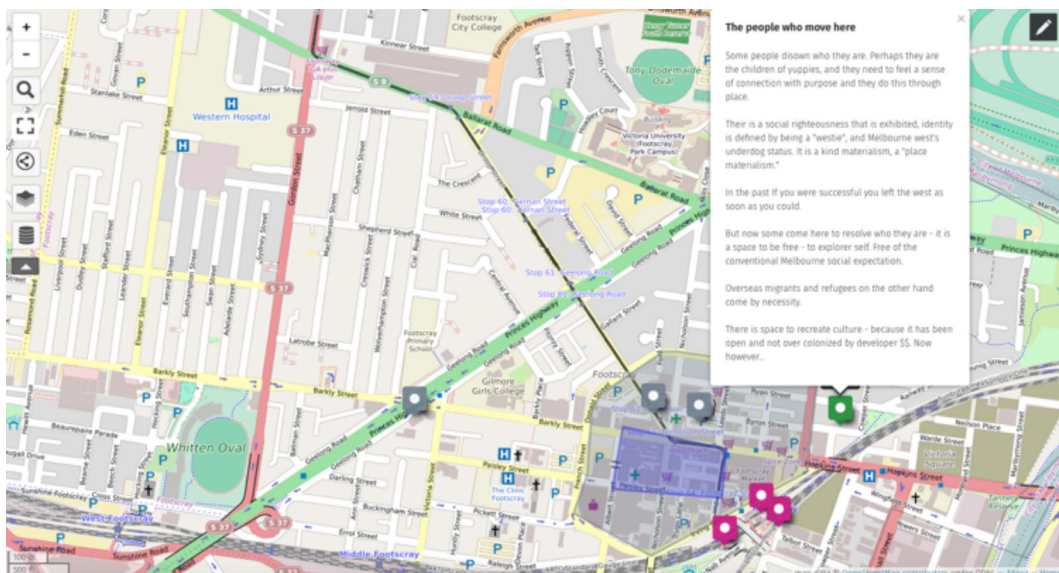


Figure 5. The U-map interface for open street maps to embed CLA data

But of course experience changes everything, and the application of CLA onto the vision mapping process had unexpected results. We used the Victoria University Social Media Lab with its 180 degree screen, and decided to have a CLA conversation about Footscray in Melbourne. Somehow, the process of being physically faced with a map changed the conversation. Rather than the U-shaped process I had been used to in facilitating CLA, the map created a conversation about the nature of place that embedded notions of history and culture into a visual understanding of the geography.

This series of open source experiments led to another opportunity, a mapping project for Victoria University to look at the ecosystems of partnerships between the University and the community, and to imagine future ecosystems that stakeholders wanted to enact.⁷

When we put an idea out into the world some ideas may be popular and some ideas may not be. If we let the field decide which direction to go and where to put our energy we may find that we end up in places that we could not have expected. We may move past our own blind spots in terms of the ideas that we decide to pursue, and may enter into a process of social emergence. In the case of vision mapping, the field chose what to work on. Letting go of what projects and ideas to work on was an important learning.

2 - The boomerang effect - collective intelligence solves problems

In most of the ideas put out in FuturesLab, I have not known how to carry out the project or implement the idea; I have been limited in both time and knowledge. I first put out an idea for a “Commons Credit Game” after being inspired by the Economics of the Commons conference in Berlin in 2013.⁸ At that conference I learned about the commons movement and also about the various alternative / cyber currencies being developed with connections to the commons. On a train ride from Berlin to Lunenburg, friend Nicholas Mendoza explained to me the logic of ‘commoning’ with community currencies. Over the coming months the idea for a Commons Credit Game began to emerge in my mind.

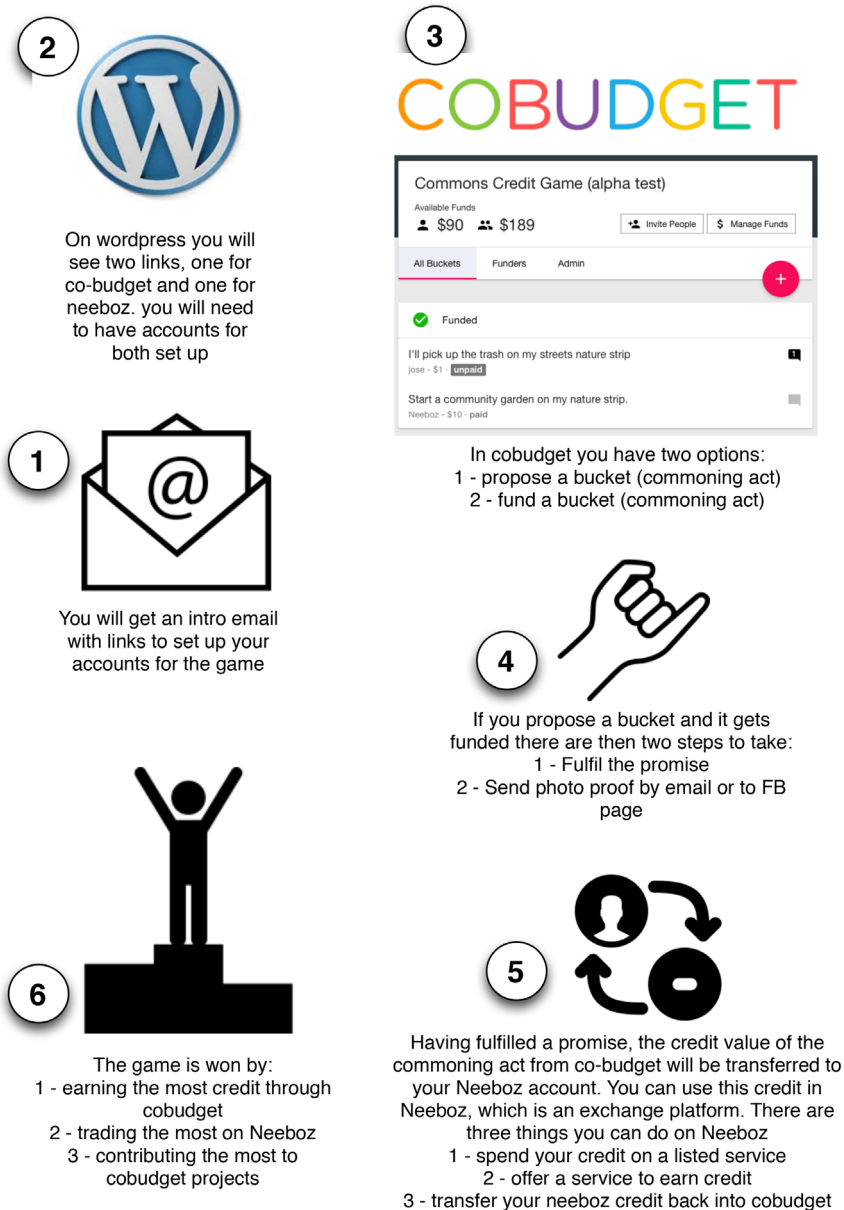


Figure 6. An iteration of the game design schematic incorporating co-budget and neeboz

When FuturesLab was established I put the idea out and posted it to my networks. At that time I only had an idea, not really a well fleshed out design. Conversations with John Sweeney and Aaron Rosa encouraged me to develop a design schematic that clarified some of the key dimensions of the game.⁹ After I produced this design schematic I put this out to the networks again, and responses began trickling in. One was from Michael Linton, the founder of LETS, who told me about his open money project and system.¹⁰ Later I visited the Enspiral community in Wellington New Zealand where I learned about co-budget from Mix Irving.¹¹ I was later introduced to Jodi Ann Hampson, who had developed a sharing and credit platform called Neeboz.¹²



Figure 7. Mix iring explaining co-budget to me in Wellington New Zealand

In the course of about a year the major design questions and technology resources needed to actually run the game were solved, not by me, but by a ‘field’ working on the problem. This all ultimately led to a small scale test of the concepts with a group of approximately 10 people connected to the Commons Transition Coalition in May-June of 2017. We spend time refining the design and system, taking into account user experience questions. We ran the game over a two week period. My experience with the commons game encapsulates as well the action learning cycle over a 24+ month period.

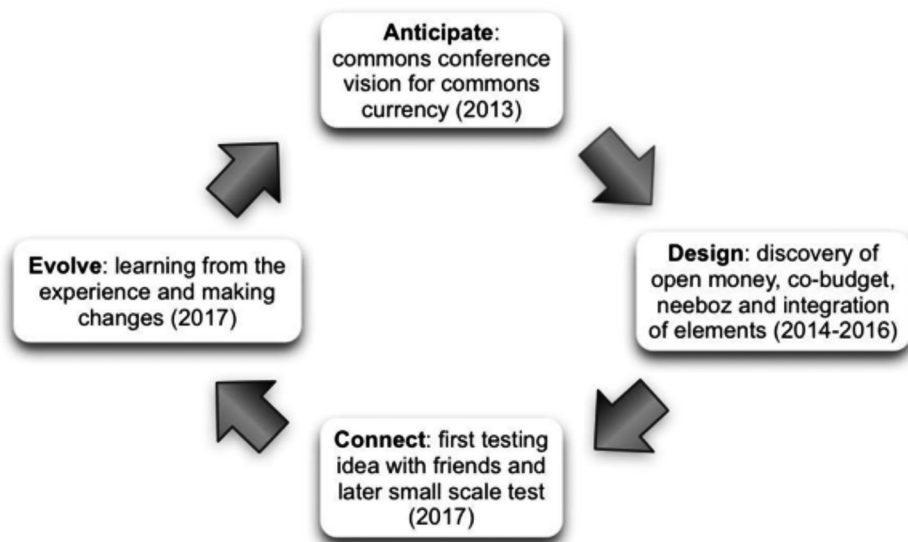


Figure 8. the FuturesLab cycle with respect to the commons game

This clarifies another important point in terms of how FuturesLab has worked differently from DIY in-house innovation. By making the problem open, the personal problem is externalized into a social problem. I as an idea proponent have let go of the idea and put it forward to the network

– it is not just my problem anymore. The network and the social processes around the network are able to provide answers to the problem. It is also as if the movement from idea to design to working prototype cannot be done by an individual or a closed group, but actually requires the network-world to work on the idea in conjunction with the proponents – a type of inside-out innovation. The pieces of the puzzle are not within us but “between us”, in the field between our colleagues, friends, and the extended network of interested people and as part of an ecosystem of collective intelligence.

3 – Safe spaces for experiencing the application of half-baked ideas

I first formalized the Futures Action Model (FAM) (Ramos 2013) working with business students at Swinburne University. However it always seemed a challenge to communicate it with those not part of a “captured audience”. In a project to develop anticipatory governance for the state of Brunei,¹³ Gareth Priday and I made an attempt to turn FAM into a game. Over a long walk in my neighbourhood we came up with two versions of the game.

But when something is written down on paper it is still abstract. Running something in a professional environment can be daunting. In professional settings things are simply supposed to work. So in my first workshops with the Centre for Strategic and Policy Studies (CSPS) in Brunei I did not run the game, I stuck to what had worked before with FAM, a more conventional conversation using butchers paper.



Figure 9. Playing the futures action model game

Later we set up an event at Swinburne’s Design Factory, hosted by design futurist Bridgette Engeler Newbury, where we were able to test the game with 22 people.¹⁴ The results of the game showed that the game did work, but needed some improvements. The interesting part (and something I had not considered before) was that the game was able to demonstrate the nonlinear nature of problem-solving within the FAM process, that was otherwise hard to explain in a PowerPoint presentation style. After this I was able to run the game more confidently for the first time in a professional setting with CSPS and senior Bruneian policy makers, and since then more ideas have emerged to enhance the game, based on the experience of playing it.

Real world experiments can be daunting. Our social contexts may not appreciate experiments, and may consciously or unconsciously expect success without failure. We need a safe place to experiment, and to gain the experience that we need to further develop something. In professional settings it can be hard to prototype, because of the expectations and pressure to perform at a high level. The idea within FuturesLab is to suspend this pressure and expectation, so that what we do becomes an experiment without success or failure, only learning.

4 – Letting go: when we get stuck

I had put together a proposal to Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) for a project called "Crowdsourcing the Pax Pacifica" which would focus on crowdsourcing peaceful visions of the Pacific Rim and its constituent countries - especially Taiwan, China and the United States.¹⁵ The basic idea was that the overly nationalistic framing of security issues seem to incline towards conflict, whereas if visions for the future of the region were developed outside of the governmental-nationalistic contexts, e.g. crowd-sourced from citizens and people with intentions for peace, we could create an alternative voice and vision in the discourse. This was in part informed by conversation with Jeanne Hoffman, who did a PhD thesis on China Futures and studied how the realist / international relations discourse framed and constrained the possibility of transformed China-US-Pacific Rim relations (Hoffman, 2015).

In a similar fashion to the commons game, after I put the concept out, several months later I was contacted by Giorgos Georgopoulos from the Futurescaper team, who generously offered to provide the platform *pro bono*, because it was a sort of public science / public benefit project idea, and something they were looking to support. Giorgos response solved a major problem, the crowdsourcing platform to run the project. Futurescaper is a futures thinking crowdsourcing platform originally developed by Noah Raford. Futurescaper is able to crowdsource ideas about the future and the connections between those ideas, and turn these into dynamic systems maps.

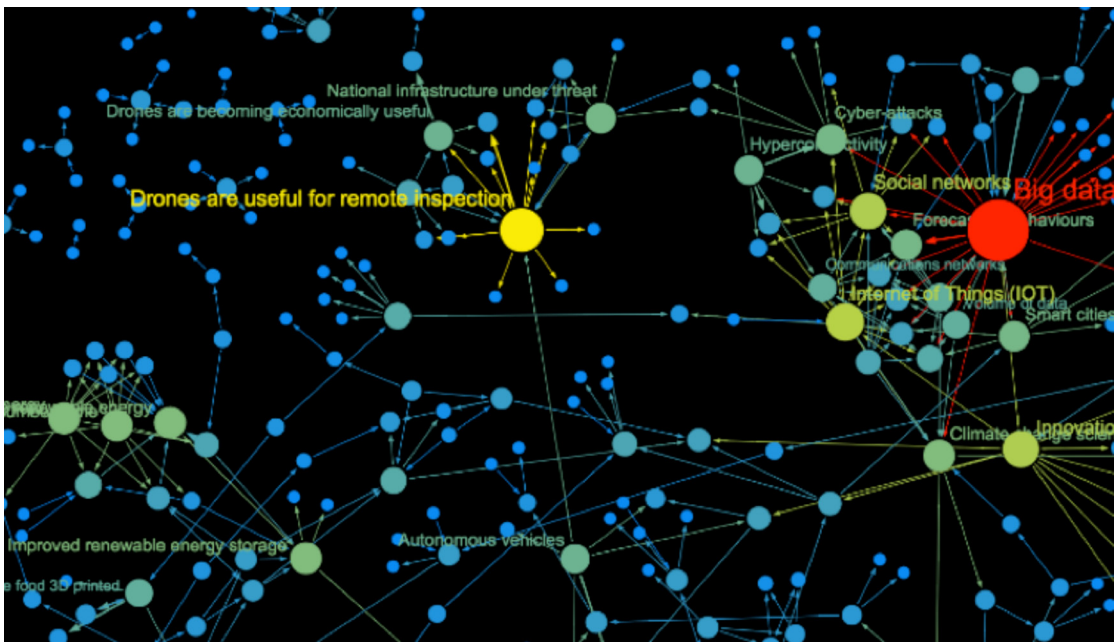


Figure 10. A systems map generated through the Futurescaper platform

I then put the idea back out to the network announcing that we now had a potential platform we could use that had very solid technology, and I was later contacted by Stephanie Pride, a futurist from Wellington New Zealand with experience using similar software. Over the next several months we began to develop the ideas into a project design, and supported by Wendy Schultz, who gave us a training session to use the software.

Based on knowing that we would be combining a methodology that used the Futurescaper crowdsourcing platform in conjunction with Johan Galtung's (2000) transcend method, we began working on a design for the project. As we excitedly began to hone in on a design, we began to

encounter a problem related to the scale of the idea and project. The main problem was that to demonstrate the value of the project to potential donors we would need to run a pilot. But even the scale of a pilot would require a whole lot of work, and we were already stretched.

We estimated loosely that running the pilot project at the scale at which it should be run would cost anywhere between \$30,000-\$80,000, or even more depending on how ambitious the project funders wanted it to be. In other words, we had trouble conceptualizing how to scale the approach. If we are serious about peace in the Pacific Rim, what is a price tag on a project such as this? Surely even \$10 million would be a bargain. Yet with our very busy schedules, running a pilot felt too difficult. Contacting potential funders would require that we have some working prototype, and just getting to this prototype was beyond our time capacity.

In effect what we had done is had taken this from an idea to a well fleshed-out design. However at this point, enacting this design (the phase shift to “connect”) seemed to be beyond our capability. The decision we made with this was to formalize the design and put it out to the world. Perhaps someone else would pick it up? We do not know how to solve the next stage of the problem. However, re-iterating point 2 above, the social field can solve the problem, if the problem solving efforts are sufficiently open sourced and documented. We know that it is possible that others within our network and in the broader social system may help provide the next pieces of the puzzle, and take it to its next stage.

Conclusion

These four of the roughly ten projects done via FuturesLab in the last two years exemplify my overall experience. In all, it was a very valuable process, leading me into places that I had not have imagined. It accelerated my learning and appreciation for the power of experimentation. If given a choice, I would certainly do it again. I have no regrets, despite the frantic energy and busy-ness that the process would sometimes produce. Indeed, I would encourage others to do this for themselves in whatever permutation works for them.

The process has taught me that there is a field of collective intelligence waiting to be tapped. If we open ourselves to the possibilities of this field, it is a source of problem solving and inspiration. Letting go of our preferences, this field may pull or push us into new directions. Understanding and accepting the limitations of our knowledge, this field will bring us solutions, new pieces of the puzzle from unexpected sources. If we allow ourselves to move beyond the binary of success-failure, we can discover an openness to experiment and play which is rich and generative. And when we can no longer work on something, we can let things go and let others pick it up, as we are part of a larger ecosystem of social transformation.

The process for me was incredibly empowering, enhancing my capacity to create change, and underlined the role of experimentation in charting new paths. The world can feel like a big place and it can be daunting to think about how we can create change. Even when we have visions that are epistemologically transformed and which go beyond the ‘used future’, there is still the question of what to do next, what are the actions? This process has emboldened me with the experiential knowledge that we can not only come up with powerful ideas, but that we can take the next step and develop real world experiments that bring these preferred futures into the present. By bringing transformative visions into the present through real world experiments which scale for impact, we can indeed become ‘evolutionary’ change agents, playing with and enhancing our long term futures.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank my friends who agreed to be members of the initial FuturesLab experiment for all of their support, wisdom and creative work: Reanna Browne, Darren Sharp, Heather Frey,

John Sweeney, Mike McCallum, Bridgette Newbury, Theo Kitchener, Aaron Rosa, Gareth Priddy, Jeanne Hoffman, Marcus Bussey, Kristin Alford, Siew Fang Law, Ian McBurney, Matt Rowbottom, Elena Pereyra, Sharon Ede, Peter Hayward, Stephanie Pride, as well as the many people I've worked with in Futureslab processes.

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Endnotes

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