



Introduction

WFSF XXV Conference Special Issue: The New, The Novel, and the Liminal in Futures Studies

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Guest-Editors

Introduction

This special issue of the Journal of Futures Studies is focused more on thinking about futures than the methods we used to design and run futures processes. When I was asked – with Steven Litchy – to co-edit the special issue, our starting point was the theme of the World Futures Studies Federation (WFSF): Exploring Liminalities; Creating Spaces for Unlimited Futures. We decided to open the issue to the public as well because this topic is not often discussed in detail.

We crafted our special issue name as: The New, The Novel, and the Liminal in Futures Studies, seeking to find new ideas about this space in which futures work exists between the past and present and exploring novel futures. It is in this liminal space that we can recognise that ‘the future’ does not exist and that the only temporal space we can influence is the present. Liminal spaces are transitions between our present realities and the futures we imagine, while understanding that it is our thinking in the present that shapes these imagined futures. Old thinking, old futures. New thinking, new futures. The theme seeks to move beyond the *practice* of Futures Studies to explore what *underpins* practice and constructs this liminal space.

As our world is in, or moving quickly towards, a liminal space we wanted to explore in this issue how we might understand the liminal not in terms of approaches, methods or frameworks but in ways that have the potential to help us work through the transitional period we are now experiencing with new thinking and new futures images. We wanted to explore an urgency to use today’s liminality to identify new ways and means of transitioning through the next phase of human development – that is, our futures.

We are on the boundary of the old and new, with the pull of our futures and the weight of the past clashing in our thinking, our beliefs, our language, and our actions. This sort of volatility is to be expected as the human race has experienced many transitional periods, and the current liminal space we are in is yet another such period. We asked: how do we understand this space? And how might we interpret/change/adapt it in positive ways. The articles in this special issue explore potential answers to these questions.

Articles

Bussey’s contribution is a journey into the nature of the ruins of the future that ‘stand before us, and we are already walking through them’ – and creating them in the present. This article is more expansive, rich and full of thoughts and ideas that position the work of ‘the futurist’ in the present and ways to move beyond the ruins that I am not going to even attempt to provide a summary here – because you must read this not only for your mind but also to feel and experience the many messages within it.

Litchy introduces the concept of trauma-transformative futures by exploring a range of liminal spaces – trauma healing interventions, empowered Kenyan youth, futures consciousness and the Triple Dividend. He provides a mix-methods process that shows how futures unconsciousness can be moved to futures consciousness, defining six

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dimensions of the latter – (i) imagination, creativity, open-mindedness; (2) foresight, possibility/thinking, scenario building; (iii) goal-setting, decision-making, planning; (iv) critical thinking, reasoning, problem solving; (v) holistic insight; empirical observation’ (vi) wisdom, combining psychological capacities with characteristics. He shows how trauma healing journeys can transform futures consciousness in his Kenyan case study, and much, much more.

Casado: *The Futures Telescope: Liminal Horizons: Co-creating Protopia*. This author ‘collided’ with the futures field and here adapts the Futures Cone and to create the scaffolding (that is, not finalized) for a Futures Telescope (FT) – which included creating future visions, sharing them and collectively act on them. The FT moves beyond the cone we all know via subjective lenses in more dynamic contexts.

The present FT is structured by three factors: (i) adjusting the ocular (personal biases); (ii) cultural paradigms (collective lens leading to different views); and (iii) inserting the modern view (utopias on the horizon). There are limitations of course, with modernity’s belief in rationality, moving us to postmodernity, a new lens in the FT which construct the futures kaleidoscope of possibilities and a diversity of futures, along with the challenge to achieve shared visions of the future.

Emerging from these stages of thinking, is a Protopian Lens – which will help move beyond the static utopia and arriving in uncharted waters populated by emergent islands – new ideas and diverse paradigms that are co-created and evolving over time. The FT is a way to visualize Protopia in the present.

Heinonen et al: *Teasing paradoxes to explore transformative futures of peace*. The authors here explore transformative futures of peace in a Futures Clinique process. They draw on the social-cultural context for peace, which is a future without war. The workshop process explored paradoxes in the present about managing future uncertainties, futures fallacies and disowned futures, before providing general example of paradoxes of peace.

A case study provides a detailed discussion of the outcomes of a process that identified participant paradoxes of peace, followed by a detailed discussion of each paradox, and tensions embedded in paradoxes. The authors conclude that paradoxes provide a powerful tool for evoking futures images and enable desirable futures to be constructed. However, they note that ‘paradox probing’ does not yet produce futures knowledge – the workshop participants linked them to the present, but paradoxes that are deconstructed could be used to generate narratives and pathways.

Gaspar et al: *Navigating the Great Transition – lessons from gaming the futures*. This is an article about gamification, specifically a futures game – Navigating the Great Transition – in this article. The authors designed and have implemented the game with several groups and provide the outcomes. The aim was to build foresight skills that provide insight into understanding the Great Transition, and there is a detailed exploration of the process and outcomes.

The authors concluded that gamification, while not a simple task, can fruitfully build future capabilities, contributes to a better understanding of foresight concepts, and help people project themselves into future images, and that using gamification to teach provides different ways to build new knowledge such as collaboration, imagination or playing. While not a simple task, gamification in this futures case study results show that during this foresight process perspective change was the most influential shift.

Hideg: *Informatisation in the foresight activities*. The author explores the increased use of online and interactive approaches in the futures field, noting the increase of accessible platforms that enable online communication, decision making and foresight processes, making a distinction between informatisation and digitalisation.

The author states that in our changing world, these developing opportunities need to be exploited, with the need for futurists to develop online methods, processes and platforms. A discussion of the existing and developing platforms that indicate past and current development, indicating that interactivity and learning process of the platform and its users are paramount considerations. The author also discusses the potential dangers of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and how it can shape future perspectives, and notes that AI can be a useful research assistant guided by futures practitioners and participants who participate in futures processes.

Essays

Larrouy and Ngo: *Word and Dreams”: Using Liminality for Empowerment*. While the authors of this article aren’t technically ‘in’ the futures field, I liked their essay which shows how the concept of ‘the future’ can be used

in one context by drawing on futures concepts. The authors describe and explore a project on “Words and Dreams” designed for the hospitality industry – particularly the catering sector - with the aim of transforming student views of careers in that industry in France. This essay is a first foray into the futures field for the authors and aims to enable students to reframe and transform their views and understanding of their courses and their future places in the catering sector and in society via a cooperative arrangement with stakeholders in the industry. Results indicated successful outcomes with reported changed views and opinions of the catering industry for both students and stakeholders.

Greenacre: *Ontological Distancing in a Liminal World*. This article explores ontology in liminal times, in which our futures are unpredictable, leaving us unsure about what is or might be emerging next. He explores several futures methods to assess their usefulness in liminal times, indicating that the ontological foundations of these methods need some refinement for them to be able to help us in the ever-changing realities in liminal times. Changing realities results in new ontologies, because we often don’t have clarity about what is ‘real’ and what is constructed.

To resolve this seeming dichotomy, Greenacre proposes that we use the theory of *distancing* – that one can exist in a space which represent different points of realness and construction. Adopting a distancing ontology, he argues, allows a framework that embraces liminality as far as is possible, because there is a relative position at any time and times of flux.

Damhof et al. *Dis/abling Futures: What ableism stops us noticing*. The authors provide us with the concept of dis/abling futures using an approach that uses a metaphor of sorts to ask us to be ‘still’ to allow the new, the different, the alternative in the present to emerge. A human being can’t be completely still because it is actually impossible – we have to breathe. So, the conference participants ‘failed’ the exercise. The authors translate that failure into a broader social and futures context that explores disability and ableism through the lens of *dis/ability*, asking us to be open to new ways of knowing. We are invited to explore and challenge our thinking to find the influence and restriction of our ontologies and epistemologies in our lived realities. We are invited to challenge what exists now to understand the constraints of our current notions of reality and thinking about futures? The authors suggest using *cripping* as an approach to do this and to find an “unconsidered imaginarium” to find new ways of thinking and experiencing our realities, noting that who we assume defines our current ways of living and working is something we need to consider. For me, this was an intriguing essay giving us a new perspective, at least for me.

Wee: *Exploring a Polyvagal Futures Literacy*. This article explores polyvagal theory (PVT) in the futures context. While some work has been completed on this topic in the futures field, it is still a relatively new perspective. The author first introduces the PVT and its relevance to the futures field, building on a range of work that focuses on mind and body, senses and emotions in futures processes to deepen thinking and engagement. Wee suggests that “somatic processes in futures thinking offer a valuable counterpoint to the rationalist and cognitive historically dominant in futures thinking, and the role of Polyvagal Theory in understanding and influencing these embodied processes bears further research.” (p3)

The aim of the essay is both to demonstrate how PVT can inform the development of our futures literacy and to provide a framework to help us do that. Wee makes clear the framework is ‘rudimentary’ for those in the futures field to critique and explore to find how to integrate PVT into futures processes. The framework is composed of four factors – orientation, sensing, shifting and structuring. The orientation is a positioning between the Self and Others which approach the remaining three factors using different approaches. As wit Bussey’s article, there is much in this article to be absorbed and added to the futures library on PVT.

Draeger and Bevolo: *Automating Liminality in Foresight Practice*. Here we have a perspective on Artificial Intelligence (AI) foresight by exploring the impact on outcomes of Generative AI generally and hallucinations generated by AI in the futures field, including whether futurists may become redundant. They also provide an AI futures process to take advantage of these hallucinations. The authors suggest that Generative-AI hallucinations can be reframed to be generators of liminality to promote new futures thinking – they conclude that practitioners will/shou be able to interpret and communicate the possible adaptations to an emerging technology. They see futurists should see Generative AI as a means of creating human creativity.

Final Words

These essays and articles all present new and or different ways to design, implement and act on the outcomes in futures processes. They come in two broad categories: cognitive (futures think) and practice (futures processes). And while liminality may not have been a focus of all essays and articles, we believe they make a significant contribution to our futures literature.