

The Polak Game, Or: Where Do You Stand?

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Abstract

This article describes the origins and uses of a classroom and workshop activity called “The Polak Game” or “Where do you Stand?”. Over a dozen years of use to date, the game has provided a user-friendly structure for facilitating quite far-reaching conversation among foresight students and clients. Duration is flexible, but typically runs 30-60 minutes. It represents an effective and accessible approach to introducing “images of the future” as a basic property of both cultures and individuals, and so to pave the way for more advanced tools and frameworks. The article is in two parts, covering the experiences of the two authors.

Keywords: Facilitation, Foresight Pedagogy, Futures Literacy, Game Design, Group Activities, Images of the Future, Embodiment.

PART I: Origin and Orientation (Peter Hayward)

The Polak Game was a magical development arising from a surprising source.

The Image of the Future is a famous text in the history of futures studies, written by the Dutch sociologist Frederik Lodewijk Polak (1961). The author, who was Jewish, survived the Holocaust hiding out in German-occupied Netherlands, and went on to write this magnum opus about how various human cultures have shaped their own destinies through their collective images of the future (van der Helm, 2005).¹

It is a book of its time in which Polak takes a swing at some big post-WW2 themes, including Christianity, Marxism, Utopia, and Culture, to name a few. It’s a ripping read.

In such a far-reaching work—over 800 pages in the original two volumes, though less than half that in the abridged edition²—I became fascinated by a particular passage explaining the role played by Optimism and Pessimism in the power of the image of the future. I have reread this single paragraph many times.

It will be helpful to make distinctions between optimism and pessimism along the lines of the concepts of Seinmüssen, “what must be,” and Seinsollen “what ought to be.” It would then be possible

to speak of Seinoptimismus or Seinpessimismus, which we will refer as essence-optimism or essence-pessimism, and Willensoptimismus or Willenspessimismus, which we shall refer to as influence-optimism or influence-pessimism. The essence categories refer to an unchangeable course of events; the influence categories refer to the supposed or rejected possibility of human intervention. The first point of view sees history as a book that has already been written; the second sees history as a process than man can or cannot manipulate (Polak, 1973, p. 17).

I found that this explanation led me to imagine a 2x2 matrix, with the vertical axis describing essence-optimism and -pessimism, and influence-optimism and -pessimism plotted on the horizontal. And so in my mind's eye, I saw it as shown in Figure 1.

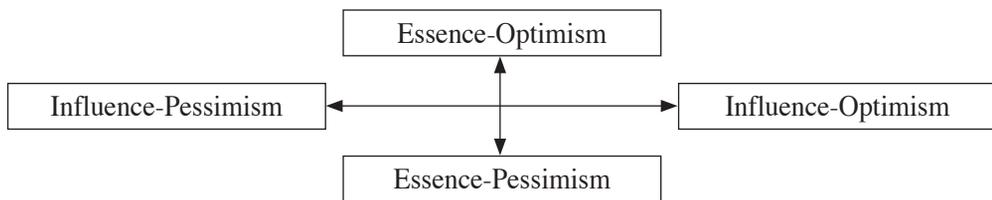


Figure 1. Imagined Polak Orientations

These factors, Polak seemed to claim, gave every image of the future its underlying logic, moral basis, and power to attract people and create culture. My understanding may be wrong, but nevertheless that was the basic grasp of the theory that gave the game its start.

It seems fitting that the first time I really began to use Polak's idea was in response to someone else who I thought was missing the point. Dennis Morgan published an article on *The Image of the Future*, finding that it lacked for him the essential notion of human progress (Morgan, 2002). My rejoinder to Dennis was that the notion of progress was wholly dependent on where you stood in relation to these dimensions of essence and influence (Hayward, 2003). On reflection, it was this simple metaphor — “it all depends on where you are standing” — that became the enduring motif of the game itself.

The first time I ran the Polak Game was in the classroom with Joseph Voros at Swinburne University around 2004. We were teaching the concept of “the image of the future” and invoking Jim Dator's statement of its importance to the futures field.

Futures studies does not—or should not—pretend to predict “the future.” It studies ideas about the future—what I usually call “images of the future”—which each individual (and group) has (often holding several conflicting images at one time) (Dator, 1995).

It was of course Polak who had introduced the concept of “images of the future” referred to in Dator's remark. At that moment, however, instead of trying to explain Polak, I said “let's *do* Polak”.

I asked everyone to stand up and gather in the middle of the classroom. I then stood at one end of the room, and Joe stood at the other. I explained that the two of us marked the extreme perspectives as to whether change in the world was working its way towards optimistic futures (my “north”) or pessimistic futures (Joe's “south”). People were asked to arrange themselves somewhere on that spectrum to express their expectations for the future relative to the endpoints. The first question from the class was “What context do I use?” and I think I responded, “How you experience the world, so you set the context.” This may not have been great direction, but it did illustrate a key point in using the game: the context of participants is crucial, and you need to establish its importance early on.

The whole class was now distributed along a north-south (or upper-lower) line, the expectation axis (the vertical in Figure 1). Joe and I moved to the sides of the room, and I instructed everyone else not to move. Now the two of us were marking out the ends of the influence axis (horizontal in figure 1). Again we explained the perspectives corresponding to the two ends: that people have influence (right), or that people don't (left). The participants were told to retain their present upper-lower positioning and to move sideways to indicate their own degree of optimism or pessimism on the influence axis, and then stop.

Having moved the second time, everyone was now standing in one of the four quadrants I had visualised. We went on to explore the nature, logic, moral basis, culture etc of each quadrant. Each had its own distinct ontological and ethical foundations.

As the game developed after that, I would either show this basic set of perspectives in a powerpoint slide, or draw out the relevant characteristics through discussion during the game. Figure 2 shows an attempt to capture a sense of the quadrants, employing what I would describe as a naïve framing.

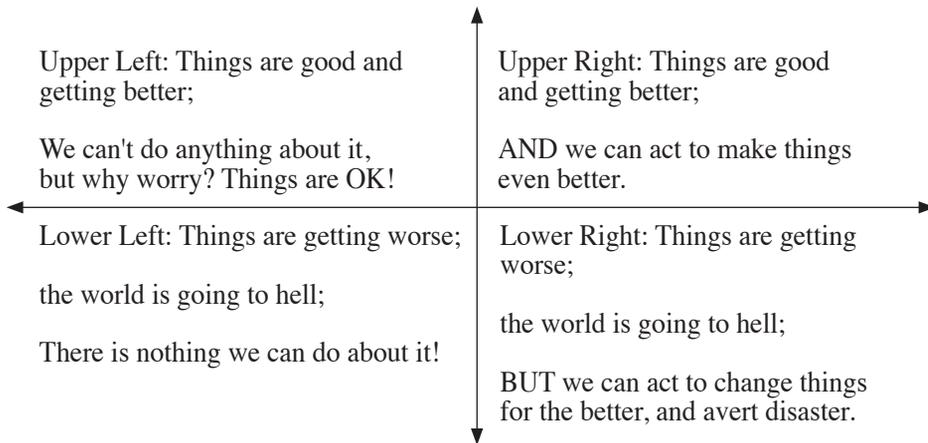


Figure 2. Generic Responses within the Quadrants

The framing shown in Figure 2 will get participants to stand somewhere and have interesting conversation, but I came to feel that it was also a bit limiting, as people tended to congregate on the influence-optimism (right) side only.

I soon began to modify how I would ask people to orientate themselves. The vertical axis was still essence-optimism and -pessimism, but I would explain it this way:

I will ask you to orientate yourself according to how you experience the world; how you understand the way that it has been and is. At one end of the room [the upper half], our sense from experience in the world is this: while things go wrong from time to time, the overall trend is that things are getting better. At the other end [the lower half], while things go okay from time to time, the overall trend is that it's more of a struggle, and things are not getting better.

I made this textual change because I did not find a binary utopia/dystopia framing that helpful. A more realistic and complex spectrum seemed more useful for participants than a simple good-world/bad-world dichotomy.

The influence variable was tricky as people would commonly see the optimistic right half of the matrix as “strong”, and the pessimistic left side as weak or passive. Again, I did not consider such simple dichotomies very useful for groups to play with, so here is how I ended up explaining that axis.

Now we are orientating ourselves according to what caused our experience and sense of the world. On the influence-optimism [right] side, the driving cause was the actions of people. While there are big processes and forces that have shaped the world, by far the biggest cause is people. On the influence-pessimism [left] side, while people are influential, it is the larger forces — physical, political, cultural, and spiritual, to mention a few — that have caused the world to be the way you have experienced it.

Using a script along these lines, we would see a more even spread of people around the matrix, and the slightly different sense of the four quadrants could be described as in Figure 3.

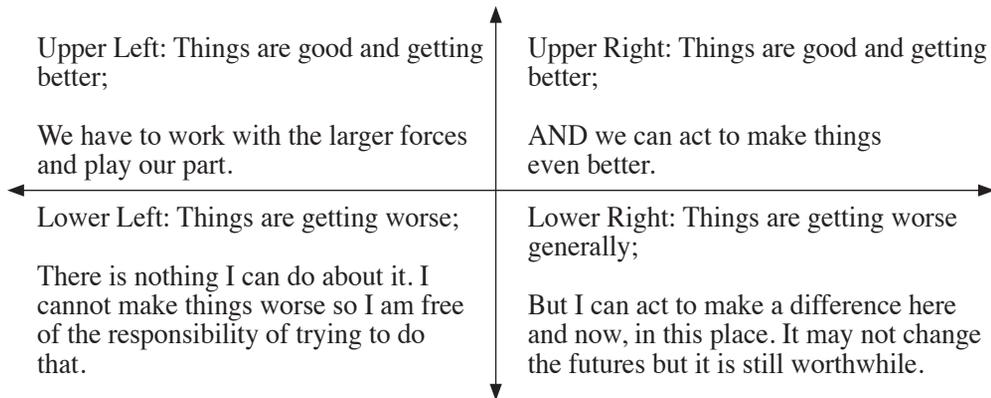


Figure 3. Modified Responses within the Quadrants

With participants distributed more evenly around the matrix, the facilitator can draw out a richer discussion both of where people are, and of what they see or feel when thinking about those in the other quadrants. The attributions and conversations *across* quadrants are probably among the most useful aspects of the game.

When you ask players to describe what energises their own image of the future, you tend to get the following self-descriptions within quadrants:

- Upper Right (UR) – Powerful, or Agentic
- Upper Left (UL) – Service-oriented
- Lower Right (LR) – Realistic, or Stoic
- Lower Left (LL) – Free, or Que Sera Sera

When asking players how they would describe the other quadrants, you get something like this:

Table 1. *How the Other Quadrants are Viewed from Each Quadrant*

In-quadrant view	View from UR	View from UL	View from LR	View from LL
UR - Powerful	X	Deluded	Unrealistic	Oppressors
UL – Service-oriented	Passive	X	Idealists	Lucky
LR – Stoic	Battlers	Martyrs	X	Lost Cause
LL – Free	Losers	Victims	Lazy	X

The UR may, for instance, think of themselves as powerful change agents, but then hear from others (moving clockwise) that the LR regard them as being unrealistic or just privileged; the LL describe them as deluded or hubristic, and the UL see them as the ones who create the world that the LL live in. You can then move people into different quadrants to “see how things look from where others stand”.

When deployed in an organisation the dynamics of the game can get very interesting. Once I worked with an executive group who all huddled in the UR, almost competing to be furthest into that optimistic-optimistic quadrant. As if channelling the UL’s critique, I asked: “How do you know you are not deluded?” When a group of decision-makers cluster in the UR, you can ask, “Where are your staff standing?” “Where are your customers?” The realisation may start to dawn that others are not necessarily energised by the same image of the future.

On another occasion, I ran the game with an executive group where, again, most were in the UR. Later on, however, while developing their strategic plan, I heard them listing all the things that they “could not do” until someone else acted first. I asked, “So why were you standing in the UR earlier?” The group quickly dropped the “We need others to act first” comment and got on with planning the actions they could take.

It is when I have used it with groups trying to create a vision of a shared future that I think the power of the Polak Game has become most apparent. Humans construct narratives from their own experience and sense of the world. You could say that we stand on our individual ontology. What the game can reveal to players is that we each need to meet others where they are, and listen to their ontologies, before we have any chance of creating a shared one. During the game, it often becomes obvious who in a group feels that they have power and opportunity, and who does not; who has been treated fairly in the past, and who has not. By bringing these hidden dimensions to light, those with power may feel humbled by their privilege, and those with disadvantage can feel acknowledged and heard. And from there, an enduring sense of what “our” future could be starts to emerge.

PART II: Exploration and Evolution (Stuart Candy)

Peter and I met for the first time at the World Future Society Conference in Chicago in 2005. Early the next year he managed to visit the “Manoa School” for a few short days, where Jake Dunagan and I were graduate students at the time; a group of us spent a highly memorable afternoon which Peter facilitated and which we hosted at the Hawaii Research Center for Futures Studies. As I have consistently found to be the case with Peter, even this all-too-brief interaction left a lasting impression.

Somehow it did not register with me at the time that this activity he had introduced to us as the Polak Game was such a recent invention; it already had the hallmarks of a classic, tried-and-tested pedagogy. It had a robust rationale, and an intriguing backstory in Polak’s own life experience, and it offered a striking way to call participants’ assumptions forth to be examined by themselves and others. This key aspect of futures work is not always simple to pull off. Yet this game was easy to play, and endlessly generative.

In our very first conversation in Chicago I recall Peter describing his notion that a thorough understanding of a subject, coupled with a willingness to experiment, could yield an endless stream of innovations in pedagogy and practice — an “infinite toolkit”.

Sometimes, in the course of experimentation, you hit on a key pattern that crystallises into a tool worth keeping, revisiting, and iterating. Such was the case with his invention of the Polak Game.

Flashing forward to a 2016 retreat held in Silicon Valley to explore futures and imagination, Institute for the Future’s Jane McGonigal (herself a renowned game designer) led our assembled group through an activity called “the Future Orientation Game”. Although neither Polak nor Hayward were mentioned at first, the family resemblance was unmistakable. The game had made its

way to IFTF via Dunagan, who had worked there for many years after leaving Hawaii. I was glad to be able to add something about its origins and underlying thinking (McGonigal & Frauenfelder, 2016, pp. 13ff).

Now, any useful and thought-provoking futures activity deserves to spread, and this second- or third-generation descendant reminds us of an important fact about how futures practice and tools are actually disseminated—evolving from hand to hand, like any folk knowledge or craft. We might recognise that the evolution of our tools and tricks of the trade; these foresight craft genealogies, often escape not only documentation, but even our explicit notice. In this context then I want to share a few lessons I've gleaned as an avid facilitator of the Polak Game during its first ten years, as a resource for those who may wish to build on it during the next phase.

Further to the point above: until we wrote this article together, I was not aware of changes to the game that Peter had made later, so the game I've developed over the years, both in its intellectual framing and in its more theatrical aspects, is probably more a cousin of the original than a clone.

A few months after his visit in 2006 I contacted Peter to ask permission to use the game with a group from the East-West Center's Asia-Pacific Leadership Program, in a session that I would be running at the end of the year in Sapa, Vietnam. In that event, out of 30 or 40 participants from perhaps two dozen countries across Asia and the Pacific, all but one stood on the influence-optimism side of the matrix. Unusually diverse in terms of disciplinary and cultural background, an invisible dimension of the cohort was suddenly apparent; one on which they turned out not to vary so much. These aspiring leaders had a distinct, robust sense of personal influence.

This first deployment highlighted one of the key learning opportunities that the game presents: a playful but meaningful way to talk about "who is in the room" and who is not. Leaders (and as a design professor, I would add designers) of various kinds are often well-represented in the UR quadrant (essence-optimism and influence-optimism). Rarely would a group of players be statistically representative of attitudes to the future found in a random sample outside, there being a level of privilege built into educational and organisational contexts, which we can recognise and use to underline the critical value of considering other perspectives. Indeed, depending on group size, one or other of the influence-pessimism quadrants sometimes stays empty. (I don't recall ever seeing more than one empty quadrant.)

In the end, whatever their configuration, people are challenged and encouraged to explore and empathise with each other's views, and especially with marginal or absent perspectives on possible futures: how do, and how should, each of us relate to our peers or constituents who happen not to have the same attitudes to change and agency?

These moves exercise the perspective-taking muscles that foresight practice asks us to develop. The lesson that contrasting ways of thinking about futures may be present in a society or organisation, but that these are not necessarily all represented at the top table where the loudest voices are heard and the biggest decisions taken, is important for those with positional authority to grasp.

The Asia-Pacific group in Vietnam was the first of dozens of deployments I have facilitated in a range of contexts; futures students from Singapore to Mexico (often with Dunagan as co-instructor); leaders of the United Nations Development Programme in New York, and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in Geneva; mental health experts at Yale University, and the Board of Directors of the Sydney Opera House; designers in the Netherlands, Russia, and Brazil; high school kids in North Carolina, biomedical engineers in Toronto, and members of the South Sudanese community in Melbourne.

Generally, as in the first run of the game in Hawaii, I ask players to start by standing in a line, all in a single row, facing me. (The line they are forming will soon become the horizontal dividing the upper and lower halves of the matrix.) I open with something like this:

I have a question for you, and I will ask you to answer by moving. The question is about your expectations for the future. When you cast your imagination one generation forward, say 25 years from today, do you expect the world to be better than the one we live in— better as defined by you — or do you imagine it as being worse? If you feel optimistic in your expectations for how the world will look in 2042 [as of 2017], then when I say “go”, you should step forward, and the stronger that feeling is, the further forward you should step. If on the other hand, you feel pessimistic or doubtful in your expectations about the state of the world in 2042, then when I say “go”, step backward, and again, the more strongly you feel that way, the further you should move. There is a subjective judgment at play here, which is fine—that’s what we want. Go! Move as far forward or as far back as you like.³

Having stepped forward or back from the starting line, however clustered or spread out they are, I double check that folks are comfortable that where they stand reflects their answer. This is of course a far cry from the kind of tidy, replicable responses prized by many social scientists, and there is a significant element of tacit social positioning and interpersonal negotiation at play in any given Polak Game. Some individuals for example take it upon themselves to push to the edges of their group, while others may hold back. However, this is all grist to the mill, because the process itself is in large part about the complex interplay between individual and emergent group/cultural perspectives.

Next, having them take care not to move forward or back, but to step sideways and, still facing forward, gather along the imaginary vertical/upper-lower axis through the centre of the space, I might say the following:

Now I have another question for you, and it is about your agency; your personal capacity to influence change at the global level over the next 25 years, in directions you personally consider to be positive. If you feel that you do have agency and can shape the world, when I say “go” please step to the right, and the more strongly you feel that way, the further you are invited to move. If on the other hand, you have your doubts, if you are sceptical or pessimistic about your capacity to shape things on that scale, over that time period, then when I say “go” move to the left, commensurate with your level of doubt. Go!

These specific parameters — the whole world, one generation from now, your own personal capacity to affect global level change — represent shared reference points, variables we hold in place so that the conversation can then push off and pivot around these in considering the multiple other issues in play. In this approach, as Peter noted, we are aiming to avoid a simplistic good world/bad world dichotomy, using instead a more dimensional better/worse (than today) spectrum and associated confidence levels to surface a range of responses. More open-ended language in the prompt is certainly possible (e.g. leaving out a time horizon, or leaving out a scope of influence), but the ensuing conversation could take a lot of time unearthing predictable differences of interpretation of a vaguer prompt (“oh, I was thinking about a decade from now, whereas she was thinking more like a century”). Being specific helps factor certain differences out, and focus instead on some of the many other issues at play behind people’s responses, such as the different kinds of evidence that players attend to, or ignore, when explaining their expectations.

The personalities, experiences and imaginations of those assembled are the always interesting and potentially revealing raw materials of the Polak Game. It presents a wealth of opportunities to surface and sift countless factors that might lie beneath people’s varying responses on the day and in that moment; cultural, disciplinary, developmental, dispositional, contextual, and so on. I may invite players to move in case they find their view has changed: they rarely take you up on it, but the fact

that people's current positions are fluid, and partly arbitrary, is good to acknowledge.

I've run the game indoors and outdoors, in gardens and courtyards, hotels, classrooms, boardrooms and hallways. If lacking access to a suitable space for bodily staging the conversation (which usually lasts around 45 minutes), on a few occasions we have resorted to people writing their names on index cards, and moving those around on a tabletop. This can work well too.

While not, strictly speaking, a game of experiential futures ("the design of situations and stuff from the future to catalyse insight and change"; Candy & Dunagan, 2017), it is certainly an experiential game about futures. What is remarkably effective about the game is that, not unlike The Sarkar Game (Inayatullah, 2013), it beds down a new vocabulary, or dimension of awareness, through embodiment. It makes immediate and memorable some useful abstract and analytical categories that can be referenced and built upon in later futures work, both inwardly (as in our invitation to players to keep paying attention to these factors) and outwardly (as in Peter's example of the buck-passing execs from the Upper-Right quadrant).

The game works well with classes or professional groups brand new to foresight. As a way to structure introductory conversation it can be highly effective: you can incorporate learning people's names, departments and the like just as readily into the game as any stand-alone icebreaker or introductory circle, and it often goes a lot deeper than those. At the end of a futures course or program, days, months or even years later, people regularly remark on how this first conversation stayed with them.

Sometimes, quite moving personal stories arise in answer to the simple question posed of people in each quadrant, "Why do you stand where you are?" I always thank participants for generously sharing of themselves in this way. I also like to encourage direct dialogue between players. ("Peter, what do you think you're seeing that Stuart might be missing? Tell him.") In a successful game, the facilitator finds ways to move out of the conversational spotlight as the group gathers its own momentum, and members assume more responsibility for negotiating understandings across multiple dimensions of difference.

On the whole, I don't see major differences between workplace and educational deployments. Whatever the occasion convening a group, discussion usually gravitates to the themes that matter most to them. Where a shared mission unifies participants, as in a recent session at Red Cross / Red Crescent headquarters, they may join the dots spontaneously between insights from the game and their organisational functions. If they don't, you can invite them to.

One practical difference between contexts may show up in the takeaways that bear emphasis as the game concludes (although these distinctions are not hard and fast). For groups from a single organisation, considerations of inclusivity and personal responsibility may have a sharper operational upshot; for example, "How can you bring in, honour and learn from the perspectives of those not in the room?" For disparate participants in the classroom, the closing moments may turn to broader philosophical questions: "What images of the future do you personally carry? Where do they come from? How do they fit, or not, into wider cultural patterns?" You might add: "Whose interests do they appear to advance, and whose do they marginalise? What might these themes, and the variety of such images, or lack thereof, portend for the culture?"

In early 2017, as part of a forthcoming documentary about and with the South Sudanese community in Australia, I ran the game twice, back-to-back (Owen, in production). The first time, my questions used the standard parameters concerning participants' expectations and influence around global-scale change over the next generation. The second time, however, we focused in on their expectations and influence with respect to the futures of the young nation of South Sudan (independent from Sudan since 2011). Several participants stood in completely different places from one round to the next, and both similarities and contrasts between iterations were instructive: having heard about and seen each other's dispositions at the world level gave people a deeper context for their own and others' views – optimistic, pessimistic, or mixed – at the scale of their country of birth, which has since 2013 been in a state of civil war.

I have found that the parameters of the game may be adjusted for valuable conversation in all sorts of settings.

At its heart, however, the Polak Game introduces the central concept of images of the future and invites players to put up antennae; to pay closer attention to the ideas and sentiments circulating in their personal, organisational, and cultural imaginaries. Everyone tends to have a view on these questions even if they may not have thought much about them before.

In theoretical terms, of course, tuning in to these often unsuspected but ever-present interior (individual and collective) dimensions of futures discourse is among the prescriptions of integral futures (e.g. Slaughter, 2008).

However, the reasons to do so are equally practical, and in playing the Polak Game, those new to the field quickly grasp why this is a literacy with extensive ethical and practical implications. Cultivating awareness of the landscape of images of the future goes directly to the cultural, political and interpersonal challenges of implementing change in multiple settings. In this sense, the game can be a very effective gateway to more technical tools and frameworks. (Incidentally, it also provides a foundational or baseline conversation to refer back to, as people reflect on their own learning and shifts of perspective while developing futures literacy.) For practitioners, it is not a replacement for but a handy prelude and companion to more focused, pragmatic tasks.

Although for many in the world, foresight is currently a luxury, normatively we could consider it a right (Candy, 2016). I believe, with Robert Jungk—another important figure in European futures, a contemporary of Polak, and like him, a Jewish Holocaust survivor—that “The future belongs to everybody” (Jungk and Müllert, 1987, p.9). For those who share an impulse to democratise foresight, wherever they may be operating, having ways for “everybody” to contribute matters.

The fundamental question, “where do you stand?” in relation to futures, as inspired by Fred Polak and crystallised by Peter Hayward, is one we should all consider. To approach it playfully, with good humour, curiosity, and compassion, is a great way to start.

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Endnotes

1. The book’s lineage is even more interesting when you discover that it was translated from the Dutch by Elise Boulding, another giant of the futures field (and peace studies too). There exist perhaps apocryphal stories of the Polaks living “at the bottom of the Bouldings’ garden”, while Elise learned enough Dutch to translate a very dense text.
2. An electronic download of the abridged single-volume version is presently housed on the La Prospective website: <http://en.lapropective.fr/dyn/anglais/memoire/the-image-of-the-future.pdf>
3. In my approach the vertical axis is described in terms of *expectation* (rather than *essence*) optimism and pessimism; a semantic shift which might help players acknowledge their particular

perspectives as being just that (as opposed to coming from some future “essence” entirely outside themselves). Other game variations are certainly available and worth investigating. For example, a generation before Polak identified the dimensions of “essence” and “influence”, physicist J.D. Bernal observed, “There are two futures, the future of desire and the future of fate, and man’s reason has never learnt to separate them.” (1929, p.7) Bernal’s framing suggests an alternative “Where do you stand?” matrix, exploring participants’ attitudes to a certain scenario for instance. (For more on “fate” and “desire” as perhaps primary dimensions in futures studies — reframing and simplifying the set of categories that usually begins with possible, probable, and preferable — see Candy, 2010, p.35.) At any rate we are not overly concerned about “getting Polak right” in the Polak Game; even its core activity, discussing people’s personal views of futures, is a departure from the focus of his work. “We do not discuss private images of the future [in *The Image of the Future*], but only shared public ones... because we are primarily concerned with the larger social and cultural processes.” (Polak, 1973, p.14) Instead, we play in the spirit of standing on Polak’s shoulders, even at the hazard of occasionally treading on his toes.

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