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# Scenarios, Futures and Design

**Anne-Marie Willis**

Ever since humanity created the ability to unleash instant destruction via nuclear, chemical and biological means, the future has been under a question mark. To this we could now add: threats from technologically sophisticated acts of terrorism; a massive genetic engineering stuff-up; or slower obliteration from an increasingly capricious global climate system.

While end-of-world scenarios are not new – they have been around for a long time in cultures that deal in linear time – the last century delivered so many more ways to end it all .... and all of 'it'.

Yet, generally, we act as if these are remote possibilities and that the worst won't happen. Organisations contemplate small-time futures like "how can we ensure our brand remains relevant?" or "what new products or services should we be offering in future markets?" They look inwards, not seeing the tenuous ground on which they stand.

On a personal level, prospects of continuous technological change and increasing environmental dysfunction add urgency to life decisions. Where and how to live? What career? What kind of education is relevant?

Given that uncertainty is a given, any method that purports to enable decisions to be made in the face of it, should prove popular with decision makers. It is in this context that we see the idea of creating scenarios of possible futures and then interrogating them with questions of concern being taken up in a variety of situations.

But before proceeding, let's pause to consider what scenario creation might conceal: that it is not available to everyone, while it may presume to speak for all.

To be able to contemplate the future is a defining feature of privilege, based upon freedom from want and the expectation of a long life – barring random disasters, accidents and the like. How different it is for those people who live in the perpetual present – the billions of subsistence producers, casual labourers and dependents whose wits are preoccupied with day-to-day survival; or for people whose futures have been taken away – the millions in Africa and Asia with HIV aids with no prospect of life-extending medications.

The other erroneous assumption about the future is that everyone exists in the same temporality. Yet we only have to consider the present to see that this is not so. Coal miners dying in their thousands to feed China's industrial revolution or subsistence farmers across Asia, Africa or Latin America being lured to jobs in cities – these people are being subjected to the same conditions of exploitation that prevailed at the birth of European and American industrial capitalism a hundred and fifty years ago.

There is, of course, a whole domain of literature devoted to creating scenarios of the future – science fiction. It conjures up fantastical visions of radically different worlds on other planets, or of life on earth at some distant future point. Yet no matter how bizarre or unlikely some science fiction scenarios might appear to be, they, like all other imaginary projections cannot escape the present. The illusion perpetuated by of a good deal of 'futuristic' scenarios is that of the future as an empty space waiting to be filled, whereas, in actuality, it is already cluttered with what the past dumps in it.

The relationship between the two figures – 'design' and 'scenario' is not fixed. The term 'design scenario' conjures up quite different associations as it circulates across various domains like strategic design, design management, design-for-sustainability, architecture and planning as well as 'non-design' areas like futures studies or management consulting. It is also inflected with design's history of embracing utopias.

Scenario practioners from all disciplines emphasise that prediction is not the goal of scenarios, but some have a greater investment in second-guessing future trends than others. In essence, a scenario is a created, plausible fiction about what might or could happen. The time scale can vary from several weeks, months or years

hence (e.g., scenarios generated during a military campaign) to many decades hence (e.g., climate change scenarios). Scenarios are means to project likely future circumstances in order to reflect on them.

Clearly, scenarios have been used strategically across many areas of human activity for quite some time, having developed out of the narrative traditions that engendered common understandings and thus constituted functioning socio-cultural groups. In their explanations of worlds, traditional narratives and myths reached back in time to posit origins. Or their time was eternal, cyclical and sacred. But the future-directed narratives of scenarios seem to be particularly modern, and based on the questionable assumption that human beings control their own destinies and that reason and calculation can be used to sort the improbable from the likely. It is only more recently that scenario-creation has become a more consciously defined and codified activity, this as the result of it being taken up within the instrumental domain of business, rather than being limited to cultural spheres (like literature, drama, film).

In their recent managerial manifestations, scenarios are usually developed by groups of people, this being integral to their purpose of creating common understandings of designated problems, and as it is hoped, commonly agreed courses of action. Scenario creation is used by management, instrumentally, for 'team building', for strategic planning and consensual direction-setting. Equally, scenarios can be used by small numbers of people to constitute themselves as a co-ordinated group able to act more effectively on an issue of common concern – which might be immediate and local or of a more broadscale and longterm nature.

Paradoxically, management consultants often claim scenario creation as a tool appropriated from design practice, while designers often draw on the 'scenario planning' methods of strategic management.

Across a range of professional practices, scenarios are generated to serve both short-term, highly specific, instrumental goals as well as long range ones involving major change. Examples of the former include the 'scenarios of use' generated by product designers, either speculatively or in collaboration with users, the aim being to create a better fit between user needs and the designed artefact. A scenario as "a concrete story about use" is claimed as an effective technique for IT design. The promotion for John M. Carroll's *Making Use: Scenario-Based Design of Human-Computer Interactions* puts it like this: "Instead of designing software by listing requirements, functions, and code modules, the designer focuses first on the activities that need to be supported and then allows descriptions of those activities to drive everything else."<sup>1</sup>

Moving to more ambitious versions of scenario design, significant differences in scope and approach can be noted. These do not arise as much out of differing professional dispositions, as from

different political and ideological dispositions towards futures. Yet this is rarely acknowledged.

Overwhelmingly, for business, the issue is the advantageous market positioning of product, service or brand within a stream of seemingly random events and circumstances. The approach taken involves mapping several distinct and credible stories about the future so as to determine a course of action that will “play out well across several possible futures”<sup>2</sup> With the ultimate goal being the maximisation of profits, all such strategic thinking, whether involving the creation of scenarios or not, is fundamentally reactive: it’s a question of survival within the status quo of the marketplace, never about finding ways to change the status quo. The market economy, the corporation, the consumer-subject, globally expanding, commodity-intensive lifestyles – such features of ‘now’ are assumed to roll on into the future.

On the other hand, there are those who regard these contemporary trends critically, and seek to use scenarios, not to second-guess likely tendencies within an unfolding drama, but to illuminate different options or directions. Leaving aside, for the moment, the vexed issue of utopianism throwing up visions without the means to realise them, the radical difference of saying “no” to things as they are, needs to be acknowledged.

To illustrate the difference: reactive scenarios might envisage demographic trends, future consumer behaviour, political events, resource supplies or technological developments; proactive scenarios might begin as a series of questions predicated on a rejection of current trends, such as some of those that frame Manzini and Jegou’s *Sustainable Everyday: Scenarios of Urban Life*:

How can we produce energy and how will we use it?  
How can we take care of our houses and things?  
How can we move around the city?<sup>3</sup>

The way these questions are posed automatically implies that how ‘we’ do these things now is problematic, and needs to change.

Reactive scenarios are concerned with what might happen, proactive scenarios with what might be possible.

Scenarios pervade design:

- Scenarios are often used as part of the design process.
- Scenarios are created by design.
- Scenarios can be a means of identifying what needs to be designed.

But there is a more fundamental connection: all scenarios are future-directed, they are attempts at prefiguration, which is something they share with design. Design always prefigures something, be it concrete or abstract, material or immaterial, organisational or artefactual. In this sense, design is a fundamental

human capacity, that forms the basis of, but also reaches well beyond, the professional practices of design. Prefigurative ability and the extent of its actualisation varies according to the degree of deliberation and the significance or triviality of what is engaged (for design never occurs in a vacuum, it is always worldly, worlded, and worlding) and the prevailing conditions of possibility and delimitation (the context in which the designing takes place).<sup>4</sup>

This echoes what Tony Fry wrote on design intelligence in the last issue of DPP:

The ability to prefigure, the essence of the ability to design, while intuitive, itself constitutes part of the essence of what it is to be 'human'. .... The degree to which design becomes a developed act of cognition itself determines the occupation of the ontology (and subject position) of a designer, yet it remains vital to acknowledge that all humans design. The extent, or not, to which the ability to design is exercised, is indivisible from the power to shape and modify one's world and the world of others. .... In this respect design is a figure of freedom. Like freedom itself, what it liberates is always the product of creation within limits.<sup>5</sup>

This characterisation of the nature of design can be applied equally to scenario creation. In fact they are often characterised similarly, thus Art Kleiner states:

Scenarios are imaginative pictures of potential futures, but the future they picture is just a means to an end. These conversations, at once free-flowing and rigorously constrained, are designed to help a group of people trick themselves to see past their own blind spots.

Kleiner also emphasises the scenario method of 'thinking the unthinkable' which had its origins in Hermann Kahn's pioneering 'post-nuclear-war scenarios', concluding that

Scenario planning forces us .... to learn to visualise the possible worlds in which the unimaginable, the unthinkable, the ungodly, and the unpredictable actually come to pass. If we can imagine such worlds we can partially prepare ourselves for whatever future does come to pass. Confronting the future with rigour tends to leave most people energised and enthusiastic about facing their future – even if the future looks grim.<sup>6</sup>

As said, scenarios do not claim to be predictions about the future. Thus they are not prefigurative, in the way that acts of design are (even if what is prefigured is no more than a variation, modification,

elaboration, recombination of something that already exists). Is it helpful then, to talk about a scenario as something that is designed? Would one say that a science fiction novel is designed? This is relevant, given that narrative is an important element of scenarios. The claim is often made that designers make good scenario facilitators because of their ability to visualise. But this ability is not unique to designers, nor certainly is the ability to tell a convincing story. But maybe it is just hair-splitting to ask whether scenarios are designed, constructed, planned or narrated – each of these activities, while distinct, share a significant degree of overlap, and all can contribute to scenario creation.

To create a scenario is to make an attempt at prefiguration. But if all that results is the scenario itself (as narrated, performed, documented or whatever, by/to its participants and/or other relevant constituencies), the prefigurative potential is limited. This is why *design* needs to be foregrounded in scenario activities.

The important relation between design and scenarios is not so much at the front end, but can come afterwards – when the scenario is used as a means to generate design proposals. For example, from an exploration of the idea of sustainment, a scenario might be created that envisages certain lifestyles very different from those prevailing now; this, in turn could be used to prompt design concepts for the material and immaterial enablements of those lifestyles. Of course, the idea of dreaming up new products for new worlds can seem like both determinism and utopianism in the extreme – the opposite of the opportunistic use of scenarios for corporate survival, but just as problematic nevertheless. To avoid this, design as prefiguration has to be kept firmly in mind, and further design activity has to be contemplated – centring around the question of what needs to be designed into or out of being to prompt the shift from current circumstances to those depicted by the scenario, which might be as much new narratives, imagery, information, policies, campaigns, organisations or infrastructures, as new services or products.

Prefiguration is a complex idea. Perhaps acts of prefiguration can only be named as such retrospectively. Only after the design has been concretely realised (e.g., the building has been built) can it be appreciated that what now stands before us was prefigured by design. However, design's prefiguration is not just the accumulation of individual acts of design, (and is only a small part of everyday designing, professional or not) for designed things themselves prefigure their own imitation, multiplication, variation and adaptation – which rolls on into the future, or rather constitutes futures; this is especially the case with influential typeforms. This kind of prefiguration goes well beyond the singular relation of that between blueprint and finished item, extending out into whole apparatuses of manufacturing, skills, of material and informational flows, of ways of doing and being with things.

In Christian cultures, events in the Old Testament were said to prefigure those in the New Testament. Prefiguration has its origins in non-Western and pre-modern Western thought, it is an idea more at home in cultures in which inexplicable powers or Gods rather than reason rules, in which it is believed that prophesies are possible and some have the power to foretell the future.

The theorist Vilém Flusser was alert to the way in which design's prefiguring straddles the transition from sacred to secular cultures. Evoking the ancients of Mesopotamia who "foresaw floods and droughts and marked lines on clay tablets indicating canals that were to be dug in the future," he notes that these people were considered prophets, but today we would call them designers.<sup>7</sup> According to Flusser, we force designs onto phenomena in order to get hold of them, and in doing so, we create worlds.

There are limited range of possible stances towards the future: put our faith in God, take a punt (the way of business), do nothing or ... design!

## Notes

1. John M. Carroll *Making Use: Scenario-Based Design of Human-Computer Interactions* MIT Press, September 2000. As pointed out in our issue on User Centred Design (Editorial, DPP1/2004) 'use', 'function' and 'needs' are never just self-evident; a good deal of needs have been created by design.
2. Lawrence Wilkinson 'How to Build Scenarios' *HotWired* www.wired.com accessed Feb 2005.
3. Ezio Manzini & Francois Jegou *Sustainable Everyday: Scenarios of Urban Life* Milan: Edizione Ambiente, 2004.
4. Given both this fundamental simplicity [acts of prefiguration] and the immense complexity of its 'field of action' [design in/and world], the pre-occupation of some design science researchers with discovering at a neural level "how designers design" seems both facile and pointless.
5. Tony Fry 'Hot Debate: Design Intelligence' *Design Philosophy Papers* 4/2004.
6. Art Kleiner *Whole Earth* Spring 1999 <http://www.wholeearthmag.com/ArticleBin/224.html> accessed March 2005.
7. Vilém Flusser *The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design* (trans Anthony Mathews) London: Reaktion Books, 1999, p. 39.