

# Introduction to the Symposium on Complexity, Narrative, Participation, and Images of the Future

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On June 17, 2010, I received an email from Prof. M. Attila Öner, Chairman of the Management Application and Research Center of Yeditepe University in Istanbul, calling for paper and panel submissions for the 2011 Yeditepe International Research Conference on Foresight (YIRCOF '11). In the email Prof. Öner noted,

A review of journals in the field(s) of Foresight and Futures Studies pointed to a tension in the relationship between Foresight and Futures theory and practice. Whether to treat “Foresight Studies” and “Futures Studies” as two different fields, or to treat them as one field and write “Foresight and Futures Studies” would probably be a matter of debate among the researchers. Some even doubt whether a field of futures studies – or whatever one chooses to call it – even exists.

I invite you to join us at YIRCOF '11 to discuss and communicate on challenging issues related to theory building in Foresight and Futures Studies.

In response to this generous invitation, I began to organize a special panel session entitled, **“Narrative, Story-telling, Complexity, and Images of the Future”**. The panel would focus on new approaches to exploring alternative images of the future – approaches that link basic futures theory to complexity and experiential engagement. I deliberately used the broadest possible terms, broader even than ‘scenario building,’ and most definitely broader than ‘scenario planning’. Panel participants could stimulate discussion on “challenging issues related to theory building in Foresight and Futures Studies” by describing their cutting edge work in participatory and experiential futures images generation and immersion. In an ideal world, the panel would also have arranged a participatory / experiential exercise as a provocation for participants -- nothing elaborate, and obviously something portable (or at least stuffable, vis-à-vis suitcases).

A wonderful group of practitioners responded enthusiastically (they are briefly profiled below), and for a few months we were all looking forward to a terrific conversation

with colleagues in Istanbul. And then the economy got in the way: none of the participants could find sources of travel funding. Fortunately, Prof. Öner and the gracious YIRCOF '11 staff supported our alternate plan: present the panel's work as 'posters' enlivened by presentations via Skype videoconference.

In the end, the panel 'beamed in' to YIRCOF '11 from London, Oxford, and San Francisco to address the following questions: What opportunities arts and design, story-telling, digital media, and social networks create for foresight and futures? What new approaches do these media and digital platforms provide for engaging people in creating and exploring alternative images of the future? How can group-sourced futures creation and exploration put chaos and complexity theories in service to basic futures theory? How can they enhance experiential engagement in the futures dialogue? The five resulting posters offer initial explorations of these questions.

On the day, the 'posters' for our session were on display; during the hour allotted to our international Skype telepresence, the presenters had five minutes each to provide a very brief overview for their poster. Technical glitches eroded and made difficult the 30 minutes we had reserved for questions and answers, but the panellists themselves engaged in lively cross-discussion.

The first panellists included here are Anab Jain and her colleagues from Superflux, Jon Arden and Justin Pickard. They present their concept of *Design Futurescaping*, along with images that illustrate the result. Anab Jain and Jon Arden both earned Design Interactions degrees from the Royal College of the Arts, and have worked for companies including Microsoft, the RSA, BITFARM, and Nokia; Justin Pickard recently completed his MA in Digital Media at Goldsmiths, University of London.

Second, Noah Raford, who currently works in Strategic Support with the Prime Minister's Office of the United Arab Emirates, and at the time of the panel had just submitted his PhD thesis to the Urban Studies and Planning department at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, presents a case study from that thesis, *Crowd-sourced Collective Intelligence Platforms for Participatory Scenarios and Foresight*.

I myself currently work as a freelance futures and foresight consultant and trainer, and am an alumna of the University of Hawai'i's graduate program in futures studies. My poster describes an integrated foresight process that creates narrative arcs against system maps using the Hero's Journey framework, deployed recently for a Fortune 500 client.

Jake Dunagan currently serves as the Research Director for the Institute for the Future's (IFTF) Technology Horizons Project. Jake completed his doctoral program in futures studies at the University of Hawai'i, working with the Hawai'i Research Center for Futures Studies. His poster introduces the IFTF's Foresight Engine, an online tool for *Massively Multi-player Futuring*.

And finally, to send participants off to their afternoon coffee, cocktails, and a very pleasant evening, the panel finished by describing the emergence via Twitter of the global mass hilarity that became *The Singularity is Boring: An Open, Collaborative 'Mock-up'*, from which we include highlights here, followed by a final reflection from Scott Smith of Changeist LLC, who joined the panel as a digital participant from the London site.

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