Design Fiction for Research

A NABS+ CREATIVE WORKSHOP

In April, NABS+ hosted a half-day creative workshop designed to support researchers to think differently about their work. The session, led by Andrew Darby (CREST Content Producer and Research Associate in Speculative Design at Lancaster University) and supported by Kay Brennan (CREST Marketing Communications Officer) focused on the design fiction method.

OVERVIEW

The workshop introduced design fiction as a research method for exploring future possibilities, questioning assumptions, and generating new perspectives on current research challenges. The session combined futures theory with practical exercises, encouraging participants to think about speculative artefacts and narratives that make future scenarios tangible and discussable.

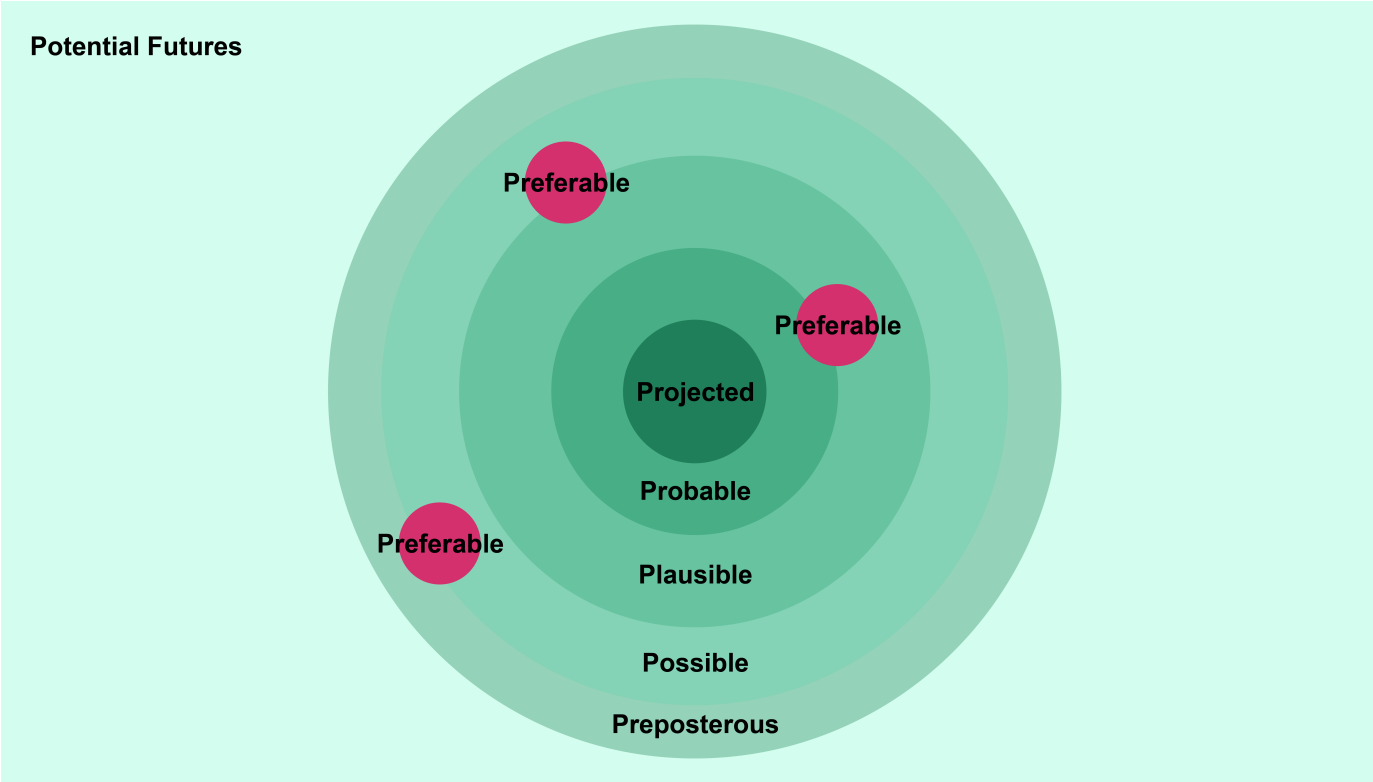
The workshop aimed to:

- Introduce futures thinking through design fiction.
- Apply design fiction to participants' own research.
- Encourage discussion of speculative scenarios and their implications.
- Generate fresh perspectives on ongoing research projects.

> **Design should explore "what if?" scenarios to challenge assumptions about progress.**
>
> **- Dunne, A. and Raby, F. (2013)**

THINKING ABOUT FUTURES

The workshop began with an icebreaker asking participants to describe their "favourite futures". These could be any future vision that they found compelling, hopeful, concerning, or otherwise interesting. Examples ranged from science fiction and popular culture to personal aspirations and technological developments.



The futures cone (see above), a taxonomy drawn from futures theory, was introduced, as follows:

- **Projected futures** – continuation of current trends.
- **Probable futures** – likely outcomes based on current evidence.
- **Plausible futures** – consistent with existing knowledge and systems.
- **Possible futures** – requiring new capabilities or developments.
- **Preposterous futures** – currently viewed as unrealistic or impossible.
- **Preferable futures** – futures judged desirable according to particular values and goals.

Participants mapped their "favourite futures" onto this framework and discussed the relationship between two dimensions, likelihood and desirability.

The discussion emphasised that the future is not fixed but exists as an open space of competing possibilities that are shaped as much by present decisions, expectations, and social narratives as they are by present circumstances. Concepts such as futurization (opening up possibilities) and defuturization (closing down possibilities) were introduced with the reminder that they exist in relation to the present because 'the future is a temporal horizon of the present'.

UNDERSTANDING DESIGN FICTION

Design fiction was presented as a method for making future possibilities concrete through imagined products, services, systems, and experiences. Rather than predicting the future, design fiction creates provocative scenarios that enable critical discussion and reflection.

Key characteristics include:

- Exploring futures through tangible artefacts.
- Focusing on technologies and practices that may soon become feasible.

- Using fictional worlds to investigate social, political, ethical, and technological implications.
- Supporting discussion by materialising speculative ideas.

At the centre of design fiction is the speculative artefact (or diegetic prototype), an object that suggests a wider future world and allows audiences to infer how society, technology, and behaviour have changed.

Participants were shown examples from Wellcome funded project Future of Human Reproduction. These included speculative artefacts developed in response to the current state of development of two potential medical interventions, artificial womb and in vitro gametogenesis.

APPLYING DESIGN FICTION TO RESEARCH

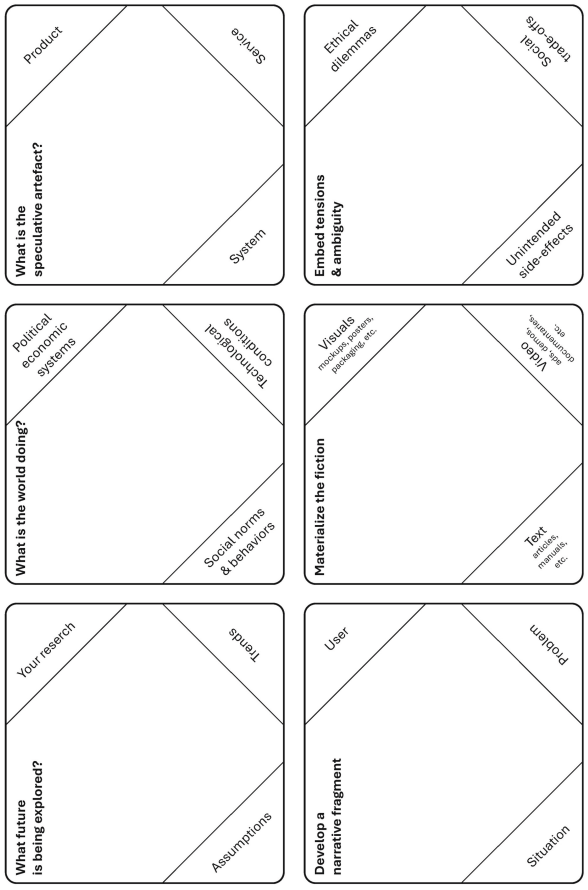
Participants were asked to explain their research projects and identify their likely or "projected" futures. The group represented a diverse range of topics, including:

- Cultural influences on risk and behaviour in Pakistan.
- Game-based interventions against romance fraud and catfishing.
- Preventing radicalisation and grooming within online gaming environments.
- Evaluating Nigerian counter-terrorism strategies.
- Understanding lone-actor mass shooter narratives.
- Long-term counter-terrorism futures and narrative models.

GENERATING AND ITERATING DESIGN FICTIONS

This session focused on developing speculative futures based on participants' research.

Participants were encouraged to develop an initial speculation grounded in a projected future for their own research, then iterate by creating alternative versions that explored different possible future trajectories. To help structure the speculation's development, participants worked through a basic series of prompts. Particular emphasis was placed on identifying trade-offs, ambiguities, and ethical concerns rather than creating idealised solutions. Finally, participants shared and critically engaged with one another's ideas in order to surface underlying assumptions and identify potential unintended consequences.



KEY INSIGHTS

Several points were highlighted throughout the day:

- The future should be understood as a range of possibilities rather than a single predicted outcome.
- Research can benefit from exploring unlikely or unconventional futures, not only probable ones.
- Design fiction helps researchers externalise assumptions and make abstract ideas tangible.
- Speculative artefacts provide an effective way to communicate complex future scenarios.
- Considering unintended consequences can reveal blind spots within current research agendas.
- Collaboration and peer critique strengthen future-oriented thinking by exposing alternative interpretations and concerns.

CONCLUSION

The workshop demonstrated how design fiction can function as a valuable methodological tool for researchers. By combining futures theory, speculative storytelling, and artefact creation, participants began to examine their work from new perspectives, challenge existing assumptions, and explore broader social and technological implications. Rather than predicting what will happen, design fiction offers a creative way to think critically about what could happen, and what consequences might follow.

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