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Scenarios and the art of worldmaking

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ABSTRACT

In this exploratory paper we propose ‘worldmaking’ as a framework for pluralistic, imaginative scenario development. Our points of departure are the need in scenario practice to embrace uncertainty, discomfort and knowledge gaps, and the connected need to capture and make productive fundamental plurality among understandings of the future. To help respond to these needs, we introduce what Nelson Goodman calls worldmaking. It holds that there is no singular, objective world (or “real reality”), and instead that worlds are multiple, constructed through creative processes instead of given, and always in the process of becoming. We then explore how worldmaking can operationalise discordant pluralism in scenario practice by allowing participants to approach not only the future but also the present in a constructivist and pluralistic fashion; and by extending pluralism to ontological domains. Building on this, we investigate how scenario worldmaking could lead to more imaginative scenarios: worldmaking is framed as a fully creative process which gives participants ontological agency, and it helps make contrasts, tensions and complementarities between worlds productive. We go on to propose questions that can be used to operationalize scenario worldmaking, and conclude with the expected potential and limitations the approach, as well as suggestions for practical experimentation.

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it could be that if one clung too closely to reality, the result might well be far from realistic—Kobo Abe

1. Introduction: beyond ‘probable’ and ‘plausible’ scenarios

One of the main aims of scenario practice is to unleash the human imagination to explore and embrace the future, rather than to simply endure it (Wilkinson & Eidinow, 2008). In this sense, the imagining of future worlds should empower people in the face of the unknown, recognize ways to overcome future challenges, or envision and pursue better worlds. Ideally, considering a wide range of futures can reveal important aspects of the present—previously unrecognized seeds of future

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challenges (Van der Heijden, 2005) and structures that hold back the realization of better worlds (Kok, van Vliet Mathijs, Bärlund Ilona, & Sendzimir, 2011). The questions that guide this paper, then, are how can the imagination be freed to create powerfully engaging and meaningful future scenario worlds? How may imaginative scenario processes make the deep, essential mutability of the future productive, and how may they trace, foreground and operationalize the mutuality of futures with the present? And lastly, how may we encourage those participating in scenario-based processes to breach the limitations implied by current circumstances, and, by extension, shed the debilitating effects of the social, political, economic and environmental status quo?

In this exploratory paper, we begin charting possible answers to these questions by proposing ‘worldmaking’ (Goodman, 1978) as a framework for scenario development. We will argue that this framework provides a way to further develop existing disciplinary trajectories: the move away from attempts to reduce uncertainty, and instead embrace it through diverse, contrasting futures; and the need to approach not only the future but also the present in a constructivist and pluralistic fashion. To do this, the worldmaking framework will harness the notion of scenarios as ‘worlds’, providing an approach that is different, in both theoretical and practical terms, from more common approaches to scenarios as narratives or descriptions of systems change.

We first set the stage by discussing the current drive in futures research away from establishing certainty about futures and toward deepening pluralism. We then introduce worldmaking as a framework for scenario development, and illustrate how it may help operationalise “discordant pluralism” in scenario practice, and how it may lead to more imaginative scenario practice. We then propose a set of questions and suggestions intended to help apply the framework. Lastly, in the conclusion, we note some of the framework’s limitations while proposing ways in which it could be embedded in broader processes and seeded through practical experimentation.

According to Ramírez and Selin (2014) and Wilkinson (2009), futures practitioners and researchers are often seen as divided into two groups: the positivist, ‘probability’ camp sees uncertainty as something that needs to be reduced in order to better assess the likelihood of particular future conditions. On the other hand, the constructivist or ‘plausibility’ camp sees scenarios as a tool that is primarily useful in conditions when prediction is not deemed possible. From the constructivist perspective it is more productive to engage intrinsic uncertainty through multiple diverse futures, without trying to evaluate the effectiveness of the process as a forecasting exercise. In this mode, future scenarios are often considered plausible if they offer both internally consistent narratives and a logical development from present conditions. Whereas the probability camp is primarily interested in objective measures of likelihood, the plausibility camp considers plausibility and scenario relevance to be a subjective and context-dependent matter.

However, Ramírez and Selin (2014) suggest that “many of the unhelpful debates, struggles and clashes over plausibility and probability can also be understood as efforts to obscure a fundamental concern of how to best keep discomfort (with what is known, hoped and feared) productive.” They point out that even constructivist plausibility approaches often bias imagined scenarios too much toward what is prominent in the present and observed in the past. In their words: “settling into too much plausibility reduces interest into a lowest common denominator made up of commonly held assumptions, baseline expectations, ‘the usual suspect’ categories, and simplistic preconceptions and extrapolations”.

From a knowledge perspective, this is all the more problematic given that humans are typically biased toward past experience, the known, and toward unambiguous accounts of the world. As Kahneman puts it, “The idea that the future is unpredictable is undermined every day by the ease with which the past is explained” (Kahneman, 2010, p. 212). When the goal is to imagine transformational futures, this means that the ability to imagine radically different futures will be similarly limited by “consensual presents”. Since scenario practice has long grappled with the problem of getting beyond consensual, limited notions of present and future (see for instance work by Wack (1985), van der Heijden (2005) and Schwartz (1991)). Ramírez and Selin (2014) suggest that if truly novel futures are to be imagined, and if we aim to get freed or ‘unstuck’ from the limitations of the present, discomfort and knowledge gaps should replace probability and plausibility as scenario development criteria. This is because discomfort and ignorance point to problematic aspects of the reality of those involved in scenario processes—aspects that are normally ignored precisely because they evoke unease. Engaging with discomfort and ignorance as guidelines for scenario practice, therefore, may not only help produce truly novel insights on potential futures, but may also help produce deeper insights about the individuals or organizations involved in the exercise—at least reveal what they find discomforting and why.

At the same time, scenario practice has seen increased interest in ways to capture and represent the fundamental plurality of understandings of the future, especially with the growing popularity of societal and multi-stakeholder scenario processes (Wilkinson & Eidinow, 2008). This interest has arisen, in part, from “post-normal” and constructivist conceptualisations of knowledge that recognize the existence of fundamentally different ways of understanding and evaluating the world, and that these epistemological differences may often defy their merger into a single consensual outlook (Funtowicz & Ravetz, 1993; Klenk & Meehan, 2015; Kurtz & Snowden, 2003). Keeping in mind the coextensivity of knowledge and power (see for instance Flyvbjerg (1998)), and from the perspective of legitimacy and social inclusion, there is a clear need to fully acknowledge diverse perspectives as equally valuable and as irreducible to subsets of overarching frames. This is especially clear when looking at complex systems issues (poverty, environmental change, health, energy, etc.), where actors from multiple sectors, disciplines, worldviews and geographical scales play fundamentally different roles yet have a shared stake in the process’s outcomes. Overall, the call to explore futures in a pluralistic fashion dovetails with the impetus to engage discomfort and knowledge gaps rather than pursue plausibility and probability. After all, contrasting

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