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Exploring the future for arts and culture organisations through scenarios and vignettes



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ABSTRACT

Drawing on multiple theoretical perspectives – innovation, design and strategy – the paper presents the case of an organisation engaging in futures processes to explore potential changes in arts, culture and creativity. Through research and participatory processes, scenarios were developed on the future of arts, culture and creativity in Wales. The scenarios were distilled into vignettes, forms of creative fictional prototypes to explore the possible environment for arts consumers, producers and distributors. The vignettes – visionary but without normative preferences – enabled creative discussions around supporting current and future artistic and cultural practices, emulating the function of probes in product innovation.

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“Undirected by culture patterns – organized systems of significant symbols – man’s behavior would be virtually ungovernable, a mere chaos of pointless acts and exploding emotions, his experience virtually shapeless. Culture, the accumulated totality of such patterns, is not just an ornament of human existence but – the principal basis of its specificity – an essential condition for it.”

Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, 1973.

1. Introduction

Scenario-building is used by many organisations to understand what conditions might emerge in the future and to improve strategic decision-making in the present [1–5]. The paper presents the case of an arts development and funding organisation, which engaged in a futures process to encourage creative discussions on how it might respond to emerging drivers and changes affecting the sector. As the body responsible for funding the arts and culture, the Arts Council of Wales was familiar with the creative media and outputs that the organisations that it funded produced. In the course of its futures exercise, it helped to define and subsequently interpret alternative scenarios for the sector. These – with the addition of creative vignettes – provided visionary and exploratory tools (fictional prototypes) that refreshed strategic thinking within the organisation and informed an investment review process.

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The paper presents the creative forms of the potential futures developed with the Arts Council of Wales through a project, *The Futures of Arts and Culture in Wales within the global context in 2025*. The author was the lead researcher and facilitator of the futures project commissioned by the organisation.

The second section reviews creative fictional prototypes from a theoretical perspective, where it has been deployed in future exploration, probing and innovation. It also reviews the concept of future exploration from the perspective of arts, culture and creativity. An overview of the context and the methodology used by the futures project is presented in the third section. In Section 4, I present the main results of the futures project, particularly focusing on the creative visionary forms to portray future changes in the arts development environment: four scenarios and vignettes of the future.

2. Creative fictional prototypes: theoretical perspectives

2.1. Future exploration, probing and the innovation environment

There are multiple theoretical perspectives on creative fictional prototypes, and the way in which they are used for product, service and organisational innovation, strategic visioning of new markets, and accelerating learning within the organisation.

Within the fields of innovation, strategy and design – amongst others – there is a common interest in exploring forms of the future through a range of devices. Scenarios and other approaches have been identified as a central component's of a company's capability to explore the future – and to innovate [1]. The increasing fluidity [6] and uncertainty of business environments are cited as reasons for thinking more boldly about innovation. Although most innovation tends to focus on incremental improvement, discontinuity in the business environment is viewed as a key factor for motivating companies to do more radical innovation and to look beyond the 'steady state' [7]. Veryzer Jr's study of product development associates discontinuous innovation with more exploratory approaches (including prototypes) rather than the typical customer-focused new product development [8].

The principles of design and creativity – whether explicitly or implicitly – support the visioning process within organisations. In consumer and marketing research, asking individuals to order their preferences rationally on a given product or service does not always provide the valuable insights sought by companies in exploring their markets. Where more radical product innovation is concerned (new to the market or new to the world), a different set of tools or developmental processes are sought to inspire more visionary breakthroughs. When Apple introduced its tablet computer range, sceptics may have questioned how effective the hybridisation of existing technologies would be, albeit in an unfamiliar physical format. This is one of the most celebrated examples of a company effectively introducing or creating a new market with significant commercial success. The concept of science fiction prototyping shares some common features with other approaches used in new product development and in strategic visioning. The use of probes by designers create the materialisation of a concept and its use, disturbing the present by re-thinking form and purpose beyond traditional practice and norms. Design probes are often provocations that create a space for experimenting and learning; these can be used by the company to re-think existing products and services, as exemplified by a consumer electronics company re-thinking the alarm clock [9]. Brown and Eisenhardt [10] flag the importance of probing the future in their studies of firms with multiple product portfolios. Their work identified the importance of direct probes (hands-on experiences) that emerged from the development of experimental products, informed by a close network of existing and potential clients. The case of a product design consultancy [11] also provides an interesting example of companies sourcing external capability to innovate through probing the future.

Creative, fictional forms are used to understand design and user issues in relation to technological innovations. One such example is the pastiche scenario approach, which is 'used as a device for recruiting shared cultural resources to provide rich understandings of possible users and use contexts' [12]. There are many ways of generating creative fictional prototypes – in addition to physical prototypes used in design and product innovation. Scenario building methods often aim to create a tangible or quasi-tangible form of what could be realised through creative devices, including textual representations, imagery and film. Scenario work tends to be in the form of textual representation, i.e. narratives of alternative futures. Although often challenging, some futures initiatives have experimented with other creative interpretation, for example by commissioning installation artists to accompany the project.

One of the formative influences on innovation is the unfolding of a knowledge economy based on information exchange and the transformative capacity of networks in changing models of production [13]. This 'democratisation' of innovation has re-focused attention on the user in generating products, services and processes [14]. The participation of customers in front end innovation is important in developing new services [15], as it is in product-based innovation. Normann [16] presented this as a fundamental challenge to the way in which companies conceived the ways they did things: "Co-production means waking up and enabling sleeping, under-utilized resources, bringing competences together more effectively in time/space, linking actors in new constellations".

2.2. Creativity, fiction, the arts and culture 'sector'

One of the intriguing questions – given the focus of the exercise described in this paper – is how, creativity, future exploration and fictional prototyping are used in the way organisations think about arts and culture policy. Sardar [17]

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