
Applied Sci-Fi Project Event #4 Summary and Report

Reimagining “The Future of [X]”

June 14, 2023

Video of public event: <https://youtu.be/3QRTm7zUIGo>



Over the past decade, there has been a growing trend of projects from think tanks, companies, academics, and activists that use collections of science-fictional short stories, artwork, and nonfiction essays to help policymakers and the public better imagine a variety of potential futures on a particular topic. Join Arizona State University's Center for Science and the Imagination for a virtual conversation that brings together science fiction authors, editors, foresight practitioners and researchers to discuss how to build “Future of [X]” projects that can actually change how we approach the future.

Panelists

Annalee Newitz writes science fiction and nonfiction. They are the author of three novels, including *Autonomous*, which won the Lambda Literary Award, and two books of science journalism, including *Scatter, Adapt and Remember*, a finalist for the LA Times Book Prize in science. They have a monthly

column in *New Scientist* and they co-host the Hugo Award-winning podcast *Our Opinions Are Correct*.

Tobias S. Buckell is a New York Times–bestselling and World Fantasy Award–winning author. His novels and almost one hundred stories have been translated into nineteen different languages. He has been nominated for the Hugo Award, Nebula Award, World Fantasy Award, and Astounding Award for Best New Science Fiction Author. Born in the Caribbean, he currently lives in Ohio.

August Cole is the author of the novels *Ghost Fleet* and *Burn In*, both with Peter W. Singer. He is a managing partner at Useful Fiction, a consultancy that works on futures projects. He is a nonresident fellow at the Brute Krulak Center for Innovation and Creativity, and a nonresident senior fellow at the Scowcroft Center on Strategy and Security at the Atlantic Council.

Amy Johnson is a visiting research fellow at MIT's Language & Technology Lab and a research affiliate at the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard, where she explores speculative approaches to technology and social change. She holds a PhD from MIT and is a member of SFWA and Codex; her stories and poetry have appeared in *Lightspeed*, *Diabolical Plots*, *Escape Pod*, and *Fantasy Magazine*, among others, and she edited the *Drones & Dreams* and *Stories from (Un)Identified Worlds* anthologies.

Tory Stephens creates opportunities that transform organizations and shift culture. He is a resource generator and community builder for social justice issues, people, and movements. He currently works at *Grist Magazine* as their climate fiction creative manager, and uses storytelling to champion climate justice and imagine green, clean, and just futures.

In another life he owned a kick-butt streetwear company, and he would have gotten away with eating the last cookie too, if it weren't for his three meddling kids.

Moderator

Joey Eschrich is the managing editor for the Center for Science and the Imagination at Arizona State University, and an assistant director of Future Tense, a partnership of Slate, ASU, and New America that explores emerging technologies, policy, and society. He coedited the collection *Visions, Ventures, Escape Velocities*, supported by a grant from NASA, and *Cities of Light*, created in collaboration with the U.S. National Renewable Energy Laboratory.

Five Powerful Insights and Examples

One contributor made the point that while anthologies have been a part of science fiction writer and fan communities for many years, the “Future of X” projects we are exploring in this event and workshop are emerging outside of the science fiction community, even though they do involve members of this community. Another added that these anthologies prioritize ends other than simply entertaining an audience. These “Future of X” projects usually have a purpose defined by the organization sponsoring them: educational, political, business-oriented, or otherwise. They seek to, using a term from David Bennet, “operationalize sci-fi,” putting the narrative techniques of science fiction to work for some other purpose. One example would be a large organization like Microsoft or Intel commissioning a project of stories to help their product teams conceptualize the future social and market impacts of a technology currently under development, but not providing those anthologies to the public and only circulating them within the organization. Examples of more public-facing projects include Nesta’s *Infectious Futures*, an anthology exploring “futures without antibiotics,” or the Center for Science and the Imagination’s “solar futures” collections *The Weight of Light* and *Cities of Light*, each of which had different funders and partners, and furthered particular intellectual and educational aims. Sometimes “Future of X” anthologies are doing both, assembled by commercial publishers with established science fiction writers, but with a broader political or societal goal in mind, such as *Tomorrow, the Stars* anthology from the 1950s, published by Doubleday, which aimed to promote space exploration at the beginning of the Space Age.

One contributor made the point that sometimes organizations use these kinds of futures projects to distract from current problems by furthering a fundamentally optimistic, even Panglossian assumption: Let’s imagine a wonderful future, where all the current problems are solved. Other participants made the point that many of these “Future of X” projects (both anthologies and contests), after an initial wave of publicity, sit on the shelf and aren’t used or read very much. This gets to the idea that a major element of the impact of “Future of X” anthologies may be to engage the community that assembles, contributes to, or otherwise directly supports the anthology, as opposed to optimizing for reaching a large audience of readers.

A number of writers who had participated in “Future of X” projects discussed how often the creators of the anthologies had expectations that the science fiction writers would take a primary role in helping to promote the anthology. These expectations may not be realistic, given the small amount of money these writers might be getting paid for their story, and other demands on their time and attention. For this reason, one contributor made the point that organizers of these anthologies should think about what rights they can give to the science fiction writers (ancillary rights for example) to make the project worth the time they are putting in, and to give them incentives to continue to promote the books, since they have the opportunity to directly benefit from the stories being read more widely, and perhaps be considered for reprints, translations, or adaptations to other media.

During the workshop, several participants described a goal of “Future of X” projects as encouraging fiction writers and other thinkers to eschew well-worn extreme scenarios of dystopian collapse and utopian completion, and to fill the yawning gap in the middle with more “realistic” scenarios that we might strive to bring into being.

In two cases, participants agreed that there was insufficient conversation about issues related to “Future of X” projects. First, in critical, scholarly, and professional attention, they pointed out that efforts from the political right (at least, as construed in the U.S.) are not made visible, studied, or well understood, and that analysts ought to pay more attention to futures-oriented Applied Sci-Fi-style work emanating from right-wing groups. Second, they noted that many “Future of X” projects are not well archived or preserved, and some become nearly unavailable mere years after their initial

release. Two examples both involve the group XPRIZE: *Current Futures*, about ocean futures, and *Seat 14C*, a collaboration with the Japanese airline ANA. Both of which are seemingly unavailable today, demonstrating that even more well-funded efforts often do not include a plan for long-term preservation and discoverability.

Summary

The panelists at the event discussed how to build collective visions of the future using sci-fi and foresight tools. The discussion focuses on the intersection of science fiction, technology, and innovation, and how sci-fi storytelling can be applied as a tool for creating diverse and sustainable futures. The panelists shared insights on the influence of sci-fi on technology development, design fiction, and the use of sci-fi stories, artwork, and essays to help envision potential futures on specific topics or for particular communities. The event aimed to explore the impact of sci-fi on decision-making about our shared technological future and to provide practical examples of applied sci-fi techniques across various projects.

Key Takeaways

1. Sci-fi storytelling can be a powerful tool for imagining and shaping the future, as it allows us to explore potential scenarios and their implications in a creative and engaging way.
2. Effective “future of X projects” provide space to consider the unintended and secondary consequences of technological change, and to think about how technological artifacts or processes might be used or misused in different contexts, creating disparities or exacerbating existing inequalities.
3. Public policy is a form of near-future science fiction, as it can provide guidelines and allocate resources, but it cannot solve the basic problem of how we imagine ourselves in a world that is very different from this one.
4. Stories help us put policy ideas and scientific innovations into a living context, and allow us to explore how present-day conflicts might evolve, as well as how people in the future might work together and forge alliances.
5. The challenges of publishing and promoting sci-fi stories include managing the balancing act of engaging readers around issues at the intersection of technology and policy

without being pedantic, and considering how to incorporate a diverse range of perspectives, worldviews, and lived experiences in visions of the future.

Examples of “Future of X” Anthologies / Contests

The panelists in the event discussed several examples of “future of X” collections and anthologies. Here are a few examples:

1. ***Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, edited by Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown.** This anthology features stories that explore the connections between social justice movements and speculative fiction.
2. ***The Weight of Light and Cities of Light*, edited by Joey Eschrich and Clark A. Miller.** These collections feature stories and essays that explore the potential of solar energy to transform our communities, economies, and relationships with the nonhuman world.
3. ***Better Worlds by The Verge*.** This collection of short stories, animation, and audio explores the potential of technology to create a more equitable and sustainable future.

The panelists also discussed several examples of “future of X” contests:

1. **The Climate Fiction Short Story Contest, hosted by Arizona State University’s Imagination and Climate Futures Initiative.** This contest invited writers to submit short stories that explore the impact of climate change on society and the environment.
2. **The Future of War Gaming and Essay Contest, hosted by the Atlantic Council’s Art of Future Warfare Project.** This contest invited participants to submit wargame scenarios and essays that explore the future of warfare and the role of emerging technologies.
3. **The Future of Cities Design Competition, hosted by the Van Allen Institute.** This contest invited designers and architects to submit proposals for innovative urban design solutions that address social, economic, and environmental challenges.
4. **The Future of Work Challenge, hosted by MIT’s Sloan School of Management.** This contest invited participants to submit proposals for innovative solutions to the challenges

of the future of work, such as automation and the precarity of the gig economy.

5. **Imagine 2200, hosted by Grist Magazine.** This contest invited participants to submit stories that explore responses to the climate crisis focused on equity and justice.

Challenges of “Future of X” Projects

The panelists in the event discussed several challenges of running “future of X” anthologies or contests:

1. **Managing the volume of submissions:** Anthologies and contests can receive a large number of submissions, which can be difficult to manage and evaluate. This requires significant time and resources to read and review each submission.
2. **Balancing entertainment and education:** “Future of X” anthologies and contests need to balance the need to engage readers with the need to educate them about important issues. This requires careful consideration of the tone and style of the stories, as well as the themes and topics they address.
3. **Ensuring diversity and inclusivity:** “Future of X” anthologies and contests need to ensure that they include diverse perspectives and experiences, and that they are accessible to a wide range of people. This requires outreach efforts to underrepresented communities, as well as careful consideration of the selection criteria and judging process.
4. **Managing expectations:** “Future of X” anthologies and contests need to manage the expectations of participants and readers, as well as the expectations of funders and other stakeholders. Is the resulting book focused on showcasing the most readable and compelling stories, or representing the broad diversity of submissions, or emphasizing topics and themes that readers are likely to be interested in, or exploring issues that are central to the mission of the funding organization or other sponsors? Managers of “future of X” projects should communicate clearly about the goals and objectives of the project with participants and readers, as well as funders, and strive for transparency about the selection process and criteria.

Steps for Running Successful “Future of X” Events

Running a successful “future of X” project, such as an anthology or contest, involves several key steps. Based on the discussions in the event, here are some important steps to consider:

1. **Define the theme and objectives:** Clearly define the theme or topic of the future of X project, as well as the specific objectives and goals you hope to achieve. This will provide a clear focus for the project and guide the selection of submissions.
2. **Establish guidelines and criteria:** Develop clear guidelines and criteria for submissions, including the format, length, and content requirements. Consider how submissions will be evaluated and what criteria will be used to select the final entries.
3. **Outreach and promotion:** Engage in outreach efforts to promote the project and encourage submissions from a diverse range of participants. This may involve reaching out to writers, artists, and creators, as well as leveraging social media and other platforms to raise awareness.
4. **Manage the submission process:** Establish a process for managing and evaluating submissions, including setting up a system for receiving and organizing entries, as well as a review process for evaluating the submissions against the established criteria.
5. **Engage the community:** Consider ways to engage the community in the project, such as hosting events, workshops, or discussions related to the “future of X” theme. This can help generate interest and build a sense of community around the project.
6. **Selection and curation:** Select and curate the submissions that best align with the objectives and theme of the project. This may involve forming a panel of judges or reviewers to evaluate the submissions and make final selections.
7. **Publication and dissemination:** Once the submissions have been selected, consider how to publish and disseminate the final collection or winners. This may involve working with publishers, creating an online platform, or organizing events to showcase the work.
8. **Evaluation and impact assessment:** After the project is completed, take the time to evaluate its impact and assess how well it

achieved its objectives. This can help inform future projects and improve the overall effectiveness of “future of X” initiatives.

Workshop

After the public event, we had a private workshop with up to 20 practitioners/consultants, experts, and science fiction writers that delved into this topic in more detail. The results of the workshop can be added to the summaries here and will be part of the detailed papers that we are creating, which may be released as an open access book.ar.

Editorial Note

An initial draft of this summary was generated using [ChatPDF](#) from the transcript of the public event, and then significantly edited by the Applied Sci-Fi project team.