Experiments in Participatory Futurism with the Community Futures Game

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Abstract

This paper describes the design and testing of a participatory futurism experience called the Community Futures Game, the goal of which is to create an experience that helps communities understand how residents think about the future, in aggregate. It additionally explores how a data-based project on citizen opinions about the future of their country might be able to influence public dialogue, popular culture, and legislative action.

Author Keywords

Participatory planning; collaboration; participatory futurism.

Introduction

The Community Futures Game is a table-top board game that enables community members to playfully co-create future-oriented visions for their town.

The driving question for the project is: *How might we use games and place-based experiences to help citizens co-create future-oriented narratives that bridge partisan divides and foster the inclusion of new voices.*

In other words, the project aims to understand how Americans think about the future, in aggregate, and explore how a data-based project on citizen opinions

about the future of their country might be able to influence public dialogue, popular culture, and legislative action.

Goals & Rationale

The specific research questions that inspired this project were:

- How and why do so many people in central Wisconsin not feel heard by government?
- What do people envision as their ideal dream for America and how can we gather data on this?
- How can we engage citizens in crafting bipartisan, aspirational visions for the future?

Inspirations

The inspirations behind the Community Futures Game included collaborative future-crafting experiences like The Institute for the Future's *Foresight Engine* and The Situation Lab's *The Thing From the Future*. These games invite participants to playfully imagine alternative futures based on a variety of prompts. The Community Futures Game attempts to increase access to these types of experiences by creating a low-tech future-crafting game that can be played in small groups or installed in public spaces like libraries, museums and malls.

Prototypes

Several prototypes were tested over the course of the semester:

Prototype 1
The first experiment tested was the "Survey String Board." The interface for this 1-person experience was

Figure 1: Prototype of the "Survey String Board"
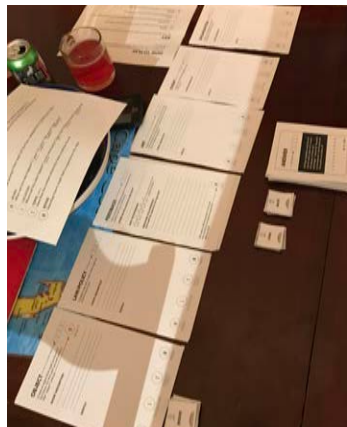
Figure 2: Idea Cards from the first iteration of the Community Futures Game

wooden board with twenty multiple-choice questions printed on it; each response to these questions was marked with a nail. To answer the question, the user needed to wrap a thread around the nail corresponding to her response (see Figure 1).

The goal of this prototype was to understand if and how a tangible interface could motivate users to share useful demographic information with the project. One playtester shared that the act of wrapping the string around the nail caused him to more carefully consider his answer. This insight suggests the interface may serve more effectively as a tool to gather responses to thought-provoking questions, rather than simple demographics.

Prototype 2
The first version of the Community Futures Game itself included a basic points system that rewarded players for filling out various "idea cards" and "question cards" (see Figure 2). Idea cards used prompts inspired by The Thing from the Future activity in six categories:

- Law/Policy
- Organization
- Object
- Feedback
- Event
- Art

Question cards contained multiple-choice questions intended to gather data on community sentiment related to government, truth, and democracy. The idea behind this was to explore what people want from government in a way that could be aggregated and reflected back to players as a data visualization.

Figure 3: A sample completed Idea Card from Prototype 3. The prompt for this card was to "Imagine and organization you'd like to see 100 years in your community's future that is related to the home." The answer supplied was "Mandatory composting with good neighbor points and more gardens!"

Working in teams of two, the player's simple goal was to complete more cards than the other team by the end of a timed round. Ultimately, the materials of the game were too complex and the win state too simple. The question cards also felt out of place for the players.

	Green Team	Orange Team	Total
Idea cards played	15	12	27
Thumbs-up earned	29	12	41
Question cards played	1	0	1

Table 1: Results of the Prototype 3 playtest

Prototype 3
The second version of the Community Futures Game added color-coding to the question and idea cards and a game board to add spatial order to experience. The system of prompts for the idea cards was simplified to three randomized factors:

1. How far into the future will this idea happen?
2. In what context/where would this idea be found?
3. What type of thing are you imagining?

The point systems was also redesigned to make gameplay more interesting. In this version, points earned by completing cards could be used to purchase various specialty items, including wildcards and "thumbs up" stickers that could be used to advance the ideas of others. The goal of the game was to capture as many "squares" on the game board as possible for your team by having the most "thumbed up" idea on a square.

Players unexpectedly enjoyed the performative aspect of sharing when playing idea cards – which was not included in the instructions – and appeared to genuinely enjoy the game. They recommended making greater use of the game board in the gameplay and rethinking the color-scheme of the cards and board. Players also enjoyed "thumbs-upping" each other's ideas, but the idea of teams was largely forgotten by the game's end and, again, the question cards felt out of place in the experience.
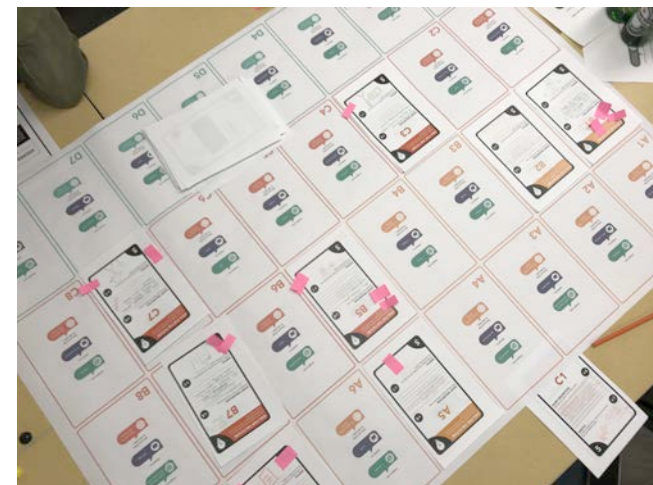

Figure 4: First iteration of the Community Futures Game board, mid-game.

Final Design
The final design of the Community Futures Game tested during CMS.842 included a variable board with a 4x4 grid of idea card prompts. The prompts used were the same as the previous prototype and players could still "thumbs up" ideas, but the question cards were

eliminated and, rather than trying to take over the whole board, the goal was updated to be the first team to capture a straight line of four idea squares across the board. This "connect four" approach was enjoyable for players, particularly with the addition of two new specialty cards: Switchcards.

Switchcards, which could be purchased by players using the "thumbs-up" stickers they earn by playing idea cards, enable a player to swap two object prompts or two topic prompts on the board, clearing all ideas from those two spaces.

Figure 5: Topic Switchcard and prompt tiles

Additionally, the colors of the topic cards were updated to two colors, each representing a team. In the previous version, ownership of a card was based on the color of ink used by the player, which was confusing.
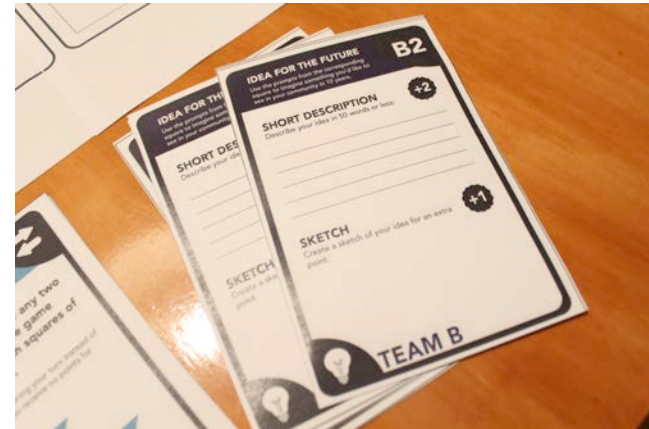

Figure 6: Blank topic cards for the "Dark Purple" team.

Next Steps

The next steps for the Community Futures Game is to begin playtests with rural communities in central Wisconsin. These will include workshops with local community groups to continue testing the current version of the game, and the installation of an adapted version in public spaces that can support non-simultaneous play over a two-week period by community member.

This installation will also bring back elements from the Survey String Board experiment as a priming experience to onboard players.
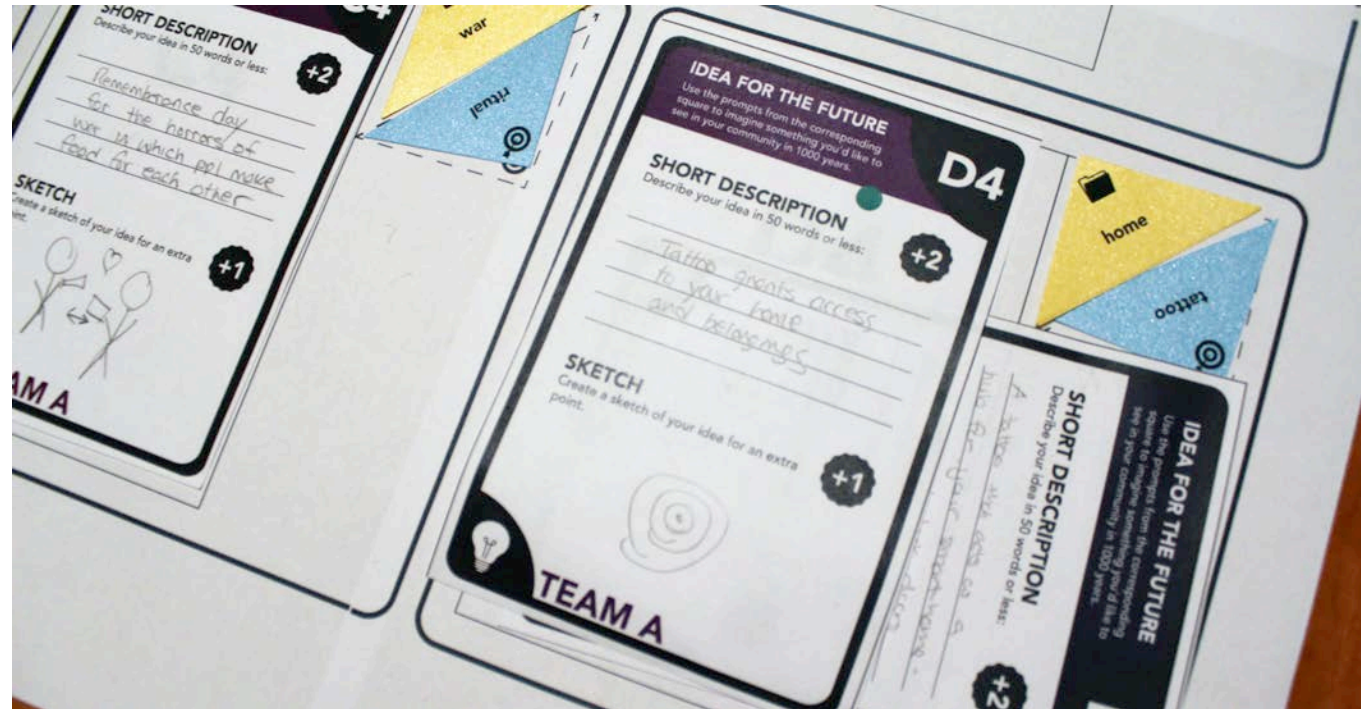
Figure 7: Completed idea cards on the final game board. For this square, the time prompt was "1000 years in the future," the topic prompt was "home," and the object prompt was "tattoo." The idea is for a "tattoo that grants access to your home and belongings."

References

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2. IFTF: Foresight Engine. Retrieved December 17, 2017, from http://www.iftf.org/what-we-do/foresight-tools/collaborative-forecasting-games/foresight-engine/