

FestForward: Participatory Design Futuring and World-Building for Equitable Digital Futures in Performing Arts Festivals

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ABSTRACT

FestForward is a fictional, local, cultural magazine, set in 2030, designed to stimulate conversations about equitable and sustainable digital futures in performing arts festivals. This extensive design fiction was developed through a series of participatory workshops, where creative and cultural practitioners responded to various ‘provotypes’ suggesting narrative content for the magazine. In this pictorial, we annotate and unpack the making of *FestForward* to reflect upon various formats and approaches to design futuring, and to offer a platform for further world-building, research and discussion on equitable digital futures in arts festivals.

Authors Keywords

Participatory Futuring; Design Fiction; Festivals; Performing Arts; World-Building

CSS Concepts

- Human-centered computing~

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INTRODUCTION

As physical venues closed throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, festivals and live events around the world undertook a ‘pivot to digital’ where cultural work and programmes became mediated by, and dependent upon, a variety of online platforms [3,16,22,23,35]. When in-person events returned, questions remained about the ongoing roles, opportunities and challenges of presenting digital and hybrid cultural events. Seeking to stimulate long-term thinking on these questions, our interdisciplinary, design-led research engaged the rich cultural sector in Edinburgh and South East Scotland to ask: ‘How can digital technologies, data-driven business models, and online platforms for performance support equitable and economically sustainable festivals in 2030?’

Crucially, this question seeks to bind together questions around digital futures in the performing arts – with deep-seated challenges related to the precarity of cultural labour, and the growing inequity of access to, and participation in, cultural production [10]. Looking beyond immediate post-pandemic recovery and resilience, this project sought to explore how digital and data-driven technologies may both address, and exacerbate these inequalities.

We turned to speculative design and participatory futuring methods [28,29,37] to engage the local cultural sector in long-term thinking. Inspired by prior

design fiction brochures and catalogues [4,11,19,34], we set out to co-create a fictional cultural magazine – *FestForward* – set in 2030, presenting various stories, artefacts and ideas about the roles of digital technologies in festivals and performing arts. The breadth of a magazine format supported the consideration of a wide range of topics, viewpoints and technologies, which were woven together to provide multiple ‘entry points’ for world-building and envisioning [13]. The final magazine (24 pages, B5) is included as supplementary material, and available to download from <https://www.festforward.org/>.

In this pictorial, we use the format to: **1)** unpack the making of *FestForward*; **2)** demonstrate how participants were involved in our design futuring activities; **3)** reflect upon the qualities of different narrative formats; and **4)** identify entry points and exits to the world(s) of *FestForward*. Taken together, we view the wider contribution of this work for the DIS community as firstly, exemplifying an approach to participatory design futuring; and secondly, providing a platform for further world-building, research and discussion on equitable digital futures in arts festivals.

RELATED WORK

FestForward seeks to address how a wide range of digital and data-driven technologies are transforming the performing arts – encompassing the creation, production and distribution of new work, as well as the organisation, labour and infrastructure of arts venues and festivals themselves. Drawing on recent critical commentary and our own and others’ research on the regions’ festivals (including the *Edinburgh Festival Fringe*, the world’s largest annual arts festival), we scoped the project around four initial, broad themes for further exploration into digital futures for festivals: **1)** The uses and value of performance, audience & festival data [32]; **2)** Producing and experiencing digital performance and events [2]; **3)** New creative transactions and ticketing [21]; **4)** Cultural work and platform labour in the festivals and cultural sector [11,16,26].

However, besides these specific themes, this pictorial is primarily focused on analysing the practices of ‘design futuring’ [28]. This term is inclusive of a range of specific practices – such as speculative design [17], design fiction [5,7], enactments [12,18,33], and world-building [13] – where design research is employed to stimulate thinking and debate about alternative presents, and preferable futures.

While this pictorial provides an exemplar of design futuring in a novel domain, we particularly wish to illustrate the processes by which research participants and communities can be pragmatically involved in design futuring – especially as means to anchor speculation about future technologies in real-world contexts and experiences. Traditionally, speculative design, and design fictions have relied on an exclusive (often individual, expert-led) design practice, there have been recent moves to directly engage research participants in possible futures, through structured forms of experience [12], enactment [18], deliberation [36], education [29] and co-speculation [9,15]. UK innovation agency Nesta broadly identify ‘*participatory futuring*’ at the intersection of futures studies and public engagement, involving: “*a range of approaches for involving citizens in exploring for shaping potential futures. It aims to democratise and encourage long-term thinking, and inform collective actions in the present*” [37].

Here, we wanted to work closely with participants across the diverse cultural sector in Edinburgh, to support more collaborative, long-term thinking and collective action regarding digital and data-driven technologies.

Finally, our work concerns how design futuring actually generates knowledge. As Kozubaev et al. [28] propose:

“Could design futuring research become more interoperable? How could we encourage practices of building upon each other’s work in more than just a shared methodology? How might researchers ‘share’ aspects of a speculation, and have a sense of building up knowledge about anticipated phenomena, or particular near-future technologies?”

Hence, in this pictorial, we aim both to show how the work was made, but also to share reflections on our speculative work that offers ways for other researchers and practitioners to build upon and extend the possible worlds constructed through *FestForward*.

PICTORIAL APPROACH

Publishing this work as a pictorial at DIS, allows us to share, annotate and reflect upon the design process and artefacts in detail, drawing directly on the logics of annotated portfolios [8].

Our design work is primarily in two parts: the initial ‘provotypes’ shown to workshop participants to generate speculative headlines; and the final magazine articles that were produced based on these headlines. Here, we have made a selection of four of the most discussed, concepts and artefacts developed through *FestForward*, and present the provotypes and final magazine spreads.

For each, we offer some brief commentary as a form of introduction and position statement. This expresses our aims and motivations, reflects on choices of format, and offers some critical reflection of the resulting design work. For the provotypes, we annotate these with selected headlines that were produced by participants in the workshops. Read with the image, these annotations may conjure particular imaginaries, issues and emotions.

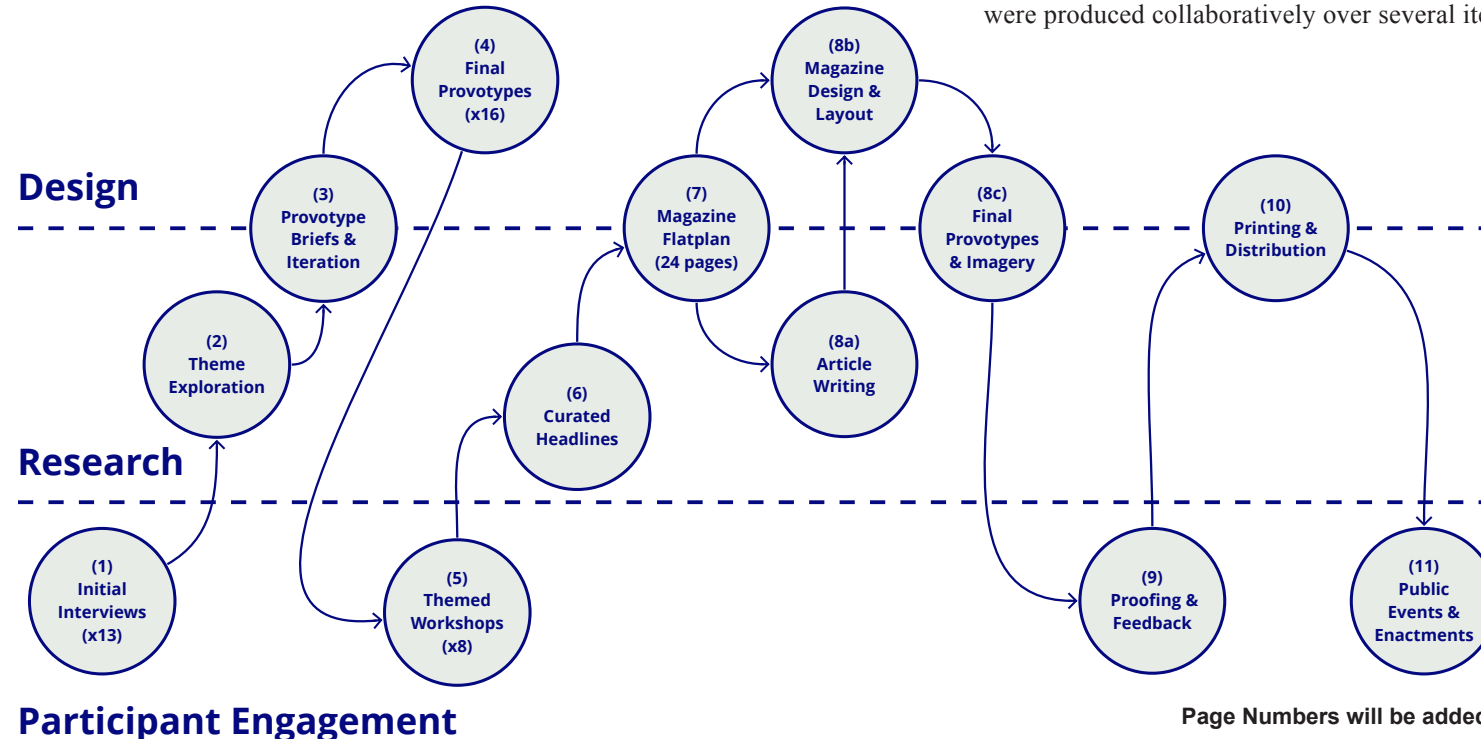
The resulting magazine articles hence showcase our attempts – through the positioning of the research team as fictionalised ‘editors’ of the publication – to reflect many of these imaginaries in a plausible, accessible and rich narrative. As with much futures work – we are not aiming to simply speculate, predict, or forecast, but to prompt reflection on the tensions that emerging technologies produce in a specific socio-political context. In the pictorial, we have annotated the articles with explicit prompts to extend and deepen the world-building we have begun through each article. These prompts reflect on and highlight different aspects of the speculation and our design choices, while pointing to opportunities to delve deeper into the implications of these imaginaries.

DESIGN PROCESS AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The research and design of *FestForward* took place over 8 months in 2022, through several cycles of collaboration between participants, the research team (Authors 1,2 & 3), and a design team (Authors 4 & 5) from design studio *Andthen*. The project began with 13 in-depth interviews, with 14 participants (1), who worked in various capacities across festivals in the Edinburgh and South East region, including freelancers and salaried staff, those in creative roles, working as performing artists and producers, as well as in fundraising, marketing and box-office roles. Interviews discussed the four initial project themes, and recent experiences of technological change during the pandemic. These interviews laid the groundwork for two collaborative workshop sessions between the research and design team to explore possible futures of festivals in each thematic area (2). The workshop sessions combined interview data, trends analysis, headline generation and prioritisation exercises to identify key tensions from which a series of briefs for low-fidelity provotypes were developed [6] (3). These varied provotypes – a mixture of adverts, screenshots, wireframes, letters and social media posts (4) – were intended to work as questionable concepts [41], offering glimpses of possible futures, for critique, discussion and iteration with participants in themed workshops (5). By focusing on key themes and tensions, our aim was not to be especially futuristic, but to address fundamental issues and questions at the heart of how digital technologies are applied in the performing arts and festival sectors.

We undertook a total of eight small workshops, one online, and one in-person for each theme. Each workshop lasted 2 hours. There were 22 unique participants across the workshops, including several of the initial interview participants, as well as recruiting through an open call. Some participants attended more than one workshop. All participants were offered a shopping voucher as remuneration for their time. During the workshops, participants were ‘enlisted’ as writers for the *FestForward* magazine, and asked to consider a selection of the provotypes in turn, and write possible newspaper headlines about each. This scaffolded a discussion of the provotypes, the technologies involved, and the wider issues of equity they revealed. Headlines gave each participant a platform to raise their own ideas and concerns about a provotype or topic. As ever, while discussing futures, participants remarks were deeply informed by their present experience and perspectives.

Following the workshop, the research team acted as an editorial team, to curate the most compelling headlines through analysis of workshop transcripts and participants contributions, (6), and with the design team, developed an outline and flatplan for the magazine content (7). The research team focused on writing articles to develop and extend the headlines from the workshops (8a), while the design team produced branding, and a layout for the magazine (8b). We sought to strike a balance between content that was closely tied to the discussions during the workshops, while being plausibly situated in 2030. Final provotypes and imagery to accompany the articles were produced collaboratively over several iterations with the design team (8c).



All participants in the interviews and workshops were given the opportunity to preview and feedback the final magazine content (9) before printing and distributing 500 copies of the magazine (10) throughout cultural venues and partners in Edinburgh.

The magazine has now been presented at various artist events, including interactive activities to enact, bring to life, and further explore the world(s) envisaged through different articles (11). The work and opportunities to share, discuss and evaluate the magazine with the local cultural sector remains ongoing.

FeStoons

This prototype envisioned the potential of a local community currency – *FeStoons* – focused on the regional festival sector. We hoped participants would consider how creative work is valued and paid for, and how more of the benefits and value generated through the festivals could be retained and distributed amidst local communities.

An introductory letter positions the currency alongside a conventional and familiar form of payment, though with some specific rules around its use, including geofencing, depreciation, and a charitable transaction fee. An exchange rate for the currency is shown in a local pub window.

High street crash! FeStoons currency fails on first day of the August festivals

Limited edition festival currency cards: get your exclusive 2030 edition while you can!

Complaints soar as festivals currency FeStoons is revalued in August

Festivals win innovation award for FeStoons platform

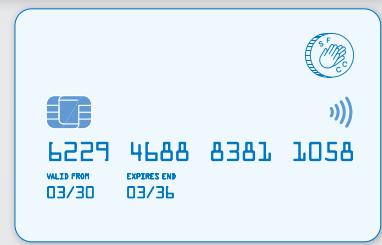


Use it or lose it! Performers in final August weekend cash in on last minute FeStoons spending



Scottish Festivals Currency Cooperative

Digital Currency Department
Festivals House
Edinburgh
EH3 4DJ



Say hello to your new festivals currency card.

Dear customer,

Your latest Scottish festivals currency card has arrived! With this card you can spend our local currency, FESTOON\$, dedicated to supporting the festivals of Edinburgh and the performing arts.

FESTOON\$ is a digitally-enabled currency with inbuilt features that we think you will love:

- 1 3% of every transaction contributes to our emerging artist support fund.
- 2 Stored FESTOON\$ depreciate in value to incentivise spending on the performing arts rather than accumulate as a speculative asset.
- 3 FESTOON\$ are geotargeted to selected venues and streaming platforms in Edinburgh, Lothians and the Borders to support local businesses and economies.

Kindest regards,

The Digital Currency Team
Scottish Festivals Currency Cooperative

Authors' Commentary

FeStoons appeared throughout the *FestForward* magazine, including on the front cover, to indicate their place as an ordinary and even mundane part of the festival landscape. A longer article about the currency describes the winning of a sustainable innovation award, based on working closely with grassroots communities to make the currency a success.

The advert shown opposite introduces the key features of FeStoons, but identifies the potential novel and collectible nature of FeStoon cards – especially for tourists and visitors.

A partnership with another new tech company ‘Culture.ai’ (see below) is introduced through the ‘collectible’ quotes from algorithmically generated performance piece *Munro Speaks*.

The FeStoons logo gives a brand identity, and is important for recognising where this form of payment is accepted.

The card design itself remains conventional, suggesting a certain familiarity, though this could have been further iterated to reference novel payment media or infrastructure.

Discussions of this concept and article have ranged from pragmatic ideas about how individuals or businesses would seek to ‘game’ such a currency, to more aspirational consideration of how alternative forms of value (e.g. social, cultural, ecological) can be represented and shared.

July 2030

Limited edition 2030 FeStoons card! Don't miss out!

Support local artists and independent businesses when you pay in FeStoons, and receive discounted tickets and exclusive perks only for FeStoons members

Buy your currency in pounds but save in FeStoons! You can use F\$ to buy tickets anywhere you see our logo and even earn F\$ in our app.

Our 2030 one-off collectible cards have been designed with our partner, Culture.ai, and in association

with the algorithmically generated performance piece, *Munro Speaks*. Choose your favourite line or collect them all!

To order, or for more information about FeStoons and full terms and conditions, visit gofestoon.scot

Munro: You knew but steadfast you stayed silent while we fell to pieces

F\$

Munro: Too old and too great were I for you to see me.

F\$

Munro: Rest on my sides and drift in deeply, for then may you see time differently.

F\$

F\$ X

CULTURE.AI

gofestoon.scot

Winner of the Scottish Sustainable Innovation Award 2030

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World Building

What kind of community and culture might develop around the collecting of FeStoons cards?

How would such a currency be backed or guaranteed to give users confidence in its sustained value?

How would venues and performers manage payments in multiple currencies?

How could FeStoons be earned in the F\$ app in ways that would contribute to the local cultural community?

How might FeStoons be designed to benefit the local cultural economy all year round?

July 2030

THEATRICA win Sustainable Innovation Award for FeStoons currency platform

By Gini Songeloh

THEATRICA, the team behind the FeStoons currency, collected a Scottish Sustainable Innovation award this month in recognition of their steady ascent from a quirky rewards system to a unique part of the festivals landscape.

The team credited a pairing with the Scottish Festivals Data Cooperative and a commitment to grassroots representation on their board as keys to their remarkable success, along with attracting seed funding.

Speaking after the ceremony, transaction designer Tommy Kettles told *FestForward*:

"We always had a vision for what FeStoons could do if enough people believed in it. It's a privilege to have won this award, and

For venues and artists, FeStoons offers new, more playful ways to engage audiences, but also to follow and understand their cultural preferences. As FeStoons are exchanged, the holder can see where they've been spent before, creating unique cultural economic maps – FeStoons spent at Ziggy Starman's first solo show have even become collectible!

When initially launched at cult venues in Edinburgh, FeStoons were known for their juzzy marketing and neon top-up payment rings. But, as more venues began trading and accepting FeStoons, the value of an explicit local, cultural currency came to the fore. The currency gained popularity in particular through funds to support emerging artists from South East Scotland

Workspace

- Threads
- All DMs
- Mentions & reactions
- Saved items
- Slack connect
- More

Channels

- # casting
- # culture.ai**
- # funding
- # general
- # production
- # promo
- # props
- # random
- # writersroom

culture.ai

Domhnall 10:36 AM
Hey Ana-Maria, how's it going? I was hoping to pick your brain on my current script, Na Luing Air Seòladh.

Ana-Maria 10:37 AM
Domhnall! 🍷 I remember that script, I hope it's going well. I would love to help, let me open up Cultur.A.I...
Right, I am ready – hit me!

Domhnall 10:37 AM
I've weirdly heard that the name of the lead character can have a big impact on algorithmic recommendation. I was thinking something like Audrey, but any ideas for alternative names for this genre??

Ana-Maria 10:38 AM
I have heard that too, let me check.

Ana-Maria 10:43 AM
I am getting a 87% recommendation for Eilidh, although Cultur.A.I. does also tell me that if you're thinking of targeting this at an audience under 30 then maybe go with Morag and write an edgy haircut like a buzzcut into her character.

Domhnall 10:44 AM
Cheers, I'll bear that in mind.

Domhnall 10:50 AM
Last request... I am speaking with Julie about the soundtrack next week and wondering if you have any recommendations for something that will resonate with an Edinburgh audience?

Ana-Maria 10:54 AM
If you're going for a digetic soundtrack, then go for a mix of 80s and contemporary Scottish trad. If a non-diagetic underscore then taking some dramatic influences from Olafur Arnalds and/or Nils Frahm would fit with what's working with Scottish audiences right now.

Domhnall 10:56 AM
D: Ok cool – thanks, Ana-Maria! I really appreciate it 🙏

Ana-Maria 10:56 AM
Anytime! 🍷

Culture.ai

This provotype sought to consider the potential role(s) of generative AI software in supporting creative and cultural work. Presented through a dialogue with an agent, the provotype suggests AI that can be queried and possibly conversed with, to offer reasoned advice for a creative practitioner to consider when writing or editing a script.

Rather than writing whole scripts, we sought to explore the potential collaborative roles of AI tools, and consider the kinds of decisions and content (e.g. soundtracks, trends, character names) that an AI may be trusted to advise upon.

Culture.ai shares 25% of revenue for providing “Key Plot Points” in new TV adaptation of Ed Fringe Theatre show

Art versus content – is tech removing the humanity of creativity?

Morag's edgy buzzcut is the look of the season!

Top 10 character names for 2030 announced

Culture.ai cured my writer's block!

‘I miss those terrible shows you choose on a whim’ – audiences bemoan how AI makes everything ‘good’

Authors' Commentary

Presenting the story in a panel format, allows multiple viewpoints to be expressed, which reflects the mixed views of our participants.

The primary focus is to question the tensions between the creative work artists undertake, and a predictive, data-driven system. The 'Death of the Author?' headline is obviously sensationalised, but raises the key issue of authorship.

Technologically, especially given recent rapid advances in AI text generation, Culture.ai is quite modest. However, this framing focuses on exploring tensions between ideas of innate human creativity and the potential for sense-checking and streamlining the work of scriptwriting, as well as tailoring work for specific audiences.

The use of avatars as headshots, implies the need for specific virtual identities, perhaps in gaming or metaverse environments. Overall, most participants (in April 2022), did not yet have a sophisticated understanding of these technologies and for some, it was challenging to think as far ahead as 2030 with this technology.

The FestForward Panel
Compiled by Denis Cheri's

Death of the Author?

TERRENCE JENNINGS, 27
Playwright and performer winner of the 2020 Young Playwright of the Year Award

ALIZA RASMUSSEN, 43
Freelance theatre and festival producer

LANI MCINTOSH, 24
Writer, activist and producer of the YouTube channel 'Art not Algorithms'

ARISHA WANG, 56
Freelance cultural data insights analysis

TJ: Systems like this make me question "who is art for?", and this is tricky. I write from my own ideas, imagination and experiences, so of course these are not going to immediately appeal to all audiences. Maybe that's fine or maybe it's self-indulgent, but I feel like my creativity is mine and I work really hard on it. I do reluctantly see that running my work through something like Culture.ai might give good suggestions to make it more accessible to more audiences, but I still can't help but feel that it dilutes the impact of the work.

AR: I tried Culture.ai with some writers recently and I was sceptical but pleasantly surprised. As someone who produces programmes of work that take place all at the same time, I was intrigued to see whether it would be useful in helping me understand the breadth of the offer and how we could be more inclusive and reach as many people as possible. As much as commercial success is seen as a cop out in terms of creative success, I do think systems like this might be useful in helping us understand how we can be both creative and commercially viable at the same time.

LM: I can't stress enough how damaging I think these kinds of systems are to human creativity. All these algorithms do is encourage gamification of art and force creativity into systems that are designed to serve the platforms and turn art into 'content' for them. Any other benefits are purely incidental and, as we saw with so many of the older social media platforms that are on the wane now, many of those benefits are outweighed by harms and bias. We're fine with content for content's sake, so let's leave art for art's sake alone!

AW: I think a lot of the backlash against systems like this is around the difference we still perceive between art and content; despite all the changes that have come about to platforms and the way we consume culture online in recent years. If we frame a system like Culture.ai as being for marketing and audience development – checking scripts for alignment with audiences and inclusivity, for example – it's easier to see the benefits. I think, in general, we are still way more comfortable with platforms and algorithms in the context of marketing and distribution than we are with ways they might be used to make art.

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World Building

What data would a software like Culture.ai be trained on? How would access to this data be licenced and paid for?

Can an algorithm or AI itself ever be considered artistic or creative? How would this creativity be recognised?

In what ways could AI text generation software actually be used to identify bias, discrimination or inauthenticity of cultural work?

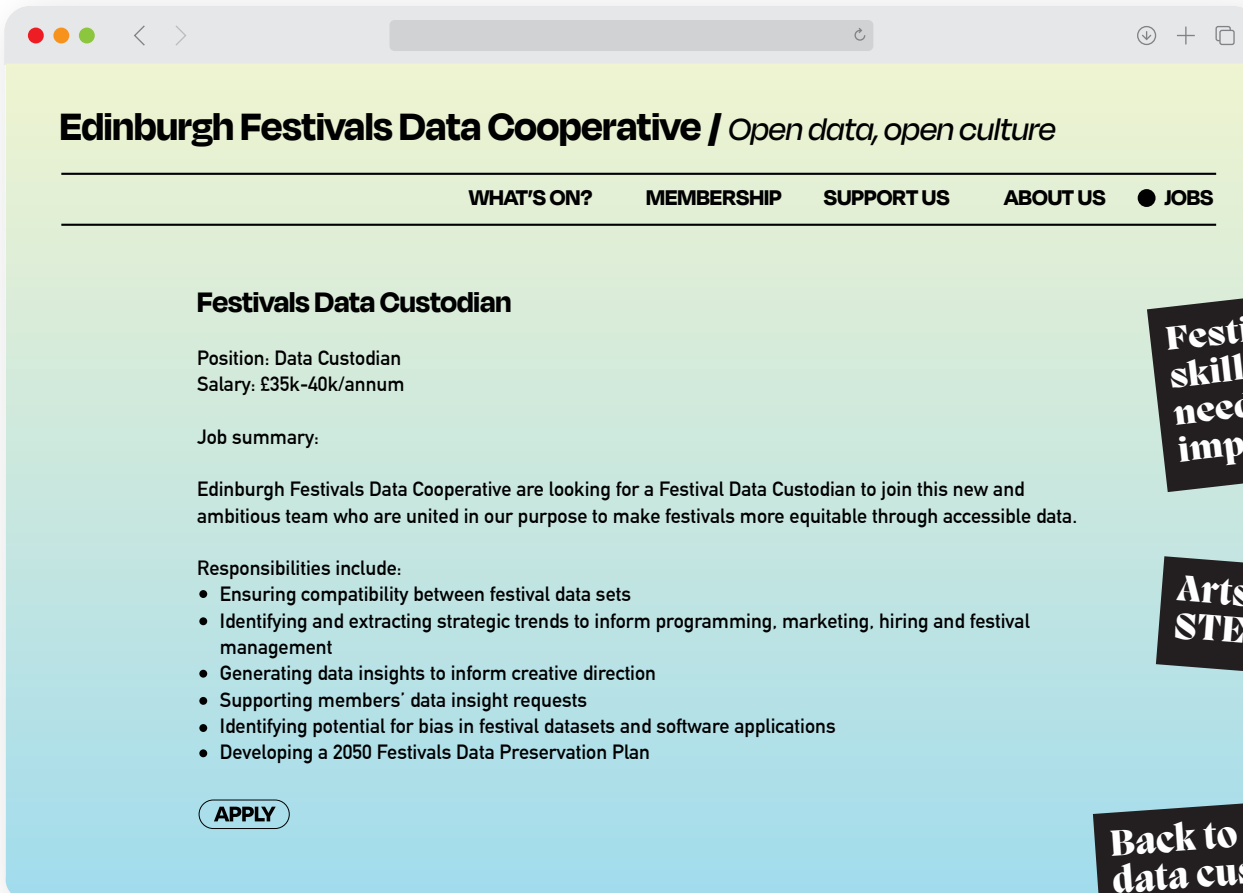
What biases and tropes are most deeply embedded in historical literature and drama that would be learnt by Culture.ai?

What role would an AI play in a collaborative 'writers room'?

How will breakthrough AI technologies such as ChatGPT be employed by theatre-makers and performers besides script-writing?

Festivals' Data Custodian

This provotype addressed a longstanding complaint and ambition in the local cultural sector that organisations lack the means and skills to manage and share data effectively. Presented as a job advert, on behalf of a new 'Edinburgh Festivals Data Cooperative' the provotype envisions a 'Festivals Data Custodian'. This broadly imagined role includes ensuring accountability for data management and sharing, supporting data-driven decision making, as well as long-term data archiving and preservation. The advert itself is situated on a basic website for the *Edinburgh Festivals Data Cooperative*, with hints about a wide membership base, a non-profit business model, and being grounded in an 'open data' ideology.



Data custodian holds festivals to account: over 500 incidents of bias and discrimination reported in festivals' algorithms

Data co-op rescues decades of festival archive material

Festivals tell Creative Scotland data skills development desperately needed as they struggle to fill important data management roles

Arts graduates lose out on jobs to STEM graduates with data skills

Back to the good old days... Festival data custodian curates ground-breaking festival history showcase

	FestForward				July 2030		
	<h1>Festivals' Data Custodian reveals all</h1>				<i>"For a long time, evidence about many of the key factors that left people excluded from participating in arts and culture was often ignored."</i>		
	By Becci Pione						
<p>Balancing the old and the new – histories and futures of data – is the day job of Xim Tyrell, Data Custodian at the Scottish Festivals Data Cooperative (SFCD). So it feels apt that we are discussing the health of festivals' data archives and practice in what was once a Nightingale Ward at Edinburgh's Old Royal Infirmary. Our interview begins with talking about how their role has changed since the SFDC began in 2024.</p> <p><i>"When we first started talking about data it meant balancing two things: trying to capture as much data about audiences as we can to make marketing more efficient, while staying on the right side of data protection laws like the BDP. We met so many arts organisations who were unaware of the valuable data they already had, or were afraid of the obligations of managing it properly. So we needed to start</i></p>	<p><i>by building confidence, skills and demonstrating the value of collaboration."</i></p> <p>Before the SFDC existed, there had been limited agreement or consensus on how cultural data across multiple festivals and venues could and should be shared. While organisations sometimes shared box office systems or marketing data, this was often ad-hoc and lacking context. At Culture Summit 2024, key, binding commitments were made by major venues about how data such as cast diversity and algorithmic authorship should be recorded, shared, and publicly archived.</p> <p>Simply having the role of a Data Custodian – someone independent, sitting outside of any single organisation – has given the sector a trusted forum and centre of expertise to address the challenges of good</p>	<p>data management. And over time, Xim has become more proactive in demonstrating the potential value in cultural data sets, not just for the sector, but for civic life.</p> <p><i>"It's been vital to find ways to show not just those who work in the industry, but the public at large, how data generated and curated from the cultural sector can tell us so much about who we are, and help us become who we want to be."</i></p> <p>However, beyond being a guardian for cultural data, Xim also relishes some of the more adversarial aspects of the role, including most recently in giving evidence to a public inquiry into Accessibility and Exclusion in the Performing Arts.</p> <p><i>"For a long time, evidence about many of the key factors that left people excluded from</i></p>	<p>participating in arts and culture was often ignored. But by engaging SFDC members to more rigorously collect and analyse data about audience participation, and the diversity of the cultural workforce, we could show directly where more needed to be done. I feel a real responsibility to use the data we have to widen the opportunities our sector can provide."</p>	<p><i>in novel ways, but it's equally essential that those companies that use this data commercially commit to a set of enforceable standards."</i></p> <p>As data is now more accessible and embedded in public life, it has also been a rich resource for artists and performers seeking to explore cultural histories, and find inspiration for new work.</p> <p><i>"We run open clinics once a week specifically to help artists run queries on the festival archives. It's amazing what people want to know: "Who did the first queer Shakespeare? How many shows were there about Brexit? What's the best time of day for a clown show?". These might seem trivial, but answering these questions can really inspire people or give them confidence in a creative idea."</i></p> <p>As our time was coming to a close, I asked Xim what kept them up at night. Their response revealed the many</p>	<p>hats and skills required for their role:</p> <p><i>"It is, honestly, thrilling to see festivals and venues investing in more roles to generate and manage data better. We've really turned a corner in acknowledging the value of data beyond driving a marketing campaign. But when I sit on interview panels for these roles, I'm often concerned that we're seeing arts graduates, and those with expertise in the sector, lose out to candidates with a pure data science background. We absolutely need both – data science in the arts is its own discipline – not just an application area or domain for computer science. What gives me hope, is that some universities are creating space in their curriculums to let arts students take data science modules, and vice-versa. But we need to keep that balance, and ensure that we're not just doing festivals by numbers."</i></p>		
					<i>"We've really turned a corner in acknowledging the value of data beyond driving a marketing campaign."</i>		
	12				15		

Authors Commentary

The resulting magazine article was a 'profile' piece, presenting a *Data Custodian* as a prestigious and exciting role. The interview format offered a platform to explore the character of this role, who can offer opinion from a certain perspective.

Through this, the role is developed as a kind of change-maker, striving to use data to make the festivals fairer and more sustainable. Throughout, participants picked up on the kind of 'care' implied by a custodian role.

Crystallised in this role, the article invites speculation about what cultural data is, and how it is shared and governed collectively and for public benefit. The article also raises the unique skillsets required to work with data in the cultural sector.

On reflection, more could have been done to illustrate the kind of work the data custodian would do on a day-to-day basis, or to visually show more creative examples of how data and performing arts can be combined.

World Building

As algorithmic agents and AI tools are increasingly used in the creation of new shows, how will that work be credited, acknowledged and compensated?

How do you start and govern a data cooperative, and what would they do?

What cultural sector data sets would be most worthwhile to produce and protect? How could this data be used beyond marketing campaigns?

How might UK data protection laws (the BDP) evolve following Brexit and divergence from EU legal frameworks?

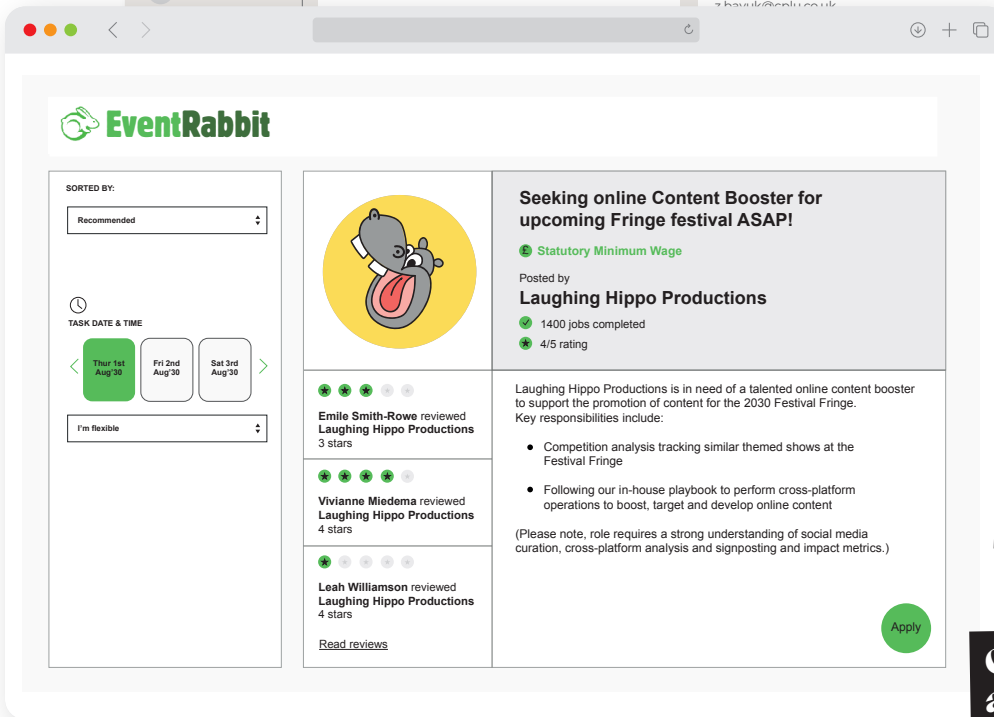
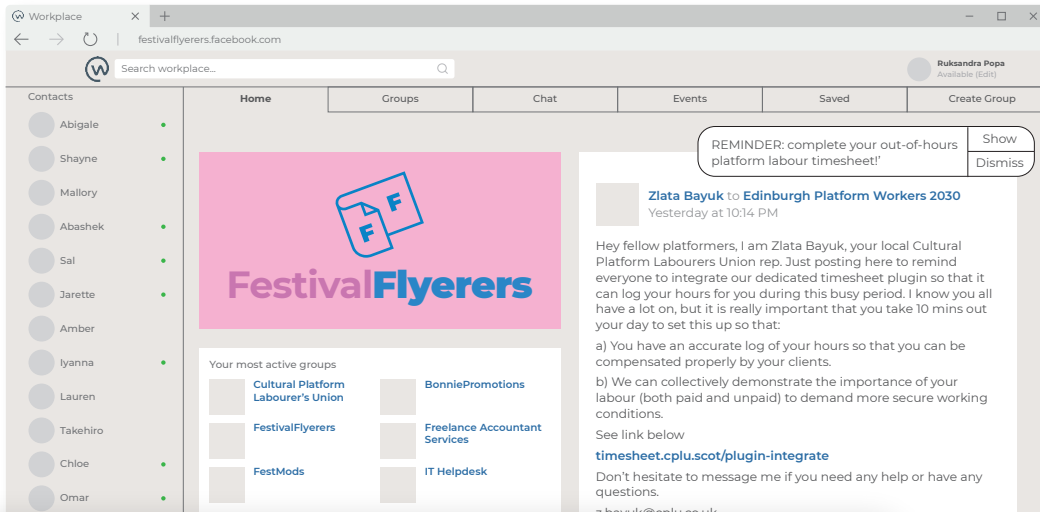
What would artists and organisations seek from festival data clinics if they could ask anything of a festival data archive?

What is distinct about doing data science in cultural contexts, and how are these interdisciplinary skills encouraged and developed?

Cultural Platform Labourer's Union

Increasingly, those working in festivals and the performing arts are reliant upon, and find their work mediated through, online platforms [16]. Such platform labour accelerated due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and saw performers and festivals seek to engage new audiences online [3,23].

One prototype envisioned a live events, crowdwork platform 'EventRabbit', offering short term 'gigs' in the cultural gig economy - such as event promotion. Subsequently, we considered how cultural platform workers may seek to organise themselves, and improve accountability and working conditions through online communities and unionisation. In particular, we envisioned a timesheet app through which the true time commitment, and contribution of platform workers could be demonstrated.



Minimum wage for maximum effort: a day in the life of an online festival content booster

Super influencers demand super pay!

Leaked timesheets show scale of exploitation of festival platform workers

Reinforcing inequalities – union figures show platform labourers from middle class backgrounds beat other workers to jobs

Call for top cultural influencers to reveal rates of pay and support platform labourers' fighting fund

FestForward

A day in the life of a festival platform worker...



Roosevelt Paige is 27 and has been a freelance platform worker in the arts and festivals for the past five years.

Lunchtime...

Lunch doesn't always feel like a break. I often drop into a stream about current algorithmic trends or viral content types while I go for a quick walk. If I'm physically close to where I'm working, I might grab a few photos, videos and soundscapes to use later on. I also use this time to update my personal social accounts – this is important for increasing rates of pay from the union and building a brand towards the next job. Sometimes I only work on a job for a few weeks so I'm always thinking about what's next.

Afternoon...

Every couple of days I set aside time in the afternoon to look at all the platform insights and work out how we're doing with engagement and sales. I've noticed over the past few years that data wrangling and analysis skills are becoming much more sought after in freelancers, although the arts organisations I work with are starting to have their own in-house analysts to look after their data too. Otherwise, I spend the afternoon creating and scheduling content and tailoring it for each platform, although I sometimes use tools that automate this process – the _crop_circle has a good one – to speed this up if I'm short of time.

Evening...

I often end up working into the evening... I'll fill in my union timesheet most days. At least the union has given us the chance to be transparent about how platforming can take over your life and try to improve rates of pay, although it can make you more competitive with others. Finally, if I've got the energy, I might update my profiles on freelancer platforms to make sure I'm as ready as I can be to attract new clients or respond to offers of future work.

Wake-up...

I usually check my emails and notifications on my work phone as soon as I wake up, just to make sure there's nothing I need to sort first thing. When I first started out, I used my personal smartphone for work to save money, but I was never off it and always worried I'd be working from the wrong account. Now I have a separate phone for work, and it's set to have notifications off between 11pm and 7am, but work social media can be just as addictive as my personal profiles, so I don't always stick to that!

Morning...

I schedule most of my content posts a few days, or at least the night before, so morning is my time to update content and campaign planners; share and link to any relevant content from other accounts; and, if I'm working in a team, maybe meet with other platformers to catch up and brainstorm ideas.

If there's something going wrong in online comms, I'll be responding to that and trying to take the conversation off public channels, to be dealt with privately by permanent employees of whoever I'm working for. Sometimes this can take a lot of time and cause a lot of stress when you're trying to stick to a tone of voice or brand while helping people resolve problems.

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July 2030

The FestForward view...

...on the Cultural Platform Labourers Union strike



Support for workers' rights is needed, but the systems being used expose the continued inequities of platform work in the cultural sector.

The Cultural Platform Labourers Union (CPLU) has announced two periods of strike action – 30–31 July and 5–7 August 2030. The strike has the potential to have a big impact on the operations of Scotland's summer festivals, from marketing and box offices to digital platform moderation. The action was announced in June in reaction to the news that several cultural organisations and festivals were moving away from regulated platform labour towards less experienced, and cheaper, in-house assistants and short-term roles. This has been widely perceived as an explicit cost-cutting move and one which undervalues both union members and other cultural workers, and increases the precarity of these roles.

But there is protest within the union too. The CPLU timesheet algorithm – which now uses personal platform profiles to inform rates of pay – has complicated its relationship with fair work and prompted internal divisions and complaints. If platform labourers' personal work in building their own influencer-type brand online is explicitly linked to their professional lives and value by their union, can they ever really be promoting fairness and equity?

The CPLU was formed in 2025, and in the early days the key benefit of membership was access to a timesheet plug-in, which encouraged gig and platform freelance workers to log their additional working hours beyond the expectations of a standard 7–8 hour working day. The aim was to show cultural organisations employing freelance or short-term platform labour at busy times of year the true cost of that work, and to highlight its value to the organisation in order to improve working conditions and secure better rates of pay.

Like other areas of gig work, the early 2020s saw an

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increased awareness of the precarity of platform-mediated labour. Collective action by unions across several services – food delivery, transport, and the cultural sector – was instrumental in securing access to living wage minimum rates of pay and other benefits.

Part of this success for cultural sector workers was linked to the CPLU timesheet as a tool for transparency, showing the huge workloads and scale of unpaid labour happening across multiple platforms. As the timesheet, and CPLU membership, grew, more features were incorporated. The algorithm that allowed workers to plug in their personal platform metrics – followers, reach and conversions for any brand partnerships – to help determine their rate of pay was added in 2028.

“Even with the best of intentions, this personalised aspect of the timesheet is encouraging competition between workers.”

As those protesting within the union say, even with the best of intentions, this personalised aspect of the timesheet is encouraging competition between workers. As a result, it is marginalising and penalising platform labourers who don't have the time or resource to increase their rates through personal branding, and feeding the 24/7 culture of platform labour that it is part of the union's role to tackle.

So, here at *FestForward*, we support the strike and encourage serious negotiations to take place; but also, and just as importantly, we support those within the union calling for reform to the systems and tools that help it work with its members best interests at its heart.

Authors' Commentary

This spread includes two articles: 'a day in the life' and an editorial perspective on an ongoing strike by cultural platform labourers.

The 'day in the life' situates the 'always on' reality of platform work, and imagines details of the multiple roles, skills and hustle required to make a living in this gig.

The editorial format allowed the research team to express a particular view, alongside a nuanced discussion of the issues. The article itself supports the strike, though questions the tools and processes being used and appropriated by the union.

A key tension that exists throughout the creative industries is surfaced, around how independent workers who compete with each other, can withhold labour and act together for collective benefit.

World Building

What kind of collective action could platform workers in the cultural sector undertake effectively? What legal cases might they seek to bring to hold employers or platforms to account?

How will automated tools hinder, supersede, or support cultural platform work?

How would a Cultural Platform Labourers Union be governed and succeed in a purely online workplace? What tactics, tools and resources would they develop?

What would greater pay transparency mean for platform workers and their employers?

How can platform workers be supported in separating personal and professional identities?

How would platform work challenge or overtake existing roles in festival management, such as comms, curation, marketing and administration?

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

In this brief discussion, we wish to reflect on the nature of participatory futuring; the need for design futuring artefacts to have ongoing engagement; and the role of ‘world-building’ as intermediate-level knowledge.

Participation through provotypes & headlines

The primary opportunity for participants to shape the content of FestForward was through their creative response to open-ended provotypes [6], which served as boundary objects between participants, research and design teams [42]. As an activity, headline writing offered a focused, accessible and shared format through which to scaffold discussion. Though a simple and familiar technique, (e.g. [20,43]), it invites participants to directly consider the impact and possible worlds that a provotype implies. Though succinct, and at times superficial, when generated by a wide range of participants, we found headlines to be an effective way to surface multiple facets of emerging technologies, while tying them to participants’ present and real concerns.

However, throughout the workshops, we felt a considerable tension between pushing participants to think more radically, creatively and ambitiously about long-term futures, and a tendency to return to contemporary problems. For example, discussing a provotype for a dynamic ticketing application in 2030 was very challenging for box-office managers who were primarily concerned about being able to sell enough tickets to keep their doors open in 2022. Such instances remind us that presents and futures are not experienced equally, and indeed it often requires a degree of security and contemporary privilege to even ‘suspend disbelief’ [7] and consider longer-term horizons. While ‘expert’ futurists, or speculative designers may be more equipped to undertake longer-term futuring, this risks being divorced from many first-hand, present realities.

We also frequently considered what degree of participation and indeed authorship we could ask, or expect, of our participants. We could have invited participants to not only write headlines, but whole articles – however, short of directly employing some

participants on the project, this felt like an unreasonable ask of their time, which would amplify some voices ahead of others. As with any participatory activity, there is a balancing act to progress a project, ensure equitable and accessible involvement, and apply specific expertise.

Ongoing Participation, Futuring & Impact

Our work to share, distribute and make use of FestForward is ongoing. The primary aim of this project has been to support local creative and cultural organisations to have productive long-term conversations about the implications of digital technologies and equity. The final magazine should not be viewed as an end in itself, but can be employed in and by the cultural sector to help identify preferable futures, and inform present actions towards these. Through printing more than 500 physical copies of the magazine, mailing these to partner organisations, and hosting and attending public events on behalf of *FestForward*, there are diffuse, organic and spontaneous opportunities to shift and inform present conversations. We have asked students to extend or expand upon some of the articles, and we plan to playfully ‘enact’ [18] certain provotypes, such as *FeStoons*. However, beyond these kind of discursive design activities [40], we perceived a weakness in many design futuring projects in terms of actually shaping impactful present action towards preferable futures. Further work might therefore build on deliberative approaches [36], action research [24] or consider examples of design-led policy-making [38] to deliver greater real-world impact and relevance from design futuring activities.

World Building as Intermediate-level Knowledge

Looking beyond participation, and real-world impact, it is worth returning to question the kinds of knowledge produced through design futuring [28], and how this is made valuable. Undertaking design futuring, with participants, can of course tell us much about present perceptions and anxieties in a given context. It may also help to map out, or reveal new facets of emerging or upstream technologies or concepts (e.g.[29,31]), related to present concerns. However, like many forms of research through design, the outputs of design futuring, often suffer from being ultimate particulars [39], locked

in a particular speculative setting, from which it is challenging to generalise or abstract to other contexts. Hook & Lowgren [25] hence argue for design research to develop forms of ‘intermediate-level knowledge’ – such as ‘strong concepts’, or design ‘patterns’ [1]. To extend this thinking to the practice of design futuring, we propose that ‘**world-building**’ is a key form of **intermediary-level knowledge**.

Through world-building [13], particular speculative artefacts or ‘*diegetic prototypes*’ [27] are abstracted, and generalised to illuminate present and future concerns. The most compelling speculative design work is highly generative of possible worlds and alternatives. However, much of the way design futuring is presented, can prioritise a final artefact, narrative or envisioning of particular future, rather than the broader, and plural work of world-building. *FestForward* is a highly-finished and entertaining piece of design fiction. However, we suggest that its real impact and contribution turns upon its capacity to support further world-building (by diverse actors), and help identify broad qualities and features of those digitally-mediated worlds worth striving for. For example, our envisioned ‘*festivals*’ *data custodian*’ should not be judged as a good or bad idea per se; rather, it is valuable as a means to understand and discuss worlds in which festivals are better able to share and preserve cultural data. Hence, a key aim of this pictorial, was to provide an example of using annotation [8] to more explicitly support such world-building, in relation to a series of speculative artefacts. Both, to more explicitly articulate the intermediate-level knowledge produced through this work (and which may inform future research); but also to explore means by which world-building can be best illustrated, supported and explained to others.

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