

# Whose Preferred Future Is This? On Possibility, Potential, and Plurality in Visions of the Future

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## Abstract

What do the images of our futures tell us about the world we live in? Whose preferred future do we often imagine? That of the people, the planet, or solely made for profits of a few masters? If it is for the benefit of the people, who are they, how much do they benefit, and how will their lives be better? What unforeseen implications might this have for the planet? Speculation is famously a provocative medium that allows us to start crucial conversations without explicitly referring to sensitive anecdotes. In an increasingly polarised and fragmented world, these images hope to spark empathy, and promote a holistic, considerate discourse.

## Keywords

design futures, speculative design, participatory design, discursive design, critical design, design fiction, postcards from the future, images of the future, decentralisation

Consider if you will: the idea of a spatial version of the internet, now dubbed ‘the Metaverse’. Businesses and their near-future strategies, technologies, and digital design and developer ecosystems seem to now have realigned their efforts in realising a vision of the spatial version of the internet. Taking Gartner’s Emerging Technology hype cycle [01] into consideration, there is a big trough for ‘the Metaverse’ to traverse before gaining a sustained, and arguably a mainstream focus in our lived experience of the world.

These disparate efforts to make ‘the Metaverse’ a reality can be seen as a ‘push’ from big-tech towards people. We’re still struggling to see the ‘pull’, or a truly valuable place in our lives. There is much precedent for top-down visions of corporate, and even social futures; and for larger organisations to sell (or impose) those visions to people.

**On seeing this vision, one might ask, ‘Whose preferred future is this?’** That of the people, the planet, or solely made for profits of a few masters? If it is for the benefit of the people, who are they, how much do they benefit, and how will their lives be better? What unforeseen implications might this have for the planet?

I’d started ‘**Postcards from the Future**’ in late 2019 to create future-visions about systems, technologies, and their effect on societies – as an independent, bottom-up initiative. Postcards from the Future [02] is

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a globally crowdsourced design fiction project with 33 one-image scenarios that depict curious artefacts, interactions, and situations from potential technological and social futures. It is a result of about two years of collaboration with 21 creatives (designers, technologists, historians, futurists, writers, and curators) from around the world. A few postcards have been crowdsourced in forecasting workshops conducted around the world.

As someone who's primarily a practitioner of futures and foresight methods, I apply them to design and technology projects of various complexities. Other times, I use them in art projects such as Postcards from the Future. I often find that futures and foresight methods augment qualitative and quantitative research methods. They help cast a wide net and intend to bring in holistic, unconsidered voices that would not have otherwise been included in discourse of projects, all in service of moving towards a preferable future.

To be able to speak with myriad voices who have deep expertise in research and academia when it comes to futures is always enriching and rewarding. Furthermore, the format of panel discussions enables comprehensive consideration of many topics touching upon diverse social, cultural, technological, and ecological visions of the future. In the panel discussions of **Situating, Transforming, [De]centering images of the future**, on October the 8th in 2021, I saw this ethos of plural futures come alive. The discussions allowed for me to investigate my own biases and assumptions about the future.

**Images of the future show plurality, potential, and possibility; rather than predicting or asserting a vision.** They act as probes sent out into the future, to gather glimpses of likely interpersonal and person-system interactions. These glimpses could then help us make sense of our own world and the times we live in, be testing ground for technological and policy interventions, and help gauge our roles in making that future real as

professionals, and as individuals (Images 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5).

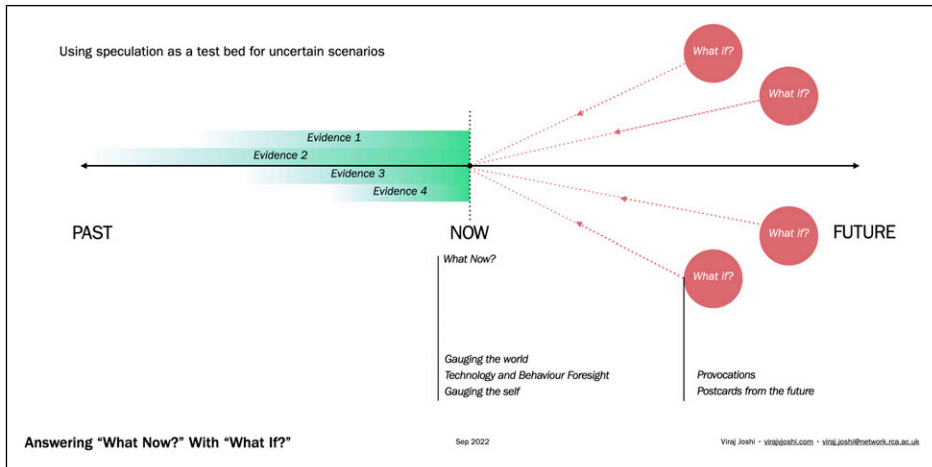
## On Possibility

When grounded thoroughly in evidence, visions of the future can be most poignant and provocative. For creating the postcards, we looked at evidence around us and asked **'What now?'**. This allowed us to use evidence as a spring-board in asking **'What if?'** and creating these provocations.

In other words, we could very well use speculation as a test bed for uncertain scenarios. This can then be used to inform our



**Image 1.** 'Deglitcher' by Martín Perez Comisso and Viraj Joshi [02]. Postcards from the Future no. 33. When sources of truth are sanctioned and controlled by the state, deciphering the truth becomes the responsibility of buggy, malware-like niche software, all developed underground. The 'deglitcher' is a tool for those who dare to find decentralised, documented truths. With this device, someone can compare the observed information with 'deep archives', to avoid being fooled by uncontrolled algorithms, deep fakes, or even the victorious stories of the government of the day.



**Image 2.** Answering ‘What Now?’ with ‘What if?’ by Viraj Joshi (<http://virajjoshi.com> | <http://virajjoshi.medium.com>) [03].

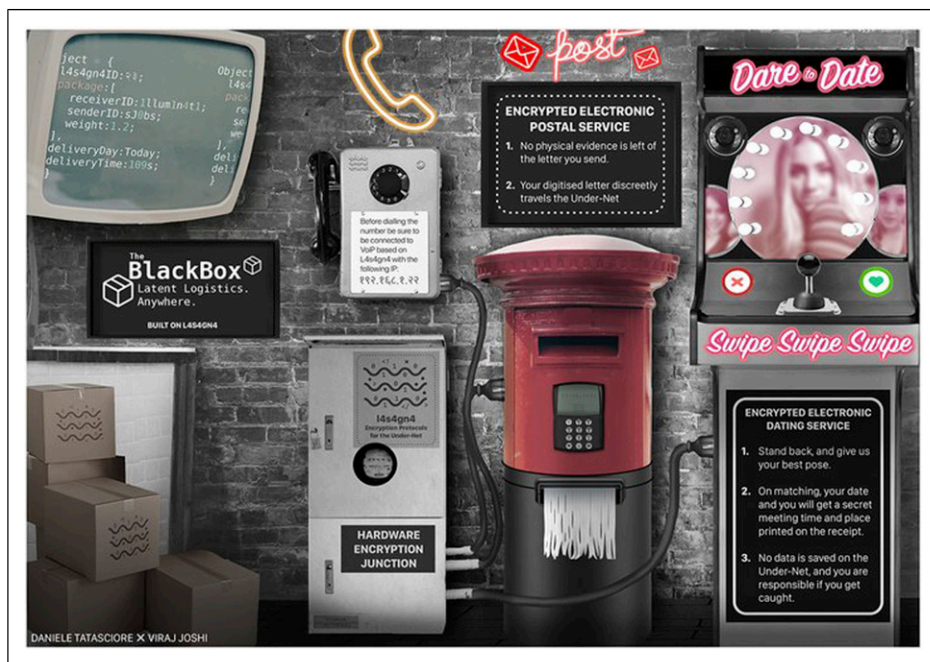


**Image 3.** ‘Posthumous Conversations’ by Nadia Piet and Viraj Joshi [02]. Postcards from the Future no. 27. When computers apply the ability to imitate speech nuances, patterns, and behaviours by learning from a continuous stream of recorded text messages, emails, audio, and video media of a person to simulate the person himself, where is the line between a person and his digital double? Would corporations own this data, and charge us to speak with someone who we have lost? What might be the economic models they use to let us access those we love? Would policy be enough to regulate this and protect the mental health of the living, and the sanctity of the dead? What ethical principles must the wizards who produce these interactions stick to?



**Image 4.** ‘The Trans-Arctic Rail Ticket’ by Viraj Joshi [02]. Postcards from the Future no. 01. With climate change looming over us, most of the Arctic ice will melt by the year 2030. Countries around the Arctic Circle have already started talking about a new ‘Arctic Silk Route’ to make trading easier, cheaper, and faster. Profitability utopia/environmental dystopia.

own behaviour, to help us as individuals and professionals to head into a preferred future, or indeed away from an unfavourable one. In ‘Posthumous Conversations’, Nadia and I took the idea of big-tech owning our data farther, in order to make a tongue-and-cheek provocation.



**Image 5.** 'Going underground for the free use of the internet' by Daniele Tatasciore and Viraj Joshi [02]. Postcards from the Future no. 22. In a world where all of the internet is moderated and warded, would the very act of speaking to someone, sending and receiving texts, and being oneself need discretion and cloaking from the system? Would underground, unlawful businesses become the new hubs for people to do everyday-internet-things?

## On Potential

The **postcards** show both utopias to strive towards and dystopias that act as cautionary tales. Both utopias and dystopias are extreme ideas rather than tangible places or times to end up in. They have their makers' intent and biases implicit in them. For example, a profitability utopia can very easily be an ecological dystopia, as seen in this postcard.

## On Plurality

Investigations into alternate futures allow us to compare our situations with those that might soon come to be, and to think of things in a plural, intersectional sense. For example, whilst a great number of people are reaping benefits of an open, democratic internet, there are others under the shadows of a government-curated

experience. This postcard brings to light this plurality.

Speculation is famously a provocative medium that allows us to start crucial conversations without explicitly referring to sensitive anecdotes. In an increasingly polarised and fragmented world, these images hope to spark empathy and promote a holistic, considerate discourse.

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## Author Biography

**Viraj Joshi** (MA, RCA; MSc, Imperial) is a designer, technologist, and futurist, who produces both design and fiction for our technological and social futures. He has worked at Fjord London and Stockholm as a Service and experience designer, and their EU Co-lead for Design Futures Community of Practice. He is a visiting tutor at the Royal College of Art (Speculative and interaction design); and is the writer and artist for ‘Eliza - The Ghost in Every Machine’, a weekly Tech Futures cartoon.