

Future Narratives

1. Definition

A future narrative²³ is a narrative that describes an event or experience that is set – when seen from the perspective of actual writing – in a moment of time in the future. A future narrative does not – as most narratives do – present a development as having already happened in the past and thus as no longer allowing for different outcomes. Rather, future narratives portray the future as being open and subject to intervention. A future narrative tends to establish a relationship between the real world (at the time of writing or narrating) and the world described in the future narrative on the basis of a measure of continuation, with possible pathways to the narrated future implied or explicitly outlined. A future narrative contains decision points at which different future developments are possible; these decision points are referred to as “nodes”.

2. Example

Since planning is both naturally future-oriented and inherently narrative, any planning document refers to at least one possible future, and contains – explicitly or implicitly – at least one node to connect the future storyworld to the real world at the time of writing. Any plan for the future is essentially a future narrative, because even where the end-state is presented as a necessary outcome without alternatives, the plan contains – at least implicitly – the decision point of realization or non-realization. In the simplest form – and this is

perhaps even the most common form – the alternatives may only be that a plan is either realized or not realized. In more fully developed form, plans for the future development of an area often explicitly present city councilors, investors, voters, and other stakeholders with two or more options between which a decision must be made. In particular in the case of informal planning practices, including scenario workshops or non-binding strategic plans, multiple future narratives can be included.

The example (see fig. 4), published in 2019, envisions how a child born at the time of publication will see their world in 2050. Events are described in the present tense (“New York ... is no longer reliant on fossil fuels”), but there are elements that explicitly refer back to the base line of 2019 (“New modes of transportation” – as opposed to the ones in use at the time of writing), or that more implicitly outline the challenges at the moment of publication (e.g., “Safe, affordable housing is available in all five boroughs ...”).²⁴

3. Explanation

Merlijn van Hulst has drawn attention to the “future-directedness” of both narrative and planning: “Through telling and listening to stories, actors in the present not only make sense of the past, but also prepare for the future. This ‘future-directedness’, the imagination that is part of or that is enabled by stories, is especially relevant for practices such as planning.”²⁵ This conception is close to the notion of “future narratives” as developed by literary scholar Christoph Bode in order to distinguish them from the more common form of “past narratives”, which present events as having unfolded already and thus as no longer subject to intervention. Even grammatically, it should be noted, most narratives are formulated in the past tense. In future narratives, the fact that the future is open and subject to intervention is made explicit in the form of decision points or “nodes” in the narrative, which can either simply be bifurcations or may offer three or more alternatives. Each of these potential paths into the future can then, in turn, contain further nodes.

Fig. 4: A Vision of New York City in 2050.

A VISION OF NEW YORK CITY IN 2050

New York City will be a very different place in the middle of the 21st century. How will a child born today experience that future? Let's take a look.

IN 2050, NEW YORK CITY HAS MORE THAN 9 MILLION RESIDENTS.

The streets are bustling with people of all nationalities — some were born here, some are visitors, and some have chosen to make their home here. More than a million more flow into the city every day to work and explore the city's culture and neighborhoods. A dramatic skyline, bridges, and iconic buildings rise from world-famous islands and waterways. And there's a familiar, palpable sense of dynamism and creativity — people are in a hurry to accomplish great things.

IN 2050, NEW YORK CITY IS PREPARED FOR A CHANGING CLIMATE, AND IS NO LONGER RELIANT ON FOSSIL FUELS.

Buildings, transportation, and our economy are powered by renewable energy — wind, solar, and hydropower — through a modern, fully electric grid. We can't avoid every impact of climate change, but our infrastructure, public services, and residents are protected from the ravages of extreme weather. Every New Yorker benefits from these changes, which were undertaken in a fair way, and our adapted city is a model for the world to follow.

IN 2050, NEW YORKERS NO LONGER RELY ON CARS.

Our streets are safe and easy to navigate, reclaimed for people. Subways and buses are fast and reliable, taking people where they need to go and connecting our city to the wider metropolitan region. Bicycle lanes abound and walking is a favorite way of getting around town. For many New Yorkers, the daily commute to work is a scenic ferry ride. New modes of transportation, enabled by technology and responsibly deployed, add to the mobility options throughout the five boroughs.

IN 2050, NEW YORKERS ARE SECURE IN THEIR HOMES AND NEIGHBORHOODS.

Safe, affordable housing is available in all five boroughs, and our neighborhoods are more diverse and dynamic than ever. Communities are safe, the air and water are clean, and there are abundant open spaces for all to enjoy. In every neighborhood, there are cultural centers and libraries, small businesses and corner groceries open for late night shopping. No longer threatened by harassment or eviction, families can choose to raise their children in the neighborhoods that best meet their needs.

IN 2050, NEW YORK CITY'S ECONOMIC STRENGTH PROVIDES SECURITY AND OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL.

All New Yorkers can find a good job with fair wages, benefits, and the chance to advance. Young people, trained to think critically and ready to learn new skills, excel in their work and easily find jobs in a diversified and evolving economy. From big businesses to local start-ups, in manufacturing, technology, creative industries, New Yorkers are entrepreneurial and open to new opportunities, driving a growing economy in which everyone can take part and be rewarded.

IN 2050, HEALTH CARE IS A RIGHT FOR EVERY NEW YORKER.

New Yorkers are healthy because quality health care is guaranteed, and our holistic approach means healthy lifestyles — good nutrition, clean air, nearby parks — are available to everyone regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, or disability. New mothers, seniors, children with asthma, people struggling with substance misuse or mental illness — all have access to care and treatment across the five boroughs. New Yorkers interact regularly with their natural environment through an extensive network of trails and waterfront greenways.

Source: The City of New York: *OneNYC 2050. Building a Strong and Fair City.* p. 6. *OneNYC 2050*, Volume 1, April 2019. © City of New York. All rights reserved. Used with permission of the City of New York

Future narratives can also be approached drawing on the work of Bertrand de Jouvenel — one of the founding fathers of futures studies — for whom future narratives stand apart from the dichotomy

fact/fiction, because they are concerned with a separate category: *future*, or future facts.²⁶ Future narratives, crucially, do not have truth-value in the actual world at the time of their writing. But they may differ greatly in the degree of urgency with which they describe a possible future to its actual readership. If the audience contemporary with the time of publication is envisioned as being able to influence the future storyworld – as in New York City’s strategy *OneNYC 2050* – future narratives have a particularly high degree of urgency.

4. Applications

In the practice of legally binding urban planning, plans – whether they are master plans for an entire district or plans for an individual building – generally do not explicitly present alternatives. However, in order to do justice to the fact that planning in democratic societies should never pretend to be without alternatives, but also in order to give stakeholders a sense of involvement, planning might benefit from explicitly formulating alternatives. In this way, planning could work with a limited number of scenarios fleshed out in brief narrative descriptions and suggestive visualizations. These ideally come with considerations on anticipated costs, benefits, environmental impact assessments and other relevant discussions of opportunities and threats.

Related entries: Closure, Narrative, Path-dependency, Scenario, Scripts

Further Reading

- Ameel, Lieven. “Fraught Fictionality in Narratives of Future Catastrophe.” *Narrative* 29, no. 3 (2021): 355–73.
- Keunen, Bart. “Learning from Stories: Narrative Imagination in Urbanism.” *Writingplace: Investigations in Architecture and Literature*. Ed. Klaske Havik, Jorge Mejía Hernández, Mike Schäfer, Mark

- Proosten, Susana Oliveira. Rotterdam: naiOIO Publishers, 2016.
18–33.
- Meifert-Menhard, Felicitas. *Playing the Text, Performing the Future. Future Narratives in Print and Digiture*. Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2013.

