

Let's report a future practice

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Interview roleplay as a way to flesh out alternatives

Lenneke Kuijer

<i>Group size</i>	<i>Level</i>	<i>Duration</i>
S/M	UG/G	Single session

A guided roleplay exercise in which participants flesh out an alternative future practice through a fictive interview performance after which they produce two 'future artifacts': a newspaper article and a page from a museum catalog.

Fact box

Tag	Topics <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Futures thinking (visioning)• Social practice theory• Role-playing Competencies <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Futures thinking / visioning• Positionality / knowing your role in the broader society
Aims / Objectives	The aim of the exercise is to flesh out an alternative future practice and thereby open up novel spaces for (non-technological) innovation, for example, toward lower resource-intensive lifestyles.
How it Works / Method	The method is structured into six main steps (see more details below). <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Step 1. Check out your alternative future (5 mins). Read the description of your alternative future that is provided by your teacher, or translate an idea you generated earlier into terms that describe an alternative future consumption practice. The title of your alternative future is [your practice].• Step 2. Pick your role (5 mins), between different experts and an interviewer.• Step 3. Prepare your role (5 mins). Experts and interviewers take a few minutes to prepare for the interview individually, transport themselves to the future, and step into the skin of their characters.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Step 4. Interview roleplay (30 mins). Interviewers interview the experts of the future practice using a list of specially designed questions as guidance. • Step 5. Visualize and summarize (30 mins); two outputs are created by the students: (1) Future newspaper article: jointly compose a short (appr. 200 words) newspaper article on something noteworthy that could happen related to [your practice] in your future scenario (with image, see more information below) and (2) A page from a museum catalog depicting something from [current year] that has become strange in your future (with image*). • Step 6. Present and reflect (20–40 mins). After the exercise, take time with the group to briefly present your outputs to each other, and to reflect on the experience under the supervision of your instructor / teacher.
Assessment	The exercise doesn't lend itself well for assessment but can be assessed based on written reflections by the students.
Size of Group / Adapted to	This exercise can be done with a variety of group sizes. The minimum number of participants for a roleplay session is 3 (1 enthusiastic and 1 skeptic experience expert, and 1 interviewer) and the maximum group size is 6 (having 2 of each). Multiple groups can perform the exercise in parallel. The exercise has been done with groups of 30–40 students.
Format	The exercise can be explained, executed, and reflected on within 2 hours, with a short break, but to have more time for reflection and breaks, 2.5 hours is preferred.
Level	Works with undergraduates, graduates, and professionals from all kinds of different disciplines; can also be multidisciplinary.
What you Need / Preparation	<p>Needed in preparation, or as a separate exercise, are a set of alternative future consumption practices to form the basis for the interview role-play. Some examples are provided below in the Activity Snapshot.</p> <p>You also need space for doing the exercise, where each group can work and interact. The exercise can also be done online, as described below.</p>

Activity snapshot

What makes a suitable practice for this exercise is that it is radically different from what is normal today in terms of societal structures, rhythms, norms, and/or values. The alternative future practices illustrated below are all relevant to 'sustainable consumption' as a topic and have proven to be fruitful starting points for the role-playing exercise. Since the main purpose of the exercise is not necessarily the alternative futures generated, but rather the experience of creatively generating them, these examples could be used as the starting point for the exercise in various contexts. Feel free to use them in your class.

The following examples were used in a workshop for Industrial Design students, both undergraduate and graduate levels, as part of their design project within the New Futures squad.

Living with no artificial lighting: a future in which homes are no longer equipped with artificial lighting and life after sundown is navigated using other senses and soundscapes.

Laptop sharing: a future in which each household (of average four members) is allowed one laptop, four smartphones, and no television (inspired by Milward-Hopkins et al., 2020).

Living with 15m² per person: a future in which living spaces in all Western countries are limited to 15m² per person (inspired by Milward-Hopkins et al., 2020).

Working a 20-hour week: a future in which the work week is halved, there is more free time, but shop opening times are also shorter, and the times for deliveries and services slow down.

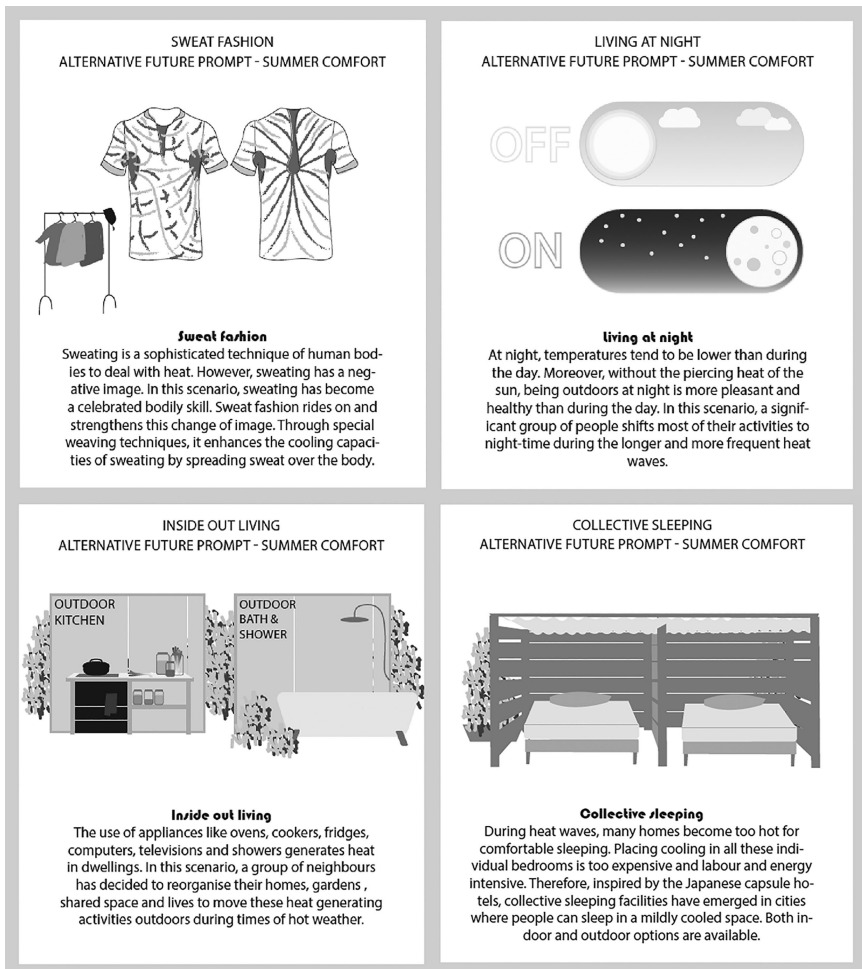


Figure 16.1 Alternative future prompts created by Lenneke Kuijer and Brigitte van der Lugt (TU Eindhoven) for summer comfort stakeholder workshop, June 2021

Source: Authors' own, Kuijer (2022).

These examples are suitable as a basis for the roleplay exercise because they imply a radically different way of living – in certain realms – and therefore trigger creativity and imagination on the level of everyday life. Anyone can relate based on their own experience without the exercise becoming too personal.

The illustrated examples below are based on a research project into the future of summer comfort in Dutch households (Kuijjer, 2021) (Figure 16.1).

A little bit more detail...

The method is structured into six main steps. The success of the exercise depends on having, at the onset, a suitable set of alternative consumption-related practices, ready in hand and as a starting point. Examples are given directly below in the Activity Snapshot.

Step 1. Check out your alternative future (5 mins). Read the description of your alternative future that is provided by your teacher, or translate an idea you generated earlier into terms that describe an alternative future consumption practice. The title of your alternative future is [your practice].

Step 2. Pick your role (5 mins). The exercise has three types of roles:

- Expert 1: an enthusiastic performer of [your practice]
- Expert 2: a skeptic performer of [your practice]
- Interviewer: a curious, critical outsider (journalist/ethnographer) who is unfamiliar with [your practice]

Each role should be picked at least once. It is ok to have up to two participants for each role in one group.

Step 3. Prepare your role (5 mins). Experts and interviewers take a few minutes to prepare for the interview individually. Transport yourselves to the future (e.g., 10, 30, 50 years ahead) and step into the skin of your character. Experts come up with a rough narrative around the future practice. It is ok, even creatively productive, if not all expert narratives match. Interviewers familiarize themselves with the questions listed below under Step 4.

Step 4. Interview roleplay (30 mins). Interviewers interview the experts of the future practice using the questions below as guidance. Try to get to the bottom of things with critical/curious follow-up questions, ask for as much detail as possible (remember to take notes), and involve all experts. Experts improvise as they go. *Have fun!*

The interview questions:

- Thank you for participating in this interview. I understand you are a performer of [practice]. Can you walk us through how you perform [practice]?
- What do you like or dislike about [practice]?
- Why did you become involved in [practice]? What do you tell others interested in joining [practice]?
- What did you have to learn and unlearn to become competent in [practice]? What helped you with this?
- What new things did you start to use since your performance of [practice]?

- How did [practice] change your life? And that of others?
- How do you now look back at how things were done in [present year]?
- How do you expect [practice] to develop in the coming years?

Step 5. Visualize and summarize (30 mins). Create two outputs:

- 1 Future newspaper article: jointly compose a short (approximately 200 words) **newspaper article** on something noteworthy that could happen related to [your practice] in your future scenario (with image★).
- 2 Create a **page from a museum catalog** depicting something from [current year] that has become strange in your future (with image★).

Divide tasks among the group members to speed up the process.

★ Use your browser's image search function and copy-paste to the board, or create your own using simple techniques or sketches.

Step 6. Present and reflect (20–40 mins). After the exercise, take time with the group to briefly present your outputs to each other, and to reflect on the experience under the supervision of your instructor/teacher. The following questions could help to guide this reflection process:

- How did you experience the exercise?
- Did it make you think differently about future everyday life?
- How was it different from other 'futuring' approaches you have experienced?
- What particular insights (if any) did the exercise generate?
- Would you use this technique or elements from it in other situations? Why (not)? How?

The duration of this process depends on the number of participants. Try to restrict the time spent on presenting the outputs to a few minutes per group. The main thing to discuss is the experience of the process.

The roleplay exercise based on the first set of scenarios helped to draw students out of their tunnel vision of the future home being a 'smart home' in which everyday life is more or less the same as today except for the addition of a bunch of connected devices. It also helps to take them out of their tendency to idealize this future. One, because they are facilitated to think about nitty-gritty details and the broader spatio-temporal contextualization of the scenario through the set of questions. And two, because of the critical perspectives brought in by the skeptic expert role.

The second set of scenarios was used in a roleplay workshop with various professional stakeholders from industry, academia, policy, and non-profit organizations. These included an architect, an HVAC innovation manager, a fashion designer, a climate policy advisor, a physiologist, a sleep expert, and a domestic shading technology trade organization representative. Within this group, the roleplay exercise opened up the imagined future space for summer comfort from a focus on artificial cooling to facilitate a business-as-usual lifestyle despite global warming, towards considering a wider range of lifestyle adaptations that are not necessarily dependent on energy-intensive cooling technologies.

What challenges and insights I can share

What I really love about this exercise is seeing the groups have fun while improvising in their roles. Fun is not just a positive side effect of the exercise that helps to keep the participants engaged and offers them a satisfactory experience. I believe it is also an inherent and essential element of the exercise; with the roleplay, the students are exploring and crossing the boundaries of what is currently considered normal and acceptable – this boundary is also prominent in humor. Their roles provide safe vehicles that help prevent the journey from becoming too personal.

While it takes some courage, and thus proper expectation management on the side of the teacher, in my experience, participants are usually very well capable of stepping into their assigned roles. In many cases, I see them surprise themselves with the level of imagination they are able to display. What often happens is that the participants assigned the role of enthusiastic performers are facilitated, through the improvised roleplay, to come up with unexpected advantages of the alternative future practice. People are quite used to and capable of justifying their preferred lifestyles and the exercise taps into this skill. The role of the skeptic experience expert nuances the scenario and helps to bring out unexpected risks and downsides of the alternative practice. The conversational format facilitated by the interviewer role allows for the enthusiastic expert to creatively counteract these downsides during the exercise. The newspaper article helps zoom out from the individual context towards change on a societal scale, and the museum catalog exercise helps to highlight what in this future scenario is different from today, and how objects can take different roles over time.

To perform the roleplay exercise, you don't need any specific materials, other than the instructions and a suitable set of alternative consumption practices. The exercise also works well in a virtual format using a video calling application with break-out options and a shared notes platform such as Miro. The duration of this process depends on the number of participants. Try to restrict the time spent on presenting the outputs to a few minutes per group. The main thing to discuss is the experience of the process.

For the online version, I prepare a Miro (or similar collaborative platform) board in which I make available the description of the steps (including the interview questions) and the alternative practice descriptions. I then copy-paste them for each group. The deliverables on the board make debriefing of the activity easier, because everyone can see each other's creations. A more active variant, possible when physically in the same space, is when experienced experts improvise in physically demonstrating to the interviewers how the practice is performed, using, for example, simple props of whatever is at hand. When focusing more on the lifestyle change aspect, the groups could be asked to deliver a narrative or storyboard regarding their future practice. For quality outputs, professional visualizers could be involved as the skill of making a clear and appealing storyboard is quite specific.

What context the example is being given in

The exercise is offered within the context of creating alternative futures. It rose out of an ambition to create futures that were different from today in dimensions other than technological ones. Looking over longer time scales shows that everyday life is subject to continuous change. Taking practices as a unit of analysis helps reveal how this change does not just involve technological change but also changes in embodied skills and know-how as well as changes in ideas of what is normal and desirable. However, when imagining futures, designers and policymakers find it much easier to think about technological change, than to think about different practices. The roleplay exercise was designed to help participants broaden their ‘unit of design’ from technologies to future practices.

I’m indebted to the many participants and collaborators who have contributed to the current version of the roleplay exercise. The method evolved from an improv acting method developed during my Ph.D. research (Kuijer et al., 2013). While initially designed for trained improv actors, it successfully ran with non-actors during the DEMAND Summer School, and a Practices, the Built Environment and Sustainability network workshop in 2014. In 2019, I teamed up with Dr. Roy Bendor (TU Delft) to offer a Design Futures module in the Urban Futures Studio Summer School at Utrecht University. The roleplay exercise became an integral part of this module, first running as a live exercise in 2019, and then taken online in 2020. The future newspaper article is based on an idea by Dr. Roy Bendor, and the museum catalog is strongly inspired by the work of Dr. Jesse Hoffmann. Most recently, when running the exercise as part of the New Futures squad of the Industrial Design program at TU Eindhoven in the fall of 2021, Dr. Holly Robbins inspired the addition of a fourth, optional role in the exercise, being a non-human agent (plant, animal, device, ghost, etc.). This again renders interesting new insights about possible futures.

→ Want to learn more about social practice theory? See Theory Box 13.1.

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