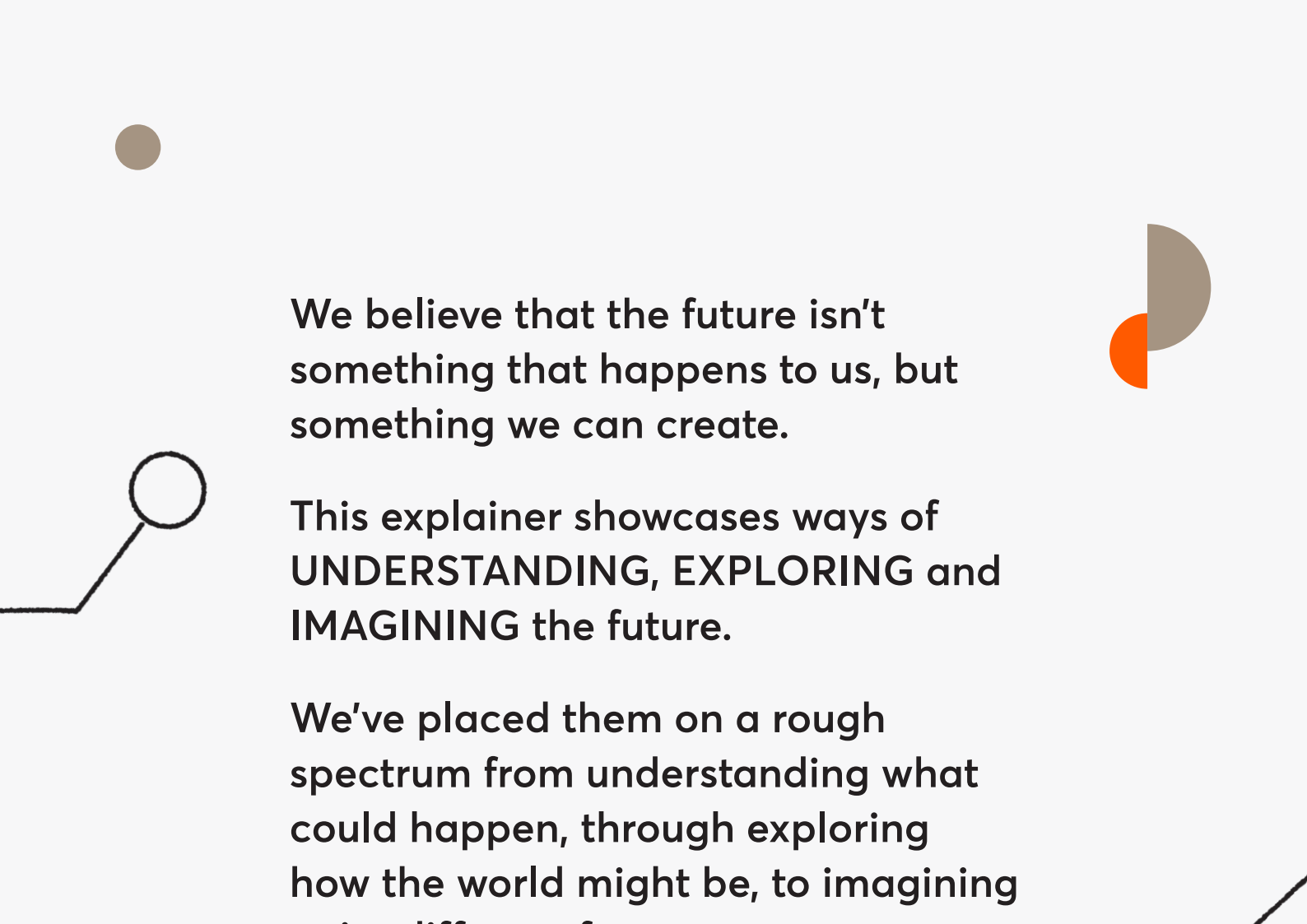


FUTURES EXPLAINER

# HOW TO THINK ABOUT THE FUTURE





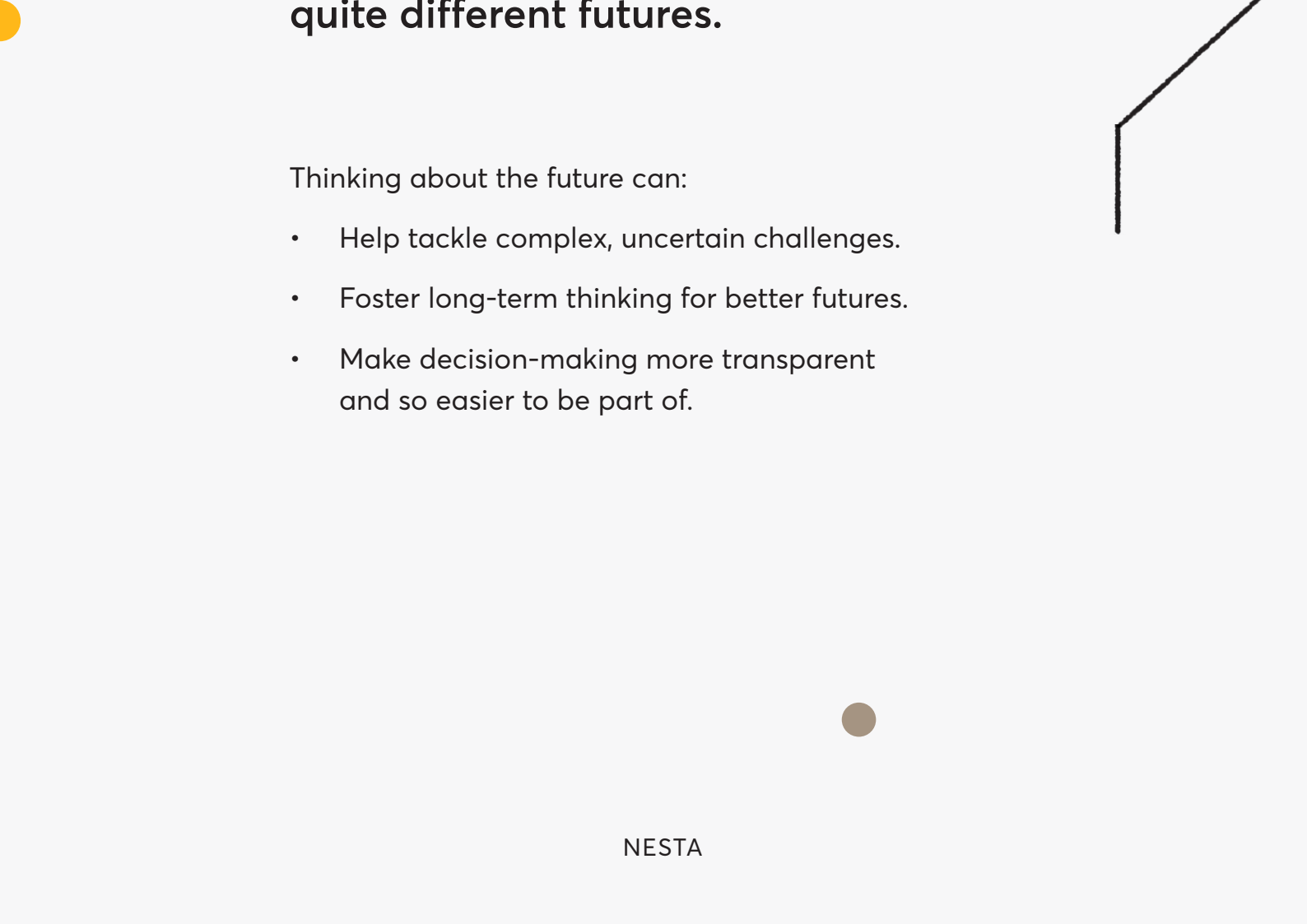


We believe that the future isn't something that happens to us, but something we can create.

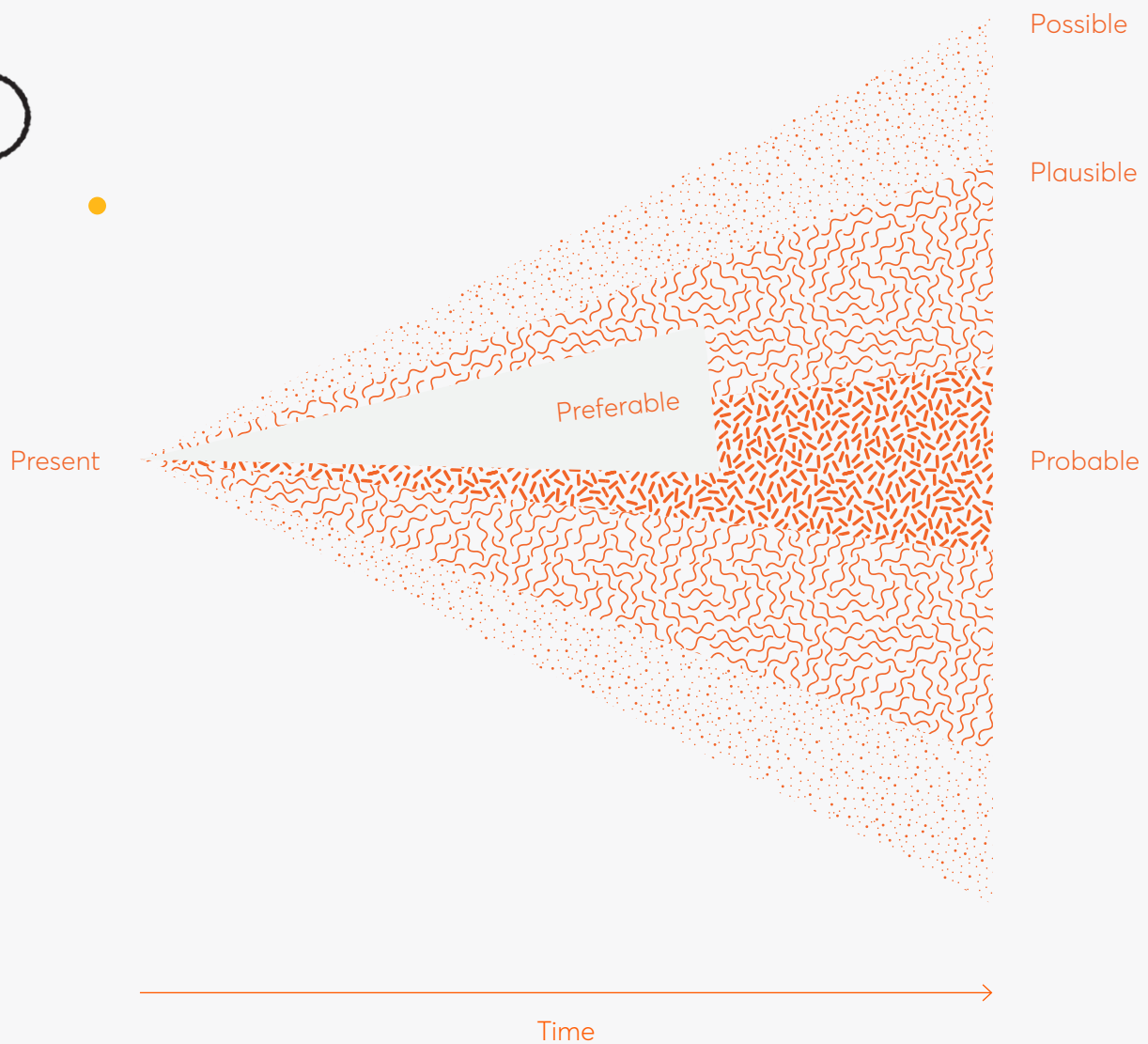
This explainer showcases ways of **UNDERSTANDING**, **EXPLORING** and **IMAGINING** the future.

We've placed them on a rough spectrum from understanding what could happen, through exploring how the world might be, to imagining quite different futures.

Thinking about the future can:

- Help tackle complex, uncertain challenges.
  - Foster long-term thinking for better futures.
  - Make decision-making more transparent and so easier to be part of.
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When we think about futures, we care not just about the probable or possible futures, but the preferable ones: the futures that help us imagine the world as a better place.

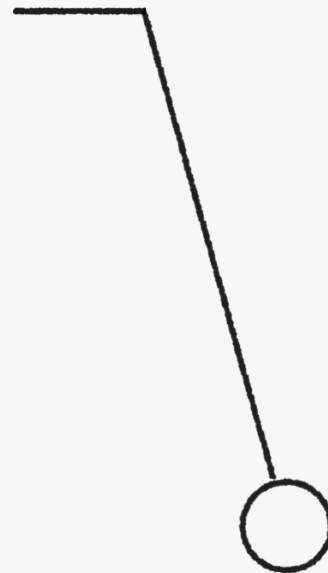
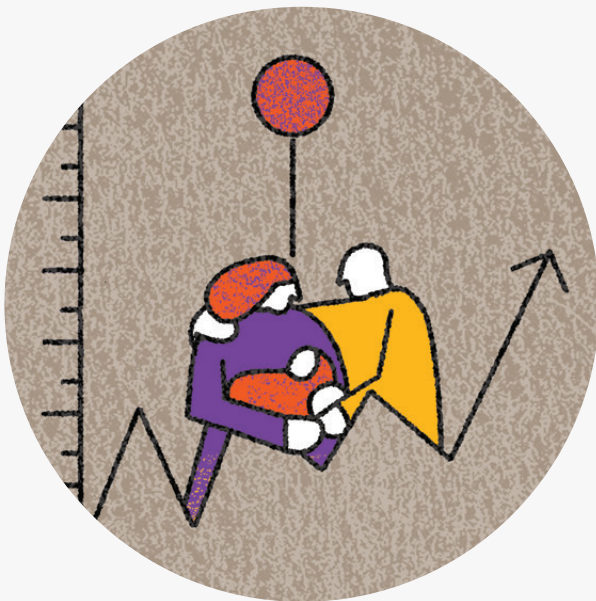


The Cone of Plausibility, inspired by Charles Taylor, 1988

# UNDERSTAND

## HORIZON-SCANNING

Horizon-scanning is used to identify early signs of change by systematically gathering and analysing information that provides insights about the future. It is regularly used by businesses and governments to develop future strategies. Singapore and the UK have used horizon-scanning to shape policy on topics such as automation and ageing.



### STRENGTHS

Horizon-scanning is easy to carry out, well established and demands less imagination.

Horizon-scanning includes:

- 🔍 literature reviews
- 🔍 weak signals analysis
- 🔍 bibliometrics
- 🔍 SWOT analysis
- 🔍 PESTLE or STEEP analysis

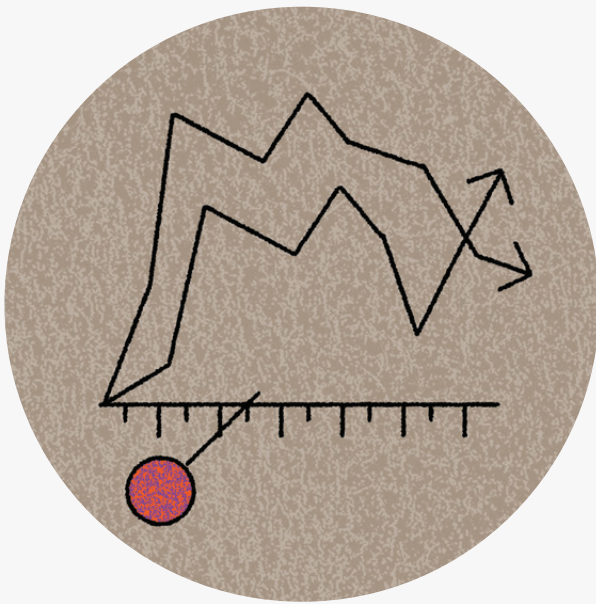


## STRENGTHS

Opinion-gathering is democratic, participatory, captures diverse views, and is better with more people.

Opinion-gathering includes:

- Q crowd-sourcing
- Q Delphi surveys
- Q citizen panels
- Q expert interviews
- Q polling



## OPINION-GATHERING

Opinion-gathering involves engaging people at scale to understand the future, often through digital technologies. It attempts to scan, sense and explore potential futures from a broad range of experiences and outlooks. Opinion-gathering has been used by the company Cognitive Edge to collect anecdotes from many people about the future of public services through an online platform. It's also been used by Latin American and Caribbean countries to shape information communication and technology policy in the late 2000s.

# EXPLORE

## QUANTITATIVE MODELLING

Quantitative models are mathematical or computational tools that can help us figure out the complicated future consequences of our decisions and help people understand the world when the consequences aren't obvious. The UK Department of Energy and Climate Change calculator uses a model to allow exploration of the future consequences of climate and energy choices.

### STRENGTHS

Quantitative modelling is good for understanding and predicting complex systems, and can reveal important counter-intuitive behaviour.

Quantitative modelling includes:

- 🔍 **spreadsheets**
- 🔍 **logic models**
- 🔍 **probabilistic models**
- 🔍 **game theory**
- 🔍 **machine learning**

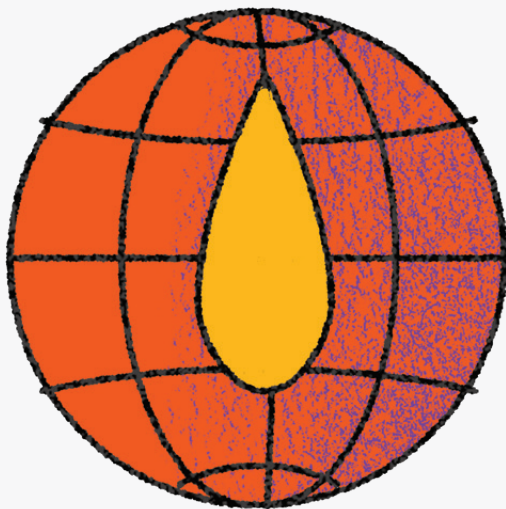


## STRENGTHS

Scenarios are well established, they consider whole systems, they often produce insights that are challenging or uncomfortable, and are often used in combination with other futures approaches.

Scenario techniques include:

- Q Shell matrix scenarios
- Q archetype scenarios
- Q morphological analysis
- Q field anomaly relaxation
- Q inductive scenarios

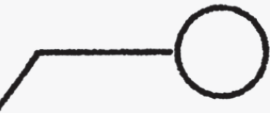


## SCENARIOS

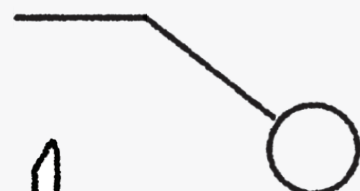

Scenarios provide snapshots of different futures. They can be used to build shared understanding, consider winners and losers and examine opportunities and threats. Scenarios have been used successfully in South Africa in the 1990s to help shape the country post Apartheid and by the company Shell to help navigate oil crises in the 1970s and 1980s.

# IMAGINE

## SIMULATION AND STORYTELLING



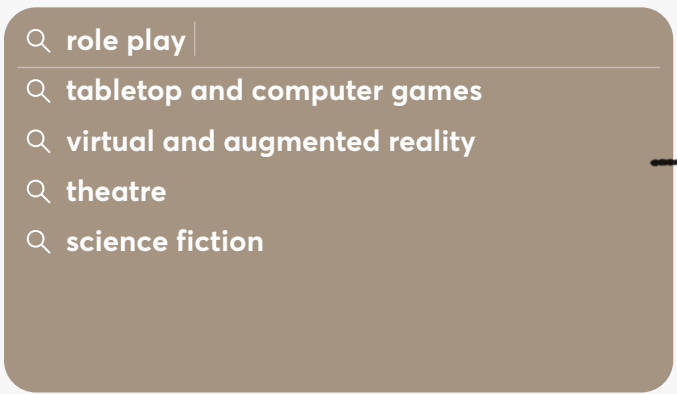
Simulation, experiential futures and storytelling allow people to place themselves in future worlds and experiment with new behaviours or values. These techniques use immersive physical or virtual environments and experiences. Examples include the use of theatre to explore Hawaii in 2050, the computer game *World Without Oil* that invited people to chronicle the imagined reality of a future oil crisis, and Nesta's own card game *Innovate!* that aims to improve policymaking. The 2018 film *Black Panther* is an example of using storytelling to evoke a sustainable, afrofuturist world.



### STRENGTHS

Simulation and storytelling provide immediate, tangible and visceral interactions with different futures, and can be less analytical when compared to approaches such as horizon-scanning or scenarios.

Simulation, experiential futures and storytelling include:

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- 🔍 role play
  - 🔍 tabletop and computer games
  - 🔍 virtual and augmented reality
  - 🔍 theatre
  - 🔍 science fiction



## STRENGTHS

Tangible objects make the imagined real, they're great for expanding horizons and possible futures, and they provoke and stimulate debate.

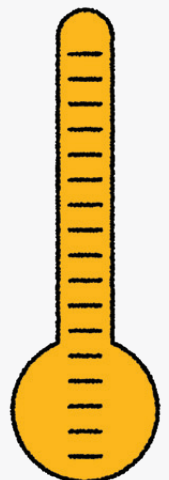
Speculative design includes:


- 🔍 **prototyping**
- 🔍 **social dreaming**
- 🔍 **art exhibitions**
- 🔍 **fashion**
- 🔍 **zines**
- 🔍 **design fiction**





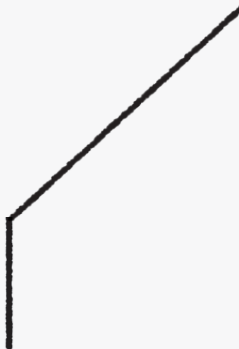

## SPECULATIVE DESIGN

Speculative design is a way to provoke thinking and debate around possible futures by creating tangible objects that dig into practical and symbolic issues. It has been used by design agency Superflux to explore how older people relate to smart objects in their home, and by artist Walter Pichler in 1967 to prototype a TV helmet (*Portable Living Room*), an early idea of what mobile phones might become.





## Things to remember when thinking about the future:

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- Futures is often less about predicting the future and more about exploring uncertainty.
  - Futures is plural as it often describes many possible futures, not just one.
  - Futures is as much a way of thinking about the world as a set of methods.
  - Start with the problem you want to solve and then select a suitable method.
  - Often the best way of imagining the future is in diverse groups, involving citizens not just experts.
  - To work well, futures requires senior buy-in, so you'll need to make the business case.
  - Ensure futures is integrated with other work, has a path to impact and has momentum.
  - Futures can generate uncomfortable, challenging insights — that's OK!
  - Futures methods can be used in combination with other innovation methods.
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Nesta has over 20 years of experience  
**UNDERSTANDING, EXPLORING**  
and **IMAGINING** as well as funding  
the ideas that build the future. We  
deliver futures work for partners across  
the globe, develop new methodologies  
like participatory futures and run  
FutureFest, a celebration of our power  
to shape the future.



