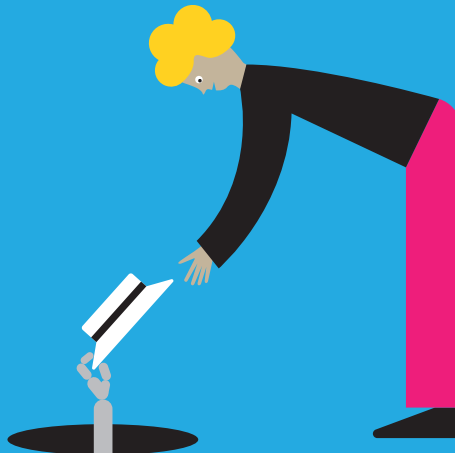a day in [y]our life
2040 Essay Contest

The Future of Today is Happening Tomorrow
Elizabeth Rembelska

A collective journey to the year 2040

During the spring semester of 2021, ETH Zurich's Strategic Foresight Hub launched an essay contest called "a day in [y]our life". The ETH community was invited to take a journey to the year 2040 and encouraged to describe a typical day in their imagined future. This booklet is the result of the initiative and contains the winning essay selected by the team of the Strategic Foresight Hub.

We look at the essay through three different lenses. The journey starts with the author's lens: the text submitted by Elizabeth Rembelska. We then put on an illustrator's lens and look at the story through the eyes of Niels Blaesi, who created three illustrations inspired by the story. Finally, we put on the Foresight lens: first we analyze the story using the STEEP Framework and then suggest a backcasting for selected aspects of the essay.

We invite you on this little journey and hope to give you playful insights into how Foresight can be used to inspire, reflect and think creatively.

Author's Lens   **Illustrator's Lens**   **Foresight Lens**

Author's Lens

The Essay

Zurich, April 24th 2040

It's another beautiful but hot April day. About 20 years ago, April was the beginning of spring with mild temperatures and nature slowly reawakening after winter. In 2040, summer is the only season of the year.

I am 36 years old and work at the University of Zurich. My role as an event coordinator gained importance after the COVID-19 pandemic ended because social events are the only opportunity to shake other people's hands. All other aspects of studying and working on campus are held online for the reasons of cost-efficiency, flexibility and reduction of CO_2.

If you cannot remember these old times when classes and examinations took place on campus, or you cannot even imagine this because you were born within the last two decades, visit the main building of ETH Zurich – it has transformed its library and a few classrooms into exhibitions with holograms which move, talk and behave like people from the pre-2020 era.

As an employee of UZH and a student of ETH, I can work and study from home, or I can use one of hundreds of booths located throughout the entire Zurich region: in the busy city center, at a quiet lakeside, facing the Zurich

Opera House or in an endless meadow with cows – different locations offering a variety of sources of inspiration.

Today I need the hectic spirit of Paradeplatz to inspire me, so I am choosing a booth there. The booths are made of glass and equipped with everything you need to be productive and feel good.

Travelling in Zurich has never been more convenient: Zurich is finally a non-smoking and advertisement-free city. Oh, and public transportation is free of charge!

The world in 2040 is a graphene-dominated one. Devices, clothing and almost everything we use every day are all based on graphene – even my Walkman, which is enjoying a second life and tremendous popularity. By the way, people who still have the first Walkman launched by Sony in the 20th century can sell it now and make a fortune. I should probably check my parents' attic…

Let's get back to the city again. There are certainly fewer vehicles than ever before – especially trucks, since Galaxus, Coop (yes, they still exist) and other retailers use the cargo sous terrain (CST) system, where goods are transported underground.

The way we do shopping has changed, too. On my way home later today, I will stop by at one of many interactive boards located literally everywhere. I will select the items I need for dinner that evening, place my finger with a built-in chip containing personal data on a sensor and … voilà! I've just paid and confirmed the address where goods need to be delivered. They may be next to my door before I arrive, delivered from the CST station to my home address by a robot.

Robots are very friendly. They are hard-working and therefore have very strong representatives lobbying for their rights. Some people are saying that we should not worry since rights for robots are something to deal with in the future. But the future of today is happening already tomorrow.

Illustrator's Lens

Foresight Lens I

STEEP Framework

What are the underlying assumptions of this story?

In what kind of a world do we find ourselves in this essay?

What are the assumptions made for the year 2040?

How is it different from the world we live in today?

Which assumptions are plausible? Which ones are not?
Which ones are desirable? Which ones are not?

Which ideas are surprising? And which ones are not?

Which ideas might not evolve as described in the story,
yet inspire us when thinking about what could be?

Where do we currently see trends heading in the direction of the story?

STEEP Analysis - A Foresight Method

STEEP analysis is a useful framework to apply in scanning work that considers the Social, Technological, Economic, Ecological/Environmental, and Political domains. Other similar frameworks incorporate considerations like Legal, Ethical and Demographic (STEEPLED) or Regulatory factors (STEER).[1]

What initially looks like a fun story can be analyzed using the STEEP framework. We examine the text in depth for underlying assumptions.

These assumptions are then categorized into social, technological, economic, environmental and/or political domains and serve as a springboard for discussions about possible future developments.

More often than not, assumptions can be assigned to more than just one domain. We live in a complex world where the domains are interconnected and influence each other.

In the following analysis, the assumptions have been assigned to one main domain as well as to others using color tags. Depending on your perspective, you might assign the assumptions to another main area or formulate them entirely differently. This analysis is not set in stone but rather serves as a starting point for a nuanced discussion.

[1] Foresight The Manual, p.21, 2014, UNDP Global Centre for Public Service Excellence

STEEP Analysis

S

Remote work in glass booths
`social` `technological`

Physical meetings only for social events
`social`

ETH main building is a museum
`political` `social`

Consumer behavior: anytime & anywhere
`economical` `social` `technological`

T

Underground transport system reduces traffic
`economical` `environmental` `social` `technological`

Implanted chip in fingertip as identity card and payment method
`political` `social` `technological`

Grocery delivery to your door
`economical` `technological`

Holograms as part of our daily life
`technological`

Ec

Graphene hype
`economical` `environmental`

Reduced mobility for cost-efficiency and CO2 reduction
`economical` `environmental` `political`

Public transport free of charge
`political` `social`

En

No more seasons, only summer
`environmental`

No more campus for CO2 reduction and flexibility
`environmental` `social`

P

Robots lobbying for their rights
`political`

Non-smoking and ad-free cities
`political` `social`

Foresight Lens II

Backcasting

How can we build a bridge from today to the described future?

What are the necessary changes for the described world in the essay to come true?

Trying to build one big bridge that explains and reconstructs everything can be pretty overwhelming. The STEEP analysis helps us to approach this task systematically. We can then build several small bridges, focusing on one of the changes described in the story at a time.

Where do you find it easy to build a bridge to the future in the essay?

Where is the foundation for a change already laid in the present?

Which changes seem like a big jump with no connection to the present?

Backcasting - A Foresight Method

Defines a desirable future and then works backwards to identify major events and decisions that generated the future, to allow organizations to consider what actions, policies and programs are needed today that will connect the future to the present.[2]

There is not just a single way to get from today to the future. There are many, depending on where you start and the assumptions you make along the way.

Building these bridges helps us to formulate specific future-relevant questions that we can then discuss with experts in the appropriate field.

This approach forces us to think step-by-step about all that is required for a change to occur. By thinking in small steps, we might encounter an inspiring idea that we would not have thought about otherwise.

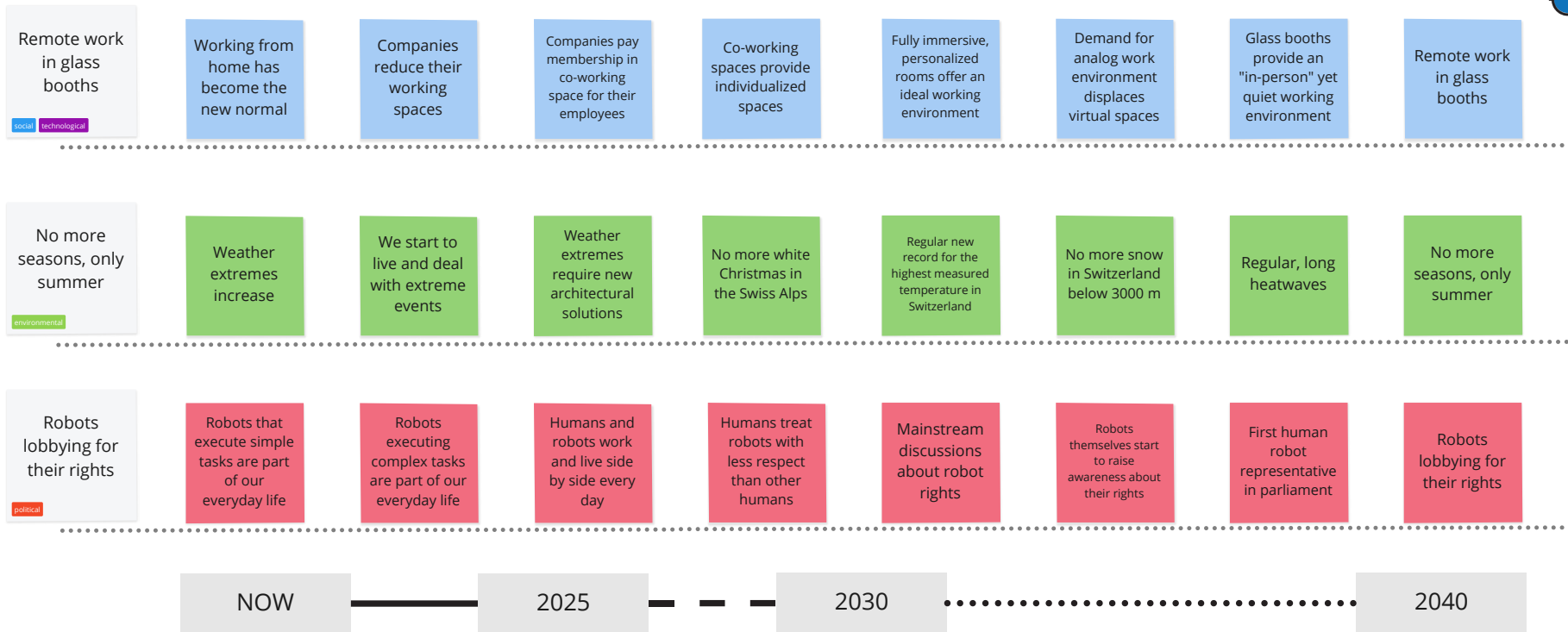Backcasting also enables us to estimate whether certain developments are plausible, and if we can already see trends pointing in that direction.
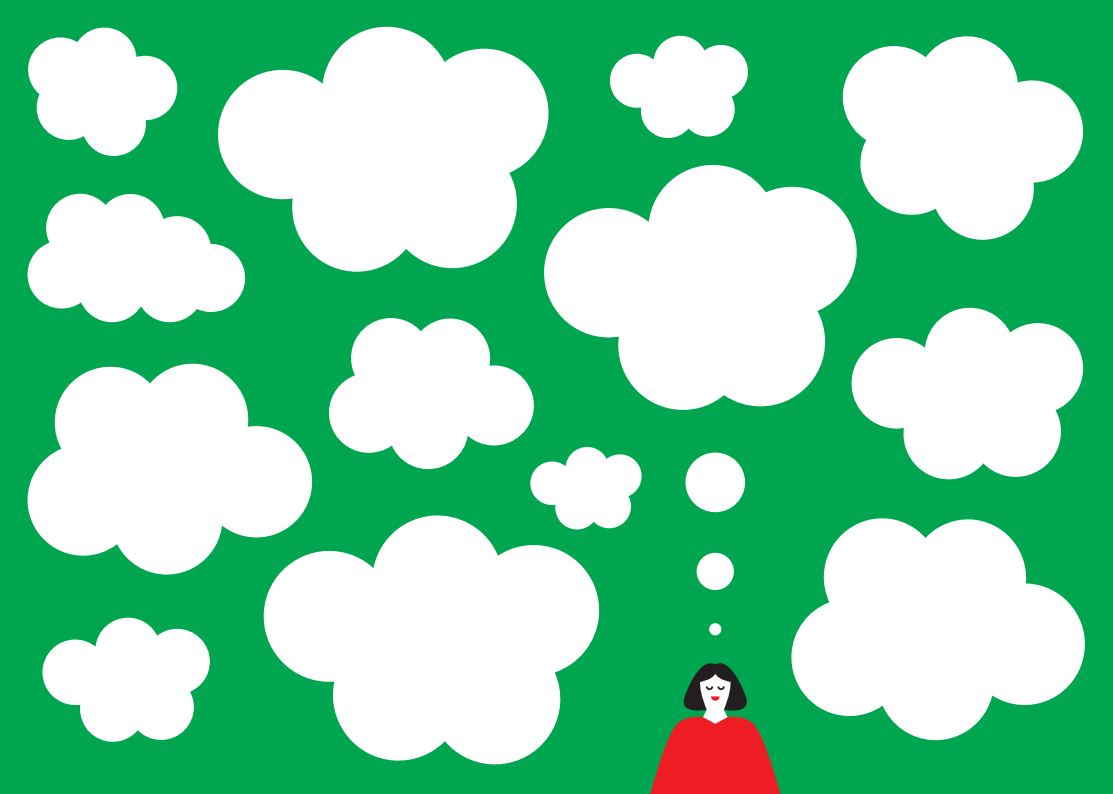
On the next page, we have done backcasting for three of the underlying assumptions in the text.

How would you bridge the story's other changes from the future back to the present?

[2] Foresight The Manual, p.15, 2014, UNDP Global Centre for Public Service Excellence

Backcasting

Remote work in glass booths
`social` `technological`

| Working from home has become the new normal | Companies reduce their working spaces | Companies pay membership in co-working space for their employees | Co-working spaces provide individualized spaces | Fully immersive, personalized rooms offer an ideal working environment | Demand for analog work environment displaces virtual spaces | Glass booths provide an "in-person" yet quiet working environment | Remote work in glass booths |

No more seasons, only summer
`environmental`

| Weather extremes increase | We start to live and deal with extreme events | Weather extremes require new architectural solutions | No more white Christmas in the Swiss Alps | Regular new record for the highest measured temperature in Switzerland | No more snow in Switzerland below 3000 m | Regular, long heatwaves | No more seasons, only summer |

Robots lobbying for their rights
`political`

| Robots that execute simple tasks are part of our everyday life | Robots executing complex tasks are part of our everyday life | Humans and robots work and live side by side every day | Humans treat robots with less respect than other humans | Mainstream discussions about robot rights | Robots themselves start to raise awareness about their rights | First human robot representative in parliament | Robots lobbying for their rights |

NOW — 2025 — 2030 2040

What is your vision of a day in the year 2040?

What about this story inspired you? Could you imagine living in the world that is described? What kind of world would you like to live in?

Travel to 2040!

Depending on your age, think back to a day 5, 10 or even 20 years ago. Where were you back then? What was your daily routine life like? How did you communicate with your friends? How long did a trip to New York take? Did you always carry your phone charger around with you? What would you find in your pocket? Did you read the news every hour?

What about today? What does your routine look like? What is in your pocket? How do you travel? Where do you go? What do you assume you can 'normally' do in your daily life? How likely is this going to change? What if it does?

Get in touch and share your vision with us or participate in the next essay contest organized by ETH Zurich's Strategic Foresight Hub.

Strategic Foresight

In times of increasingly rapid change, growing complexity, and critical uncertainty, responsible governance requires preparing for the unexpected. Strategic Foresight is required whenever there is a high degree of uncertainty surrounding changes to the relevant future context.

Foresight uses a range of methodologies, such as scanning the horizon for emerging changes, analysing megatrends and developing multiple scenarios, to reveal and discuss useful ideas about the future.[3]
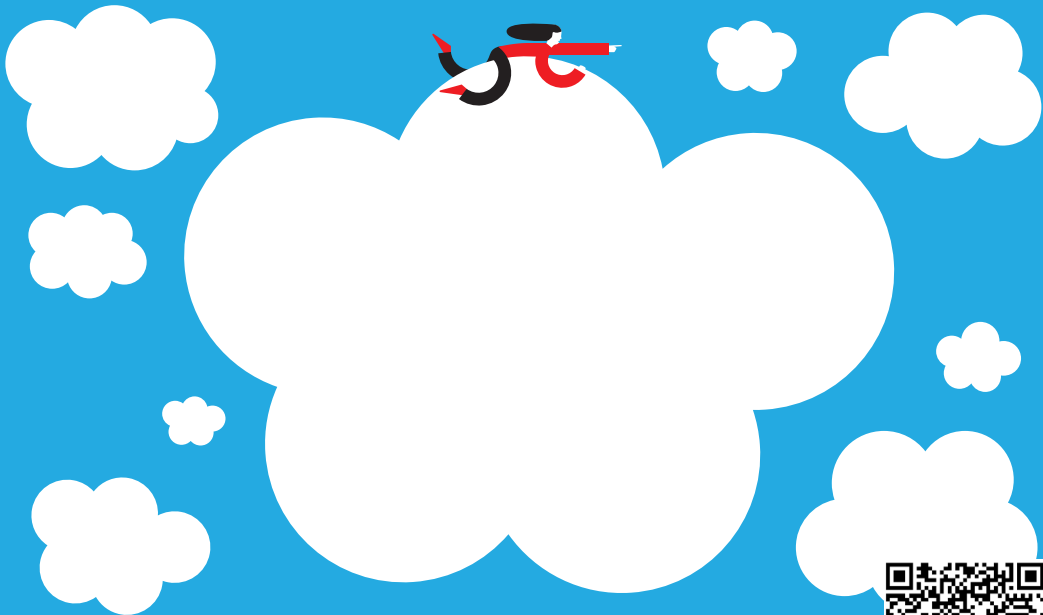
ETH Zurich's Strategic Foresight Hub

ETH Zurich has established the Strategic Foresight Hub based within the Office of the President to deep-dive into the intriguing territory of long-term trends and plausible futures. The Hub's core mission is to advance a deeper and more profound understanding of how the university, our society and the world at large could evolve in the future. The intent is to look beyond the obvious.

The Strategic Foresight Hub provides the space, guidance, tools and methodologies to all those interested in engaging with "what could be". The power of strategic foresight lies in its ability to engage a wide range of stakeholders in a creative and non-partisan manner to facilitate new, refreshing perspectives concerning future developments of relevance. The team helps others to reflect upon the implications that various future contexts might carry.

[3] https://www.oecd.org/strategic-foresight/whatisforesight/

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