

Futures of Democracy

Coordinators

Kiki Benzon, School of Cinematic Arts

Jeff Watson, School of Cinematic Arts

Summary

Democracies around the world are in crisis. Concentrated and energized by the alembic of social media, anti-democratic authoritarian movements in the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, and other leading democracies have reached levels of visibility and influence not seen since the years leading up to the Second World War. Perhaps owing to its eighteenth-century origins, western parliamentary democracy has seemingly been caught flat-footed in the face of a transnational and algorithmically supercharged twenty-first century neofascism. Given the centrality of democratic political participation to the maintenance of civil society, the protection and expansion of human rights, the redress of historical inequities, and the confrontation of global-scale crises such as climate change, it is the responsibility of those of us who are able to restore, renew, and "harden" democracy in the face of the socially atomizing technologies and borderless oligarchies that underwrite its present malaise. But what are the fixes we need? How can we shift the direction of states rendered nearly rudderless by decades of "starve the beast" austerity--and how can we do it *quickly*? What are the first steps and the first milestones of such a process? What lessons from the past might be drawn upon as we envision more democratic futures? Can a more democratic future be arrived at without a catastrophic collapse to galvanize action? Who will lead--and how?

To address these questions, the Futures of Democracy Project will engage in a yearlong interdisciplinary research collaboratory culminating in a public event and outreach process designed and run by collaboratory members. Drawing on expertise gained from designing participatory imagination projects such as USC's own educational collaborative production game, *Reality Ends Here* (2012-present); interdisciplinary speculative design events such as *The Science of Fiction* (2014) and *1-888-FUTURES* (2015); and portable futures foresight games such as *The Thing From the Future* (2014) and *FutureSchool* (2016), project leaders Kiki Benzon and Jeff Watson will guide collaboratory members through the polymathic process of conceiving, designing, and deploying a large-scale transmedia creativity and imagination experience to engage the USC community, selected visionaries from arts and industry, and the public at large in envisioning futures wherein



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democratic governance is resilient and expansive, and where authoritarian anti-democratic movements are returned to the dustbin of history where they belong.

In order to design a participatory imagination activity of this sort, collaboratory members will begin with historical research on pro-democracy movements, phase-shifts in governance linked to technological transformation, the rise (and defeat) of fascism and authoritarianism in a range of contexts, the role of play in political transformation, and instances of pro-democracy institutional programming that directly engage with matters of the imagination. This research will populate the initial entries in a public-facing digital archive/website that will expand as the Futures of Democracy project continues to constitute the interactive hub for the project's culminating event.

Building on the research artifacts discovered through research at the Libraries and elsewhere, students will next conceptualize, design, and test a series of miniature "imagination game" prototypes tackling relevant themes. These mini-games will have as their primary play activity the production of creative ideas relevant to the strengthening and expansion of existing democratic institutions--and to the creation of new speculative institutions. Drawing on the expertise of the facilitators and special guests, collaboratory students will develop and iterate playable prototypes, finishing them to a high level of polish using the technologies available at the Ahmanson Lab.

The culminating event of the Futures of Democracy project will invite students and others to participate in a series of hands-on imagination activities involving the creation of stories, media objects, and speculative design artifacts probing the future for its most democratic possibilities. These activities will be designed and run by members of the collaboratory, who will also document the creative output of the event on the project's hub website. Additionally, collaboratory members will design and deploy social media outreach activities that will engage the broader public in the conversation. Following the event, the archive will be maintained online and condensed into a book that will be made available as a .pdf and hardcopy via print on demand services. Additionally, where possible, imagination games designed by collaboratory members will be made available to the wider public, so as to foster the continued consideration of democracy's futures.

Proposed Schedule

The collaboratory will meet for two hours every two weeks over the course of the Fall 2018 and Spring 2019 semesters; meeting times will be Wednesday evenings, 7-9pm. Applicants should be prepared to dedicate an additional 4-6 hours per week on research and development related to the collaboratory.



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2018

September - Introduction to imagination game design; historical research on democracy

October - Imagination game prototyping; Web archive construction

November - Final mini-games complete

2019

January - Culminating event PR and planning

February - Event activity prototyping

March - Event design and material production

April - Public outreach and PR campaigning

May - Culminating event: Futures of Democracy

Desired skills

This collaboratory seeks students with a range of skills and specific competencies. The ideal candidate for this collaboratory should be able to bring at least one of the following skill-sets to the project:

- Graphic design and layout (Photoshop, Illustrator, etc)
- Copy writing and marketing strategy
- Social media strategy
- Video production
- Political organizing and activism
- Game design (digital and/or analog)
- Storytelling/narrative
- Materials fabrication (3D printing, online services)
- App development (iOS or Android)
- Education and curriculum design



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