We teach the future
as we do the past.

The Thing From The Future

Stuart Candy and Jeff Watson
Situation Lab
OCAD University
Toronto, Canada

Stuart Candy is professor in Strategic Foresight and Innovation at The Ontario College of Art and Design University (OCAD U). Jeff Watson is Assistant Professor of Interactive Media and Games at the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts. The two run the Situation Lab, a design research laboratory.

The Thing From The Future is a card game with a deck of 108 cards[1] playable by individuals or teams of two to six people, with four people the optimal. Larger settings use a facilitator to coordinate play among analogous groups, one deck per group.

"The object of the game is to come up with the most entertaining and thought-provoking descriptions of hypothetical objects from different near-, medium-, and long-term futures. Each round, players collectively generate a creative prompt by playing a card game. This prompt outlines the kind of future that the thing-to-be-imagined comes from, specifies what part of society or culture it belongs to, describes the type of object that it is, and suggests an emotional reaction that it might spark in an observer from the present. Players must then each write a short description[2] of an object that fits the constraints of the prompt. These descriptions are then read aloud (without attribution), and players vote on which description they find the most interesting, provocative, or funny. The winner of each round keeps the cards put into play for that round, and whoever has the most cards when the game ends is declared the overall winner."[3]

---

1   As of April 2016, decks cost USD $40 each, plus shipping. A free "Print-and-Play edition" is also available.
2   Descriptions may include drawings/graphics and prototype mockups.
3   http://situationlab.org/projects/the-thing-from-the-future/

Arc, Terrain, Object, and Mood are the four cards. Arc sets the overall future paradigm theme (Grow, Collapse, Discipline, Transform). Terrain identifies contexts, places and topic areas where the future thing might be located. Object provides a common shape or type. Mood establishes the emotions evoked in the present observer of the future object. The multiple options within the four categories allow more than 3.7 million prompts, not counting Wildcards.

A sample of drawn cards in a hand and the subsequent alternative future:

EXAMPLE PROMPT

ARC
GROW
30 YEARS FROM NOW

TERRAIN
EDUCATION
SECURITY
TERRAIN

OBJECT
POSTCARD
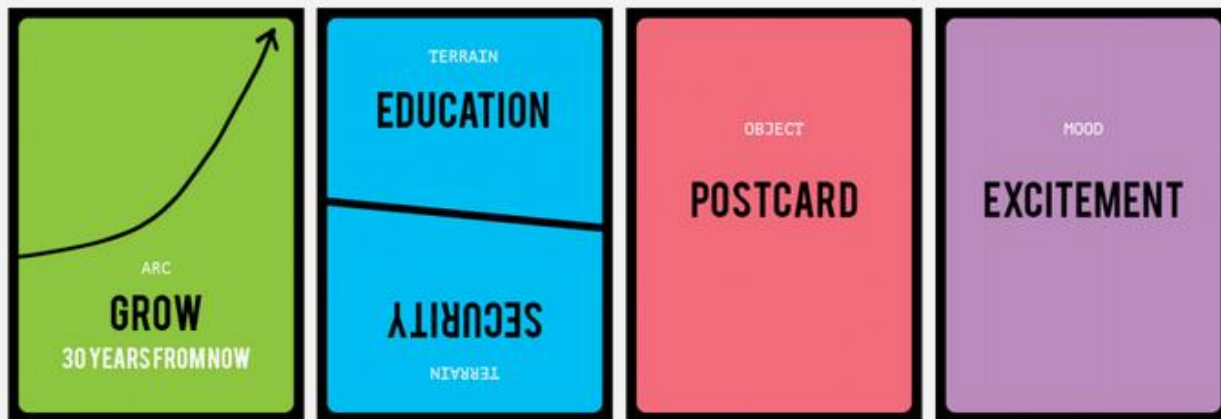
MOOD
EXCITEMENT

- Arc = "Grow, 30 years from now"
- Terrain = Education
- Object = Postcard
- Mood = Excitement

The card deck is also adaptable. For example, the Situation Lab has created extension sets or "Hackpacks" that customize the game to specific audiences.