Experimental Futures: An Approach to Humanities Scholarship for the 21st Century

The future is coming. And it will be shaped by the choices we make individually and collectively about major challenges like climate change, algorithmic bias, and political polarization. Yet when we think about the future at all, we tend to think of it as remote, unalterable, or someone else’s problem. How can we foster a sense of agency and responsibility for the future?

This talk explores the idea of experimental futures: a theoretical foundation and a set of methods that combines approaches from the humanities and social sciences to define a new form of scholarly practice for the 21st century. Experimental futures combines the critical framing, close reading and attention to context that defines traditional humanities scholarship with rapid prototyping, collaborative ideation and broad public engagement. This hybrid approach draws on speculative design, improvisational theatre, science fiction, and other fields to create inclusive, inviting, and co-creative visions of the future. I will offer examples of these techniques at work in my research and teaching at the intersection of contemporary culture, emerging technologies, and 21st century storytelling. Experimental futures is a vital form of imaginative practice, a way of building our capacity to anticipate social and technological change that will only become more important as we navigate the increasingly complex and interdependent world of tomorrow.

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Ed Finn is the founding director of the Center for Science and the Imagination at Arizona State University where he is an associate professor in the School of Arts, Media and Engineering and the Department of English. He also serves as the academic director of Future Tense, a partnership between ASU, New America and Slate Magazine, and a co-director of Emerge, an annual festival of art, ideas and the future. Ed’s research and teaching explore digital narratives, creative collaboration, and the intersection of the humanities, arts and sciences. He is the author of What Algorithms Want: Imagination in the Age of Computing (MIT Press, spring 2017) and co-editor of Frankenstein: Annotated for Scientists, Engineers and Creators of All Kinds (MIT Press, spring 2017) and Hieroglyph: Stories and Visions for a Better Future (William Morrow, 2014). He completed his PhD in English and American Literature at Stanford University in 2011 and his bachelor’s degree at Princeton University in 2002. Before graduate school, Ed worked as a journalist at Time, Slate, and Popular Science.