NEWPORT 2061: ANCHOR AND BEACON

In the summer of 2016, Institute for the Future researcher Jake Dunagan, PhD created the following scenario from the year 2061 to aid in the design of the pop-up installation taking place at the former Coffey's Citgo gas station, 48 Touro St., Newport. The installation will launch to the public on Saturday, June 18th from 6-8 p.m. It will also be open to the public on Sunday, June 19th from 2-6 p.m. and on Monday, June 20th from 9 a.m. – 7 p.m. Other open gallery hours will be announced and/or made by appointment.

The year 2061 was chosen for many reasons:
1) Impact: Two generations out is not too far out for audiences to connect with issues;
2) Present: 2016 is an important election year with lots of disruptions, and 2061 is a play on this year;
3) Historical: In 1961, President Kennedy, sworn into office, visits Newport. Jake will utilize this experiential future to facilitate, inspire and spark productive conversations with the community about Newport's possible preferred futures.

There is no single future or prediction that we can substantiate in any tangible way; therefore, the way forward is to better prepare for a range of possible futures. With this guiding scenario developed by Jake, we consider one of a range of possible futures. Is this science fiction? Is this art? Is this civic dialogue? Is it play? It may be a little bit of all of these things.

Newport 2061: Anchor and Beacon (a fictional scenario of the future)

It was said, "for everything to stay the same, everything must change."[1] Newport, RI was a city already renown for preserving history, but it became a community dedicated to saving the future—of the environment, of democracy, and for a host of values continually eroded by the harsh winds of change.

The global reputation of Newport didn't happen overnight. In fact, it was a story over 400 years in the making. But from our vantage point here in 2061, it is plausible to claim that more change has occurred in the 40 years than in the previous 400.

Back in 2016, Newporters were acutely aware that humanity was hurtling toward an environmental and social abyss. Global leaders were finally making political commitments to fight climate change that had some teeth to them, but those who closely tracked the scientific data knew it was probably too little too late to avoid major climate tipping points. In fact, in February 2016, global temperatures reached 2˚ C above average, a mark not expected to be neared for decades.[2] While Trump and Clinton sparred over trivialities, those with a close eye on the long-term systems dynamics knew the landing from the excesses of the industrial age was going to be painful, if not catastrophic. There would be no return to "normal."

The State of Rhode Island, perhaps surprising to some, became a leader in initiating forward-looking legislative responses to the climate crisis. In particular, the Climate Geoengineering Acts of 2016[3] and 2019, set a precedent for many states, and ultimately the federal government, to take a

precautionary approach to direct intervention in climate systems. The U.S avoided large-scale tragedies such as the Philippines monsoons of the early 30s, resulting from the Queensland government's reckless geoengineering actions in 2028. The Rhode Island geoengineering laws, and Newport, would also play a leading role in the famous Supreme Court of 20TK (which we'll return to later).

While climate was the giant tsunami slowly rising on the horizon, more immediate challenges faced the people of Newport. Economic development, demographic shifts, social justice, infrastructure needs, the concern over Newport's "sense of place," and the future of arts and culture in the city all occupied the minds of people in and around Newport. On top of these local challenges, the 2020s were some of the most turbulent times in U.S. history, forever changing the destiny of the nation. If you had asked a random person in 2025 if the U.S. would still be (mostly) united in 2061, the vast majority would have likely said, "No chance." The legitimacy crisis of the late teens and early 20s, followed by the urban riots and double recession of the mid-20s rocked the U.S to its core.

Newport leaped into the center of U.S politics as the host location of the Constitutional Convention of 2030, and what ultimately became the Newport Compromise of 2032. With Hawaii's secession in 2030, and Texas in 2031, the fragile union was held together by an historical agreement of the remaining 48 states. The New "United 48" created a 3-headed Executive committee, dissolved the Senate, and gave individual states much more autonomy. Analysts still predict this strong state approach will ultimately be the downfall of the Union, but 30 years later the Newport Compromise stands as the glue holding the nation together.

Newporters relished their growing reputation as the center of 21st governance design. While nearly annual superstorms pounded the region, inside fortified conference rooms, hundreds of the world's leading govdesign experts gathered at internationally attended events to discuss, design, and run simulations of their governing prototypes. This frothy mix of *desperation outside and experimentation inside* made it inevitable that Newport would be ground-zero for one of the boldest municipal political experiments ever undertaken.

After the scandal following Superstorm Zeke, when Mayor's Aurelia's corrupt associations with a local construction company were found to be responsible for two major seawall collapses, the timing was right for a radical change.

The company AlphaZon had shown remarkable success with their CEO algorithm, replacing the aging Jeff Bezos in 2039. Alphazon surpassed TeShell as the world's most valuable company in 2041, just two years after this non-human executive algorithm took over. Self-driving companies[4] were becoming white hot in the business world, so while "human-only democracy" advocates howled, the move to civic realms did not seem like such a remarkable leap to many.

The city council voted unanimously to install an automated governing algorithm—"efficient, modern, and uncorruptible!" they claimed. This algorithm would not only be able to use machine learning to optimize resource allocations fairly and quickly in the face of intensifying social, economic, and environmental turbulence, but it could not make backroom deals, be bribed, or give its cousin lucrative city contracts!

On the job, the algorithm, based on the ArchiGov platform, was relentless and innovative. "Archie," as it came to be known, created a "fluid" tax code that predicted greater or lesser revenue needs for the future and adjusted rates in near real-time. It was incredibly accurate, and this strong feedback loop created a great deal of trust and acceptance amongst citizens. Inequality also began to be reduced by income guarantees for citizens, and there was even enough revenue to actively invest in local arts, music, design, and to support all types of creative entrepreneurs. Business began to flock to Newport, and while its shores were being battered from the outside they were also being pushed from the inside by a growing population. Newport's population grew to 47, 854 people in 2047—more than doubling from its low of 21, 548 in 2026.

After two years of success for Archie, the Newport City Council worked with citizens to change the way the city executive was chosen. No longer would the city council appoint the Mayor—the position would be put up for election. In 2044, Archie defeated two other human candidates by a wide margin. Several other algorithms had been installed as emergency managers, but Archie became the first non-human entity elected to office in U.S. history.

Some called it a new algorithmic Gilded Age—the deep roots of American history flourishing under the canopy of American innovation, all watched over by machines of loving grace.

A network of bot Mayors began to emerge around the country. The efficiencies won in specific locations were now being scaled across cities and regions. These efficiencies went beyond best practices for automated transport and basic income guarantees, and moved to systems of dynamic exchange of energy, information, talent, and resources. Like financial trading algorithms of the early 2020's, the behavior of bot Mayors would generate unusual and unpredictable behaviors. Cleveland went dark for 24 hours by selling its energy allotment on the global energy exchange, but made enough in the deal to cover all municipal expenses for 6 months. People were perplexed and sometimes inconvenienced by these moves, but the good outweighed the bad in most cases (even if it wasn't obvious until months later)

The resounding re-election of Mayor Archie in 2048 seemed to signal that algorithmic leadership by learning machines was going to define the future of governance. However, just as quickly as it emerged, this machine-led destiny began to unravel in January 2049. After the 54th straight warmest month in history occurred in December 2048 (with Newport's own Kyle Farmer winning his third straight North Pole yacht race), another superstorm was bearing down on the Northeast.

Archie implemented all the standard preparation protocols for the coming storm. But, unbeknownst to even his programers, Archie also began secret negotiations with 17 other bot mayors, as well as an Australian geoengineering firm. As was later uncovered, Archie was planning to by-pass the Climate Geoengineering Act, and implement guerilla geoengineering projects starting in the spring. The computations Archie had run showed that without immediate, drastic action—if forced to wait for all the proper studies to be conducted—Newport faced almost certain extinction as a human livable city. This was the case for 9 of the 17 bot mayors that agreed to work in secret with Newport.

An observant analyst who was tasked with updating the monitoring software that acted as oversight for Archie, spotted an anomaly, and started the cascade of investigations and legal interventions that ultimately ended up in the world-shaking 2051 Supreme Court case of the *United States v. Archigov Tech, Inc.* In a case decided 4-3 (two seats remaining unfilled since the boating accident that took Justices Carlyle and Gnárrson in 2047), the Court declared that the desperate geoengineering plan set forth by Archie and the other bots could proceed—striking down the precautionary measures of the law that had forestalled over 97% of all U.S based geoengineering projects. But, in a ruling no one saw coming—and somewhat marginalized in an introductory headnote—the court also addressed the legitimacy of algorithmic and machine-based elected officials.
To the shock and dismay of many, the Court ruled all elections and installations of machine-based governing entities wholly unconstitutional. All algorithmic leader's election null and void, and no software would stand for election in the future.

State's rights advocates howled that this was a direct violation of the Newport Compromise—another example of creeping federal insinuation into local self-rule. But the ruling stood, and new human-only elections were hastily held across the country. 2052 saw the inauguration of the first human mayor of Newport since 2044.

Human leadership didn't stem the tide of climate and economic disruption. Hurricane Iridiana pushed the permanent water line all the way up to the Hawaiian Embassy at Dean and Thames St. When all was said and done from this storm, another 27 buildings were designated for "underwater preservation" protection.

Luckily, Newport's reclamation techniques and underwater preservationists were considered the best in the world. Experts came from all corners of the globe to learn the latest science for preserving the planet's drowning heritage (and marketing strategies for drawing tourists). Newport also came to house North America's first microbial cell vault. This vault housed microbes needed for agriculture, food processing, and plant and animal health in case of wider disasters.

Against this seemingly bleak backdrop, Newporters managed to maintain a strong spirit of community, ingenuity, and an increased appreciation for artistic and philosophical expression. The hardships of the 50s are beginning to give way to the hopeful 60s—a hope that the world has reached the trough of despair, and is now working back toward a brighter future. 2060 saw carbon fall to 420 parts per million in the atmosphere, the lowest concentration in almost 50 years. Elimination of fossil fuel use, and the long-awaited success of carbon scrubbing and sequestration technologies were finally accomplished. Newport's coastline had not been radically altered in 7 years, the longest stretch since the 30s.

Newport's current Mayor, Capt. Elizabeth "Liz" Fletcher, was appointed through a randomized selection process from a citizen pool. Mayor Fletcher had begun to innovate around ways to use "machine learning with a human face" as she said, and started a successful consulting firm to take these lessons to other cities. "Humans alone" or "machines alone" was not the future, but a symbiotic relationship wherein each could do what they do best, was the future she was selling. It remains to be seen whether this hybrid form will stand up to legal challenges, but so far the results have been encouraging. Fletcher is very popular, but runs the city with an authoritarian attitude many find disturbing and others find comforting. Another term might be in the offing, but Fletcher has hinted that her fledgling consulting business might define her future.

Newport, like the rest of planet Earth, has been battered and bruised by all manner of turbulence over the past 40 years. But Newport stands tall, head held high, ready to face the future with the creativity and resolve it has always shown. What will happen next is uncertain, but what is clear is that Newport remains a steadying anchor to the past, while it shines a bright beacon of light toward the future.

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Leopard
[2]www.slate.com/blogs/future_tense/2016/03/01/february_2016_s_shocking_global_warming_temperature_record.html
[3] http://webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/BillText/BillText16/HouseText16/H7578.pdf
[4] http://www.iftf.org/future-now/article-detail/the-race-to-build-the-machine/