

The future is a project to
RECOLOR
the world

**SYSTEMS MYTHOLOGY
TOOLKIT**

10YF
2014



INSTITUTE FOR THE FUTURE
www.iftf.org | SR-1675C



A DECADE OF DISRUPTION

Over the next decades, our global society will face **continual disruption at massive scales**. Disruption of the way we deliver goods and manage information, but also of the centuries-old institutions that define our society: education, health, work, government. As we pull the stuffing out of these systems and replace it with something else—pull learning out of schools and put it in the cloud, or pull diagnostics out of the doctor’s office and put them into consumer devices—we’re not always changing what these systems **do**, but we’re certainly changing what they **mean** to us, how they fit into our personal and shared narratives of what the world is, and how our society works.

We’re also building new systems—such as global networks and autonomous drone fleets—that have never existed before. We don’t have centuries of shared culture to tell us how these things fit into our lives. We need new stories, new mythologies, to address these transformations in the bedrock of our society. And we need new design tools for making sense of a rapidly changing world.

Systems Mythology was developed to address this gap.

WHAT IS SYSTEMS MYTHOLOGY?

Systems Mythology uses a palette of four colors—**blue**, **red**, **green**, and **purple**—to describe four fundamental archetypes of meaning.

These archetypes have weight to them. An organization or process with blue assumptions will naturally produce blue structures and blue interfaces. Green design invites green activities, and the symbols of red let you know that the goals of your immediate environment are red. The language of Systems Mythology is intuitive: the way a system feels when you interact with it tells you a lot about its worldview and purpose.

We cannot build anything without communicating some kind of meaning; this toolkit is designed to help you understand what meaning you're communicating. It can provide insights into how your system will be perceived and used, whether it's an organization, a product, an experience, or a platform. It offers a human-centered feedback process that will help you intuit when a system is balanced, translate ideas between different teams, and understand the limits of your own perspective.

WHY “SYSTEMS MYTHOLOGY”?

Systems Mythology borrows language from the feedback loops and flows of **Systems Thinking**. This emerging science describes the complex relationships of interconnected systems and provides tools for generalizing the behavior of a system based on its structure.

It also borrows from the language of **mythology**, from the symbols and rituals that humans have always used to communicate our experience and to build shared meaning. Mythology is the grand narrative of a culture, the shared stories and assumptions that make a society coherent.

Straddling both of these worlds, Systems Mythology is interested in how the **nature of our systems** (everything from our infrastructure and institutions to our products and platforms) dramatically influences the **mythologies of our society** (the stories we tell ourselves about how the world works and who we are in relationship to it). By holding both perspectives, it reveals when and how our systems are imbalanced, and provides insight into what design or structural decisions will help our projects realize their true potential.

HOW TO USE THIS TOOLKIT

These cards can be used with many different activities, but the first step is to calibrate yourself to the archetypes. Read the four suits in order, paying attention to the implications of each color. Then visit iftf.org/systemsmythology to provoke deeper insights with in-depth exercises.

Each suit is divided into six design categories:

Interactions are user interfaces and engagement strategies. The color of an interaction tells you the values and logic of that system.

Environments are human-scale systems. An environment's archetype will prompt its inhabitants to explore, relax, achieve a goal, or prepare for battle.

Symbols tell you what kind of a system you're in, and what you're meant to do there.

Design is how your system presents itself to the world. It's the branding and the furniture. The color of a design tells you the goals of that system.

Perspectives often vary between people with different roles. These cards can help translate ideas from engineering to sales to customers.

Voice is the way a system speaks. How ideas are communicated tells you everything about the nature of the system that produced them.

SYSTEMS MYTHOLOGY TOOLKIT

10YF
2014



INSTITUTE FOR THE FUTURE
www.iftf.org | SR-1675C



BLUE SYSTEMS MYTHOLOGY

IOYF
2014



INSTITUTE FOR THE FUTURE
www.iftf.org | SR-1675C



BLUE

The blue archetype values structure, logic, and objectivity.

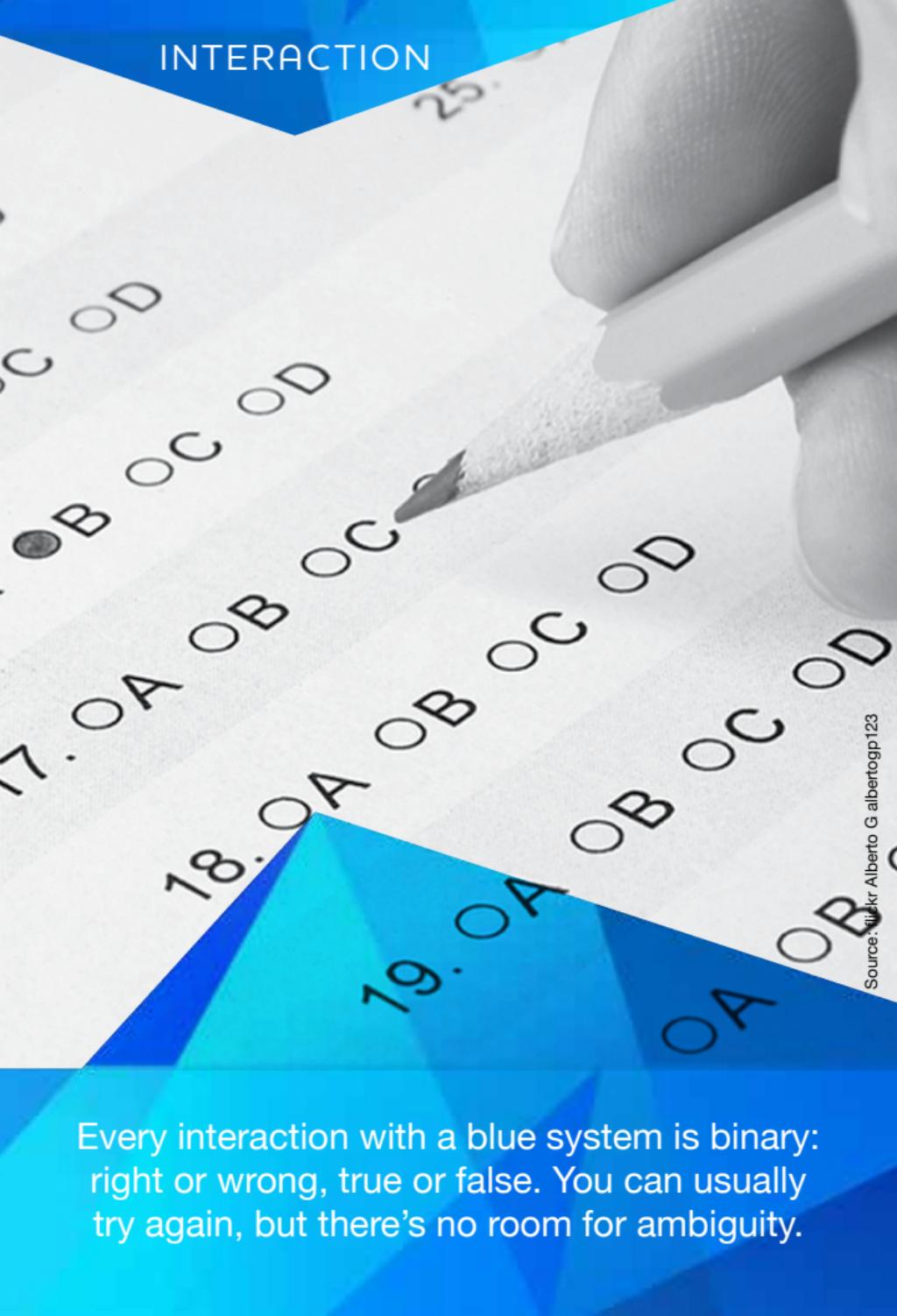
Blue views the world from 30,000 feet, observing and measuring, turning knobs and tweaking variables to achieve the definitively right answer to the problem. Blue aspires to ideals, and has no patience for ambiguity. It improves itself with every iteration like a disciplined robot, but it will never know what it means to be human.

Blue roles follow set rules to achieve predetermined outcomes. Blue is the color of planners, scientists, accountants, referees, engineers, and coders.

Blue strategies are centralized, all-encompassing designs that attempt to address the entire system from one set of principles. They are algorithms, legal frameworks, blueprints, textbooks, and APIs.

Blue environments are giant machines, designed for achieving specific goals by following an established circuit. They are laboratories, power grids, data centers, traffic infrastructure, and hospitals.

INTERACTION



Every interaction with a blue system is binary: right or wrong, true or false. You can usually try again, but there's no room for ambiguity.

SYMBOL



Blue is a central command console with labeled buttons and blinking lights that monitor and adjust every aspect of the system.

ENVIRONMENT



Source: research.usc.edu/managing-a-scientific-laboratory/

Inside a blue system, everything is optimized for preset goals and outcomes, which are understandable and clearly stated.

DESIGN



Blue design is meant to be admired from a distance. It's cool and aesthetically pure, but living inside a blue environment can only ruin its mathematical perfection.

PERSPECTIVE



Source: blueWayne Geertling et al., The Ultimate Guide to Teaching MacroEconomics

Blue views the world from 30,000 feet. It sees the whole system at once, but remains detached from life on the ground.

VOICE

WIKIPEDIA
free Encyclopedia

page
ents
red content
ent events
om article
te to Wikipedia
media Shop

eraction
ip
ut Wikipedia
mmunity portal
cent changes
ntact page

ols
nt/export

Life

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

For other uses, see Life (disambiguation).

"Life on Earth" redirects here. For other uses (disambiguation).

Life is a characteristic distinguishing objects having signaling and self-sustaining processes from those that do not,^{[1][2]} either because such functions have ceased (death), or because they lack such functions and are classified as inanimate.^{[3][4]}

Biology is science concerned with the study of life.

Any contiguous living system is called an organism. Organisms undergo metabolism, maintain



Blue systems speak for the whole, with the authoritative tone of a tenured professor or a benevolent robot.

RED

SYSTEMS MYTHOLOGY

10YF
2014



INSTITUTE FOR THE FUTURE
www.iftf.org | SR-1675C



RED

The red archetype values heroes, competition, and winning.

Red is the color of agency, urgency, and blood. It is passionate and driven, and will do whatever it takes to succeed. Red is behind every war and every love affair, and will rear its head any time a line gets drawn in the sand. It's there when you need it, or when it needs something from you.

Red roles drive the story forward and don't back down until they've won. Red is the color of investors, warriors, entrepreneurs, salesmen, agents, firefighters, and political candidates.

Red strategies are winner-take-all competitions where individuals fight for dominance. They are games, contests, advertisements, elections, and battles.

Red environments are arenas, designed for the game to play out until a winner is determined. They are markets, auctions, battlefields, shark tanks, and political debates.

INTERACTION



Source: call_of_duty_black_ops_2_33

Red interactions are urgent, in-the-moment, high stakes competitions. All red systems are eventually won or lost, and to the victor go the spoils.

SYMBOL



Red is the high score at the end of the game, the trophy for a successful conquest, the brass ring that's just out of reach for all but the most determined.

ENVIRONMENT



Inside a red system, individual players are free to make their own choices, and are responsible for their own survival. Red is a marketplace and a battlefield.

DESIGN



NASCAR SPRINT C
RACE TO THE
INSTANT

With Purchase

LARGE CUP
or LARGE COOLER

Peel & You Could Win
Thousands of Prizes

GRAND PRIZE

Trip for 2
to the Daytona 500

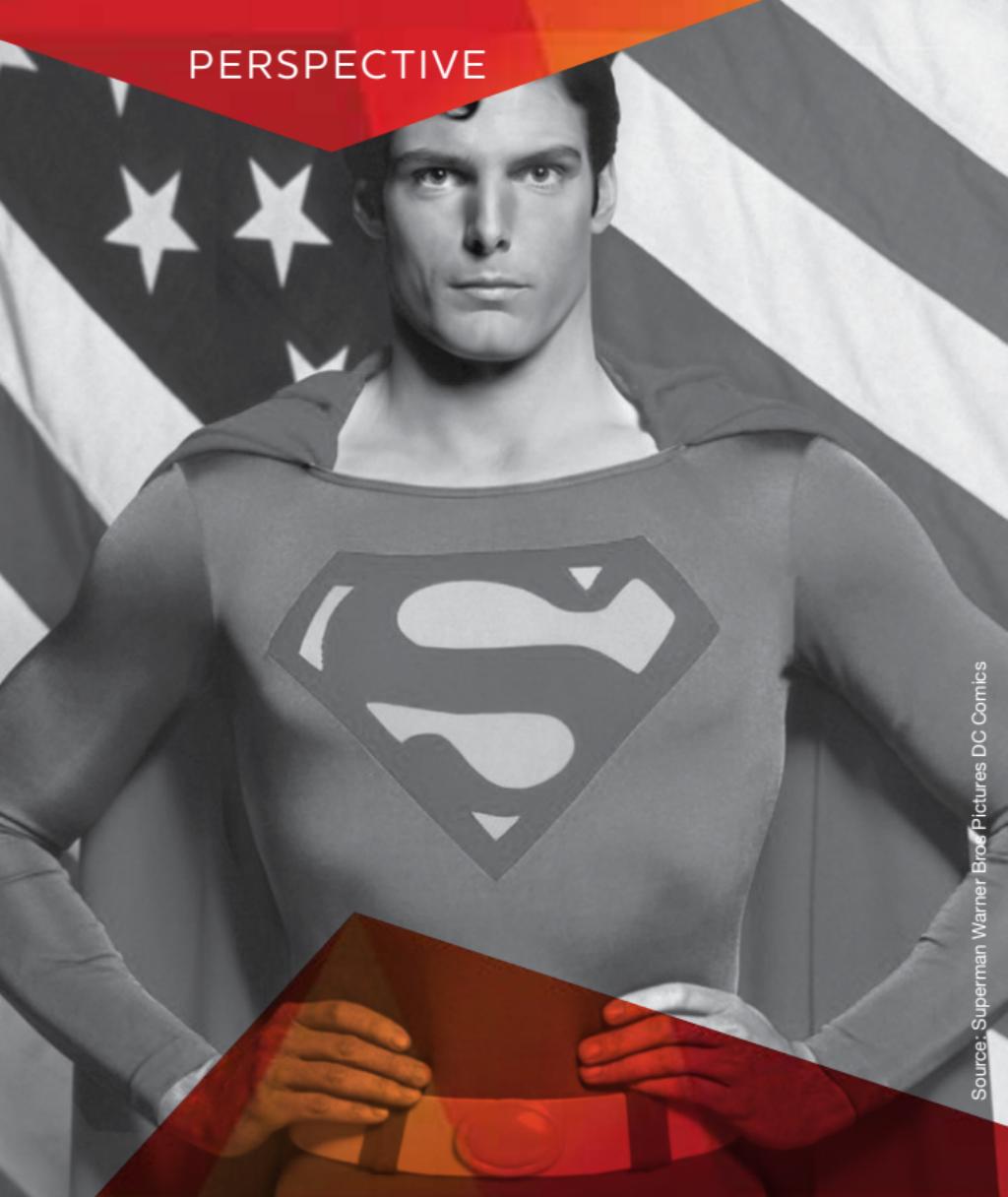
FOR MORE INFORMATION
www.hardees.com

NASCAR, the NASCAR logo, and all related marks and trademarks are the property of NASCAR, Inc. © 2009 NASCAR | Turner Sports Interactive, Inc. All Rights Reserved. NASCAR® is a registered trademark of the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing, Inc. All rights reserved. Coca-Cola® and the contour bottle are registered trademarks of The Coca-Cola Company. © 2009 Hardee's Food Systems, Inc. All rights reserved.

nascar ad placement

Red design is in your face, grabbing your attention by any means necessary. Red doesn't just inform, it dominates.

PERSPECTIVE



Source: Superman Warner Bros Pictures DC Comics

Red views the world with passion and drive, but also with aggression and single-mindedness. Red is both Superman and Lex Luthor.

VOICE



Source : terabass wikimedia commons

Red systems are dissonant and noisy.
Everyone has something different to say, and
only the loudest voices will be heard.

GREEN

SYSTEMS MYTHOLOGY

IOYF
2014



INSTITUTE FOR THE FUTURE
www.iftf.org | SR-1675C



GREEN

The green archetype values inclusiveness, emergence, and creativity.

Green is the grassroots movement and the thriving ecosystem. It is playful and organic, and will grow according to its own innate potential and unique personality. It's a canvas begging to be painted, and an organism in search of its true self. Green feels alive and relatable, but it doesn't take orders.

Green roles respond to the natural rhythms of their environment. Green is the color of residents, community organizers, musicians, settlers, farmers, and artists.

Green strategies create the conditions for life to thrive, and allow the system to find its own path. They are gardens, blank canvases, brainstorms, hackathons, and conversations.

Green environments are safe and inviting and cool with whatever. They are cafés, parks, public squares, living rooms, and community centers.

INTERACTION



Green interactions are generative, inclusive and low-stakes. Green builds on itself without expectations of what the outcome should be.

SYMBOL



Green is the park in the middle of the city.

It's the comfy couch at the local coffee shop that invites you to enjoy life for the sake of being alive.

ENVIRONMENT



Green systems are emergent and organic. If the conditions are right for them to thrive, they'll develop and grow. They can't be controlled or scaled directly.

DESIGN



Green is a blank canvas, inviting creative input without fear of judgment. It's self-expression without external pressure or guiding structure.

PERSPECTIVE



Green views the world as alive, full of beings and ecosystems with their own quirks and personalities.

VOICE



Source: flickr user mitch_silman manman23

Green is playful and low-key, generating ideas for the sake of having new ideas. It's about building shared meaning without any specific agenda.

PURPLE

SYSTEMS MYTHOLOGY

IOYF
2014



INSTITUTE FOR THE FUTURE
www.iftf.org | SR-1675C



PURPLE

The purple archetype values mysteries, hidden truths, and the unknown.

Purple lives outside of our familiar experience of the world, on another frequency or in an alternate dimension. Purple is the edge of the map, full of dragons and aliens and unnamed subatomic particles. Purple represents the unexplored frontier, the promise of unknown horrors and unrealized potential.

Purple roles peek behind the curtain of the known world to the world beyond. Purple is the color of shamans, visionaries, sorcerers, spies, priests, and aliens.

Purple strategies step outside of the box and any metaphor involving boxes. They are voyages, dreams, experiments, magic spells, and expeditions.

Purple environments are found beyond the edges of our understanding, in alien worlds, secret passages, and new paradigms.

INTERACTION

Source: nasa.gov

Purple interactions are mysterious and open-ended. They are portals from the known world to the vast unknown void. Who knows what's on the other side?

ENVIRONMENT



Source: flickr user bkl citronmuff

Purple is the strange world at the bottom of the ocean. It's the farthest reaches of space, and the deepest depths of the imagination.

SYMBOL



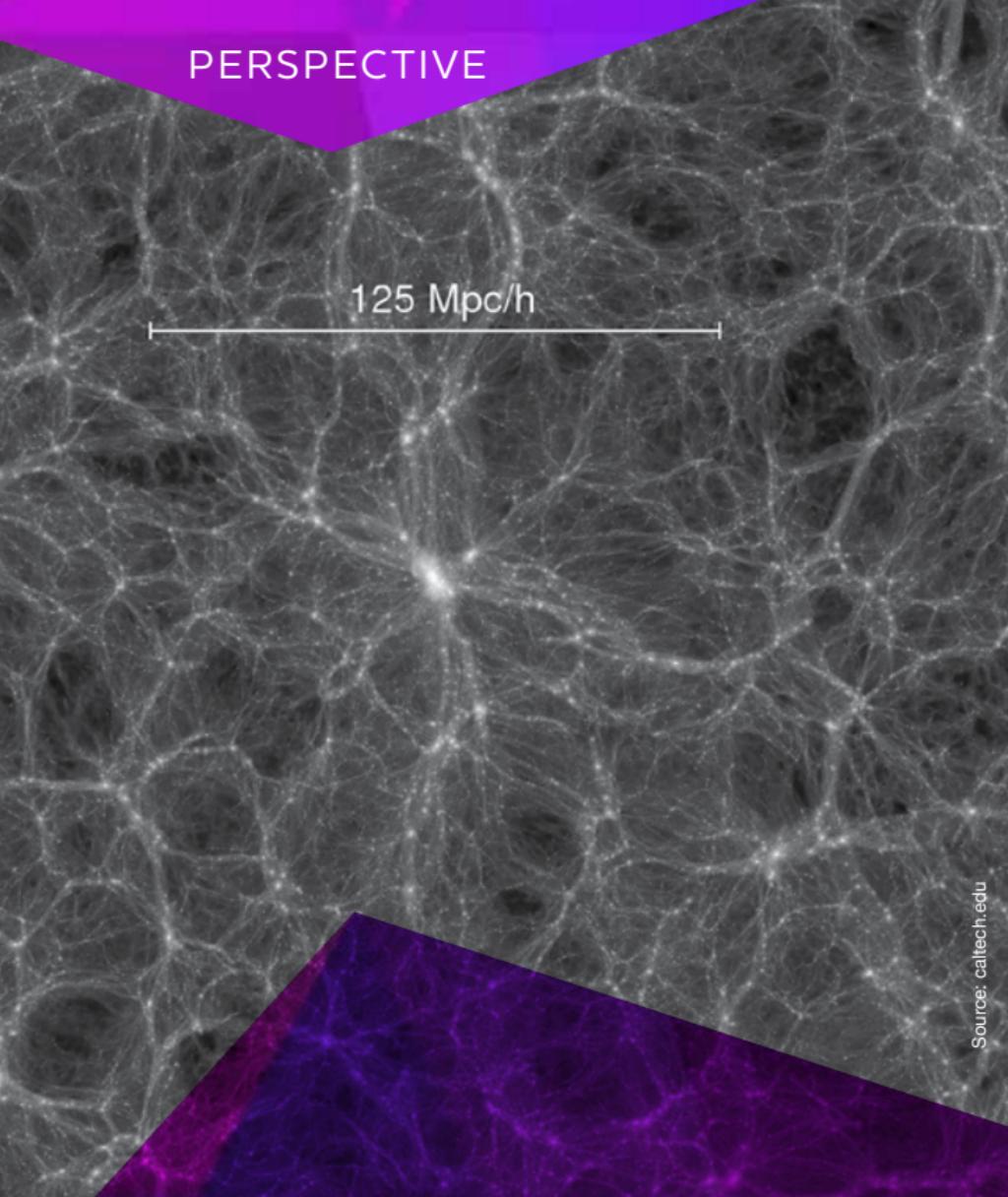
Purple is the hidden passage behind the bookcase. It's the shadow side of the accepted story, the secret truth spoken only in hushed whispers.



DESIGN

Purple design is often a substitute for understanding. It says, "This is from an alien culture, or maybe it's magic. Don't worry about how it works."

PERSPECTIVE



Purple views the world from a totally different perspective or paradigm than we're familiar with. It violates everything we know to be true.

VOICE



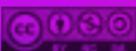
Purple is the voice of the mysterious stranger, the otherworldly visitor, or the shaman. It speaks of unseen patterns and alternate dimensions.

SYSTEMS MYTHOLOGY TOOLKIT

10YF
2014



INSTITUTE FOR THE FUTURE
www.iftf.org | SR-1675C



FUTURE CAVE ART

Are you making something that has never existed before? Whenever we see something for the first time, we project meaning onto it. We try to make sense of it and fit it into our lives. 3D printers and autonomous drones are recent innovations whose place in society is still being explored. To uncover the alternative color destinies of world-changing projects, you can create four archetypal “artifacts from the future”:

The Blue Artifact: What would the project look like if it was embedded in the infrastructure of society, a utility or algorithm as fundamental as the power grid? How would it contribute to the automation of human labor in a future of computer-controlled smart cities?

The Red Artifact: How would it look as an advertised product, poised to dominate the market? How could it be used as a weapon, creating imbalances of power between those who have access to it and those who don't?

The Green Artifact: How does it look when its hacked together in a garage and donated to the open-source movement? How could it empower individuals and communities to create and experiment, developing a following with a life of its own?

The Purple Artifact: What version of it will violate social norms, but potentially spark a new paradigm? What breakthrough design will be heralded as visionary by some, and as ludicrous by others?

INSTRUCTIONS FOR DISRUPTING SOCIETY

Are you looking to change the world? Whether you're shaking up the health industry, reinventing education, or transforming democracy itself, there are three questions you must answer to responsibly disrupt the underlying structure of society.

- 1. What am I breaking?** Assess the dominant color archetype of the system you're disrupting. Is it a load-bearing pillar of our blue foundations, or red fuel in society's engine? Is it a green canvas for the local community, or a purple anomaly outside of mainstream acceptance?
- 2. What have I created?** Using the color archetype cards, explore how you might be changing the color of the system by altering its underlying structure or external design—turning a blue system red by privatizing it, or making a green system blue by formalizing it. When you change the color of a system, people will perceive it differently, and may not even recognize the new iteration as serving the same purpose.
- 3. What color does the system want to be?** Some systems are inherently geared towards winning and losing, while others produce the best results when patiently nurtured to grow. Systems become dysfunctional when they're out of balance, but can be restored by pushing their design and organizing principles back towards the missing color. Color-balanced systems lead to livable futures.

LEARNING TO SPEAK ROBOT

Within an organization, people with different roles generally view the nature and structure of that organization very differently. Translating an idea from engineering to sales to management is a famously difficult problem, and the waters of communication will only become muddier as we invent new job titles to match our 21st century workflows. But at the heart of every job, you'll find one or more color archetypes asking some version of these questions:

Blue Roles: What is the intended outcome or goal of this system? What metrics do we use for measuring that goal? How can we optimize everything we do to better achieve the ideal outcome?

Red Roles: How do I know if I'm winning? What is the reward? What is the penalty for losing? Who's my competition, and how do I stay ahead of them?

Green Roles: What do I feel like doing right now, in the present moment? Can I play with this? What if I tried this? I like this, and I don't like that as much. Is this a place I want to be?

Purple Roles: What is the secret to this, that few people know? What's the shadow side of it, that they don't want to talk about? How does the current paradigm keep certain truths hidden? What are my darkest fears and wildest hopes for what this could be?

About the INSTITUTE FOR THE FUTURE

Systems Mythology was developed at the Institute for the Future in Palo Alto, California.

IFTF is an independent, nonprofit research organization with a 48-year track record of helping all kinds of organizations make the futures they want. Our core research staff and creative design studio work together to provide practical foresight for a world undergoing rapid change.

For more information about IFTF or Systems Mythology:

Contact Sean Ness at sness@iftf.org

Visit www.iftf.org/systemsmythology

Acknowledgments

Conception and Design: Dylan Hendricks

Ten-Year Forecast Program Director: Kathi Vian

Executive Producer: Jean Hagan

Design Production: Robin Bogott, Maureen Kirchner, Trent Kuhn, Karin Lubeck, Robin Weiss, Lutzka Zivny

Special thanks to Marina Gorbis, Nicolas Weidinger, Sara Skvirsky, and the Ten-Year Forecast team.

SYSTEMS MYTHOLOGY TOOLKIT

10YF
2014



INSTITUTE FOR THE FUTURE
www.iftf.org | SR-1675C

