



Beyond Science Fiction: The American Dream

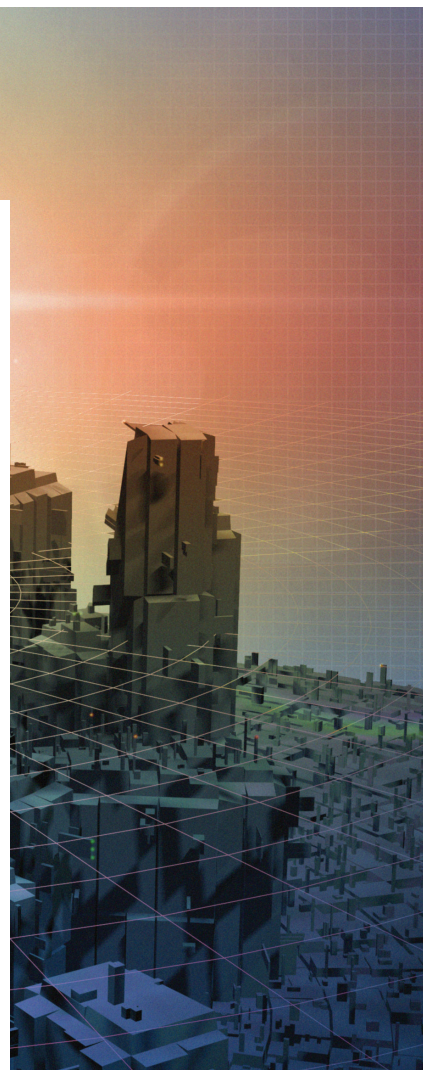
Brian David Johnson, Arizona State University

Science fiction gives us a language for talking about the future. But how do we empower those who are turned off by science fiction to imagine a different future? Internationally renowned futurist Brian David Johnson leaves Intel to discover the future of the American dream.

January is a time for both reflecting on the past and looking forward. I'm humbled by the unexpected and fascinating ways in which science fiction prototyping has been used to examine possible futures. I originally used the process in my own work as a futurist. Later, with gentle prodding from the Creative Science Foundation (www.creative-science.org), I turned the concept into a textbook. It's now taken on a life of its own.



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Science fiction gives us a language for talking about the future. Science fiction prototyping gives us a process for developing those possible futures and asking hard questions: What future do we want? What future do we want to avoid? How might things go terribly wrong? (My students especially like asking that last one!) Once we've created science fictions based on facts, we can begin to understand their human, cultural, ethical, business, and even legal effects.

STORY-BELIEVING MACHINES

I think science fiction prototyping has been so successful because, ultimately, everything is about people—whether you work in education, technology, science, business, research, or the service industry. Regardless of

the many intervening processes and technologies, it all starts and ends with people.

All good stories are about people. Science fiction prototypes concern a person in a place with a problem. And human beings are story-believing machines. Our brains and consciousness are wired to focus on and understand reality through the stories we tell and hear.

This is part of science fiction prototyping's power. But it still has a flaw preventing much wider usage: science fiction.

THE PROBLEM WITH SCIENCE FICTION

If you're a science fiction fan, you probably can't comprehend that last sentence. If you're not a science fiction fan, you're probably nodding your head in agreement.

Despite science fiction's new frontiers, far-away galaxies, and androids dreaming of electric sheep, for all the people excited by the genre, even more are instantly turned off by it.

So I got to thinking about how to encourage the folks who are turned off by science fiction to start imagining different futures. We know we

ON THE HIGHWAY FROM PALMS SPRINGS TO TEMPE

It all started on US Interstate 10 between Palm Springs, California, and Tempe, Arizona. I sat on the wide leather backseat of a 1996 Cadillac Fleetwood. In the front seats were two old white dudes. The first was one of the most beloved people in my life: my dad. The other was my uncle Paige.

As I watched my dad and his brother on that sunny spring day, I started thinking about the American dream. It wasn't something I thought about often. But looking at those two men, it struck me that they'd achieved the American dream. And from where I sat, they deserved it.

Dad grew up on a Minnesota farm in the middle of nowhere. Each of the five Johnson boys joined the military and went on to marry, have children, get good jobs, own homes, and eventually retire. Uncle Ralph passed away early from a heart attack, but the remaining brothers were alive and kicking and causing trouble.

Their respective retirements scattered them across the US. But each year they reunited in California and piled into two matching Fleetwoods for the trek across the desert to

I knew that my dream wasn't the same as theirs, but what was it? The American dream had inspired generations of people in completely different ways, but was it still relevant in the 21st century? Finally, I asked myself the big question, "What's the future of the American dream?"

WHAT'S THE FUTURE OF THE AMERICAN DREAM?

Quietly and in small groups, I started asking people this question. The responses were surprising—and worrying. It seemed that America was suffering from the lack of a dream, a deficit of imagination. There was a void where the American dream used to be.

Over the past year, I began asking more people in larger gatherings and venues. I was told that the American dream was alive and well and should be a shining light on the hill to guide the country. I was also told that the American dream was destroyed and that I was a jerk for even asking. In short, it was a good question to ask. Every conversation brought me closer to an answer and also wildly expanded the debate. And in 2016—an American presidential election year—it seems even more pressing.

I realized this question was the "thing" beyond science fiction that could engage people's imaginations. The question can never be answered fully, but it quickly leads to conversations about our hopes, our dreams, and, ultimately, who we are. With each new conversation and person who tries to answer it, I get that much closer.

LOOKING INTO THIS FUTURIST'S FUTURE

Beyond science fiction prototyping, I hadn't found another subject that captured my imagination and astounded me with its power and effect on people until I started researching the new American dream. My questions became the backdrop for conversations about education, manufacturing, race, gender, and income inequality. Each conversation was simultaneously

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can change the future by changing the story people tell themselves about it. If we empower people to imagine a different future, they'll make different decisions and actually change their tomorrow. I've seen it happen. For me, it's one of the greatest joys of science fiction prototyping.

But what if people reflexively turn away from science fiction? How do we empower them to imagine a radically more awesome future than what they have today? I think I've found the answer. But first, a story.

Tempe. These Cadillacs were the last big model that Detroit produced—"the last time they really built them big," as Paige liked to say. Their ultimate destination was the Cactus League to watch Major League Baseball's spring training. What could be more American than retired vets driving Cadillacs to watch baseball?

As I watched the desert pass by, I realized that these two men and others in their generation had enabled the rest of us to achieve the American dream, figuratively and literally.

micro and macro—people talked about their dreams for themselves and their families as well as their hopes for their communities, country, and world. That's why I decided to make a change this year.

I realized I couldn't fully explore the future of the American dream and remain a corporate futurist. There were simply too many conversations to have in 2016. So this January I'll be leaving Intel Corporation and taking a post as the resident futurist at Arizona State University's (ASU's) Center for Science and the Imagination (CSI; <http://csi.asu.edu>).

CSI unites diverse people to think more creatively and ambitiously about the future. It invites global collaborators to approach the future as a collective story—one that's based on our daily individual and collective decisions. The American dream is one of the most enduring and powerful collective stories: an aspiration

for a better future and a continual effort to define, redefine, and improve the US.

I'll also be teaching a class in ASU's School for the Future of Innovation in Society (SFIS; <https://sfis.asu.edu>). SFIS takes to heart the university's charter to pursue access, excellence, and impact—which isn't a bad description of the American dream. The school believes that the future belongs to everybody, and its curriculum emphasizes thinking about and systematizing the ways in which we ponder the future. Students are challenged to think about innovation's role in society. Ultimately, reflecting on the future of the American dream can help students begin to build the future of their dreams.

certainly be featured here. And from time to time, I'll update you on my journey beyond science fiction and into the future of the American dream. **C**

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