

# Storybook Futures: A Public Installation for Speculative Narrative Exploration

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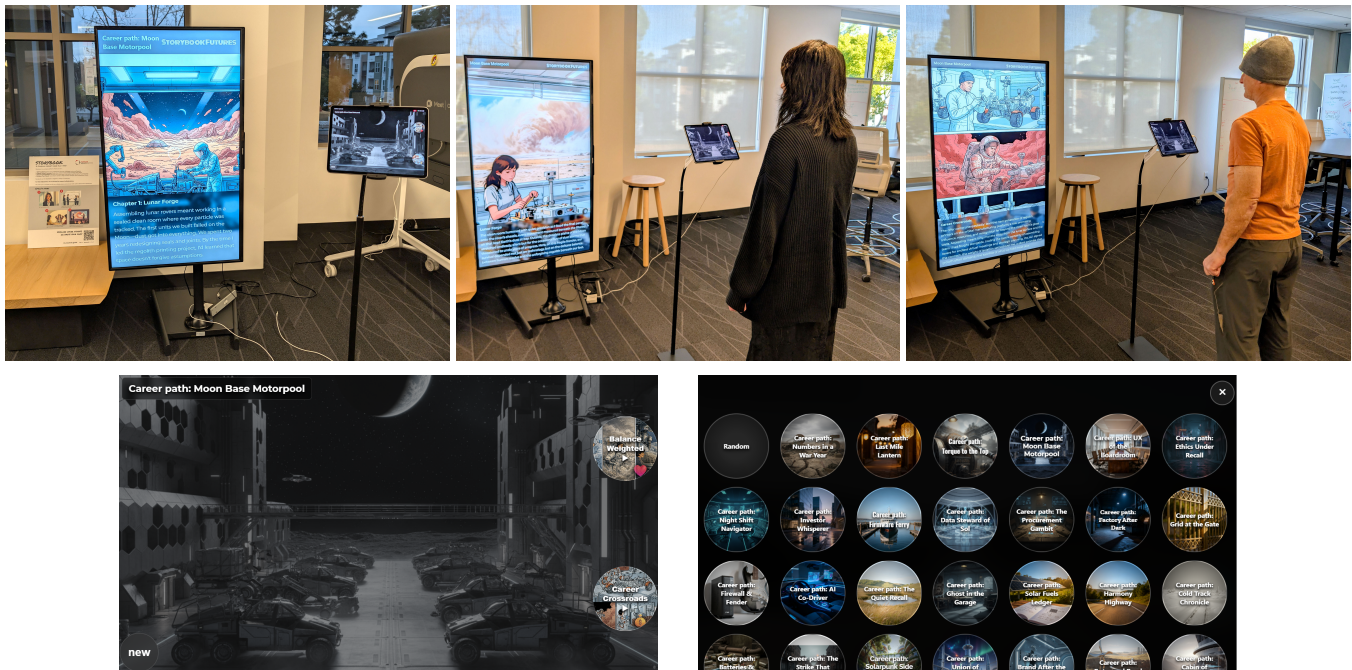


Figure 1: Storybook Futures as a public interactive-media installation. Top left: the portrait display, tablet controller, and printed instructions in situ. Top center: a participant uses the controller while the large display presents the current chapter with the participant’s likeness inserted into the scene. Top right: the chapter image updates when a new participant approaches the kiosk. Bottom left: the controller presents two branching futures emphasizing well-being (heart) or career/financial advancement (money). Bottom right: participants browse seeded stories or begin with a random choice.

## Abstract

Storybook Futures is a public interactive-media installation for exploring speculative narratives. Inspired by Storybook, a web platform for creating illustrated stories that support perspective-taking and career reflection, Storybook *Futures* is a walk-up kiosk in which people can see themselves in a possible future. A tablet-sized controller lets participants choose among dozens of seeded paths and then branch through an illustrated story by selecting between two deliberately value-laden futures: one oriented toward well-being and one oriented toward career and financial advancement. A synchronized large display shows each chapter at audience scale, while

a webcam-driven self-insertion pipeline regenerates the current scene using the participant’s face. The result is a walk-up demo that combines branching narrative and generative text and imagery that inspires questions of people’s place in the world, surveillance, and the role of AI in both. We position the system as both a narrative experience and a conversation prompt about perspective-taking, labor futures, and the politics of interactive media.

## CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → **Interactive systems and tools**; *Human computer interaction (HCI)*; • **Applied computing** → *Media arts*.

## Keywords

interactive narrative, career futures, perspective-taking, public display, generative AI, self-insertion



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**1 Introduction**

Personal narrative offers a way to make challenges legible through concrete lived experience. Storybook built on that premise, using illustrated storytelling to support perspective-taking, reflection, and collaborative exploration of possible futures [4, 5]. Prior Storybook deployments focused on undergraduates navigating school-to-work transitions, employees exploring career development, and workplace learning. Storybook *Futures* keeps that narrative core, but changes the form. Rather than reading someone else's story on a personal laptop or mobile, people interact with a public display through which they can choose a possible pathway and see their own likeness incorporated into generated scenes. With Storybook *Futures*, participants see themselves in imagined scenarios, and make decisions about the kinds of futures they can pursue.

The system is motivated by work showing that narrative can support perspective-taking and reflection [1, 3, 18]. It also draws on research suggesting that more direct forms of embodiment or future-self visualization can intensify reflection about alternative lives and long-term outcomes [8, 9, 12]. Our goal is not to predict a participant's precise future or to present a neutral model of decision-making. Instead, we use speculative illustrated narrative to stage an encounter with possible futures and with the values encoded in interactive systems.

The current prototype focuses on mobility and manufacturing-adjacent career paths, ranging from battery supply chains and robotics maintenance to labor organizing, resilient infrastructure, and even lunar manufacturing. However, the system is flexible: story focus is easily adjusted. The experience is intentionally uncomfortable. It makes the camera visible and consequential rather than invisible, and it reduces branching futures to a stark well-being-versus-career choice. Those choices are not presented as realistic advice. They are provocations meant to spark discussion about labor futures, public AI, surveillance, and the simplifications that interactive systems impose on complex lives.

**2 Related Work**

Storybook *Futures* sits at the intersection of narrative interfaces, interactive media experiences, and future-self reflection. The original Storybook system used illustrated digital narratives to help people share perspectives and think through educational and career transitions [4, 5]. Within HCI and interactive media research, narrative has also been used as a structure for reflection, motivation, and decision support. Murnane et al. designed ambient narrative-based interfaces to help people reflect on and sustain physical activity [13]. Manni et al. showed how responsive video can personalize narrative information in a sensitive healthcare decision-making context [11]. More recently, Belz et al. demonstrated that generative storytelling systems can adapt story content in real time using contextual signals from a user's surroundings [2]. Recent work has also explored computational visual storytelling as a creative design space [7]. These systems extend a longer line of interactive

narrative research in which user choices shape unfolding stories [14]. Taken together, this work suggests that narrative can function not only as content but as an interaction technique for reflection, personalization, and engagement.

Storybook *Futures* is also informed by research on participatory and audience-centered media experiences. Past work has explored how narrative and performance can be distributed across multiple devices, sites, and roles [15] and work on immersive social audience experience in remote VR opera [17]. Our system similarly splits control and viewing across a personal tablet and a large public display, but applies that architecture to speculative illustrated career narratives rather than live performance.

Finally, Storybook *Futures* relates to work on empathy, possible selves, and future-oriented reflection. Narrative has long been studied as a mechanism for perspective-taking and empathy, from fiction reading [1] to empathic accuracy [18], narrative intervention [3], and immersive perspective-taking in VR [8]. Markus and Nurius describe possible selves as imagined future identities that shape motivation and behavior [12], while Hershfield et al. showed that age-progressed future-self visualizations can make long-term consequences feel more concrete [9]. More recently, Jeon et al. showed that LLM-based future-self agents can increase engagement in career-exploration exercises [10]. Storybook *Futures* extends this line of work by moving from private reading, writing, or conversation into a public, walk-up installation that combines branching narrative, illustrated scene generation, and live self-insertion. Our contribution is to use that combination not to optimize decisions, but to foreground reflection, discussion, and the values encoded in interactive systems.

**3 System Overview**

Storybook *Futures* is implemented as two coordinated web pages. A controller (`control.html`) page running on a tablet handles story selection, camera capture, branching choices, and API calls to third-party text and image generation services. A viewer page (`view.html`) running on a large screen renders the current chapter on a large display. The two screens are synchronized through a real-time messaging service [16], allowing the controller to manage state while the public display presents the current story chapter at audience scale. In the current build, participants can choose from 86 seeded career stories, each with its own title, descriptive prompt, illustration style, and typeface.

Each story follows a five-part narrative arc: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. The first chapter can be pre-generated to support walk-up responsiveness, while later chapters are generated from the story-so-far plus one of two branch modifiers. These modifiers explicitly bias the next chapter toward either personal well-being or career or financial success. Each chapter is paired with an illustration generated from the chapter text and story style prompt: the goal is that the user's overall experience feel more like stepping through an illustrated speculative story world than reading a uniform chatbot transcript.

In the current implementation, a backend endpoint generates chapter text and images. Specifically, the controller sends the story description, story-so-far, narrative prompt, and optional branch modifier to a server-side text-generation service, which uses a

configurable frontier LLM to create and return the next chapter text and a short title. Chapter illustrations and background images are generated through a separate image service, with the client currently set to choose between two configurable text-to-image models. When an avatar image is available, the pipeline switches to image-editing mode and combines that cropped face image with the chapter text and style prompt to regenerate the scene with the participant inserted into it. This architecture is modular: the text, text-to-image, and image-editing components are configurable and can be swapped for other compatible services or models, including any alternatives available through fal.ai [6].

The controller leverages the tablet's webcam to run face detection in a loop in the browser to determine when a new participant has taken over the kiosk. When a prominent face is detected, the system crops the face region and updates the avatar input image used by the image-editing pipeline.

### 3.1 Privacy and data handling

The controller camera identifies the current participant and crops the face region. Full camera frames are not saved. Cropped face images are kept only during the active interaction and are discarded when the session resets or when a new participant is detected. The cropped face is sent to a remote image generation service solely to create the current illustration. Printed instructions at the kiosk inform participants that the installation uses camera-based self-insertion and that participation is voluntary.

## 4 What the Demo Shows

At the conference, attendees will encounter Storybook Futures as a walk-up installation composed of a tablet-sized controller with a webcam enabled and a portrait-oriented public display near the controller. A participant can browse or randomly select a seeded story, at which point the large display immediately shows the opening chapter. As the participant stands at the controller, the system detects the current face, regenerates the chapter image to incorporate that likeness, and then offers two possible next futures. Repeated selections produce a branching multi-chapter story that the participant experiences privately through the controller and publicly on the large display.

We designed the demo to address three issues. First, the demo is a *personal* interaction that drives a *shared*, audience-facing narrative. Second, it explores dynamic, on-the-fly branch generation, in which each choice updates both the next chapter's text and illustration. Third, it makes the self-insertion mechanism legible, allowing participants and observers to watch how the system changes when a new person steps in front of the camera.

The interaction is intentionally split between a personal controller and a public display. The tablet supports close-range, low-friction choice making, while the large display turns those choices into a shared audience-facing scene. This arrangement lets one attendee steer the story while nearby observers witness both the narrative progression and the visible effects of personalization.

The setup requirements include a public display, power, a small standing footprint, and a reliable network connection for the text and image generation services. We will provide the laptop to control the public display, as well as the tablet and tablet stand. A TV in

portrait orientation is preferred for the public display, though the system can support landscape as well. Audio is not required.

Our goal is that the demonstration will elicit discussions about labor futures, competing value trade-offs, and the cultural assumptions encoded within generative systems. Although the present library is organized around career pathways, the underlying pipeline is sufficiently generalizable to be adapted to other domains, including personal finance, hobbies, and other forms of future-oriented self-reflection. We can also keep the library focused on careers while adjusting the domain. The topic and domain of the story library can be adjusted per deployment.

Our contribution is the design of a live walk-up installation and the public experience it enables. While we have conducted several informal heuristic evaluations and field pilots with the system, we have no plans for a formal user study (though we would be excited to collaborate with others interested in using the system for their own studies).

## 5 Conclusion

Storybook Futures extends Storybook from a platform for sharing illustrated perspectives into a public, embodied, and more provocative speculative-media experience. By combining branching narrative, generative imagery, live self-insertion, and a public display, the system invites participants to inhabit possible futures rather than simply read about them. We see the project as both a demo and a discussion starter: it offers a concrete interactive experience while opening broader questions about empathy, career imagination, public AI, and the uneasy relationship between personalization and surveillance in interactive media.

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