

Living Today in the Future We Imagined 20 Years Ago

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Every year around this time, I attend the annual conference of the International Simulation and Gaming Association (ISAGA) and write about my experiences for this column (*Kaze*). In 2024, the conference took place in Christchurch, New Zealand, and in 2025, in Stuttgart, Germany. This year, in 2026, we gathered in Stockholm, Sweden, and next year, in 2027, the conference will come to Tokyo. As Chair of the Organizing Committee for the Tokyo conference, this year's meeting was also an important opportunity for me to introduce and promote next year's event.

The conference was held **on** the campus of **the** KTH Royal Institute of Technology, just outside central Stockholm. I had little time to explore the city, but returning to Stockholm after 21 years was special for me in ways that had little to do with sightseeing.

The last time I was here was in 2005. At the time, I was staying at Ruhr University Bochum in Germany as a visiting researcher. I had been invited to join a European research tour organized by Saburo Kato and Konoe Fujimura of Environmental Civilization 21. We were examining environmental education and other environmental initiatives in Swedish companies. Revisiting my notes from that tour brought back many memories.

In Stockholm, we visited hotels, railway companies, housing providers, and other organizations. We wanted to see how environmental considerations could be woven into corporate management, how people worked, and **the** design of products and services.

One conversation in particular has stayed with me. At a housing company, I heard about an approach to designing homes not merely to meet current standards, but to remain functional for the next 100 years—even as regulations and lifestyles change.

A hundred years can seem unimaginably distant, almost beyond reach. Yet 21 years have passed since then—one-fifth of a century gone by within our own lifetimes. Once again, I am struck by the realization that the future does not suddenly arrive one day. It quietly becomes the present, one year at a time.

Going back a little further, in January 2003, I joined another European research tour, this time to learn about methods for involving citizens in public policy discussions. We were preparing to organize a participatory meeting in Nagoya to discuss a recycling-oriented society. This was the first time I had traveled abroad with Kato and Fujimura. We visited the Danish Board of Technology and the University of Stuttgart in Germany.

Today, participatory deliberative processes in which ordinary citizens come together to discuss public issues are widely known as “mini-publics.” Back then, however, such an approach was relatively unfamiliar in Japan. We were learning about it and wondering how the idea might take root in Japanese society.

In 2006, we put this idea into practice through the “Nagoya Recycling-based Society – Citizen Proposal Meeting,” where experts, stakeholders, and citizens gathered to discuss the future of Nagoya’s environmental policy.

At this meeting, citizens first envisioned what a recycling-oriented society might look like in the future. They then worked backward from that vision to determine what needed to be done today. In other words, they adopted a “back-casting” approach: imagining a desirable society 20 years ahead and then working backward to identify immediate actions.

Twenty years have passed, and it is now 2026. We live our lives moving toward the future. At the same time, however, the present is also the future that people 20 years ago imagined. The timeframe discussed in Nagoya in 2006 as “20 years from now” is no longer a distant vision. We are living in that future today.

Of course, the “20 years from now” envisioned at the time did not materialize exactly as planned. A devastating earthquake and tsunami struck. Then came a global pandemic. Society shifted, technology advanced, and many things occurred that we could never have anticipated.

The future, it seems, does not simply unfold according to our plans. Rather, it takes shape through unexpected events and developments that gradually transform the present.

Looking back from 2026 to 2006 is therefore about more than just checking whether past proposals were realized. It is an opportunity to ask what people 20 years ago

regarded as critical issues and what kind of society they envisioned. For those of us living in that future today, there is immense value in revisiting and reconsidering the vision they left behind.

Over the years, I have recreated the 2006 Citizen Proposal Meeting as a simulation game. I developed an educational gaming program called “Stakeholders: Recycling-based Society,” which I have used with students and other groups. In the game, participants discuss their priorities regarding societal benefits and individual risks while working together to envision “Nagoya 20 Years from Now.”

I used the game again this year in a class at my university in Tokyo. The students had grown up in different parts of Japan—Tokyo, Yokohama, Fukuoka, and beyond. As they talked, they shared their experiences with waste separation and other sustainability efforts in their hometowns.

What was discussed in 2006 as the future of a single city, Nagoya, had by 2026 become a theme explored by comparing the experiences of different cities over two decades. The core question had traveled through time and across regions.

The Citizen Proposal Meeting in Nagoya did not end when the session adjourned. What was discussed there was transformed into a game, developed into educational material, carried to new places, and reconsidered by different generations. The participants have changed, the communities involved have expanded, and the meaning of the questions has evolved. Yet the practice of imagining the future has been passed on.

In early August 2026, I plan to use “Stakeholders: Recycling-based Society” once again during an intensive graduate course at Chukyo University in Nagoya. I find myself wondering what those students will think. How will they respond to the society that, back in 2006, was described as the future of Nagoya? How will they confront the reality in which they live—the very future that people two decades ago imagined?

Just as people in the past thought about the future, we who live in the present ponder what lies ahead. And 20 years from now, another generation will live in that future as their present.

Talking about the future is not simply a matter of imagining an unwritten world. It is about asking how we should live in the present that past generations entrusted to us. And in doing so, we are likely doing the exact same thing for those who will follow.

(Translated by Hideyuki Mori)