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# Fiction in design research

Report on the 6th Swiss Design Network  
Conference in Basle, 2010

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'*Negotiating Futures – Design Fiction*' was the leitmotif for the Swiss Design Network's (SDN) annual design research conference on 28-30 November, 2010.<sup>1</sup> During the three-day event around 200 professionals – design researchers, students, practitioners and other experts with "hybrid" or interdisciplinary interests – shared their perspectives on design research, methods and projects. The conference was split into various thematic blocks: Project presentations by Junior Researchers of the MA programmes took place during a pre-conference; keynote sessions, held in a church, were given in the mornings; the afternoons were reserved for papers and break-out workshops. This meant that participants had to choose between workshops and miss parallel sessions – a regrettable fact of conference life that even design fiction was unable to solve!

Invited speakers and workshop leaders from various fields, such as design history, product design, technology, art, visual communication, brand development and marketing, and physics, were asked how they use fiction within their creative processes of research and/or design. The best way to discuss design research is to debate and reflect on projects "live". SDN 2010 – three days spent listening, presenting project outcomes, comparing methodologies and processes and exploring micro- and macro-theoretical issues – proved this beyond all doubt.

## Negotiating futures

Having rotated between various Swiss design schools in recent years, this sixth event was once again organised by the Basle University of Applied Science where the conference series was launched in 2005. SDN President and head of the conference organising committee, Martin Wiedmer, started with a brief review of half a decade of design research experience in Switzerland. The SDN's activities and publications

have, he said, become an important reference point in the field of design research. Wiedmer noted:

- the growing number of citations in Swiss design publications;
- that the prolonged epistemological and methodological debate has led to a convergence of some common viewpoints on design research discourse. (The debate has calmed down, but it is by no means over due to multiple ambiguities in design discourses.);
- a gradually developing linkage between research initiatives and the new MA programmes at Swiss design schools;
- the record track of interdisciplinary and heterogeneous research projects conducted by the Swiss design schools.

Despite these developments, Wiedmer observed that the applied research-oriented Swiss schools (Fachhochschulen) are not yet authorised to set up in-house doctoral research programmes. This, he said, puts a ceiling between these institutions and the cantonal and federal universities, which traditionally offer PhD programmes to scholars in other scientific domains, but still not in design.

The conference title *Negotiating futures* can thus be understood as part of an internal and external process of defining design research as a tangible discipline and creative practice that is recognised in the Swiss academic context. *Negotiating futures* may be understood as a reference to this present struggle, as an aspiration or even as a strategic claim.

## Design fiction

The conference revolved around a 13th-century Gothic church in Basle city centre — a place with a long tradition of spirituality, symbolism – and fiction. The theme of design fiction explored research practices that follow Herbert Simons' idea of 'changing situa-

tions into desirable ones', in other words, design and design research 'that focus on the world as it could be'. The core question addressed here was: How do researchers and designers design fictions and how are these new, possible future scenarios negotiated and realised?<sup>2</sup>

Design fiction is an approach to design that speculates about new ideas through diegetic prototyping and storytelling.<sup>3</sup> Diegesis in fiction is the construction and rhetorical presentation of a fictional world in which situations and events occur in narrated form.<sup>4</sup> Many design-fiction projects depict situations and actions that enact real situations and actions from the past. The principle of enacting as a method of telling a story within design fiction therefore cannot be qualified as diegetic or as *true* fiction.

Design fictions are merely imaginary design stories that refer to reality and which are *re*-told in a "designerly" way. However, the creative profession seems to be tolerant and there appears to be a good deal of blurring when it comes to concepts and neologisms. Rather like what *docu-fiction* is to cinematographic work, or *literary journalism* (creative non-fiction) is to fiction,<sup>5</sup> design fiction dramatises certain assumptions and actions via scenographies and representations, such as props, prototypes or actors, as if they were real. 'Science fiction can do things that science fact cannot,' said keynote speaker, Julian Bleecker (Near Future Laboratory and Nokia Lab, California). He showed various highly detailed technical manuals of the Star Trek Star Fleet, which were represented as real artefacts, whereas in fact the whole story was fiction. With the exception of some physical Star Trek toys or an actual physical gathering of members of a 'Star Trek Star Fleet' fan club, these items and narratives exist on a representational plane in the media only.

Design fiction seeks to discard the routines of lifeless and de-contextualised design production that frequently characterises regular design processes. Bleecker and James Auger (Royal College of Art, London) introduced the idea of (fictional) props and prototypes which can be used to materialise design ideas in the development phase of the design process. This allows an idea to be shared, tested and circulated prior to its final materialisation.

Design fiction is thus used as a vehicle for transporting ideas to or between stakeholders in the design process (both producers and users), and to shape design concepts that would otherwise remain abstract. Design fiction is simultaneously used as a methodological and a rhetorical instrument for scenario development. It can be applied to progressive as well as less progressive and to visible or hidden ideas and ideals.

In her presentation, Alexandra Midal, a historian at the University of the Arts, Geneva, HEAD, drew attention to the thin line between different socio-political agendas of design fiction and 'dreaming' about the future with reference to *Futurama* and *Futurama II*, the US pavilion at the 1939 and 1964 New York World Exhibition.<sup>6</sup> By highlighting both the technophobia and the obsession with a sensational future that has dominated America throughout the 20th century, Midal guided conference delegates through some insightful examples of design fiction (in the sense of fictitious designed objects) and the design of fiction. She described new technologies, products and lifestyles which, in 1939, were perceived as advanced or indicative of the modern life of the future. Persuasive design and communication strategies were widely applied to eliminate people's fear of new technologies by making them look exciting and enjoyable. Design techniques were used to present the future as a story and the exhibition-goers were the living props among the fictional props. In *Futurama*, the boundaries between fictional ideas manifest in the *realistic* exhibition props and people's own daily experiences merged. If we think of the interior design of an airplane today we notice that the design of the interface between human beings and technology remains similar to the examples exhibited at the 1939 World Fair. The design fiction at work in a plane dilutes the dramatic reality of flying; it tries to make the harsh truth of gravity less daunting.

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The hybrid nature of design fiction naturally throws up ethical questions concerning truth. There is a wafer-thin conceptual line between advancing design through fiction which is explicitly disconnected from its contextual reality, but which still stakes a claim on reality through seamless simulation and representation (think of the comedy-drama *The Truman Show*, 1998), as well as design developments which use fantasy, imagination and boundary-less experiments to comment on real-world issues, and the urge to manipulate those realities into better ones. How real is design anyway? Do you really know – or want to know – what happens behind a car dashboard when you slam your foot on the break?

But is looking for new possibilities and scenarios not already recognised as a key element of design? Victor Papanek divided his 1984 book *Design for the Real World* in two sections: 'How it is' and 'How it could be'. Papanek clearly makes a strong case for alternative design attitudes, methodologies and scenarios that aim to improve people's lives in an ecological and socially responsible way. He states that any attempt to single out design – to make it an end in itself – runs counter to the inherent value of design as a primary, underlying matrix of life.<sup>7</sup>

### Negotiating futures or present realities

Virtually every design-research conference explores the epistemological status of design and design research; design assignments, and practice-based design research<sup>8</sup> that embarks on design research *through* design, routinely culminate in the 'what-is-design?' question. Although this question was also raised in various sessions at the Design Fiction conference in Basle, it remained unanswered due to a rather unfocused discussion in which a shared analytical or theoretical foundation was sadly missing.

But revisiting the very first SDN conference in 2005 may help us make some valuable inroads. During this gathering Prof. Wolfgang Jonas (University of the Arts, Bremen) suggested design research should be viewed less as fundamental research (research *about* design), or as an ancillary service for the design industry (research *for* design), and more as a basis for argumentation for or in design practice. 'The Latin word *argumentum* means explanation and illustration,' Prof. Jonas noted. Design research therefore supplies design practice with underlying discourses. It develops reasoning, foundations, substantiation; it illustrates and generates conceptual tools for design in order to facilitate communication and debate. Prof. Jonas also differentiated between three domains of design research: the *true* (analytical, rational, scientific); the *ideal* (projective, speculative, value-oriented); and the *real* (practical, designing, poetic).<sup>9</sup>

The 2010 conference theme presumably refers to or aims to include these conceptual differentiations. Inside the otherwise well-thought-out conference publication the conference title differs from that used on the cover: *Negotiating Futures – Design Fiction* has been changed into '*Design Fiction, Negotiating Realities*'. (Page 9.) Although this small adaptation of the title may be excused as just a minor printing error, it opens up a key issue for the debate about what design fiction is or could be and what the field of application is or could be (the design and fiction of design fic-

tion...). Future situations can be shaped by referencing, learning from, and negotiating current realities. This seems to be an eminently realistic starting point for any serious design debate.

Due to this underlying lack of clarity (negotiating future or negotiating reality?) it was hard to pin down a single, overarching theme of the conference. Should design fiction negotiate the future of design or a hypothetical, abstract future of society (or parts of thereof)? Or should the debate centre on present-day realities which need to be challenged and negotiated via alternative scenarios?

That the designed reality of today's world — too often 'ADHD' and incoherent — is in need of radical alternatives seems, against the backdrop of ecological and economic breakdown and widespread socio-cultural distrust, beyond reasonable doubt. Furthermore, because design production is often shaped by and beholden to context-specific political, ideological, economic and technological conditions, it makes a lot of sense to scan the horizon for alternative design methods and approaches that can genuinely challenge the straitjacket of the status quo. This notion was addressed in a well-articulated presentation by James Auger entitled, *Alternative Presents and Speculative Futures*. With reference to technological paradigms, he explained: '*Alternative presents* are design proposals that utilise contemporary technology but apply different ideologies or configurations to those currently directing product development. Here we break free of lineages to question why things are the way they are.' Bruno Latour suggested in his book *Iconoclasm*, that art and design practice are the ultimate laboratories: 'Nowhere else but in contemporary art [...and design...] has a better laboratory been set up for trying out and testing the resistance of every item comprising the cult of image, of picture, of beauty, of media, of genius.'<sup>10</sup>

### Failures

A particularly interesting aspect of the design-fiction debate, investigated in a workshop lead by Nicolas Nova (University of the Arts Geneva, HEAD / Lift Lab Switzerland) and Julian Bleecker (Near Future Laboratory), concerned the role of failures. In fiction, failure matters little – designers are familiar with this notion from prototyping and rendering techniques primarily used in technology. In the workshop, Nova and Bleecker shared with participants insights into how failures can be envisioned under different conditions. The workshop resulted in the following intuitive taxonomy of failures:<sup>11</sup>

1. Short sightedness/not seeing the big picture
2. Failures and problems that we only realise ex-post/ unexpected side-effects
3. Excluding design
4. Insufficient optimisation
5. Unnoticed failures
6. Miniaturisation that does not serve its purpose
7. Cultural failures: a success in one country/culture may be a failure in another
8. Delayed failures (feedback too slow)
9. When machines do not understand users' intentions/technology versus human perception/false assumptions about people
10. Individual/group failure (system that does not respond to individuals, only to the group)
11. System-based failures versus failures caused by humans/context
12. Natural failures: leaves falling from trees may be seen as a problem, but it is definitely the standard course of action for trees
13. Good failures: failures need to be interpreted; perhaps there is no failure at all; alternative uses, misuses
14. Inspiring failures
15. Harmless failures

### Future, which future?

One important question was not debated in much detail: Is design fiction simply a new prop within the design discipline that is, very often, quite fiction-oriented already (branding, game design, etc.), or does it genuinely contribute to building a new – and long overdue – narrative for a sustainable design culture? Marc Dusseiller, scholar and artist at Hacteria and Dusjagr Labs, spoke enthusiastically in his talk, entitled 'NanoBioInterface', about his interdisciplinary professional identity, which is an amalgamation of nano-science and media/electronic art. Using several examples of his nano-biological and electronic experiments, Dusseiller showed that in the context in which he operates it is virtually impossible to draw a clean line between fiction and science. Indeed, he claimed that our designed world has long been a blend of fiction and reality. Design thinker John Thackara also states: 'Talking of the future removes us from being responsible for what is happening today. Future is an old paradigm word on it's way out.'

In light of this, we may conclude that it is essential to question exactly how design-fiction methodologies and processes function and how they can be applied in design processes that deal with the real – or better still, the multiplicity – of parallel realities we encoun-

ter all around us. It is crucial not only to understand what these particular kinds of design processes produce but how their outcomes and value for design practice and society at large can be measured. In Bas Ruysenaars' words: 'The best way to predict the future is to design it.'<sup>12</sup>

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4. <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diegesis>
5. <http://www.worldlingo.com/ma/enwiki/en/Docufiction>
6. [http://www.wired.com/entertainment/hollywood/magazine/15-12/ff\\_futurama\\_original#](http://www.wired.com/entertainment/hollywood/magazine/15-12/ff_futurama_original#)
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10. Bruno Latour (2002) *Iconoclash – Beyond The Image Wars In Science, Religion & Art*
11. <http://eyebeam.org/reblog/10-11-03/workshop-about-failures-and-design-fictions-at-the-swiss-design-network-symposium>
12. Bas Ruysenaars, *Choice Architects/The Beach*, Amsterdam

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