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Discursive Design: Objects that Talk

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Introduction

Most designers work within the realm of affirmative design. Industrial designers, architects, and other design professionals create objects that affirm the status quo. These objects fit into our environment, solve our current problems, and work towards the future that we collectively expect. Discursive design is the opposite; rather than support the status quo these design projects challenge it. They fit in only in a foreign world, they solve problems we do not have, and they are based in realities and futures that can seem largely implausible. Discursive design is a practise of industrial design that can propose novel ideas and ignite meaningful conversations. Subgroups of discursive design can reshape our visions of the future, put our views of our reality in question, affect consumer behaviour, and much more. Discursive design is thus culturally significant and has the potential to be a driving force of social innovation.

Introducing Discursive Design

Discursive design defines design practise that has the primary purpose of communicating ideas. This is an umbrella term that contains design practises such as critical design, speculative design, design fiction, and many others. Discursive design is a subset of industrial design, although is often not commercially viable and so will likely be found in exhibition, print, and research rather than the marketplace. Different types of discursive design projects can be better understood using two binary dimensions: Terminal/Instrumental and Internal/External (Tharp & Tharp, 2013, p. 1). The Terminal/Instrumental dimension refers to the purpose of the message. A project that is strongly terminal will communicate its message to the audience in a "message in a bottle" way, that is to say the designer will send a message to the audience through an object and

the reception of the message is generally outside of the control of the designer. This is similar to how most artists deliver meaning to their audience. On the other hand, instrumental design projects will use the audience's experience of the project for a larger use. In this case, the designed object is a tool used to elicit conversation with users, which is then applied to inform a greater purpose, such as product development research. The Internal/External dimensions of discursive design relates to intended audience. Simply put, the internal aspect characterises projects whose message is critique or commentary on design practise or design-related fields. Contrarily, the external aspect would define any project whose message is unrelated to design practise. The introduction of discursive design is often attributed to Michael Hays' article "Critical Architecture: Between culture and form" in 1984. It was more recently given a large push by Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby by means of their books and their courses at the Royal College of Art throughout the 2000s (Tharp & Tharp, 2013, pp. 2-4). This considered, discursive design is very young field of industrial design and it is still in the process of being explored as it continues to evolve.

Looking Forward with Speculative Design

Speculative design is one of the many sub-genres of discursive design. A key characteristic of speculative design practise is its disinterest with the predicted future. Affirmative design often uses projections based on the present to design for a future that is statistically likely. In the case of speculative design, all futures that are possible are equally valid for exploration, no matter how unlikely. Normally, it is difficult to immerse a viewer in a farfetched world and have them analyse it as if it were real, and science-fiction depictions of the future are common in literature and film for the primary means of entertainment. For speculative

design to achieve meaningful provocations of thought in the public, it is essential that it should not be discredited as purely fiction or entertainment by the viewer. To achieve this, the "perceptual bridge" needs to be closely managed by the speculative designer. The "perceptual bridge" is the link that connects the audience's perception of their world and the speculative world. If the speculative world is too distant from the viewer's reality, the viewer may discredit the work as simply fiction or art. The viewers then may not be able to relate and engage with the work in a meaningful way. In contrast, if the work is too familiar it may be easily assimilated into the audience's world and go unnoticed (Auger, 2013, p. 12-13). The goal of the speculative designer is to propose a speculative world that is not a prediction of the future but merely an option, among others.

Speculative design's unconventional treatment of the future can be illustrated visually with the use of future cones (Fig.1). Future studies are closely linked to speculative design as they share the same basis of considering the range of all possible futures. The three laws of future studies are that the future is not predetermined, the future is not predictable, and future outcomes can be influenced by our choices in the present (Voros, 2001, pp. 1). These are the laws that govern the 4 classes of potential futures. The widest cone is the possible futures, which contains realities only possible with future knowledge that cannot be understood currently. Smaller than that is the cone of plausible futures, which includes all situations that are possible to happen, based on our current knowledge. Smaller again is the probable futures, which are the situations that are likely to happen based on current knowledge and current trends. The final class of futures are the preferable futures, which can overlap anywhere within the other three classes and are based on current values and desires (Voros, 2001, pp. 2-3).
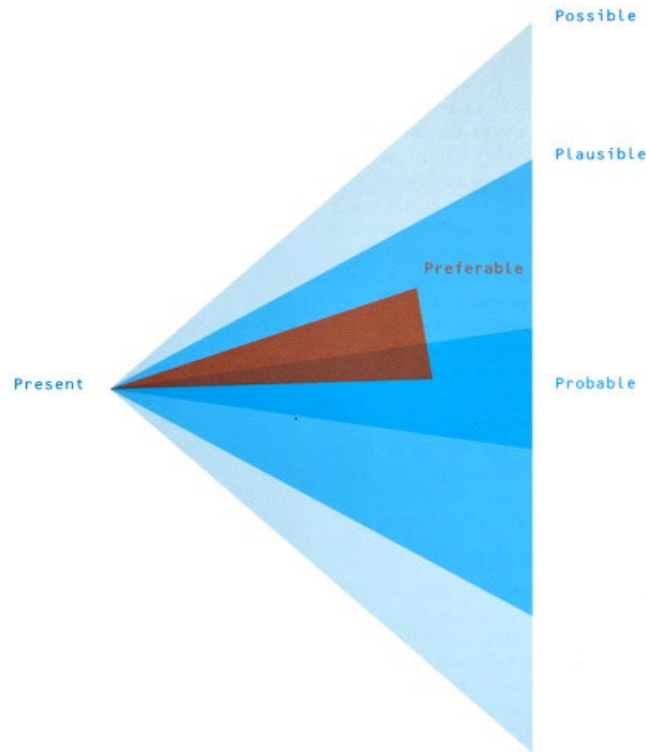
Figure 1 – Future Cones (Dunne and Raby, 2013 : 5)

Understanding the range of possible futures is essential to analyse and apply speculative design, as the possible futures are the realm of this field of design. Affirmative design is constrained to the probable future and affirms a timeline of predictable innovations. Speculative design treats all classes of future cones as equally viable for consideration.

The viewer of speculative design takes on a particular role, which can be described as "imaginers". This is the same role a viewer may take when visiting an anthropological museum. The viewer at a museum will analyse the artefacts on display and infer a society out of these objects. The viewer will imagine what it would be like to use those tools and live in that society, and intuitively the viewer will begin to understand the values of the culture in question. Viewers can apply this same mindset to an exhibition of speculative objects and begin to understand tacit attributes about the speculated world (Dunne & Raby, 2013, pp. 93-94). Considering the youth of

speculative design, getting the viewer to adopt their role as an "imaginer" may still be a challenge. Without adopting this role, viewers may disregard speculative design as a sort of fiction for entertainment, and the provocation of thoughts is then lost on the viewer. If done successfully, viewers will grow an understanding of a different reality and form an opinion on the speculative reality. By probing multiple possible futures by use of speculative projects, the location and bounds of the preferable future for citizens of the present can be understood more clearly.

Designing for Implications, not Applications

New technological innovations are rapidly arriving from the realm of science and academia, and designers are often tasked with bridging the gap between the inaccessible science and the public. Designers will create applications for these breakthroughs, which can then be produced and marketed to integrate novel technology into the human ecosystem. Naturally, design can not understand all the ripples that can be caused by an emerging technology and early technology integration is likely to either fail to be accepted by the public or will integrate with unknown long term implications. Speculative design can be a method to explore the implications of a scientific breakthrough rather than only its applications. To apply speculative design practise to new technological innovations, the designer must first imagine the future in which this technology is commonplace. By designing in that world and for that audience, the messy implications of a technology begin to appear: the marketing, ecological effects, psychological effects, cultural effects, and so on. Like a persona, speculative design allows the viewer to see a defined possible future, even though it is certainly not accurate or predictive.

The resulting speculation about the application of this emergent technology can be a fiction that appears more plausible than reality. Consider lab grown meat as an example. Lab grown meat is a difficult advancement to propose to the public, as people are particularly picky about what they eat, and artificially grown food is a frightening idea for much of the population. Because of this, it is especially difficult to probe accurate opinions on the novel technology. The designer James King tackled this issue with his project *Dressing the Meat of Tomorrow* (2006) (Fig. 2). In 2006, the technology to create lab grown meat existed, but it was far from ready for consumer products. More so, the lab grown samples were crude and largely unappetizing. Using speculative design, King imagined a near future where lab grown meat was the established norm. He then posed questions such as "in this world, what does the meat look like? How is it served? How much does it cost?". The resulting work is a representation of what King found as a possible design of lab grown meat. Although it looks very different from our current meat, it appears more believable and edible than the crude puck of lab grown meat created by scientists. Not only was the form more appetizing, it also had intention: King said that in this world the ideal versions of each farmed animal would be located and scanned. The internal structures of those animals would then be adapted to inform the shape of the mold in which the artificial meat is grown. King's representation of lab grown meat allows the public to now consider the possibility of lab grown meat and its potential nuances more clearly than before, and a new possible reality is created in the mind of the audience.

Figure 2 – James King (2006). *Dressing the Meat of Tomorrow.* MoMA, NY.

Provoking Conversation with Critical Design

Critical design is a broad and loosely defined sub-genre of discursive design that describes design projects that have the intention of critiquing the status-quo and challenging assumptions (Dunne & Raby, 2013, p. 34). Critical design can be useful for understanding and shining a light on difficult to articulate aspects about society and culture. This can make concepts easily digestible for a wide audience, and thus difficult concepts can be interpreted by the general population. Works of critical design are often presented in an exhibition setting just like art, which can be effective for presenting concepts clearly and seriously. Although, critical design can also be blended in with our reality, as was the case with the Audio Tooth Implant in 2001 by Auger-Loizeau. The designers wanted to examine the implications of human enhancement through the use of implantable technology. The designers created a fictive concept of a mouth-implanted cellphone and advertised it as reality. The fictive product spread widely to the public through news reports and other media. Millions read the news columns and magazine articles

written on the product, and the public reaction was strong. According to a poll ran by CNN the concept was widely disliked by the public, with 86% of respondents answering "no" to the question "Would you want to have a telephone implanted in your tooth" (Auger, 2013, pp. 20-24). Without realizing, the population was undergoing a thought experiment through the guise of a ground-breaking technical innovation. This is an excellent example of a very convincing perceptual bridge; the Audio Tooth Implant was close enough to the present reality that is could be seriously considered by the general population, but ridiculous enough to cause great tension in understanding and strong opinions. Without the use of design, it would have been very difficult to probe the public's feelings on real technological human enhancement without their opinion being affected by the science-fiction fantasy of the idea.

As well as promoting public discourse, critical design can encourage personal reflection. Affirmative design rarely includes dark or morbid topics, as their objects should be pleasant and user-accessible to be viable in the conventional market. Critical design is intended to be thought provoking and thus has the ability to bring us to explore topics that consumer design cannot. An example of a product that inspires internal reflection is Dunne & Raby and Michael Anastassiades's *Huggable Mushroom Clouds* (Fig. 3).

Figure 3 – Dunne & Raby and Michael Anastassiades (2004-05). *Huggable Atomic Mushrooms: Priscilla (37 Kilotons, Nevada 1957)* (Dunne & Raby, 2013: 42)

The intention was to create a product that would address the dread of nuclear annihilation. Varying sizes of plush sculptures were made based on real nuclear bomb tests, and a user would go from the smallest plush to the largest to gradually overcome their phobia of nuclear explosions (Dunne & Raby, 2013, pp. 40-42). The subject of the objects is incredibly grim, although the objects themselves have a cute and very comfortable appearance. This contrast provokes a deep emotional tension for a viewer interpreting the object and its meaning. Critical design has this ability to communicate with its audience and affect them on a different level than artwork because of its nature of being a product. A critically designed product that has a well managed perceptual bridge will integrate into the viewers world and stimulate internal

tension. This tension is the essential part of the viewer experience of critical design. A successful work of critical design will inspire a complicated pleasure in the audience, as it will introduce the audience with new worlds and ideas, without biasing the viewers towards thinking this world is better or worse than our own. It is in the comparison between the viewers world and the proposed world, and the subsequent contemplation of which the viewer deems preferable that builds the tension. Dunne & Raby describe this ability of discursive design as it being "a catalyst for social dreaming" (Dunne & Raby, 2013, p. 183).

The Critical Shopper

Additionally, discursive design can have a salient effect on the current reality. In the present consumer society, the world is shaped by consumer's purchase behaviour. Products that consumers purchase become part of the collective reality and continue to establish themselves until consumer preferences change. Goods that consumers refuse to purchase are rejected, sent away, and eventually cease being produced. This way, every time a consumer spends money, they contribute a small nudge to the collective reality. Critical design has a unique opportunity to change the world by converting consumers into critical shoppers. Critical shoppers would think about the reality they want to manifest and shop accordingly, without the influence of advertising, societal customs, social norms, or other outside factors (Dunne & Raby, 2013, p. 34). Works of critical design can put our relationships with goods into question and spark conversation about the implication of consumption. One way this can be done is by creating designs that speculate about a future in which our current consumer behaviours carry on and are exaggerated. This message is well communicated by science fiction literature and film, of which the Netflix television show "Black Mirror" is a clear modern example. Critical design and design

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fiction can communicate this same message with objects to connect with an audience and generate productive public and personal discourse. Bernhard Hopfengärnter's speculative design project "Belief Systems" provides an example of this style of message. In Hopfengärnter's speculation, facial recognition systems have become so advanced that they can read facial micro-expressions and decipher emotional reactions with pinpoint accuracy. One of the proposed objects is a vending machine for teapots. The user walks up to the vending machine, pays for a teapot, and then the machine flashes hundreds of images of teapots on a screen to decide which teapot the customer would prefer based on their facial micro-expressions. The machine will then give the user the teapot it has calculated that the user prefers, even though the user could not have consciously distinguished a single teapot from the images. In this world, free will is distorted and arguably destroyed by the advancement of technology. This scenario may represent a utopia to some and a dystopia to others, but in both cases the work elicits questions that connect directly to current consumer behaviours.

Conclusion: Anti-User-Friendly Design

Affirmative industrial design tends to value "useability" and "user-friendliness" above all else. The goal for affirmative design is often to create products that achieve tasks at the utmost efficiency and can be used by all users in a way that provides the least physical, cognitive, and emotional strain possible. In a workplace, these values are often appropriate, as users are focused on achieving the most productive results by the most efficient means. Although, as technology and design infiltrates more personal corners of our lives, so do the values of efficiency and productivity (Dunne, 2006, pp. 21-22).

Could it be a human right to have the ability to make "mistakes"? In the previously mentioned "Belief Systems" project by Hopfengärnter, the customer wishing to buy a teapot from the machine will never choose the wrong teapot, but they will also be surrendering their conscious choice of preference to the perfectly tuned machine. This may be the ideal that affirmative design strives toward, a product that takes minimal mental and physical effort to deliver the user with their ideal result, every time. Discursive design provides the design community with the option of breaking the mold to explore ideas that are less than optimal. A human being will never achieve perfect optimisation in their life, and perhaps the world that is built for them should be designed to be the same.

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