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<center>Our Symbiotic Life: Reading Critique</center>

Speculative design is a method of imagining fictive alternative futures of human communities and designing experiences that would fit those scenarios. This process has its strength in addressing societal issues that are vastly complex and that extend into multiple years into the future. The term has been first created by Anthony Dunne, professor of design interaction of the Royal College of Art, and Fiona Raby, professor of Industrial Design at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna[1]. Both aimed to envision a process of creation that does not rely on current social, political or technological limitations. Rather, the creative process takes into context either possible, plausible, probable or preferable future scenarios.

Our Symbiotic Life, a work by Katja Budinger and Frank Heidmann from the Department of Design of the Postdam University of Applied Sciences, uses the concept of design fiction to discuss climate-related issues. Design fiction, as explained by the term's creator, Bruce Sterling, an American science fiction author, is the use of "diegetic" prototypes that exist within a fictional scenario. A diegetic prototype is one that does not only represent a concept, but embodies a functionality that is integrated into the storyline of the fictional world.[2] Budinger and Heidmann thus take an approach that greatly focused on materiality, tangibility and physicality of the design process. They created four fictive scenarios that are not fantastical in nature, but that are built upon excising climate impact research, technological advances and plant research. Prior research informed them of the affordances and characteristics of the materials or systems that they chose to exploit, which in turn dictated the storyline of the designed experience. They emphasized the use of visual or physical approaches that would fit those scenarios. Thusly, their process consisted of either iterating through tangible prototypes or storytelling through sketching. This process of experimentation allowed them to research the best ways to communicate the values behind a scenario.

Heidmann and Budinger created four shared socioeconomic pathways (SSP), i.e. four sets of alternative societal futures, each with different qualities and concerns. For example, SSP1 is a scenario

[1] "Speculative Design: 3 Examples of Design Fiction." Inside Design Blog, https://www.invisionapp.com/inside-design/speculative-design/.

[2] Levine, Davis. "Design Fiction." Medium, Digital Experience Design, 14 Mar. 2016, https://medium.com/digital-experience-design/design-fiction-32094e035cd7.

based on democracy, collaboration and sustainability. Affordances of the plant material that fit this theme of harmony were that plants trigger specific responses in humans and promote their recovery process. Combining this with the technological advancements in autonomous driving, the resulting prototype consisted of a mobile shared garden that allowed participants to get from one place to another while benefiting from the healing properties of plants, harvesting food and participating in the community. In this scenario, individuals are included in the societal decisions and the delay that it creates is taken into account for the sake of democracy. Additionally, sustainable consumption is encouraged, and biodiversity can recover.

Such methods of speculative design allowed to make abstract problems more tangible and facilitated the definition of goals that needed to be achieved and the steps that needed to be taken. The "tangible metaphors" that they created then not only stimulated a reflection regarding the main issue, but also humanized the problem. Creating fictive scenarios allows participants of the speculative process a wider freedom of action and thus a more diverse set of ideas. Since a major goal of speculative design is the inclusion of the public in discussions concerning technological, political, social or cultural realities[3], Bundinger and Heidmann's tangible approach was successful in reducing the barrier of engagement and popularizes the discussion of the issue at hand.

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[3] Kunjo. Speculative, 12 Feb. 2017, http://speculative.hr/en/introduction-to-speculative-design-practice/.