

CRITICAL REFLECTION ONE

Asking We [Prototype] :

*A Reflection on Budinger and Heidmann's
"Our Symbiotic Life"*

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In "Our Symbiotic Life", Bundger and Heidmann build on data from climate scientists to examine four possible climate futures through the prototyping of speculative artifacts. In doing so they use technology as an entry point to concretely imagine future socio-cultural, environmental and economic relations. A focus on enaction, embodiment, and complex interdependencies are woven throughout their exploration of climate futures via "artifacts as tangible metaphors" (Budinger and Heidmann 2019). The design fiction process they elucidate shares much in common with enactive models of social change that also seek to prototype the future. In this context, the most radical potential of design fiction lies in the possibility of collaboration, and of combining design fiction with other participatory processes.

Design fiction has been defined as "the deliberate use of [diegetic](#) prototypes to suspend disbelief about change" (Sterling 2012). As a gateway for exploring possible futures and parallel realities, design fiction allows us to break out of the systemic constraints of our current context. Under capitalism, design methodologies that appeal to diversity and collaboration are instrumentalized as tools to drive corporate "innovation". Competition is seen as the principal driver of human creativity. By contrast, Budinger and Heidmann (2019) speculate that design fiction, applied collaboratively, could act as "an instrument for...finding unexpected facets for future communal life." This important shift in context reframes the concept of innovation, deflating its status as a corporate buzzword and neoliberal rallying cry.

Critics of capitalism are often dismissed as failing to provide detailed answers to every possible problem or question about what a post-capitalist future would look like. In many ways, anti-capitalist ideologies and movements for systemic change are engaged in works of speculative fiction. Within this conception, smaller scale experiments in alternative social relations and communal power structures are examples of design fiction: prototypes for systemic change. Just as in any prototyping process, these experiments may fail or succeed in different ways, leading to adjustments, iterations and discoveries inaccessible through speculative thought alone. In the midst of their anti-capitalist struggle for indigenous self-determination, the Zapatistas coined the slogan "*preguntando caminamo*" ("asking we walk"). Systemic transformation is advanced through enaction, continuous learning and adaptation. It's a process of questioning rather than perfectly elucidated answers.

Some of the implications of "asking we walk" are echoed in principles of design fiction. According to Dunne and Raby (2013), design fiction is *critical* rather than *affirmative* and *problem finding* rather than *problem solving*. It is in the service of *society* rather than *industry* and concerned with *functional fictions* over *fictional functions*. Instead of designing for how the world is, design fiction considers how the world could be. Design fiction is process oriented, something echoed in Budinger and Heidmann's discussion of collaborative applications for design fiction. They speculate that facilitators can help overcome some of the hurdles of co-creation, encouraging "radical thinking and deep immersion within a group" (Budinger and Heidmann 2019).

The role of the facilitator, and perhaps of designer as facilitator, is particularly interesting in a scenario where collaborators have different areas of expertise. The benefits of interdisciplinarity are apparent in an ever-more-complex and interconnected world where skills are increasingly specialized. Collaboration across knowledge bases and disciplines is key for the development of holistic perspectives and more effective problem solving. A key example is the evolution of enactive models of cognition as a critical point of intersection between the arts, biological sciences and computer sciences. It's no coincidence that the concept of design fiction, along with Budinger and Heidmann's work in "Our Symbiotic Life", appear firmly rooted in the same theoretical traditions.

Exercises such as this can only benefit from collaboration across diverse skill-sets and experiences, illuminating futures unimaginable in isolation. For example, a participatory design fiction process that includes disabled participants will yield more accessible diegetic prototypes and future imaginaries. As Nägele, Ryöppy and Wilde (2018) write, "people in marginal social positions, enjoy an epistemological privilege that allows them to theorise society differently from those in dominant social locations." Likewise, people from different cultural groups are more likely to explore future narratives that are culturally accessible and meaningful to them. These are different kind of expertise that can guide and complement a technical prototyping process.

Imagine Budinger and Heidmann's climate futures design fiction process, iterated into dozens of different participatory processes. What might result, and how could those results be combined into something truly meaningful? Through collaborative design fiction practices, participants are not only offered "space to identify with a plausible future self" (Budinger and Heidman 2019)

through the prototyping of tangible artifacts. They are offered space to identify with *each other's* plausible future selves, to explore *shared* narratives and to *enact* alternative forms of social organization based on knowledge sharing and collective decision making.

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