Imagination and Reality

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WHEN reading one of our scientifiction stories in which the author gives free reign to his imagination, providing he is a good story teller, we not infrequently find ourselves deeply thrilled. The reason is that our imagination is fired to the *n*th degree, and we thus obtain a real satisfaction from the time spent in reading the story, improbable as it often appears at first. I should like to point out here how important this class of literature is to progress and to the race in general.

The human mind is a tremendously complex machine, which often works in a very strange manner. A man sets out to invent a certain house appliance, and while engaged in his experimental work, gets a certain stimulus that takes him in an entirely different direction, so that the first thought of the house appliance may end in the invention of a factory labor-saving device, or perhaps something even more important.[1]

When Alexander Graham Bell was a young man, he occupied himself by devising means of enabling the deaf to hear. This led him into electrical research work, and the apparatus, far from becoming a device by which the deaf can hear, became the present telephone. To be sure, loud-speaking telephones are made today for the use of the deaf, but this is only a by-product and not at all the actual and more important use of the instrument.[2]

[1] More on the tinkerer's aesthetic? On the one hand a prophet, on the other hand a repurposer. See **"Born and Mechanical Inventor."** How does it square with the idea above that invention works through a series of mistakes (a mousetrap is really a good burglar alarm?)

[2] Alexander Graham Bell was inspired by the work of his father, Alexander Melville Bell, whose alphabet of "visual speech" served as a pronunciation aid for deaf individuals. On the continued reciprocity between telephone technologies and the naturalization of hearing as an measurable, quantifiable capacity, see Mara Mills, "Deafening: Noise and the Engineering of Communication in the Telephone System," *Grey Room*, -, (April 2011): 118–143, doi:10.1162/GREY_a_00028.

Hundreds and thousands of similar instances could be cited. An author, in one of his fantastic scientifiction stories, may start some one thinking along the suggested lines which the author had in mind, whereas the inventor in the end will finish up with something totally different, and perhaps much more important. But the fact remains that *the author provided the stimulus* in the first place, which is a most important function to perform.

On the other hand, many devices predicted by scientifiction authors have literally come true for many generations. There is an old popular saying that what man imagines, man can accomplish. This proverb of course, should be taken with a grain of salt, because not everything that man imagines is possible. For instance, I can imagine that I blow out the sun, or grasp the moon in my hand, or cut off my head without dying. Naturally such things are impossible. On the other hand, many of the so-called wild ideas which we read in our scientifiction stories may prove to be not quite so wild if they give an actual stimulus to some inventor or inventor-to-be who reads the story. And as long as there is a stimulus of any sort, we have no reason to complain, because we never realize where progress in any direction may lead us.[ˆstm]

There is the well-known story of the inventor who had patented the mouse-trap, and finally sold the patent to a manufacturer, who found that an excellent burglar alarm could be made from the mouse-trap, with but a few changes. Another case of an original stimulus which, perhaps, went wrong, but finally became righted.

We should not, therefore, become too impatient if occasionally we encounter a seemingly impossible prediction or improbable plot. It is beyond our power to foresee what reaction this may produce in some one, and what tremendous consequences it may have in the future. And, strange to relate, the patent offices of most countries follow scientifiction stories pretty closely, because in many of these the germ of an invention is hidden. It is not necessary to actually build a model to be an inventor; often it becomes necessary, for court proceedings and for patent reasons, to find out who really was the original inventor of a certain device; if the inventor is an author who brought out the device, even in a fictional story, this would, in the long run, entitle him to ownership of the patent, always providing that the device is carefully described, as to its functions, its purpose and so forth.[3]

[3]Legal precedent for using works of science fiction as "prior art" in patent law is hard to come by. But scientifiction stories, with their high degree of technical specificity, would theoretically have a better chance given that "enablement"—a requirement at the core of patent law—means that a document must allow a person having ordinary skill in the art (PHOSITA) to make the device as described in order to constitute prior art. Jeffrey H. Ingerman and Drew Schulte, "Should Science Fiction Affect Patentability?" *Law360*, May 2013, http://www.law360.com/articles/440742/should-science-fiction-affect-patentability. In a recent, well-known example, Samsung cited the use of tablet computers in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* during its patent battle with Apple over the iPad. While Judge Lucy Koh allowed examples such as commercial prototypes designed by Hewlett-Packard and Knight-Ridder to be used in the case, she ruled that Samsung could not use the film as evidence. Jason Mick, "Judge Excludes Samsung's 'Sci-Fi' Tablet Evidence From Trial," *Daily*

For instance, in the United States, the inventor would have two years from the publication of the story to apply for a patent. Thus it will be seen that a scientifiction story should not be taken too lightly, and should not be classed just as literature. Far from it. It actually helps in the progress of the world, if ever so little, and the fact remains that it contributes something to progress that probably no other kind of literature does.

Tech, August 2012, http://www.dailytech.com/Judge+Excludes+Samsungs+SciFi+Tablet+Evidence+From+Trial/article25329.htm.