Design for This Century
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09.05.17

Response

When we consider the relationships among humans and new humans, non-humans, technologies, general economies, AI, ecosystem etc, one thing we have to keep reminding ourselves is the very principle of diversity. Certain preoccupations that our modern societies and institutions are built upon may not be the ultimate answers. With the ever-increasing information of the Internet age, we must keep challenging our perceptions of the world as if we were still living in the Medieval pre-Copernican age. How do we define our society, either geological or physiological? How do we delimits the degree of intelligence? How do we even depict the fundamental characteristics of humans?

The status quo in some societies may not apply to others. The spatial differences in the world we live in can be seen in a lot of conflicting war zones. During the siege of Kobane, the patriarchal reality of most countries became non-existent. Instead, a flat, rotational system was formed to operate the government machine at the Kobane canton. Women are no longer the "second sex", and payments are never requested within social interactions. The extreme demands of war lead to such family state culture so that everyone unites and prioritize his/her attentions to defeat the common enemy. While this Utopian state's sustainability remains questionable during peaceful times, it is interesting enough to realize this alternative worldview in parallel with the rest of the world.

Modern AI has always been a controversial area ever since its emergence in the 1950s. Regardless of the technological debates around us, how humans can either design or adapt to it needs more to be investigated. Is human intelligence the only possibility of intelligence that can be found on Earth? If not, the existence of other kinds of intelligence can fundamentally alter the way we cultivate our civilization. Is the human-centrism mentality that limits the potential of our world? However, it is terrifying to realize that humans can no longer be the matter of interest in the universe.

Numerous attempts have been made to eradicate the differences between genders, races and classes in our society. But isn't diversity itself needs to be valued also? Technology is a double-sided blade and the source of multiple problems nowadays. We've achieve so much for the past decades in terms of science and engineering. Is it worth the risk to restore back to the early-stage black and white text-based cyber culture?

All these questions need to be asked, questioned, and attempted if not answered by our generation. It may be impossible to answer all of them; however, us designers do have the responsibility to inspire and provoke thinking in others to at least attempt these questions. This way, we can better prepare these alternative worldviews in the face of singularities and human annihilation.

Questions

1. How do you interpret the topic "Horizon of the Human"?
2. Do you think the people reached a true equality at Kobane?
3. Is "hard AI" (compared to "soft AIs" like Apple's Siri…) really a necessity to the humans?
4. How do we determine the intelligence of AI?
5. Explain *"worse than being seen as an enemy is not being seen at all"*?
6. What are the pros and cons of women guerillas at Kobane?
7. What do you think about the present "reputation economy", where people put on fake personas just to please people on social media.
8. What's your opinion on *"if nature is unjust, change nature!"* from Xenofem manifesto?
9. How would imagine the world after the disappearance of Man?

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Response

I'm fascinated by the concepts of signifier and signified in semiotics. We we create or design something, the meaning we intended to convey may not be the same as the audience interpret. Individual interpretation can differ through the process of initial perception, then the digestion based on his/her unique backgrounds. In this scenario, the power of seeing is equally important as the perception of what has been seen. The angle of a single event, the right to be informed and the freedom to interpret are all indispensable rights of a human-being. When I look at the controversy of representation, it is fundamentally about the quest of power: who creates the meaning in our life and who sets the rules to express and interpret meaning. The discussion of representation will still exist, as long as there is the interest of power involved.

Speaking of the angle of event, it reminds me of the evolution of representing media of our society. From the 2-D street representation of ideas and values through posters, we now enjoy a decentralized form of propagating through social media. I cannot say that social media completely eliminate the bias of representing meaning. However, it does offer us various angles when looking at a single event. Since everyone has the power to create contents, the only questions left is to either trust the content and how to interpret that. I believe in a decentralized world facilitated by technology. There are always going to be debates and flaws of certain technology. But it can't be denied that we are getting closer and closer to the real representation of meaning in this technological world.

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Response

This week's reading can be generally grouped into two categories: equality and representation. We humans occupy the majority of the Earth's resources and power, while produce nothing useful to our globe. Plants, in contrary, provide oxygen, minerals, and food to the the ecosystem. The justification of the hierarchy that humans are regarded as top of the ecosystem is not legitimate in terms of the contributions of humans and plantations of Earth. Some may argue that humans are highly intelligent and emotionally capable of justifying our needs and demands. However, plants are also self-expressive using electromagnetic waves as a form of emotions. In an experiment conducted by scientists, plants can raise themselves by signalling their needs for water and nutrients. In this sense, can we still say humans are the only emotionally capable creatures to justify our needs. In this unbalanced hierarchy of humans being on top of the ecosystem, we developed this sense of selfishness and legitimacy to rule, even though we do no contribution to the entire world except for satisfying our selfish needs.

Even in the human society, equality is barely achieved within racial and sexual groups. Science fictions, music videos, or any form of media all portrait through a biased lens of distortion. We depict black as dangerous, or overly simplified comedians-like figures in movies. We depict women only as sexy, brainless animals and creatures that are succumb to men. All of these remind us designers that the mainstream bombarding of information cannot be taken as what it is. We need to think about issues in a prolonged timeline and examine every single choice we make as designer. Are we facilitating this tilted bias of perceptions of things? Or can we work together and rethink about how to correct it. The empire was built to rule people under the regime and kept us in the kingdom. It takes both courage and wits to challenge the foundations of the empire and help bring out a flattened, equal world.

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Response

I found Stephanie Wakefield's idea of Black Loop fascinating. It is extremely difficult for us to imagine a world without humans. That's why she mentioned in her work *"Field Notes from the Anthropocene: Living in the Back Loop"*, what we are seeing as apocalypse might be just one stamp of the timeline of the Earth. Wakefield defines a concept that explains the dynamics of ecosystem as four stages: exploitation, conservation, release, and reorganization. What we called the climate change right now is in fact one sign of the Black Loop, when individual organisms or small groups of individual organisms interact across
previously unbridgeable divides and in doing create something fundamentally original.

Someone also mentioned this perspective of the a sustainable world for humans in a speculative design class. In our discussion, a student mentioned that instead of trying to change the world and keeping the climate in its old balanced state, wouldn't it make more sense to come up with adaption techniques. If we cast our world perspective to be a little bit longer, and eliminate the human-centric view. We could probably understand the facts of climate change better. Instead of squandering all the resources on making trivial improvements to keep global emissions and temperatures in check, it is also worth developing a series of disaster protocols to adapt humans better to more extreme environments. Can we make humans multi-planetary species? Can humans sustain daily activities in a drier and hotter environment. In the ecosystem, can we imagine to place humans lower in the food chain. All of these assumptions are valuable foundries of our emergency tactics in the face of climate change. Especially, what if all our existing approaches just simply don't have time to truly implement in case of immediate changes?

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Response

The 2016 presidential election was a shocker to me and a lot of people around meself. As young college students, most of our information comes social media and our friends-generated contents. Since we not only share the same major, engineering and science, but most of us are from the great liberal state of California as well, it is extremely difficult to have any conservative news penetrate through our campus and the Newsfeed. While the homogeneousness of news is already a major problem for the mass society. Flawed information or even fake news can cause more damage to our judgement. Whether Russians have interference the 2016 election still remains unclear, one thing we can be sure of is the fact that "20% of all political tweets were made by bots". In a world where it is non-trivial to tell the differences between humans and bots, how are we supposed to interact and acquire the necessary pieces of the truth to sustain our democracy?

There are barely anything individuals can do, as the article, *The Algorithmic Democracy* suggests. Large technological companies occupy the vast resources on creating algorithms and setting rules that can affect every aspect of our life. While we do have to power to boycott certain companies and stop using their service. Other companies replacing them will continue to exploit artificial intelligence to monetize their products. One thing to remember is that, AI still requires humans to train and set up several fundamental parameters to start running. And humans interventions are naturally biased in its choices.

What we can do, in this case, is to simply ask more questions and educate the people around us: who benefits from a system that learns from users; what the AI's goals are; whether we, the users have a right to know how the AI was trained? And finally, who can be the ultimate arbiter of our information sources.

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Response

The digital world is binary. It has to do with the technology that is benefiting us nowadays. Electric signals are binary, computing is binary, until we realize that our modern world that was constructed on these science revolutions is also becoming binary. In fact, circuitry and electric signals were analog back then. The reason digital technologies replaced analog is due to the fact that digital signals are easier to encode and less subject to errors. If we keep the history of our technological world in mind, maybe one day some new technology is going to replace the binary and digital world again.

I do believe that our lives should be analog, it can take any values, any shapes and any colors. Donna Haraway mentioned in the *Cyborg Manifesto* that her worry was that this rigid boundaries that define our world become norms so that no one will even think out alter them. This mentality of keep everything under control kept our world running more efficiently, but also at the same time greatly hinder our creativity and the curiosity to explore the undiscovered. Boundaries do not mean the end of our globe; within our societies, there are parallel worlds and subcultures that stay submerged under our mainstream attentions. Can we argue that they are not part of the world also? However, one thing we have to keep in mind is that not everything new or cool can be seen as progressions of the human race. This techno-progressive worldview can be dangerous when all we care about is trying to be the next "queer" or different things. The implications of every event or movements that happen in our society can be far-reaching effects not only on the individual level, but also grandier levels like society, government, country, and the entire human race.