

The Creepy Rise of Real Companies Spawning Fictional Design

Speculative design tasks creators with building a better world through public thought experiments. But with companies like Google adapting the practice, it can feel like a taunting display of power.

[Felix Salmon](#) 05.30.2018 08:00 AM

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In 2011, the Dutch industrial giant Philips unveiled something it called the [Microbial Home](#). It was a zero-waste, self-sustaining vision of the future, where household appliances ran on food and human waste, powered by a “bio-digester island” that converted food scraps into methane, which in turn powered a range and heated water.

The home was not a prototype of anything Philips actually intended to manufacture. Instead, it came out of the company’s Design Probes program, which was rooted in the discipline of speculative design.

Speculative design is design freed from the constraints of practicality, design intended to change the way we think, about today’s world and tomorrow’s. Its intellectual godparents, Tony Dunne and Fiona Raby, [explain](#) that they’re in the business of posing “what if” questions, using design “as a tool to create not only things but ideas.”

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Often speculative design can envisage terrifying or dystopian futures. If you share

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Dunne and Raby's aspiration to "increase the odds of achieving desirable futures," it's important to face these possibilities actively. As a result, much of speculative design is deliberately discomfiting. Some of it isn't: A

friendly yet futuristic concept car, like Honda's [sports EV](#), still falls under speculative design.

At the core of speculative design, however, are unsettling visions, in the tradition of *Brave New World*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Blade Runner*, or *Black Mirror*. Speculative dystopia is a tradition that can be traced back 200 years, to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, but it's a tradition limited, mostly, to the world of novels and fiction. Speculative designers work a similar vein but do so in the world of designed objects, be they physical or digital.

So what happens when speculative design goes corporate? When the practice retreats behind the walls and NDAs of giant Silicon Valley companies, it loses its status as a public provocation and becomes instead something much more troubling. At its most disturbing, it's a way of giving a company's employees permission to think the unthinkable—to grapple with how omniscient and powerful that corporate entity might become.

All large companies employ designers, who, depending on the industry and the company, often carry great status. Carmakers tend to lionize designers; Apple, too, is a haven for them. And at companies where designers are held in high regard, they are often given a bit more free rein to indulge their imaginations rather than simply creating the next product.

At Google, this free rein, in 2016, resulted in [a video entitled](#) *The Selfish Ledger*, which was leaked to the Verge earlier this month. As a grad-seminar provocation, it's really well done, with a professional-sounding

voice-over and lots of surprisingly clear explanations of Lamarckian epigenetics. The conceit is that as our lives become increasingly measured and recorded, the “ledger”—the digital record of all our activity—will start to influence not only our own behavior, but that of the entire species. It will become a Lamarckian epigenome: a set of information, not unlike the human gene, which seeks to replicate itself across generations.

The idea is not particularly far-fetched: Facebook researchers have already [successfully tinkered](#) with hundreds of thousands of users’ emotions, and the [study of epigenomics](#) has produced significant measurable effects. We construct our environment; our environment constructs us. Given the undeniable and constant effect that Google and Facebook have on our lives and our existence, it’s at least theoretically possible that they could end up altering our genetic makeup.

Google’s video was put together by Nick Foster, the head of design at mysterious Alphabet subsidiary X. Foster is a cofounder of the Near Future Laboratory, a shop that promoted something called “design fiction” at much the same time as Dunne and Raby were thinking about speculative design. *The Selfish Ledger* is clearly a work of design fiction, and an X spokesperson [told The Verge](#) that it was also a work of speculative design:

“We understand if this is disturbing -- it is designed to be. This is a thought-experiment by the Design team from years ago that uses a technique known as ‘speculative design’ to explore uncomfortable ideas and concepts in order to provoke discussion and debate. It’s not related to any current or future products.”

It’s notable here that Alphabet is not using Foster’s own “design fiction” language, and instead is using Dunne and Raby’s “speculative design.” The reason, surely, is that speculative design is a respected academic discipline

with clearly-understood parameters and a not-entirely-friendly attitude towards the technology industry. Design fiction, in contrast, was built [on the idea](#) that fact and fiction frequently swap properties and that by designing something fictional and fanciful, you might be laying the groundwork for something entirely real.

When I asked Dunne what the difference was between speculative design and design fiction, he said that “design fiction tends to focus more on technology-based video scenarios and stays closer to reality...Whereas the kind of speculative design we do tends to focus more on objects for exhibitions that rarely attempt to convince the viewer they are real. They are props for thinking with. Speculative fiction is more critical of the kind of technological narratives put forward by the tech industry.”

Was *The Selfish Ledger* Foster’s attempt to warn Googlers of the possible dystopian consequences of their actions—an Alphabet version, if you will, of the famous [Boz memo](#) at Facebook? Did Foster really want to call his video “The Ugly,” and warn the company he worked for (confidentially, internally) that there was a risk it would go too far?

That’s the impression X is trying to give, when the company talks about the video as a piece of speculative design. But it’s not a Black Mirror episode, it’s not self-evidently horrific, and to many Googlers, it might even be an exciting harbinger of technological possibility. What’s more, the video is not some kind of ancient history, as X’s “from years ago” phrasing might imply: it was created at the end of 2016, right around the time that Donald Trump was being elected president.

The Selfish Ledger, then, is clearly a piece of design fiction more than it is a piece of speculative design. It wasn’t really designed to be disturbing, it just is disturbing. And it’s particularly disturbing by dint of the fact that it was

made by Google, in secret, for internal distribution only. Some speculative design thinkers, like Genevieve Bell, are very happy to talk in public and in detail about what they do. She does it now, at Australian National University, and she did it in her previous job, too, when she worked as a vice president at Intel.

X, by contrast, is a mysterious organization which is opaque even to most Googlers. The loss-making Alphabet subsidiary exists precisely to think outlandish thoughts and to turn them into reality: that's its *raison d'être*. In that context, *The Selfish Ledger* looks very much like an aspiration, rather than a warning.

As Dunne says, the use of speculative design within corporations can be a good thing, if it's used to explore the cultural, ethical or political implications of an idea, and if it's done in public. "A dystopian vision created by a large tech corporation is going to be more scary than one produced by a small design studio or developed as entertainment for TV," Dunne says, "especially if it is stripped of context and its purpose is unclear."

He continues: "As tech companies become more powerful, and as the scale and complexity of their technologies mean there are many more possible unforeseen outcomes and implications, perhaps companies should be obliged to explore and make public any potential implications of the technologies they are developing."

It's a very good suggestion. Foster's video is disturbing, but it's disturbing mainly because it was kept secret, for internal X use only. Google is too big and too powerful to be trusted to build the future of humanity in a top-secret lab.

It's time, then, that Alphabet becomes a bit more like Intel during the Genevieve Bell years: It has no choice but to start engaging more with the

broader design community and the public at large. If it doesn't, publics and governments around the world are going to start asking some very pointed questions about what it's hiding.