Four Futures

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Enchanted Objects opens with a premonition of "Corbusier's utopia"; a world of empty, rectilinear spaces devoid of objects (which are to be seen as clutter), uniform surfaces with no immediately apparent functionality. That is reality of the so-coined "Terminal World" – a trend in the built environment and a lens through which to conceptualize human interaction devices that consists exclusively of the preoccupation with screens. David Rose names this trend after the terminal, the textual, screen-only mode of interaction with early computers that in many permutations has persisted to this day. The smartphone, too, is subsumed in the monoculture of the Terminal world - only replacing the cursor for the finger.

The text explores alternative lenses to from which to envision the future of technology with regards to human interaction. How might one imbue your common artefact with augmented properties whilst maintaining the form, and *the appeal* of the original object, without adding yet another screen? Rose's very prescient exploration of technology through the lenses of animism, prosthesis, enchantment and digital displays paint visions of the future more *human* than the one we are so far headed in.

Part One deals with the aforementioned domination of "Terminal World" and the profit incentive that keeps it alive at the expense of innovation. Rose dubs this "black-slab incrementalism" (19), where each new product simply ups the specifications of the last's, perhaps with some new gimmick here and there, yet the interface of the screen fulfills no fundamental human desire, and is certainly not magical. Indeed, a very clear notion is established about what such a magical object might be; *the bag of gold that is always full,* or the *flying carpet* are objects with a cultural tradition and natural wonder about them. Rose speaks of delightful objects that work on the terms of the user (do not confuse or render them incompetent) and have an immediacy in both function and emotional impact.

The first deviation from the screen is in that of the prosthesis as presented in *part two.* The idea of enhancing the human form such that its aesthetics are unaltered but our abilities (sight, strength, thought, etc..) are enhanced - much like a superhero and superpowers.

The HUD and the ill-fated Google Glasses are brought up as the first real world examples of such augmenting devices. Whilst the fate of the glasses project was not yet known at the time of writing, the general public at large chose to reject them, echoing the concerns Rose spoke about in contrast to his idealised vision of the glasses before donning the prototype. These being the nature of the glasses as just another little screen, with all the faults that carries with it, and how it would not augment life

but instead distract from it, requiring the user to look up and specifically interact with the limited display of the device.
A point that really resonated with me was that of 'relativistic sensorial views' being more isolating. A foretelling, it seems, of the future brought on by Facebook and *bubbling* (Boutin). How one may filter reality with devices (such as Google Glass) to tune their literal senses to their tastes. The chasm in empathy this tailoring of reality can create is both horrid and unfortunately already true. Many episodes of the BBC anthology *Black Mirror* deal with the technological distortion of reality, with the episode *Arkangel* specifically focusing on these ramifications (Gilbert).

Animism, and our propensity to project human characteristics on all that vaguely resembles human behaviour is the focal point of *Part Three.* All throughout I was thinking of a certain robot that has advertised to me ad nauseum, Anki's *Vector.* This is a always-online *Wall-e*-esque robot toy that appeals with neoteny in the same fashion that a small animal might. It is effectively a *Tamagotchi* with wifi (Statt). This little robot fit in Rose's larger discussion of what we conceptualise as an acceptable aesthetic for robots; that they seem singularly-purposed or relatively powerless so we may continue to feel unthreatened as the generalists of our planet, artificial in enough ways so as not to enter the uncanny valley (whereupon we would scrutinize every deviation from the human form), yet useful enough to merit their own existence. It's a remarkably tough puzzle, oft approached in the wrong direction (approximating the image of mankind). To this, then, comes the final part.

Enhancing the regular thing with all the technological marvels we have at our disposal: this is the enchanted object. Rose opens this chapter with prototypes of a wallet (with all the functional aesthetics of a wallet - no cumbersome headgear of battery packs) that use real account data to modify their behaviour. Like something out of a fairy tale, the wallet puts up a fight being opened when your balance is low. With the idea of enchanted objects exemplified, Rose these objects to be 'avatars for services' when considering their feasibility from a financial perspective. The SaaS, in more technical jargon, solves the half-life problem that comes to mind when designing these objects, that the 'expiry date' for software is often much shorter than hardware. Early 2000s luxury automobiles exemplify this perfectly with really dated dashboard UI designs, often making the car look older than it is.
The modular architecture solution proposed by Rose is effectively that of the Software as a Service, providing a stream of minor features and fixes throughout the life of the physical product.

Consumerism strikes an odd balance between rehashing the old and delivering on the truly new. On one end, it is so much safer to sell *mark II* instead of a wholly new thing, yet on the other, the promise of a monopoly with the very latest and greatest has its allure. Perhaps a Cambrian explosion is due,

though I would bet on such a thing only after the point where people begin to miss the tactile world of wood and stone. So far the cold sheen of an all-black smartphone seems still like second nature for a more enchanted paradigm to take hold. IoT, perhaps, might change the steady beat of the OLED machine - but that's in the realm of tech enthusiasts and the wealthy for now. All the same, the wave of nostalgia-laden and 'simpler times' lifestyles that are in vogue now, might hint to a slow shift back into using tools that don't look like a Kubrick prop.

References

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Technologists have already shown that the price thresholds of today will be history tomorrow. So long as people delight in enchantment—in its utility, simplicity, and wonder—the cost of technology will vanish as a barrier to enchanting things.