

CRITICAL REFLECTION # 1
Our Symbiotic Life - An Exploration of Interspecies Relations
by Katja Budinger and Frank Heidmann

Design fiction is an innovative way to rethink the tired concept of 'problem-solving'. We are faced with many seemingly impossible scenarios: the eventual crashing and burning of capitalism at the rate it is going at, the environment eventually being unsustainable given our current consumption habits, etcetera. While we can make projections of the future, these are hardly totally accurate, and can therefore render our efforts useless. Instead, design fiction embodies a fictional narrative that avoids hardcoded statistics and instead focuses on a present to near future time period, allowing us to come up with scenarios that we can creatively solve through prototyping.

Budinger and Heidmann's project uses prototyping to display and solve scenarios in a creative way that is not often considered. Focusing on the connections between people, plants, and technology, they prototyped their way to addressing plausible futures that would allow room for creative solutions to arise. This way, concrete goals can be made and steps can be taken. Their three scenarios are Harmony, Invasion, On Demand, and Bottle Garden.

Harmony seems almost utopian in nature- people, plants, and technology are all working together in cohesion. Self driving landscapes move alongside people as they walk to a destination, and some even include urban crops that can occasionally be harvested by the community. There is an app (a journey planner) that allows users to decide on speed or enjoying the journey. This concept is about humanity advancing with our wellbeing as opposed to economic growth. Climate conditions can improve through our lower use of resources and energy.

Invasion weaves a darker scenario, pitting invasive species and drones against each other. In this scenario, climate change is pushed by the wayside in favor of using the earth's resources for war. On Demand is less directly cynical, but looks at these relationships through a consumerist lens, considering how plants become commodified and used as accessories to our social status. Bottle Garden follows the scenario of pollution and waste and explores the possibility of a new algae that contains a finicky power source to charge electronics for poor people. This paints a picture of plants struggling to adapt to their new environment.

All of these concepts are abstract: that is, none of these scenarios have yet occurred. However, design fiction works to make these abstract concepts concrete. They allow us to ruminate on the societal values and ideas that drive these scenarios, bringing a lot of attention

to our present society in a way that isn't simply forecasting a possible future. The reason why they are so compelling is because they springboard off of certain values and realities that we currently hold in society, and simply push it a few steps forward. Discussing many possible futures based on these values informs us what sort of future we would want as opposed to what we wouldn't want. Through speculation and exploration, we can learn a lot about how the world currently operates and if we want to continue down that avenue or not, and why.

Design fiction is ideal for any educational scenario. This creative way of thinking not only pushes people to consider the political, social, environmental, and other views of the world, but allows us to work within those realms in a creative manner. Alison Hardy explores this through the Design and Technology curriculum in most primary and secondary schools in England. Using design fiction to structure classes by learning about technology and the world, and allowing students to actively engage with the world through these creative scenarios, can develop critical thinking and encourage creativity. Students can become engaged with the content by addressing scenarios that correlate with their own values, leading them to be more passionate about their ideas and eventual prototypes. It also encourages a new way of thinking that can possibly reframe the way we look at the world through humanization of global issues.

Additional Works Cited

1. Ahmadpour, N., et al. "Co-Creating and Assessing Future Wellbeing Technology Using Design Fiction." *She Ji*, vol. 5, no. 3, pp. 209–230. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1016/j.sheji.2019.08.003. Accessed 5 Dec. 2019.
2. Dunne, Anthony and Fiona Raby. *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming*. The MIT Press, 2013. Project MUSE muse.jhu.edu/book/28148.
3. Hardy, Alison. "Using Design Fiction to Teach New and Emerging Technologies in England." *Technology & Engineering Teacher*, vol. 78, no. 4, Dec. 2018, pp. 16–20. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eue&AN=133398159&site=eds-live.