SPECULATIVE DESIGN—DESIGN AS CONVERSATION

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Speculative design has promise as a way that design can explore alternate possibilities for the future—and looking at it from a critical perspective reveals potential challenges and opportunities with the approach. Thinking about inclusivity, speculative design isn't just a chance to think about how future objects and services might impact end users. It is also an opportunity to learn how to facilitate discussions about the future where people will feel secure enough to take part. When speculative design is used in a more provocative way, it can challenge people to participate in (or facilitate) difficult conversations, with the possible reward of getting participants out of their comfort zones and into a place where they are more able to empathize and reflect.

What is Speculative Design?

At a roundtable on library innovation hosted by the Aspen Institute, participants noted that, along with establishing cultures of innovation and committed leadership, "new narratives about the library's role in society" would be key factors driving transformation in libraries[1]. Roundtables like this are just one way libraries explore future possibilities. Speculative design could be another. Like its relative, critical design, it is "a form of research inquiry that uses the creation of provocative artifacts to challenge established assumptions, encouraging people to shift perspectives and think in new ways[2]."

According to Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, two driving forces behind approaches like this, speculative design "aims to open up new perspectives on what are sometimes called wicked problems, to create spaces for discussion and debate about alternative ways of being, and to inspire and encourage people's imaginations to flow freely[3]." Thinking about new narratives for libraries, and in the context of this year's conference theme of inclusivity, I was especially curious about 'alternate ways of being' in the description above. How might speculative design and a concern for inclusivity intersect? The goal of this workshop was to allow participants to get to know speculative design experientially, and then to encourage them to approach it from a critical perspective so that we could think through this as a group.

1   Amy K. Garmer, "Libraries in the Exponential Age: Moving from the Edge of Innovation to the Center of Community," accessed April 14, 2019, https://csreports.aspeninstitute.org/documents/Libraries_Exponential_Age.pdf.

2   Rachel Ivy Clarke, "Using critical design to explore the future of libraries." *Library Hi Tech News*, Vol. 34, No. 9 (2017)

3   Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming.* Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. (2013)

Examples

We began the workshop by looking at some examples of speculative and critical design. All links were valid as of August 2018:

• *The Realest Real*, directed by Carrie Brownstein
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VbfSRa5BRhk>)

• *The Alternet*, by Sarah Gold
(<https://www.sarah.gold/work.html#Alternet>)

• *Dressing the Meat of Tomorrow*, by James King
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xmqHnBp8odg>)

• *Smoke Stacks*, by the University of Chicago Game Changer Lab
(<https://ci3.uchicago.edu/portfolio/smokestacks/>)

• *Thresholdland*, by Jörg Lukas Matthei[4]

• *Killing Me Softly*, by Fobazi Ettarh
(<http://fobettarh.github.io/Killing-Me-Softly/>)

• *United Micro-Kingdoms*, by Dunne and Raby[5]

• *The Driverless City*, from the Illinois Institute of Technology
(<https://www.id.iit.edu/driverlesscity/>)

• *The Selfish Ledger*, attributed to Google[6]

• *Skip Showers for Beef*, by the Yes Men
(<http://www.skipshowersforbeef.com>)

• *New York Times Special Edition*, by the Yes Men
(<http://yeslab.org/nyt>)

Although these projects all fall under the umbrella of either speculative or critical design, I was especially interested in the way they move back and forth between building empathy and being provocative. To me, a project like Killing Me Softly was designed to build empathy. It's a text-based choose-your-own-adventure game about microaggressions. You play as one of two characters: Alex is a white, able-bodied gay man, and Leslie is a black, straight woman with a disability. In the game you start a new job and experience coworkers saying things that are more or less hurtful. You get to choose how to respond, but as you play Alex or Leslie's stress level increases.

I found this project very thought-provoking, and as I played I realized that it was talking about microaggressions of which I haven't always personally been aware. I wondered if there were layers to the narrative of the game

4   For more information about this project see: Patrick Jagoda, "Gamification and Other Forms of Play." Boundary 2, Vol. 40 No. 2. (2013)

5   For more information about this project, see: Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. (2013)

6   Felix Salmon, "The Creepy Rise of Real Companies Spawning Fictional Design", Wired, May 30, 2018. Accessed April 14, 2019 https://www.wired.com/story/the-creepy-rise-of-real-companies-spawning-fictional-design/

that I still didn't perceive. It would be good to talk about experiences playing the game with a group—but this raises a challenge for the groups who want to have this discussion. Ideally they would do what they can to provide a space for participants where they will feel emotionally secure, but also where people can grow—possibly by making mistakes.

In comparison, United Micro-Kingdoms is a project that was designed to be deliberately provocative. It explores a fictional future England that has been divided up into four states, each with its own technology and political identity. Although the project includes small, toy-sized models of the modes of transportation from each state, the point of the project is serious—to debate the desirability of each political approach, and to weigh, for example, the pros and cons between authoritarian and liberal forms of government. In these cases, designers or people leading discussions should build skill in facilitating difficult conversations. In practice, a group might more or less agree (e.g. they might generally prefer liberal forms of government). But working in a provocative manner and getting beyond broad strokes, it seems clear to me that speculative design could surface differences of opinion that would be quite difficult to confront and discuss.

Doing Speculative Design

Dunne and Raby built their speculative design practice through a process of experimentation that lasted several years. In our workshop sessions, once we finished looking at examples, we did a quick activity to continue to explore speculative design by doing. The activity was based on a project from the Yes Men, an artist/activist duo. In their original New York Times Special Edition project, the Yes Men produced a fictional version of the New York Times that is essentially a fantasy about the future. It included stories like "Iraq War Ends", "Nation Sets Its Sights on Building Sane Economy", and "Maximum Wage Law Succeeds." Once the paper was produced, the Yes Men distributed it on the streets of New York, to the surprise and amusement of the New Yorkers who encountered it.

In our workshop, each table was provided with blank mockups of the cover page of the New York Times. Their task was to write headlines and stories for the paper, and to use magazines, scissors and glue to make collaged illustrations for it. Although I didn't require it, I encouraged them to use the exercise as an opportunity to think about inclusivity and the future of libraries. I projected a slide with IDEO's seven tips for brainstorming[7] and the groups got to work.

Results among groups varied. One participant said that "this approach works for the kinds of people that think this way." However, when groups found the approach productive, I was impressed at how quickly they

7   IDEO, "Effective Brainstorming Techniques" Accessed April 14, 2019, https://www.ideou.com/pages/brainstorming.

were able to work. In one session a group came up with the idea of a future vaccine that would prevent people from being able to perceive differences. In this version of the future, words like "inclusivity" were no longer necessary. What made this especially noteworthy to me was the genuine discussion in that group about whether the effects of a vaccine like this would be positive or not.

A Critique of Brainstorming

One of the good things about encouraging participants to approach speculative design from a critical perspective is that they approached the workshop itself in that way. Since our activity was essentially a brainstorming exercise, they took it as an opportunity to provide me with feedback on brainstorming in this context.

This was a chance to see how our brainstorming rules were not optimized for certain topics! When the rules say, "encourage wild ideas," they don't mention anything about the emotional safety of participants. Maybe this style of idea generation is naturally limited: it's useful for some things, like imagining new product features, but it's not useful for confronting things like problems around inclusivity.

One participant mentioned "things that were difficult to discuss" and "things that went unsaid" in the session. There is nothing about giving people chances to get to know each other gradually in IDEO's rules, and in practice, brainstorming sessions are almost always optimized for speed. They are also designed to produce "one best idea," which can have the effect of drowning out diverse opinions. In a podcast about complicating diversity and inclusion, Maha Bali talks about the difficult work of creating spaces where non-majority voices can be heard[8]. To me, all of this points to reasons why brainstorming could be extended, or other idea generation techniques could be explored, so that these sessions could become legitimately more inclusive.

A critique of Speculative Design

Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby admit that they have a very optimistic picture of the potential of design. "Although essential most of the time, design's in-built optimism can greatly complicate things, first, as a form of denial that the problems we face are more serious than they appear, and second, by channeling energy and resources into fiddling with the world out there rather than the ideas and attitudes inside our heads that shape the world out there."

8   Maha Bali, "Complicating 'Inclusion' & 'Diversity' in Education." *Pushing the Edge with Greg Curran.* Accessed April 19, 2019, https://pushingtheedge.org/complicating-diversity-and-inclusion/.

There is nothing to say that speculative design can "solve" complex, wicked problems. Luiza Prado de O. Martins questions "speculative and critical design's aspirations to sociological critique within the larger framework of diverse oppressions in capitalist, heteronormative, sexist, racist and classist societies[9]." I value that critique, but at the same time I am (cautiously) optimistic about speculative design as an approach. This workshop was an opportunity to work with speculative design experientially, and to see how a group responds to projects like this. We got a sense of how speculative design can stress test a group's ability to discuss difficult ideas.

It provides a challenge to create environments where those kinds of discussions can take place. My hope is that the reward for this challenge is worth it. Martins continues: "whereas words might be difficult to assimilate—especially words that incite us to leave our comfort zones— experiences are far more effective tools for provoking estrangement, discomfort, and ultimately, reflection."

More than anything, I am excited about the critical aspects of speculative design. They're a chance for design to learn and grow in new ways. As we move into the future I think this attitude could be helpful for user experience work in general, to make our concern for "the user" genuinely more inclusive.

9   Luiza Prado de O. Martins, L.,
    "Privilege and Oppression:
    Towards a Feminist Speculative
    Design." Accessed April 14,
    2019, http://www.drs2014.org/
    media/654480/0350-file1.pdf.

10 Isabel Gonzalez-Smith, Juleah
    Swanson, and Azusa Tanaka,
    "Unpacking identity: Racial, ethnic,
    and professional identity and
    academic librarians of color." *In The
    librarian stereotype: Deconstructing
    perceptions and presentations of
    information work.* Association of
    College and Research Libraries,
    Chicago, IL (2014)

Thanks

To prepare for this workshop I reached out to Isabel Gonzalez-Smith, one of the authors of *Unpacking identity: Racial, ethnic, and professional identity and academic librarians of color*[10], for advice about facilitating a workshop about inclusivity. She was incredibly helpful, and our conversation gave me a lot to work on. Thanks also to Amy Killebrew of Columbia College, who had the original idea to use the Yes Men's New York Times Special Edition project as an exercise to explore speculative design. And thanks to all workshop participants, who got out of their comfort zones and helped work through this material with me, and who provided feedback and ideas about how it felt to experience these kinds of projects. I appreciate all of those conversations very much.