
The Age Of Imagination: A History of Experiential Futures 2006-2031

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Abstract

Imagination is a critical public resource. However, in Western culture, as late as the turn of the 21st century, it was primarily thought of as a fragmented and personal property of individual consciousness. This paper examines the recent flourishing of transdisciplinary practices for cultivating shared public imagination, focusing on the generation-long period circa 2005-2030, now known as the Age of Imagination. The historic emergence during this time of design fiction, together with other experiential futures practices consciously scaffolding collective imagination, proved to be a turning point for collective human capacity – not only, as many initially recognised, for practical design applications on a modest scale, but also for shaping history itself. Acknowledging a cultural debt to long-standing and diverse strands of imaginative activity including storytelling, theatre, simulation, prototyping, and the 20th century tradition of futures studies (aka strategic foresight), two practitioners who helped bring this new tradition into being pause to look back upon a quarter century of astonishing change. In the process, they acknowledge the growing significance of seventh generation ritual computing technologies to the Age of Imagination.

Author Keywords

Experiential Futures; Design Fiction; Prototyping; Immersive Theatre; Foresight; Futures Studies; Ritual Computing

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Introduction

The history of humanity is also a history of imagination. From cave paintings to *2001: A Space Odyssey*, to today's neurocinema; from ancient China's *I Ching* to Kobayashi Virtual Concern's groundbreaking *Prof-eSee*; from the shamans of Siberia to Tehran's celebrated back-room imaginists: perhaps nothing is more characteristic of our species than our incessant manufacture of representations of alternate realities, and the endless quest for possibility's horizon.

And a good thing, too, for it requires a prodigious act of imagination to remember just how different things were even a mere generation ago.

Although the story reaches back much further, some sense of the remarkably accelerated uptake and development of this field can be gained from a brief timeline of the past 25 years. The shift from technology-themed, object-oriented prototypes of early design fiction [19] — presented mainly in stand-alone artifacts and videos — towards increasingly immersive, participatory, synthetic, and richly multidimensional experiential futures may be seen below.

2006 - Science fiction writer and design critic Bruce Sterling's *Visionary in Residence* is published, coining the term 'design fiction'. [20]

2006 - "Hawaii 2050", a statewide public planning process, is launched with a set of four physically immersive scenarios. [5]

2007 - Several different futures for Honolulu's Chinatown (respectively exploring the consequences of gentrification, a bird flu outbreak, and mainland Chinese sponsorship of Hawaiian independence) are brought to life in the streets via tangible artifacts. Controversy ensues as city officials are temporarily convinced that some key neighbourhood properties have been gentrifying without a permit. [5]

2007 - World Without Oil, an early "alternate reality game" set against the backdrop of a hypothetical oil crisis, launches just months before an actual spike in oil prices. [8]

2008 - The Museum of Modern Art opens the landmark exhibition "Design and the Elastic Mind", bringing to a mass audience many "critical design" future artifacts of Anthony Dunne, Fiona Raby, and their protégés at the Royal College of Art. [2] [7]

2008 - A future-dated "special edition" of the *New York Times*, produced by culture-jamming activists the Yes Men, invites commuters to celebrate the (hypothetical, obviously) end of the War in Iraq. [5] [23]

2008 - The world's first 'massively multiplayer forecasting game', *Superstruct*, is hosted by Institute for the Future. Thousands of players co-create hypothetical solutions to real problems set in 2019. [5]

2009 - An alternate reality game about pandemic flu (*Coral Cross*, funded by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), is shockingly derailed by an actual pandemic just weeks before launch; a clear harbinger of the increasing hazards of accelerating change in the present overtaking our imaginings about the future. [1]

2010 - *The Futures of Everyday Life*, the first Ph.D. dissertation on the intersection of foresight and design, is completed. [5]

2011 - Amid the turmoil of the Arab Spring, Tunisian press, radio and TV outlets all report from #16Jin2014 for the entire day, helping get the population back to work. [16]

2012 - ByoLogyc's 2012 experiment runs in Toronto with a massively multiplayer simulation of a global pandemic, the "BRX Virus" convincing thousands that the end is nigh. [11]

2014 - the Body/Mind/Change exhibition at the TIFF Lightbox in Toronto invites hundreds of visitors to meld their minds with a 3D printed and personalized "Pod" neural interface that enables massively unsettling social gaming. [22]

2019 - The Pechora River Cult, comprised largely of international HCI experts and operating from an isolated mining town in Northern Russia, tests a prototype nanotechnological computing platform that mimics the induction of a shamanic ritual chronicled by explorers in the late 19th century. [12]

2021 - Fortune cookies distributed in Hong Kong's posh New Territories invite those who open them to "Channel their energy into something positive... for everyone. *Jambo*." Everyone who ingests the cookies reports experiencing a profound dream of China's domination of Central Africa in the year 2064. The originator of this designed fiction remains unknown, but is suspected to be a nootropic division of the People's Liberation Army. [10]

2022 - *Prof-eSee* launches: a supercomputer network designed by Kobayashi Virtual Concern to write and test natural language scenarios for the futures of the human race. Its outputs are rated by a focus-group of 18,000

individuals and statistically revealed to be better at concocting plausible tales of the future than any human. The stories it delivers to mass audiences branch off a single scenaric premise that is customized according to each reader's social media profile. [13]

2024 - *Prof-eSee* is relaunched as *Dreamnet* on a fully Open Source basis. Transensory renderings and adaptations of the scenarios are delivered seamlessly across channels as videos, headlines, and the profiles of fictional characters. The average participant in the program encounters over 168 touchpoints with the future scenarios created by *Dreamnet* in a given day. [14]

2025 - The Finnish electoral process trials a week-long participatory simulation of key candidates' visions for the country addressing a (mandatory) twenty-year time horizon. Within three years, the process becomes standard across the Nordic region. The remainder of the Eurasian Union follows suit by 2030. [15]

2030 - Last month, at a landmark visiongaming session convened on *Dreamnet* by the exponentially-growing Global Governance Meetup, approximately half a billion participants experience a simultaneous epiphany. Initiates universally refuse to disclose any details of their revelation experience but vocally encourage others to join the next session. [9]

A key conclusion which consideration of this historical trajectory invites is the fact, so clear in hindsight, that much of the initial excitement and thinking surrounding "design fiction" was surprisingly narrow in its focus on technological artifacts. The meme's spread gave many designers a welcome and probably overdue opportunity to reframe their craft's potential in more creative, speculative terms. However, both the material-object (vs. systemic- contextual) connotations of the term "design", and the fanciful connotations of the term "fiction" worked against the wider realization - which did not arise until experiential futures began to gain currency - that making new stories and prototypes can take any number of forms. Whatever scaffolds and enables thought and feeling about future possibilities is fair game. As humans, we're all "worlding", all the time - designers just a bit more intensively than most. [Haldenby] And the more comprehensive or immersive the intervention, the more effectively future-shaping (i.e., catalytic of actual change) it is liable to be.

A second remark to make is that (perhaps ironically) it is difficult to forecast the impact of the convergence of these accelerating technosocial trends. Our research points to the crucial importance of creating a new research group within the Association for Computing Machinery dedicated to further exploration of Human-Future Interaction, as suggested in 2007 by Senator Jason Tester [Tester, personal correspondence], in tandem with the agenda of the Human-Computer Interaction special interest group.

The impactful innovations and transformative social breakthroughs recounted in the chronology in this abstract might have sounded like dreams (or nightmares) 50 - or even 20 - years ago, but as we enter the fourth decade of the twenty-first century, what was once the realm of design fiction has rapidly become reality. The Age of Imagination is well and truly upon us. Indeed, it's truer than ever to declare today: the future is already here.

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