

Introducing Adversarial Design

Carl DiSalvo

We say design isn't political. We say design is political. But we rarely seem to talk about what we mean by "political." What does it mean for design to be political? And if design is political, what kinds of politics does it do?

Ok, so let's be clear. Design can be political.

There, that's done. Now let's get on to it.

Adversarial design is an attempt to provide one answer to the question of "What does it mean for design to be political?" Adversarial design is design that does the work of agonism. What is agonism? It is a political theory that emphasizes the potentially positive aspects of certain forms of political conflict. Adversarial design does the work of agonism in multiple ways: it expresses bias and divisive positions; it provides opportunities to participate in disputes over values, beliefs, and desires; and it models alternate socio-material configurations that demonstrate possible futures.

Why would we want this?

Let's assume that we want democracy. The first question to then ask is, "What kind of democracy do we want?" Democracy is not a single thing. The character of democracy is pluralistic. Democracy is not only deliberation and consensus. Democracy is not restricted to the rational discourse of a smooth public sphere. Democracy is also – and necessarily – contention, dissensus, and passion. This is crux of agonism as a theory of democracy — democracy is the capacity dispute and act against, the democratic endeavor is constant and ongoing questioning and controversy.

Agonism, however, is not just a theory of democracy. It is also a practice of democracy. Adversarial design is the practice of agonism through design. Adversarial design is not just thought about, it is made.

It's really a simple premise. When we make the world we put in place and set in motion certain affects, which both reflect and shape our lives and the lives of others. This is a political act because some values, beliefs, and desires are privileged, while others are obscured or dismissed. The task of adversarial design is to design things (goods, services, events, systems) that reveal the political qualities and implications of made

world, and also offer new material conditions and experiences that enable divergent political affairs.

The difficult aspect of adversarial design is that the work is never done. If the democratic endeavor is constant and ongoing questioning and controversy, then adversarial design is also constant and ongoing remaking of the world — revealing, articulating, and re-configuring over and again. There is no utopia to be achieved. There is just the need to never be at rest in our pursuit and enactment of pluralism.

Five Questions to Ask and Act On (in regard to Adversarial Design)

1. How does adversarial design fit into broader field of historical and contemporary political design practices? How does it fit into political practices outside of design proper? If one purpose of adversarial design is to foster new forms of political action and expression, how does it do this in concert with existing formal and informal social movements?
2. Much adversarial design comes in the form of objects that we consider, for example visualizations of hegemonic networks or speculative products. How do we to an adversarial design of objects to act with? For that matter, how do we move beyond objects, to develop an adversarial design of services, environments, and even organizations?
3. Is adversarial design a practice of experts only? Can we imagine and enact a kind of participatory adversarial design? Can adversarial design be a cooperative or collective endeavor, pursued by more diverse publics than is currently the case?
4. If agonism is radically pluralistic, how can we take better account of non-humans in our designs? Yes, actor-network theory provides a start, but mostly as an analytic perspective after the fact. How can we be pre-emptive in our consideration of non-humans? Put another way, how can we more effectively de-center the human in design?

The adversarial stance can never settle. Therefore, neither agonism nor even democracy can be considered as the ends of an inquiry into design and political. This, then, shapes the final question.

5. What are the limits of adversarial design? And for that matter, what are the limits of agonism? What new forms of democracy must be discovered? What new forms of democracy can design do the work of? And how?