

Design Fiction's Odd Present vs. Science Fiction's Near Future

J U L I A N B L E E C K E R

If there is anything to be gained from the Design Fiction practice it is the playful optimism that comes from "making things up." Making things up is playful and serious at the same time. It's playful in that one can speculate and imagine without the "yeah, but..." constraints that often come from the dour sensitivities of the way-too-grown-up pragmatists. It's serious because the ideas that are "made up" as little designed fictions — formed into props or little films or speculative objects — are materialized things that hold within them the story of the world they inhabit. There is the kernel of a near future, or a different now, or an un-history that begins the mind reeling at the possibilities of what could be. When an idea is struck into form we have learned to accept that as proof — a demonstration that this could be possible. The translation from an idea into its material form begins the proof of possibility. Props help. Things to think with and things to help us imagine what could be.



This is how the world around us is made, by people who imagine what could be and then go forth and make it material. Wheels did not suddenly appear on luggage, but there they are and it's hard to imagine that it didn't happen sooner.

Playfully, seriously making things up is how the world around us comes to be. Don't sit around and wait. Make up the world you want. Believe it. Tell its story. Inhabit it and it will become.

Design Fiction strides alongside of Science Fiction, obligating itself to fashion representation of what could be — whether that's a different present, a reassessment of the recent past, or a future likely to be obtained. It may be a reaction to a sense that Science Fiction has given up on the future, or ceded its remit to imagine the future. Perhaps Science Fiction has shifted to envisioning the differently present or the recently past. Ridley Scott recently said, "We have

done all we can do for Science-Fiction. After 2001: A Space Odyssey, Science-Fiction is dead."

Design Fiction mucks around in this odd present in which we live. Every year the future is held aloft in the hand at widely publicized consumer electronics trade shows. The press eats it up. It's the new science fiction. This is how we imagine the future. Through 100 million dollar trade shows. Through the trade's hand-held technologies and their odd mash-ups of telephone fitness devices brain wave TV remote controls. (No wonder the science-fiction literary has thrown in the towel. They'd do better as consulting engineers. What a great idea.) Our future is shown to us as made things — prototypes, or evocative objects that suggest, MacGuffin like, what they do. Objects that take batteries and have screens that goad us to massage them. Objects that cycle every 12-18 months and thence end up in a discard drawer or in a closet under last years' crap. Or on the Internet's closet, Craigslist.

Design Fiction's commitment is to create a legible, tangible, material representation of alternatives. It uses designed objects — props, prototypes, fakes, punks, speculative consumer electronics objects, evocative ingots of color, material and precision manufacturing, prompts, provocations, little films, atmospheres and visual moments — to start conversations about the future. Design Fiction embraces the cycles of obsolescence, the banal next-new-thing — but it does so in order to find chinks in the iron-clad cycle and find innovative alternatives to the mediocre experiences they inevitably deliver.

The emphasis of Design Fiction is on alternative worlds as represented through the things. These props are called "diegetic prototypes." They are objects that test an idea. The fact that they exist as material objects imply their existence in the same way an object's existence in a movie or play makes the object come to life. In some cases, those props spread ideas more effectively than could a laboratory prototype. Diegetic prototypes serve to tell a story about an object and start conversations, sometimes even before technical possibility has been considered. Diegetic prototypes implicate themselves as things that people would live with, rather than operating solely as technological, scientific or engineering possibility. They are designed, evocative, desirable, ineffable and imbued with a sense of imminent possibility, even necessity. They come across as things that actually make sense.

Design Fiction creates these things because they can help tell the stories about the worlds they occupy, without the stories being told in a typical narrative — and because telling good stories is hard. Making suggestive, evocative, compelling, curious objects is a designer's way of telling stories about worlds that could or should become.