

A Larger Reality

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"When life itself seems lunatic, who knows where madness lies? Perhaps to be too practical is madness. To surrender dreams – this may be madness. Too much sanity may be madness – and maddest of all: to see life as it is, and not as it should be!"

Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra's Don Quixote in *Man of La Mancha* by Dale Wasserman (1965).

Writing about design education at a time when in the West we are experiencing a major reconfiguring of geopolitical power relations and a shift towards inward-looking nationalism; the marketisation of seemingly every aspect of life, including education; increasing environmental instability and uncertainty; and the appearance of significant cracks in a political and economic system that, while generating vast wealth, has completely failed to ensure its fair distribution; it is hard to be optimistic. But I will try.

What if our approach to design education is wrong? What if educating designers to work with prevailing economic, social, technological and political realities – designing for how the world is now, has become a convenient conceit? What if teaching student designers to frame every issue, no matter how complex, as a problem to be solved squanders valuable creative and imaginative energy on the unachievable. What if design education's focus on 'making stuff real' perpetuates everything that is wrong with current reality, ensuring that all possible futures are merely extrapolations of a dysfunctional present?

If for a moment we were to abandon the tried and tested approaches of Western design education, approaches designed and built in the twentieth century but struggling to adapt to the realities of the twenty-first, where would the search for alternatives begin?

For me, it would have to be with the idea of reality, or more precisely, The Real, and how it is dealt with in Western design pedagogy, especially in relation to emerging technology. With few exceptions, at the heart of most current approaches to design education is a zealous focus on being realistic. By thinking within existing realities whether social, political, economic or technological, the ideas, beliefs and values that have gotten us into this very difficult situation are reproduced through design, endlessly. Yet the underlying logic driving the labelling of certain ideals, hopes and dreams as real and others as unreal is rarely challenged or even questioned, leading to the ongoing suppression of the design imagination.

As the current geopolitical situation is making very clear, just because something is impossible, does not mean it is not possible. In this light, it might be more realistic if design education prepared designers to be what writer Ursula K. Le Guin has called 'realists of a larger reality'. A reality that fully embraces the imagination and all that is yet to exist, or might never exist – what we currently think of as unreality.

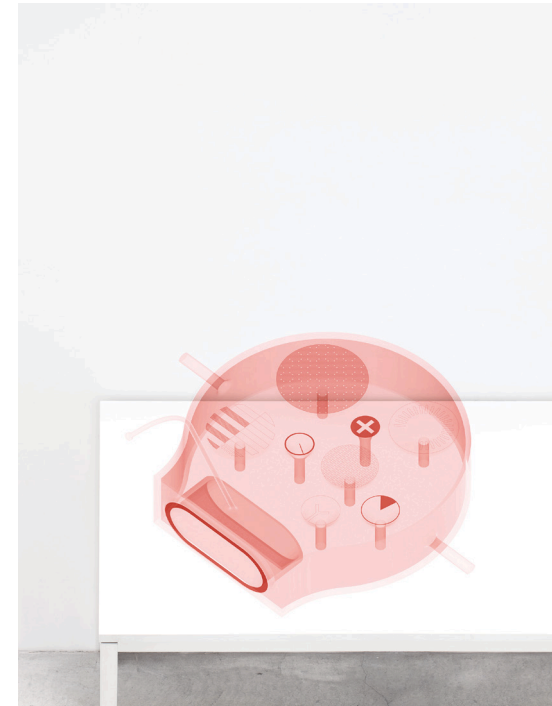
Such an education would encourage designers to be constructively unrealistic. But to do this, it would be necessary to embrace new ways of thinking that break with conventional wisdom and begin to experiment with other kinds of wisdom, much of which may feel counter-intuitive or even unpalatable.

THE FUTURE

One thing design does very well is give tangible form to ideas, ideals, attitudes, and ways of seeing the world, all expressed through the stuff of everyday life. But the kinds of stories currently being projected through Western design are pretty disheartening. A narrow range of technological narratives dominates the Western design imagination. Expressed through idealised products, services and scenarios, they focus on celebrating

unfettered consumption and technological progress; economic growth regardless of cost to the planet, people and other species; denial of impending environmental doom; and the facilitation of a technologically mediated form of group-think. They are so prevalent that it is becoming increasingly difficult to imagine other possibilities. But this is exactly what we need to do – to imagine radically different ways of being. Ways of being, currently deemed unrealistic.

Whole new worlds are imagined by writers, film-makers, and artists. Could this approach be integrated into design education so design schools could become a source of alternative ideas and counter narratives, materialised through design, that provoke thought and further imagining about the kind of worlds people wish to live in rather than prescribing any one particular future or communicating a vision of how things will, or should be?



Ethiculator from *Not Here, Not Now* (2014)

The Ethiculator is a calculator for resolving everyday ethical dilemmas. It is one of six studies for fictional digital products, each accompanied only by a title that hinted at its function and purpose, commissioned for the Future Fiction exhibition in Hasselt in 2014.

A design education like this would probably no longer be organised around disciplines but instead, maybe, different ways of seeing the world. Its students and faculty would study, experiment with, and deepen understanding of the mechanics of unreality – utopias, dystopias and heterotopias; what ifs and as ifs; hypotheses, thought experiments and reductio ad absurdum; counterfactuals and uchronia, and so on. Synthesising ideas from political science, anthropology, sociology, history, economics and philosophy into new worldviews made tangible through an expanded form of design practice.

From where we stand today, this might seem unrealistic, maybe even a little escapist, so I will end by turning once again to Ursula K. Le Guin and her response to critiques of highly imaginative work as escapism: "The direction of escape is toward freedom. So what is 'escapism' an accusation of?"