Design for the Unreal World

Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby

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"It's clear that reality only works for a privileged minority, but designers advocate a realist approach, which means they work within the constraints of reality as it is, for the minority. The school aims to challenge this by making reality a little bit bigger to provide more room for different kinds of dreams and hopes. An important part of this process is generating multiple versions of reality, and this is where design comes in."

"We concluded," he said, "that the only way to challenge this unsatisfactory situation was to be unrealistic—to breach realism's heavily policed borders and to fully embrace unreality."
—Director, School of Constructed Realities[1]

The phrase 'real world' is something most designers (and academics) will be familiar with—as a rallying cry, as a critique, as a justification. But what is this real world, and where is it? More importantly, this suggests there is also a 'not real world': where does this not exist? And who decides what is real and what is not (what can and what cannot not exist)?

Speaking as committed objectologists fascinated by objects of all kinds whether real or unreal, we both find it perplexing, when confronted with a certain kind of object, to hear a person claim that it is not real. Yet, there in front of us is a thing, taking up space,

[1]
Dunne, Anthony and Fiona Raby, "The School of Constructed Realities", *Maharam,* 2017. The full story can be read at http://maharam.com/stories/raby_the-school-of-constructed-realities.

This binary view, which divides the world of ideas, things, and thoughts into 'real' and 'not real' is extremely damaging to the fostering of imagination and its ability to uncover alternatives to how things are now.

existing, being in the world. Ok, the values it embodies might be at odds with those around us, and its purpose or reason for existing might be abstract or cerebral, but surely, if it actually exists as a physical object, it is real.

This binary view, which divides the world of ideas, things, and thoughts into 'real' and 'not real' is extremely damaging to the fostering of imagination and its ability to uncover alternatives to how things are now. Especially when the word 'unrealistic' often simply means 'undesirable' to those in charge, rendering alternative realities impossible for everyone else. Designers need to move beyond this binary approach to dividing up thoughts, ideas and things. They all exist after all, just in different ways, somewhere, otherwise it would not even be possible to think them. Design needs more nuanced ways of understanding and talking about this relationship, one that acknowledges that the real and the not real are just two poles on a subtle and rich spectrum.

Embracing Unreality:
Meinong's Jungle

In 2014, Dunne & Raby were one of ten curators invited by the MAK in Vienna to select a collection of designs for Exemplary, an exhibition aiming to raise questions about the kind of objects a museum of applied art might collect over the next 150 years. Our collection consisted of fictional technology-related products and services developed by writers of social fiction over the last 150

years. Imaginary objects have as much impact on life through the collective imagination as actual objects. In the exhibition the books were presented with inserts that framed passages describing the products in the texts.

After the exhibition, the curator wanted to add our exhibit to the museum's permanent collection and had to present it to a selection panel. This did not go well. They could not accept that a museum of applied art should consider fictional objects as part of its collection, even if they impact on how people think about their daily lives and material culture. The project was accepted into the collection in the end, but on the basis that books are physical objects.

In the discussion one of the curators made a connection to the late nineteenth/early twentieth-century Austrian psychologist and philosopher Alexius Meinong and his *Theory of Objects*, a taxonomy of objects which includes all kinds of things: existing entities (eg tables and chairs), non-existing entities (eg numbers and ideas), fictional entities or *ficta* (eg Sherlock Holmes, King of France, unicorns), impossible objects (eg round squares) and even unthinkable objects (ie having the property of being unthinkable). For many philosophers, *Theory of Objects* is a mess; in fact it is known as "Meinong's Jungle", which in itself is appealing to us. It is a conceptual space where all kinds of weird objects are welcome and even celebrated. This is our new intellectual home.

Theory of Objects gives equal importance to things that can only exist in fiction or in the imagination as it does to concrete or actual objects such as chairs and mountains. Designers say there is the real and the not real, and that they want to deal with the real. Meinong says there is the real, the sort of real, the hyper-real, the not quite real, the really real, and so on. We want to be in this world. A world that more fully reflects the range of realities and unrealities that people interact with daily.

In a time when many people's lives are shaped as much by fictional entities as supposedly real ones, designers need to take the fictional side of things more seriously, to embrace unreality, and Meinong's *Theory of Objects* is one way of thinking about this.

The process of deciding on what is considered real, and what is not, is where politics and the imagination meet: "If politics has become a struggle for people's imagination this is, in the first place, due to the fact that such a struggle takes place *within* human beings and not just among them…"[2] Politics today is a battle over the imagination, and work that operates on the imagination by either maintaining pre-existing realities, or by challenging them through alternatives that encourage people to question prevailing world views becomes political. Being aware of this as designers is "doing work politically", to borrow and slightly modify Thomas Hirschhorn's phrase; for practitioners, the politics are in the 'how', not the 'what'.[3] In this way the unreal becomes

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Bottici, Chiara and Benoît Challand eds, *The Politics of Imagination*, London: Birkbeck Law Press, 2012, p6.

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For more on this, see Hirschhorn, Thomas, "Doing art politically: What does this mean?", *Art & Research,* 2008, http://www.artandresearch. org.uk/v3n1/fullap01.html.

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political—political in the sense that it can challenge the limits people place on their own imaginations when it comes to thinking about, and questioning, what is possible.

But where could work like this happen? Academic and cultural organisations seem like a natural home for the unrealistic, impossible and yet to exist zones where the unreal can be experienced, considered and enjoyed. And this is why it is time for design—so often only concerned with the pragmatic and realistic—to join those whom the writer Ursula Le Guin calls "the realists of a larger reality", by embracing unreality, and beginning to design for the unreal world.[4]

Beyond Reality-Based Communities

All this talk of fiction and imaginary objects might seem esoteric and quite abstract, but fictions are everywhere—money, numbers, law, nations, financial markets and Pokémon. It is becoming clearer each day that the boundaries between what most people think of as real, concrete and existing, and that which they deem imaginary, nonexistent and intangible, are fluid; differences between the real and the unreal are not so clear, in reality.

A group of scientists researching what happens in people's brains when they are confronted with real and fictional entities recently concluded that "the categorical distinction between reality and fiction that we employ in daily life appears to be too simplistic and

[4]
National Book, "Ursula Le Guin", *YouTube,* 20 November 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?t=12&v=Et9Nf-rsALk.

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Zyga, Lisa, "What is 'Real'? How Our Brain Differentiates Between Reality and Fantasy", *PhysOrg.com*, 23 March 2009, http://phys.org/news/2009-03-real-brain-differentiates-reality-fantasy.html.

non-representative of our phenomenological experience. The term 'real' in itself does not have much explanatory power, as it means only that something objectively exists."[5] These experiments focussed on the identification of two zones in the brain, the amPFC (anterior medial prefrontal cortex) and PCC (posterior cingulate cortex), which are activated to greater or lesser degrees when encountering fictional and actual characters. The long-term goal is to understand how the brain tells the difference between reality and fantasy and what criteria it uses. At the moment it is related to relevance. Fictional characters for example are less relevant to most people than real characters, although gamers, for example, might not agree—something that they plan to test later.

Not long ago, Pokémon Go, which uses augmented reality and smartphones to track down virtual creatures located in real locations, was frequently featured on the news. Fans were taking the existence of these virtual entities extremely seriously, and in some cases even risked their lives:

> Lifeboat crew member Chris Lyons said: "It is great to see people getting out and about enjoying themselves, however, putting your life in danger trying to catch Pokémon is extremely irresponsible.… In Weston the tide comes in so quickly, in seconds you can be in life-threatening danger. Please, if you do see a Pokémon either on the rocks or in the muddy areas of Weston bay, don't put yourself into a position where

you could become stuck. … The water is unforgiving, it doesn't give you a second chance whereas a game will."[6]

But this is different from the kind of unreality we're interested in. Although virtual, Pokémon have a place within the existing world, so in a sense are real. We are more interested in alternative versions of the world that, even though possible, seem unrealistic or distant, and only exist in the collective imagination. Brexit, for example, represented an alternative version of the UK, which became a new reality for 60 million people overnight, changing what it meant to be British forever.

Some politicians have already made this shift, which suggests to us that contemporary statecraft is focussed less on reality management and more on the construction of new realities:

The aide said that guys like me were "in what we call the reality-based community," which he defined as people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." … "That's not the way the world really works anymore," he continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors … and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do."[7]

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Gibbs, Samuel, "Pokémon Go players narrowly escape Weston-super-Mare tide", *The Guardian*, 29 July 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/jul/29/pokemon-go-players-narrowly-escape-weston-super-mare-tide.

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Ron Suskind quoting an unnamed aide of George W Bush: "Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W Bush", *The New York Times Magazine*, 17 October 2004, http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/magazine/faith-certainty-and-the-presidency-of-george-w-bush.html.

Whereas Bush's aide spoke about creating new realities, Peter Pomerantsev describes a slightly different approach in Russia: "What they are basically trying to undermine is the idea of a reality-based conversation … and to use the idea of a plurality of truths to feed disinformation, which in the end looks to trash the information space."[8]

Russia is not just countering Western propaganda with alternative narratives, but developing alternative conceptual models that simply don't make sense to a liberal Western intellectual and are therefore ridiculed and dismissed. The effect is to undermine the stability of what most people think of as reality. The best interpretation Western analysts can offer is that it is a form of post-propaganda that aims to scramble reality, or at least destabilise what people think of as true, false, real, unreal, fact and fiction; it doesn't offer a position, but destabilises all positions.

A more recent example of this is Putin's new chief of staff Anton Vaino's Nooscope, a seemingly pataphysical device for attempting to manage complex emergent futures and economic realities, which even Russian academics admit just doesn't make sense, at least according to current models of 'sense'.[9]

At the level of governments (well, the Russian and US governments at least), reality is now viewed, maybe irreversibly, as something malleable, something that is made rather than given. It's a 'thing' that can be constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed.

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Castle, Stephen, "A Russian TV Insider Describes a Modern Propaganda Machine", *The New York Times*, 13 February 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/14/world/europe/russian-tv-insider-says-putin-is-running-the-show-in-ukraine.html. For more on this subject see Beckhusen, Robert, "The Kremlin's 'New Generation Warfare' Is Just Getting Started", *War is Boring,* 10 December 2016, https://warisboring.com/the-kremlins-new-generation-warfare-is-just-getting-started/. Also see "Germany sees rise in Russian propaganda, cyber attacks", *Reuters*, 8 December 2016, http://in.reuters.com/article/germany-russia-idINKBN13X16C.

9
Ivshina, Olga, "Nooscope mystery: The strange device of Putin's new man Anton Vaino", *BBC News,* 19 August 2016, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-37109169.

Shouldn't we as citizens begin to view it in these terms too?

Constructed Realities

Clearly there are certain features of reality that are fixed, at least for the time being—science concerns itself with these—and there are certain unthinkable imaginary objects that can never exist anywhere, or even be thought. But these are the extremes. In between, there is a rich and fascinating space from which unknown realities might one day emerge. Not just things, but also beliefs, values, hopes, ideals and dreams—the raw material from which new realities can be constructed.

By 'constructed realities' we mean alternative realities that have been consciously constructed with a purpose in mind. These are different from virtual and augmented realities, which are the media through which constructed realities might be communicated, made or experienced. They don't have to be objects, but are more than just narratives. A story or an idea becomes a constructed reality at the moment it is given form and materially embodied whether as an object, stage set or photograph. Despite the name, constructed realities are different from Berger and Luckmann's socially constructed realities. They are more than social conventions; the emphasis is on their construction, how they are made and what they are made from; they therefore have some physical objectivity. They are consciously made or fabricated

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realities rather than found realities. But 'fabricated' sounds a bit like 'faked', which suggests hoaxes—which they are not.

In 2010, an image from Google Street View began circulating online. The image showed a car parked on the pavement near a man holding up a baby a woman beside him had just given birth to on the street, just as a Google Street View car was passing. The discussion focussed on whether it was real or fabricated. One of the better articles was on a blog called sippey.com in an entry entitled "even if it's fake it's real".[10] Here the 'real' equalled truthfulness. Related to this, but a bit closer to what we are thinking of, is the Cross-Quadrant Working Group, a website that gathers examples organised into Real-Real, Real-Fake, Fake-Fake or Fake-Real:

> The Quadrants are an aide to categorizing and sense-making for an increasingly complex world around us, a world in which what is actual and what is illusory are often difficult to disambiguate. Because if a myriad of forces, from cheap technology to global media to fragmented politics to re-thinking of the self, playing with the lines between objective, socially agreed reality and types of manufactured 'realities' has become easier and more pervasive. Having a means of typing these phenomena is a first step to both understanding, and eventually operationalizing, tactical and strategic uncertainty.[11]

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Sippey, Michael, "even if it's fake it's real", *sippey.com,* 24 November 2010, http://www.sippey.com/2010/11/even-if-its-fake-its-real.html.

11
"Spotter's Guide to Quadrants", *Cross-Quadrant Working Group,* http://crossquadrantbulletin.tumblr.com/spottersguide, accessed 17 October 2017.

Although the text suggests the Cross-Quadrant Working Group is exploring manufactured realities, the categorisations like those on sippey.com seem to focus more on the authenticity and inauthenticity of mediated imagery. Much has been written on this subject. From Philip K Dick's notion of 'pseudo realities' in the 1970s in relation to mass-media such as TV and radio, to Baudrillard and his *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*.[12] Now there is an accelerated version, via social media, which produces 'viral realities' with a very narrow but high impact, something that became painfully apparent during the Trump election campaign.

In his most recent film, *HyperNormalisation*, 2016, Adam Curtis examines how global realities are constructed by politicians to achieve specific ends. Once they are reproduced through the media, even though fake, they may as well be real. His argument is that they become a reality, a fake reality in which Westerners are now living, which long ago replaced the real reality. Something he calls 'hypernormalisation'. The common link in these examples is the collapse of distinctions between perceived realities and reality proper. If it is perceived to be real, then for all intents and purposes it is, as it influences behaviour, beliefs and therefore actions that have consequences on people's experience of the world in which they live. But perhaps the closest concept for us is Ursula M Franklin's notion of constructed or reconstructed reality, which includes fiction, advertising and

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Dick, Philip K, "How to Build a Universe That Doesn't Fall Apart Two Days Later", *I Hope I Shall Arrive Soon*, New York: Doubleday, 1975.

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propaganda. She distinguishes this from vernacular reality (the reality of everyday life), extended reality (the body of knowledge and emotions based on the experiences of others), and projected reality (the vernacular reality of the future).[13] For us though, it is its materialisation that matters.

In 2011, BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) introduced an award for constructed reality TV shows that mix found and made realities: "Constructed reality shows are a cross-pollination of soap opera and documentary, following real people going about their daily lives—but some storylines are constructed or initiated by producers in advance."[14]

A related example concerns the test sites used by car and technology companies for testing conventional and self-driving cars, or military simulations of distant villages and landscapes for training solders to do battle in remote, and for them, alien realities. Both begin to approach our notion of a constructed reality; something that blends different kinds of real and unreal, and moves beyond representation to presentation. The users of these spaces and viewers of these shows know these places are not pretending to be anything more than they are, they are simulated rather than fake realities—unreal, yet concrete. Constructed realities are not fake; they do not hide their status as constructions—in fact, they celebrate it. Glimpses of this can sometimes be seen on film sets where green-screen props and costumes are

13
Franklin, Ursula M, *The Real World of Technology*, Anansi, 1999, pp 28–29.

14
"Bafta introduces new 'constructed reality' award", *BBC News*, 9 November 2011, http://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-15652404.

juxtaposed with everyday scenes. They lay bare the seams joining different kinds of reality together. They are real in the sense that they exist in the same space as the viewer, but they reference an alternative reality—political, social, cultural, ethical, philosophical and so on. They are devices for shifting attention away from the here and now, to the yet to exist, possible and—as of now—unreal.

Designed Realities?

If realities are constructed rather than given, can they also be designed, and what does this mean for design?

At least one direct outcome is the end of the real as something straightforward, monolithic, shared, solid, authentic and honest. And an acceptance that the unreal is equally as important, a space for uncovering realities as of yet unknown, which are more than variations on what already exists.

Although Meinong's theory of objects has been contested, it appeals to us as designers due to the equal importance it gives to ideas, thoughts and objects whether they actually exist or are imagined, or, in Meinong's words, have or do not have 'being'. We began to wonder if the extremes of his taxonomy might serve as inspiration for an aesthetic approach to fictional objects which highlights the seams joining together different kinds of realities—an aesthetics of unreality. If, rather than cautiously stepping back from unreality, we stepped through the looking glass, what

kind of new design opportunities might we find on the other side?

It would probably take us away from naturalism, realism and the attempt to create an illusion of reality, and instead allow us to enjoy the designed nature of constructed realities. Meinong's theory of objects might provide some clues about how to show the seams, how realities and unrealities fit together. Embracing estrangement rather than verisimilitude, ambiguity rather than fixed meaning; openness to suggest different realities, rather than tightly linking to a correct version; and abstraction rather than figuration, with ties to the known and everyday.

In some ways, this relates to 'possible world' theory, where every fiction creates a new world in the reader's imagination. Design can do this too. By working with anthropologists, political scientists and social theorists, it can contribute to the proliferation of multiple worlds existing in the collective imagination, enlarging it to provide a richer conceptual space from which to uncover alternatives to the present and consider the kind of world(s) people wish to live in. A form of interdisciplinary imagining that aims to inspire further imagining, rather than communicating a vision of how things will or should be.

In design, when a project steps away from the 'here and now', it is automatically relocated to the future, often a 'possible' (realistic) one. But futures, as a narrative framework, are too limiting for the kind of thinking we are talking about here. They restrict the
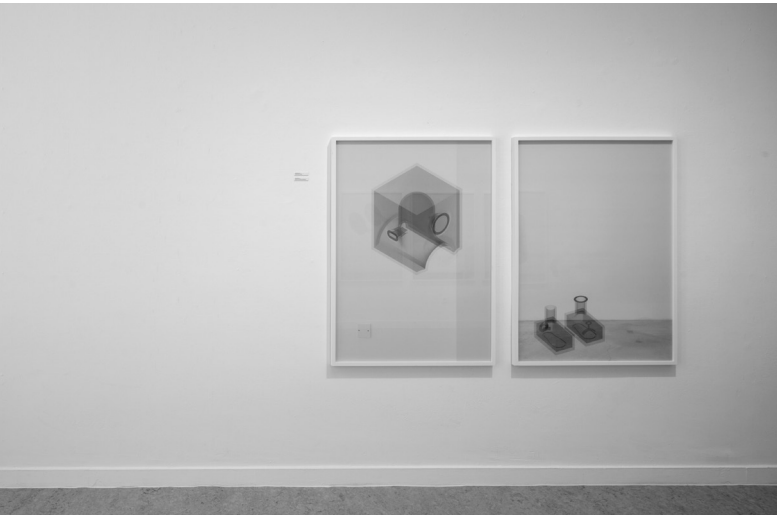
Dunne & Raby
Not Here, Not Now, exhibition view at Z33 House for Contemporary Art
2014
C-type prints
119 × 84 cm
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imagination through the requirement to link back to the present, which of course they are nearly always some version of, or extensions of current worldviews. We are more interested in starting with alternative worldviews and using design to give them form. They can be in the future, in the past, or a parallel present, but most importantly for us, they are simply: *Not Here, Not Now.*

In this role, the designer's task is to give form to a multiverse of hidden possibilities that contribute to a culture of imaginative alterity materialised in ways that engage the mind by challenging it, shifting its focus, arresting it, motivating and inspiring. Raising awareness that if reality is not given but made, then it can be unmade, and remade. This is not simply about the re-imagining of everyday life—there are plenty of examples of this—it is about using unreality to question the authority of a specific reality in order to foreground its assumptions and ideology.

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