29. Entertaining uncertainty: a conversation with the Near Future Laboratory

Through the years-long process of working on this book, we were often forced to reconsider much about what design fiction is, what it means to us, and what it could mean to other people. Writing a book forces you to "question your teaspoons," as Georges Perec once advised. It's another lesson in the value of "making the thing"—the detailed introspection and discussion it provokes, not just the object in your hands at the end.

As a conclusion, it feels natural to have that conversation out loud. It's as if the book itself (or, in reality, its editors) sent us a meeting invite, assembling the four of us to address some of the questions we've stirred up, and where it all might be going.

How has your practice and understanding of design fiction evolved since you started getting into this?

Nicolas: Simply, we have a more thorough sense of what design fiction is, how to do a design fiction project, and how best to use it with clients and partners. Maybe it's a bit weird to say this, but we weren't really sure what we were doing when we started. The first design fiction projects we did were largely intuitive, and in some ways just about connecting with each other. Over time, as we did more projects with public- and private-sector clients, things naturally became more structured, so it was easier to present something valuable back to them.

Fabien: The other obvious thing is just how much more easily and quickly you can make or build things now—the tools available are so much more sophisticated. Obviously this would have a lot to do with the internet. It's even more of an echo chamber than it was ten years ago, and there is a thinner, hazier line between reality and fiction. While it is now possible to amplify the signal so you can reach more people, the level of noise is also that much higher. And I feel like the work we produce exists on that thin line between fiction and reality, so of course there are people who encounter the work and aren't sure what to make of it. It can be a concern when something like disinformation has

become such a major problem.

Julian: I've realized that the value of design fiction is not so much as a tool for solving problems or providing answers, as it is an approach. That's to say, through creating these materials you evolve your mindset generally and your thinking on a topic specifically, all of which prompts important questions about what kind of near future you want to achieve and why.

Nick: Is there any reason why I am going last?

Nicolas: Brexit.

Nick: Fair enough. First thing, completely what Fabien said—the incredible change in the ability to make things. Being able to produce a one-off embroidered patch, a short run of only 50 books, or edit a cinema-quality movie from my bedroom. But my approach to design fiction and this field of stuff that we do hasn't changed very much. As a designer, I'm a practical maker of things and content. So it's always been a creative pastime about actually making things, as opposed to this crowd I studied with in London back in the late nineties, early 2000s, who were largely under the influence of the Dunne and Raby critical-design school, for whom this sort of creative speculative work was more of an academic exercise. You know, a means to produce more writing, more analysis. With our work, if something useful and stimulating comes out of it that creates some academic or public engagement, that's cool. But that's not what I've been particularly driven by.

We want to pick up on what Fabien said, the implications of doing work that intentionally blurs the line between reality or fact and fiction at a time when the media space is so corrupted with disinformation and fakery. You all saw the response when *The Selfish Ledger* was leaked and taken as fact. Is this something you feel the need to be mindful of?

Nick: Before, fiction used to live in a box, and it was clearly marked "drama," "movie," or "novel." Now, it's like the whole culture, including us, is playing around with that blurred space between fiction and fact. What we were just saying, about how much easier it is now to produce things, obviously also has a dark side—it's quite easy to fabricate

deceptive things that look real and convincing. In my case, it depends how comfortable I am with the risks. With *The Selfish Ledger* I was pretty confident that my company was smart enough to see what I was trying to do. And it turns out they were, and so the risk to me was kind of low. Except for, like, threats to my reputation, personal attacks, all those things...

Nicolas: It's a topic Fabien and I tried to address a little bit in a talk we gave in Helsinki, about the relationship between design fiction, fake news, and fabricated realities. I do think it's important for design fiction as a practice to have proper ethical standards, and those obviously need to be defined in a way that questions or tests certain hypotheses. You can't just put this work out into the world and say, "This is the future, deal with it."

Fabien: Our intention is not to fool anybody or to take advantage of anybody. So what's tricky for us is being able to be clear about this intention and for the audience to not misinterpret what we're doing. Most of our projects come with a piece of writing that explains why we did it, that gives a bit of the background. But you want to do that without taking away from the thing and the kind of fresh, first engagement we want people to have with it—that momentary suspension of disbelief. There comes a moment when you have to break away and say, "Okay, that was a fiction, and this is what we think we learned from it."

You four started work on this book pre-COVID. Then much of this book ended up being written while the pandemic was unfolding—not to mention everything else that went on across 2020, from massive protests over racist policing and other inequities, to more grim news about climate change, and the divergent realities surrounding the U.S. presidential election. We can honestly say we have little clue what might happen next, and yet we've been deluged with so many predictions of what life and business will be like next. Has your thinking about design fiction changed at all over these past months?

Julian: The assumptions we have around what is possible are what usually divert promising conversations about more desirable, alternative possibilities. It's hard to think of alternatives, particularly when the

prevailing assumptions are so well dug into our consciousness. For a while, smart people found it hard to imagine there would ever be a trillion-dollar company that manufactures electric cars, or that wheels on luggage was a good idea. Plug in all your examples of where that dramatic level of change actually does happen.

Obviously, with the pandemic, many things have changed. And it only took a miniscule microbe to prompt massive change. Probably its only silver lining is that it's provoked these exciting new moments and conversations around systemic change, touching on everything from our everyday ways of living, working, and collaborating, to institutional power and accountability. And, for most of us, an invigorated appreciation for social and familial contact.

Nick: COVID has given license for conversations about a scale of change we haven't really seen before. In spite of the kind of crazy shifts we've experienced in politics and technology and everything else the past several years, there still was this general sense that certain things were concrete, you know? We go to work, we do things in certain ways. In commercial design everyone is supposed to have an eye on the future. But it's a very couched or controlled future, like the one mapped out according to end-of-Q2 figures: "We'll keep doing what we're doing, but we might innovate with one new product or something." Throwing something like a global pandemic in the mix allows for conversations that would have seemed a bit silly or fanciful in the past. There is space for them now.

Maybe it's confirmation bias on my part, but the second thing I would note is how the impact of this massive disruptive change rendered out in very mundane ways. How very quickly conversation turned to home baking and haircuts and toilet paper. And that sort of reaffirmed what we've been saying about the "future mundane," and how we ground or orient the stories we tell about the future. Again, it might be I have a bias for that way of looking at the future, but you have something this huge on a global scale causing extraordinary, sudden change, and within 24 hours the conversation was about the ordinary, boring things.

Fabien: What's struck me even more than the global scale is the speed. You have people who think, "Oh, that's not going to happen for at

least ten years." Then we see how life can really, really change in just a few months. I think most governments were taken by surprise, not necessarily by the scale, but by the speed of this pandemic's spread. Where we can maybe be hopeful is seeing how we are able to change behavior and other mundane things when you do it at scale—and it actually makes a difference. Possibly, it's going to help us pull through the challenges that are ahead of us. To see such rapid change at scale is an eye-opener. To see that rapid change is possible for other kinds of problems that are ahead of us.

Nicolas: Before COVID-19, foresight and futures research was something experts did. Now everyone is preoccupied with thinking about the future in deep and meaningful ways that could have transformational impacts on society. I see an opportunity in using design fiction as a tool that democratizes how we discuss and project into the future, exploring alternative futures differently and more accessibly than the futures experts would, whose work is so often abstract and philosophical, or just done for companies. It allows people to clarify their perspective on the future.

What's your reaction to the criticism that design fiction puts too strong an emphasis on technological futures, or that it isn't sufficiently critical toward technology?

Nick: I nominate Julian for that.

Julian: We could have a long, fun, and maybe productive discussion talking about what "technology" actually means. At the end of it, you would see technology as the throughline between human behavior, human possibility, and human potential. It intersects our lives in such a way that it is culture, and by being culture, it's meaningful beyond the way we think of technologies as just tools. And its impact on the way we live our lives can be transformative. So, I think it actually feels responsible to center design fictions around technology and its implications.

This argument assumes that technology is somehow divorced from the role it plays in establishing and patterning relationships among people. But technology is the flour in the cake that is culture.

Nicolas: Technology is not just about screens, and smartphones, or

COVID ZINE (2020)

At a time when reality shifts daily, where do we start in trying to make sense of it? Being who we are, we took to the streets during the first few months of COVID-induced lockdown—when permitted, that is, and for only as long as sensible—documenting the most mundane evidence of this supposed ‘New Normal’ we were living, from the mandated distancing, hygiene protocols, and surge in panic buying to the accelerated shift toward more automation, remote work, and even remote worship.

We produced a 32-page zine of entirely visual observations, mixed together with a selection of design fictions inspired by the pandemic, placing truth alongside fabrication. When the line dividing the two seems to shift so rapidly, even dissolve, it’s a potent reminder of what drew us to the practice of design fiction in the first place—as a tool for recalibrating expectations of what happens next, a challenge that anyone in the fields of foresight, speculative design, and critical futures will need to embrace.

VR goggles. It's any piece of material culture that can change and have an influence on the world around us. And anyway, technology is not always our primary concern. The project for Lyon about the city streets of tomorrow looks not only at the ways streets may be shaped by technology, but also how they must give consideration and space to the natural world—the trees, plant and animal life—as a component of encouraging both urban quality of life and strategies for mitigating climate change.

Nick: I suppose our work is kind of techno-adjacent, but the output of our work very rarely conveys a belief in a certain technology. It's much more about the implications of that technology, and how we explore what that does to culture, products, people's behavior, all that stuff.

The first point Julian made is right: If our job is to explore change, then technology is clearly one of the major drivers of almost all change, now and in the foreseeable future. And the role of design fiction is not to champion that, but to question whether this or that particular solution is the right one, or this particular version of the solution is going to yield the best results, or the most desirable future. I don't think that's necessarily techno-centric, it's just change-centric, and those two are linked permanently, as far as I can see.

Can design fiction have a political role or agenda, or should it?

Julian: It's hard these days for something not to project—implicitly or explicitly—a set of ethics, interests, or values that fall into some bucket of a political orientation or sensibility. But should or can design fiction have a role to play in representing certain political points of view? We've had interesting discussions around this recently, but I keep coming back to design fiction working best in almost a satirical mode, with a sense of humor and irony, functioning as a form of social or cultural commentary. What design fiction is good at turning up is cautionary use cases, which is a polite way of saying how to avoid fucking things up.

Nick: Yeah, satire is probably the best way of framing our approach to the work. In my time doing design fiction, and speculative design more broadly, I've come across numerous people with much stronger political views that they want to express through their work. Personally,

it's just not how I approach things. And I don't think we collectively approach a project with the goal of legitimizing a particular point of view. But, like satire, there is a cautionary element to it that exposes the potential implications of certain changes.

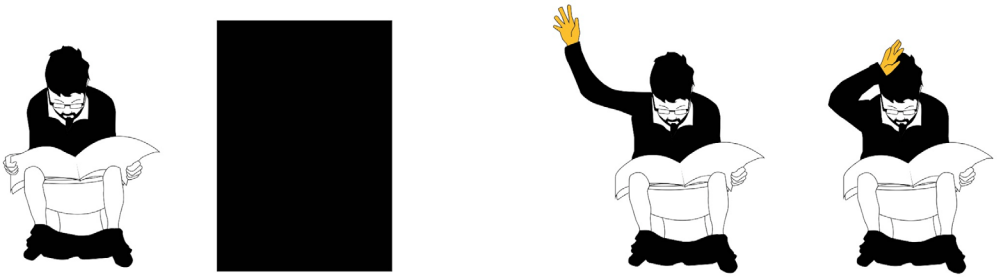
Fabien: I think of design fiction as a tool, and you can use the tool for different political means. If your intention is to get people talking about or engaging with an issue in an explicitly political context, in the sense of trying to create meaningful social change—it can be a beautiful tool for that, as a kind of stimulus. But if your agenda is simply to score political points for your side, pre-empting any sort of public discussion, then you get more into propaganda and you lose the satire. I'm less comfortable with that.

Julian: Very Swiss, very Swiss.

Have you ever been surprised by the way one of your design fictions travelled through the world?

Nicolas: Probably *Curious Rituals,* which started as a sort of alibi to explore weird stuff like people's gestures and how they are adapted to new technologies. For me, it's one of the key projects that paves the way for our design fiction approach. What was notable about the reaction is you didn't just have a bunch of academics or designers or nerds finding the work strangely interesting. It was being at a conference and getting introduced to a guy from Nespresso who has to think about the design of their machines, and this stuff resonates even with him. When something you explore really out of intuition can also have value for business or other types of organizations.

Fabien: Another interesting one for me is this design fiction we did for the company BBVA, part of which included creating these fictional advertisements that were circulated within the company to create a discussion. After a few months I got a call from the CEO's office asking me for the editable version of these ads, so they could rework and rephrase them for actual release in a public environment. I thought that was great. They took the material and then they did their own work. Sometimes I feel like the work that we do is like that of a songwriter, that we set the stage for something, a framework with all sorts of



"Waving at sensors", from *Curious Rituals*.

prompts, then our clients or partners do their interpretation or version of it, based on the creative and critical thinking of those people in the room.

Nick: *TBD Catalog* seems to crop up in my life a lot. It's one of the primary reasons I got the role at Google. I just kept encountering all sorts of different people who unexpectedly had seen the work.

Julian: It's *TBD Catalog,* for sure. With all humility, to me it just stands out as the canonical design fiction project, and not just for the catalog itself, but the crazy process by which it was made. As much as we try not to be overly prescriptive, in the best design fiction the process is as important as the result. How we got a whole bunch of interesting people together over a weekend to have these conversations about the future and then make something—it's the basis for much of how we think about the practice today.

Much of your work inhabits a space close to or overlapping with the fields of forecasting, strategic foresight, and future studies. What are your thoughts on the business of foresight and how it's practiced?

Nick: I think they sort of do something similar to us, but it's very hard to see the throughline, because their work is almost always oriented more towards commercial questions. And, you know, they love a framework. The classic framework they use is SWOT analysis—strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

Where we diverge is in our attitude to design as a practice. As we've already said a few times in this book, we take issue with the way

"design thinking" has been swallowed whole by so many in the industry, reducing design to this role of problem solving, whereas we see design as having an important critical and educational role. Unfortunately, the longer I spend with those folks in the foresight world I'm often frustrated by how far forward into the future they're willing to look, and how confident and concrete they treat their predictions and ideas about the future... That just sounded like a bile-filled rant, apologies.

Julian: No, that was almost diplomatic. It was a soft rant.

Fabien: I can't say I know these foresight practices well enough to offer up a fully thought-out critique, but my feelings about the work I've seen coming out of that world is that the work is really done at the macro level. They look at trends and things on a global or national scale. Whereas I really love that our focus is often on the micro level, the small, mundane details, and so on. The world is really so complex and interconnected, I question what you can get out of drawing these big lines about where the world is going.

Nicolas: I'm not sure I totally agree with that. Foresight and forecasting practices sometimes deal with the very micro level, like we do. The big difference is their application of very structured methodologies in doing the work. There's this sort of morphological analysis. Say you want to understand the future of self-driving vehicles in the city of tomorrow. You do this very detailed analysis of all the factors that may have an influence on the adoption and use of self-driving vehicles. You build this questionnaire and do expert interviews, weighing all the different parameters that may have an influence, and then you build scenarios and models based on that.

I teach a class in this, and my impression is that their intention is probably close to what we're doing, but most of the time they make it overly complicated. It just strikes me as overkill to develop this, like, two-year project mapping all the parameters, especially in the context of a rapidly changing world with all these variables, often unseen, you can't account for. My sense is that with design fiction, we take a lighter, more flexible and creative approach, and thereby avoid being overly deterministic and making any big, questionable claims about what the future will be. It feels like they need to have this opaque, super-complicated

machinery to come up with just one or two scenarios. I think what we're doing leaves things more wide open to questioning, which is how one should approach the future.

Julian: I probably fall somewhere between you guys. I don't know the practice so intimately that I feel like I can constructively criticize it. But when I have found myself involved in more foresight-type work, it seemed, I don't know, it just seemed very uncreative. Like it was just kind of running a series of steps. And there was no sense that the process or the approach to the work was itself up for consideration, or as important as whatever the final output or report was going to be. Any answers you come up with are going to be based on who's in the room—what sort of people, their own experiences and expertise—the timeframes they're given, and all that. There's no pause at the outset to truly ask how we should go about asking these questions.

To Nicolas's point, they already have their pre-established procedures. In my experience it didn't seem like design work so much as a kind of reified process, like this is how we take gallbladders out, or land an airplane, and we don't deviate. I see our practice more as trying to expand people's insight, perspective, and knowledge by just trying to figure out what should or could be. We're not here to supply you with some big, simple answer that tells your company what you should build or produce.

Fabien: Maybe this is my coming from academia, but I think an essential component of our work is about being open to uncertainty. You are constantly driven by doubt, testing your assumptions and verifying results. There is no moment where you are absolutely sure about something. And so whenever I see someone who's really convinced about how something will be in the future, I think there is something behind that that must be investigated, or at least tested. Sometimes people hire us for the doubt that we bring. Through design fictions we try to make some sense of the uncertainty, or maybe I prefer the word messiness, but we don't pretend to be able to resolve that complexity with easy answers.

Nicolas: Doubt, entertaining uncertainty, it's just part of the way we think. To me a big part of being open to uncertainty means

understanding and appreciating other people's hopes, fears, and anxieties, and that's probably related to my ethnographic practice. I'm always trying to understand what the world might look like in the minds of other people, their attitude to the present and future, their hopes. And from this, we can hopefully build alternative futures or alternative trajectories. Sometimes that can be a bit exhausting, because you always have to consider the perspective of the person in the present and try to extrapolate how this person's thinking might evolve over time as new possibilities emerge. It took me a long time to understand how our design fiction can be useful for clients and partners, and it's probably helping them achieve some kind of alignment around how they see themselves in the present, and how they can approach future uncertainties—we try to probe, push, and pull on that.

Julian: Incorporating a multiplicity of lived experiences into the work is vital. It not only makes the work more thorough, it introduces possibilities that you might not have otherwise imagined. Growing up biracial gave some insight into this. My grandfather, my mom's dad, was a beautiful and poor Black sharecropper, a tobacco farmer in the south. I was fortunate to get to know his world. At the same time, I'm growing up in this very WASPy town in New Jersey with a fancy university, and I was astutely aware that some of my friends whose moms looked like my mom lived on the other side of town—what did that mean and why? I quickly learned what it meant to have multiple points of view simultaneously in your own head. How can I live in this world being both Black and white? It was an ongoing, kind of existential question and debate in my own head.

I think that sort of sensibility, being able to live in the world and see it from multiple points of view, is what can make our work powerful. We are quite literally in tech and outside of it, just as we are in academia and comfortably on its periphery. We've had a slug of the various Kool-Aids, swirled it around a bit, then spat it out in the potted fern in the corner of our Silicon Valley home.

Looking ahead—do you have any sense of how design fiction practice might evolve, or where would you like it to go?

Nicolas: I like the idea of design fiction evolving into this understanding that it's ultimately a mindset. It's not just about a set of stages in a process

or exit rounds, but more about maintaining this broad, open perspective, where you seek out and explore different possibilities and scenarios about tomorrow in this semi-formalized way by creating artifacts. It can be useful beyond just the design context, it could be applicable to people working in the social sciences or policy making—anyone whose work involves making important decisions about tomorrow.

Fabien: I agree with that, the practice being about a mindset for approaching the future, one that complements and goes beyond the usual, quantitative metrics and other methods that organizations use, like what the next quarter growth or earnings tell us, or just focusing on the next major deliverables. Organizations in general need to adopt practices that cultivate a resilience and openness to dealing with uncertainty and change, a method that helps them see through some of the messiness. Hopefully with this book we've given people some of the ingredients and recipes and background so they can reappropriate the practice to their own context and setting.

Nick: I've been a designer for around 25 years, and I've seen new techniques and frameworks appear, evolve, and disappear. I've no reason to suspect that design fiction won't follow a similar arc. I do think it's still in its early stages though, having had a comparatively slow start. Perhaps it's entering its awkward, pubescent years, trying to find out exactly what it is, making a few missteps here and there, but it's got a long way still to grow. As I see design fiction techniques making their way from academia into the world of business, I'm struck by just how useful its mindset can be, at the level of changing the way ideas evolve and decisions get made.

Julian: I hope that it becomes almost like an approach to thinking about one's role in the world, in a really sort of pragmatic sense—this agile and open way of being immersed in the world, and understanding it's possible, in concrete ways, for the world to be other than what it is now. I mean, it's cool if companies use design fiction as one tool in figuring out whether AI should be added to their value chain or whatever. But at the root level, we want to get people out of that mode which assumes things will only turn out a certain way, that the range of

possibilities is limited. It should in some small way do for the world what science fiction did for science-fiction nerds growing up—help them imagine beyond the constraints of daily existence.

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