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# A Closer Look at the UrbanIXD Summer School Design Fictions through the Meta-Lens of Agonism and Dissensus

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ISBN: 978-0-9562169-3-9

**Abstract**

By analyzing the collective output of interweaving design fictions from the UrbanIXD summer school, this paper explores the qualities in the creative process as well as the output through the meta-lens of agonism and dissensus. The understanding of these qualities and their interrelations is argued to present an opportunity for advancing urban interaction design as a hybrid discipline and design fiction as a design format.

**Introduction**

UrbanIXD is a Coordination Action project, running from 2013-2014, for the European Commission under the Future and Emerging Technologies program. As part of the two-year program, a summer school took place in Split, Croatia from August 23 to September 1, 2013. For these 9 days, 40 participants from a wide array of disciplines and nationalities were selected to team up in Split and work on urban interaction design projects in atelier groups. Being one of those participants, this paper is written with the experience of having been part of the summer school.

The brief for the summer school originated in the hybrid field of urban interaction design itself: through the deliberate framing of interaction design in an urban context, the emerging “smart city” and its future inhabitants becomes the locus for design. By breaking down this wicked problem [14] further into the triad of people, tech and the city a further emphasis is added on the highly dynamic interrelations at stake. Within the complex maze of these interrelations, the basic discrepancy between the emerging data-laced mega city and the (lack of) human-scale agency of its citizens is crucial. This is one of the basic tensions that urban interaction design discourse explicitly seeks to address [10].

The summer school participants were introduced to a critical design methodology, opening up ways for design to be critical, provocative and speculative within the wicked problem field. In line with this particular design understanding, the vast majority of the groups ended up producing design fictions using a short film format.

### **The Flux State of Design Fiction**

Design fiction, not unlike its close relatives critical design and speculative design, is difficult to pin down in a clear-cut definitive manner. That said, science fiction writer Bruce Sterling has provided the following useful definition: “(...) *the deliberate use of diegetic prototypes to suspend disbelief about change.*” [5]

In other words, design fiction is concerned with the designed extrapolation of weak signals into the future, confronting us with the possible future trajectories ahead of the now. Design fiction is a term being used quite differently in various contexts. As summarized by

Gonzatto et al. [8], the various approaches range from viewing it as a philosophy of things [11], a research prospect [9], a methodology [13] and a design technique [4].

From the formulation of the brief, the choice of atelier leaders and invited speakers plus the overall experience of participating in the summer school, the UrbanIXD approach to design fiction – although not explicitly articulated – seems to position itself on the instrumental end of this spectrum. Thus, design fiction was introduced as a useful design tool within the urban interaction design field.

### **Correlating ‘External’ and ‘Internal’ Time**

Navigating time both efficiently and meaningfully is of outmost importance in managing a design project as well as in forging a design fiction. The summer school provided some interesting insights regarding the correlation between the ‘external summer school time’ and the ‘internal design fiction time’.

By taking a deeper look into the latter it becomes clear that time is a delicate matter. As noted by Auger [1], a design fiction scenario holds the risk of being situated too far ahead in time, thus becoming a disjointed technocentric dream such as jet packs, flying cars etc. On the other hand it can’t take place in the all too near future either: it needs to be so far ahead that the design fiction effectively can extrapolate and create the essential tension that, through juxtaposition and suspension of disbelief, can actively question the present. Moving beyond the linear extension from status quo, design fictions too can unfold in parallel realities or simply take off from the past or a distant future. Also, as with anything in this world, design

fictions are subject to the constant flow of 'external time', as it eventually renders design fictions into design fiction history.

In the context of the summer school the correlation between 'external' and 'internal' time is interesting in the sense that all the design fictions were produced within just a few days, while in fictional terms spanning several decades or in the case of the project 'Aurora, the Aura City' [2] a millennium. While all projects more or less depart from Split 2013, the future scenarios take off in different tempi, employ different narrative structures and consequently unfold in different times. The contrast in-between the short summer school deadline and the vast timelines within the design fictions measured against the fact that all groups successfully delivered their final output on time, suggests that the set-up acted as a productive creative constraint rather than a strenuous limitation.

### **Interweaving Outputs**

As previously mentioned, the group of summer school participants consisted of a diverse set of backgrounds and skill sets, ranging from architects, psychologists, urban planners, anthropologists, sounds designers, interaction designers and more. Reflecting the hybrid, emergent nature of urban interaction design, the sharing of knowledge and forming of networks were encouraged as valuable summer school outcomes.

Throughout the 9 days the groups naturally experienced surprising outbursts of synergy just as they encountered frustration over the lack of shared methodologies. However, for the most part this was solved with an open organizational structure, allowing groups to form and reform organically throughout the

entire period. As a consequence, interests diverged and converged up to the very end, with great projects seemingly emerging out of nowhere. The free-floating structure and the design fiction format seemed to go well together.

As design fiction presented a new format for the majority of the summer school participants, it proved to be an ideal neutral common ground for groups to collaborate and deliver their final output in a very short timeframe. On a practical note, film production seemed perfectly suited for a tech-savvy, multidisciplinary team as it offered a range of roles, from acting, to designing, animating, editing and so on. The fact each production had the possibility of running in parallel tracks (e.g. editing one scene while shooting another) enforced this dynamic further.

As many design fictions required an extensive amount of actors, many group members would co-star in each other's design fictions. Eventually, this would create an interweaving effect of intertextual cohesion throughout the collective UrbanIXD output. The space in which the summer school took place, the unfinished Youth Centre (Dom mladih) in Split, was a strong contributing factor to this. As a stern anachronistic monolith, the large building facilitated a certain studio atmosphere, while featuring prominently in several design fictions. As a result of using the same core interior and exterior locations, actors and gear as well as sharing the pool of on-site inspiration brought in by atelier leaders and invited speakers, a certain meta-layer emerges when viewing the collective summer school output as a whole.

## Meta-layered Dissensus

This meta-layer opens up for the possibility of identifying overarching storylines and/or viewing the 15 design fictions as episodes residing somewhere between the procedural and serial format. Either way, this is not due to having reached some kind of deliberate consensus across the different projects. On the contrary, as the following example of 'The Price of Memories' [3] and 'Nokuna - Social Utopia or Creative Control Centre?' [6] illustrates, the juxtaposition of certain design fictions can rather be characterized by dissensus.



Still from 'Nokuna - Social Utopia or Creative Control Centre?' [6]. Doing 15 mins of gardening to briefly access Nokuna –a region running purely on gift economy.

[3] speculates about a future where it's possible to transplant memories from one human brain to another. Although originally intended for scientific research, memories soon enter the free market with various business models shooting up as a consequence. As hackers start producing risky artificial memories, a new psychological disorder appears. [6] takes us to The Displaced City in 2063, in which the restricted region of Nokuna (Kuna is the currency of Croatia) is located. Nokuna runs solely on gift economy and citizens are only allowed to enter by helping others and supporting the city infrastructure. As soon as you stop contributing to the flow of gift economy, Nokuna expels you.

As the projects respectively extrapolate a neoliberal capitalist free market and a pure gift giving economy, they serve to illustrate how all 15 design fictions have their own distinct character, and yet revolve around certain key themes, converging and diverging along the way. In this sense, the collective output seems to resemble how the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, using Aristotle's famous formulation.



Still from 'The Price of Memories' [3]. Getting ready to record a memory for the growing marketplace.

## Final Remarks

Thus, the agonistic friction found in the spaces in-between the design fictions becomes more important than the singular production value or sole vision. In this way the summer school output structurally mirrors its problem field, shifting the focus from the various contained elements to the dynamic interrelations. Unlike the rather superficial and univocal corporate visions such as Microsoft Productivity Future Vision [12], the collective summer school output displays a diversity and complexity characterized by agonism and dissensus, in line with DiSalvo's adversarial design [7]. I would argue that these qualities are a direct result of:

- a) the subject matter: urban interaction design
- b) the format: design fiction
- c) the structure: the UrbanIXD summer school

Understanding and utilizing this interplay further through the lens of agonism and dissensus presents a great opportunity for advancing urban interaction design as a hybrid discipline and design fiction as a design format.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the organizers of UrbanIXD for being part of the summer school as well as the subsequent reflection on its outcome. I would like to thank friends and fellow participants from Split and Aldeia da Mata Pequena as well. Also, thanks to Umeå Institute of Design and my supervisors, Johan Redström & Carl DiSalvo, for support and critique. Finally, a special thank you to Leyla Nasib.

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