How Tools in Game Design Can Inform Discursive Environments in Design Fiction

Harry Solomons, 22004655
Macro UX
Blog link: https://harrysolomons.com/macro-ux/

The emerging discipline of design fiction draws significant inspiration from the blurred boundaries between science fact and science fiction (Bleecker, 2022). However, unlike narrative fiction, design fiction aims to use created objects as entry points into a constructed world, rather than to advance specific narratives and stories (Coulton *et al.,* 2017). This focus on world building creates an avenue into discourse in which the usability of created tools comes at diminished priority compared to their discursive power. Considering this established hierarchy of goals, this essay aims to re-examine the boundaries of agency established by the tool-user relationship found in existing interactive media that establish discursive environments concerning issues of power in extrapolative scenarios.

The design of diegetic tools has long been a staple of speculative fiction, as can be noted in Ursula Le Guin's consideration of the "carrier bag theory" of narrative fiction (Le Guin, 1988). This theory draws attention to the key priority of weapons in classical stories of "the Hero", both as primary elements of context and as overarching structural paradigms, leading to what Le Guin refers to "the reduction of narrative to conflict" (Le Guin, 1988). Avoiding this paradigm, the re-centring of non-combative tools is apparent in Le Guin's own fiction, such as the 'ansible', a piece of long-distance communication technology, defining Le Guin's imagined future as decidedly collaborative (Bierman, 1975). Le Guin's both extrapolative (Blythe and Encinas, 2016) and anthropologically-centred (Ylipulli *et al.,* 2016) work, with a heavy focus on tools, ties in with the emergence of what Kirby refers to as "diegetic prototypes" (Kirby, 2010) – technological artefacts normalised as usable objects within fictional worlds, acting as discursive entry points at various orders of macroscopic and microscopic scale (Coulton *et al.,* 2017).

While much design fiction has focused on learning from science fiction literature (Markussen and Knutz, 2013) or motion pictures (Bleecker, 2022; Coulton *et al.,* 2017), there has been some small consideration of the worth of video games as a fount of design fiction inspiration. Indeed, video games offer a potentially extensive pool of existing knowledge surrounding how tools provide and define agency and power, in what Backe refers to as

"the player's access to the gameworld…[being] mediated through the affordances of the player character's technological apparatus" (Backe, 2022). In more aesthetic considerations of player-environment, the bounded agency afforded to a player by their equipment is noted as a key building block in the incomplete revelation of a game world's underlying mechanisms, in what Vella refers to as the "ludic sublime" (Vella, 2015).

To examine this further, let us consider the tool-specific variance in two games of similar genre – the space exploration games *No Man's Sky* (2016) and *Outer Wilds* (2019). *No Man's Sky* provides its player-characters with a 'multitool', an all-in-one device allowing for construction, resource extraction and combat that serves as the player's primary tool for interaction (in line with what is commonly defined as 4X gameplay: eXplore, eXpand, eXploit and eXterminate (Ford, 2016)). *Outer Wilds,* in contrast, offers perceptive tools such as a universal translator or long-distance listening device, but no weapons at any stage. This presents two antipodal worldviews of the roles of the 'protagonist' in extrapolative science fiction: *No Man's Sky*'s augmented "explorer-as-colonist" (Flick, Dennis and Reinhard, 2017) is far from *Outer Wilds*' posthuman, and decidedly Le Guin-inspired, de-centring of player agency (Bowie, 2021).

Drawing upon these principles of agency directly informed our work on 'The Lighthouse Group' – a fictional near-future agency designed to oppose privatised self-driving public transport, while granting members of the public agency over their own safety and data rights. One key component of this design was the app, 'BlackBox', which would offer users a way to report issues, gather manufacturer information, and include themselves as active and informed participants in the data-sharing ecosystem required of advanced artificial intelligence. In the design of this tool, we wished it to represent the potential agency that could be provided to 'consumers' of vital services in the face of corporate opacity: by providing a tangible representation of user power over their own role in a neo-capitalist information exchange, the tool created more intact and developed

environments for discourse on present-day issues of power in artificial intelligence.

In conclusion, an examination of tools in game design, particularly on their world-building responsibilities in creating and defining user agency, represents an under-explored area of inspiration for researchers in design fiction. As the discipline develops, looking to these sources of existing work can provide myriad insights to designers who may look to cultivate more intact and immersive discursive spaces that incorporate a wider range of worldviews, including those that go beyond the anthropocentric, in order to raise important questions surrounding agency and power.

References

Backe, H. (2022) 'Centaurs and Horsemen: Composite Avatars and the Epistemology of the Playable Figure', *Narrative,* 30(2), pp. 240-249.

Bierman, J. (1975) 'Ambiguity in Utopia: "The Dispossessed"', *Science Fiction Studies,* 2(3), pp. 249-255.

Bleecker, J. (2022) 'Design Fiction: A Short Essay on Design, Science, Fact, and Fiction', in Carta, S. (ed.) *Machine Learning and the City: Applications in Architecture and Urban Design,* Wiley Online Library, pp. 561-578.

Blythe, M. and Encinas, E. (2016) 'The Co-ordinates of Design Fiction: Extrapolation, Irony, Ambiguity and Magic', *Proceedings of the 2016 ACM International Conference on Supporting Group Work*, pp. 345-354.

Bowie, S. (2021) 'Posthumanism in Outer Wilds', *Press Start,* 7(1), pp. 45-65.

Coulton, P., Lindley, J.G., Sturdee, M. and Stead, M. (2017) 'Design Fiction as World Building'*, Proceedings of the 3rd Biennial Research Through Design Conference*, pp. 163-179

Flick, C., Dennis, L.M. and Reinhard, A. (2017) 'Exploring Simulated Game Worlds: Ethics in the No Man's Sky Archaeological Survey', *The ORBIT Journal,* 1(2), pp. 1-13.

Ford, D. (2016) '"eXplore, eXpand, eXploit, eXterminate": Affective Writing of Postcolonial History and Education in Civilization V', *Game Studies,* 16(2).

No Man's Sky (2016). PC [Game]. Hello Games: Guildford.

Kirby, D. (2010) 'The Future is Now: Diegetic Prototypes and the Role of Popular Films in Generating Real-World Technological Development', *Social Studies of Science,* 40(1), pp. 41-70.

Le Guin, U.K. (1988) 'The Carrier-Bag Theory of Fiction', in Du Pont, D. (ed.) *Women of Vision.* St. Martin's Press, pp. 1-12.

Markussen, T. and Knutz, E. (2013) 'The Poetics of Design Fiction', *Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Designing Pleasurable Products and Interfaces,* pp. 231-240

Outer Wilds (2019). PC [Game]. Mobius Digital: Los Angeles.

Vella, D. (2015) 'No Mastery Without Mystery: Dark Souls and the Ludic Sublime', *Game Studies,* 15(1).

Ylipulli, J., Kangasvuo, J., Alatalo, T. and Ojala, T. (2016) 'Chasing Digital Shadows: Exploring Future Hybrid Cities through Anthropological Design Fiction', *Proceedings of the 9th Nordic Conference on Human-Computer Interaction*, pp. 1-10.