

FABULATING FUTURES FOR FLOURISHING AND VIBRANT WORLDS

TOM JENKINS
IT UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN
TOMJE@ITU.DK

PEDRO SANCHES
UMEÅ UNIVERSITY
PEDRO.SANCHES@UMU.SE

NADIA CAMPO WOYTUK
KTH ROYAL INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
NADIACW@KTH.SE

KAREY HELMS
KTH ROYAL INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
KAREY@KTH.SE

JASON TUCKER
MALMÖ UNIVERSITY
JASON.TUCKER@MAU.SE

MARIE LOUISE JUUL SØNDERGAARD
OSLO SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN
MJJUUL@AHO.NO

VASILIKI TSAKNAKI
IT UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN
VATS@ITU.DK

NOURA HOWELL
GEORGIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
NHOWELL8@GATECH.EDU

LAURENS BOER
IT UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN
LAUB@ITU.DK

ABSTRACT

This one-day workshop will explore fabulations in design research. Bringing together design researchers and practitioners in hands-on exploration and critical dialogue, we will explore emerging practices and potentials of using fabulations in futures-oriented and exploratory practice-based design research. Drawing on fabulations' relations with feminist technoscience and more-than-human concerns, we seek to

understand if and how the practice of fabulating can contribute to designing vibrant worlds that can flourish in new ways.

INTRODUCTION

What the future may bring is a core consideration for design. Researchers have long claimed that one of the things that is being prototyped in design is the future (Tonkinwise 2015), building worlds and systems that drive future lifestyles and behaviour (Light et al 2015, Coulton et al 2017). This workshop seeks to try to make this futuring activity to be more intentional as well as more generative—not only foreclosing possible futures by producing particulars but also by opening up



possibility, bringing new visions, conceptions, and concerns into the frame of design. Put simply: what futures are we designing, and how are we doing it? We propose that one way to broaden this frame is through fabulation as a practice, technique, or methodology for creating visions of the future that can be conscious, conscientious, and caring.

Envisioning worlds that offer new possibilities is essential, especially at this moment in the Nordics. Shifting power relations, new forms of economic models, shifts towards public-private partnerships in welfare models, rapid emergence of “disruptive” technologies like AI and blockchain, and novel forms of service provision are transforming how states, communities and caregivers plan and improve living conditions of the population. These challenges thus require new forms of participation to ensure that products, practices, services, and emerging technologies are designed and adopted to support citizens in equitable ways. Further, as the rhetoric of technological solutionism becomes more richly embedded into how we think of design’s capacity to create futures, it may be necessary to resist solutionist impulses entirely, envisioning radically different futures that call fundamental concerns into account. Mark Fisher describes *capitalist realism* as a superseding logic of everyday life, one where the fundamental presence of capitalism is so deeply assumed that any alternative becomes unimaginable (Fisher 2009). Likewise, design might be in a similar danger of becoming trapped by user-centered design, design thinking, apps, user experience, and expedient metrics that take already-existing agendas as a given. As designers, design researchers and design educators, we are experienced in doing and imagining design as a form of future change, yet with increasingly complex challenges and uncertainty, we argue that there is a need to radically expand our futures-oriented design approaches for envisioning lively and thriving worlds.

This workshop will explore *fabulations* (Haraway, 2016) in design practice and practice-oriented design research. We will explore how fabulations and the practice of fabulating can be used to collaboratively imagine futures that encourage broader forms of participation in society, building stronger connections among citizens, and ultimately fostering more resilient futures. *Fabulation* is part of a new approach using storytelling in design futuring, borrowed from STS and feminist technoscience, oriented towards alternative forms of critical and radical world-making. However, the use of fabulation in design futuring, while having enormous potential in being able to bridge contemporary challenges of participation, is currently tentative and understudied. How should or could fabulation be deployed within collaborative design to imagine new worlds for design?

BACKGROUND

In recent years, design research has shown increasing interest in design futuring, critical feminist technoscience, and more-than-human concerns. For instance, recent work calls for expanding approaches to design futuring (Kozubaev et al., 2022), underscores the importance of feminist technoscience for imagining alternative futures with design (Søndergaard, 2020), and expanding conceptions of users and human bodies to include more-than-human concerns (Homewood et al. 2021). Design futuring, critical feminist technoscience, and more-than human concerns garner increasing interest in part because they offer ways to both resist design solutionism *and* explore avenues for engaging highly complex, challenging societal problems such as capitalism and unsustainability in relation to designing and living with new services, systems, products, and technologies.

An emerging practice addressing these topics, is fabulation. In design research, fabulation has been used to retell ignored stories from the past (Rosner, 2018) to backcast from the future into the present (Wilde et al., 2021), and emphasise moral values using non-human archetypes (Russell et al., 2022). Through imaginative collage-making, illustrations and written short stories, fabulations have inspired joyful reimagining of bodily fluids (Helms et al., 2021) and biodata (Tsaknaki et al., 2022). Often, such approaches are inspired by speculative design but deviate by using critical and feminist commitments and participatory approaches (Forlano et al., 2016; Mazé, 2017). Building on and contributing to these emerging threads, we see fabulation as a mode of generating possible futures that can complement ongoing participatory design process, particularly if combined with critical and collaborative world-making activities that could break away from the sometimes-inevitable feel of current imaginaries of human-technology relations (Markham 2021). Our aim is to contribute to this scholarship by inquiring into Haraway’s notion of speculative fabulation, as well as how it could apply to different forms of design research and practice in diverse issues and contexts.

Speculative fabulations are particularly interesting as a form of collaborative future making because 3: 1) they combine thinking with making, 2) they are a reciprocal practice, done in dialogue with others, 3) they trouble predefined categories, and instead propose new configurations of humans and non-human actors, 4) they are radically inclusive in including perspectives from all implicated by the practice of worlding, including multispecies perspectives. As feminist activists, researchers, artists, and technologists, we see it as urgent to create new forms of situated, plural and collective forms of design futuring. However, as an emerging method, speculative fabulation is currently under-defined and therefore difficult to apply to design research.

WORKSHOP GOALS

A primary aim for this workshop is to therefore to explore, discuss and formulate best practices, theoretical concepts and implications of fabulation as a collaborative design practice for imagining futures. Of particular interest are a set of questions: what does a design-oriented practice of fabulation look like? What kinds of designerly knowledge can fabulation produce? What methods can be developed for fabulating with stakeholders? Can speculative fabulation be deployed as a strategy to produce “viable” futures? Alongside examples of fabulated futures, the workshop will offer a forum for sharing, comparing, and learning from one another. We seek conversations of how fabulation has been deployed in design futuring and other areas of design, uncovering the possibilities of fabulation as a generative mode of making new connections between actors and technologies, and build a space for reflecting on the futures fabulation produces, developing direct interventions for implementing changes that they inspire.

A secondary aim for this workshop is to invite researchers into hands-on playful explorations of fabulations, through a set of exercises of fabulating futures from across the different Nordic countries. Through a common brief of fabulating futures of the Nordics, we will explore and produce fabulations, and use these quickly iterated and open-ended story-worlds to discuss the potentials and implications of fabulations as a futures-oriented approach in design research.

POSSIBLE TOPICS

Together with participants we hope to drive conversations around topics including (but not limited to):

- *Materializing fabulations* – What forms of materials can fabulations take? What are advantages and disadvantages from various representations and performances for fabulation? What kinds of novel materials and approaches can help produce stronger, more affective or affirmative radical futures?
- *Temporalities for fabulation* – When can using fabulation be a helpful part of a design process? How can different forms of thinking with time be useful for design? How does fabulations relate temporalities of pasts, presents, futures?
- *Cultivating joy, cultivating hope* – How does fabulation navigate utopian and dystopian collective imaginings in its effort of envisioning preferable futures? How can joy and hope be nurtured in imagining futures?
- *Feminist futuring* – How does speculative fabulations’ feminist commitments transfer into design practice? How are power hierarchies and intersectional critique mediated through storytelling and world-building practices?

- *Post-anthropocentric worlding* – How are non-human perspectives included in collaborative design practice? How are future predictions of climate crisis deployed in futures-oriented design practice aiming at informing the present?
- *Audiences* – How can fabulations be performed, interpreted, and used by other disciplines? What political possibilities does fabulations open across audiences and stakeholders? Can fabulations inspire designers, policymakers, technologists, ecologists and so on to imagine and build different societies?

WORKSHOP STRUCTURE

We propose a one-day in-person workshop at Nordes 2023.

SESSION 1: FORUM

In the morning session, we will share and discuss how fabulations have been deployed in design, including design futuring and other areas. With the help of short presentations, debate, and concept mapping, this activity aims to provide grounding for future work done in this area. Through sharing and presenting case studies and examples of existing digital technologies, in addition to analysing and reflecting on those, this workshop will set the scene for “the present”, creating a base for start imagining possible futures.

SESSION 2: FABULATION

In the afternoon, we will create fabulations that envision new futures for design in the Nordics. We will use hands-on explorations, such as collage-making, bodystorming, low-fidelity prototyping and storytelling techniques, to develop fabulations in smaller groups. We will share these examples of fabulations and use them to discuss our mappings from the morning session.

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

By bringing researchers of varying levels of experience together we hope to do three things. First, there is an opportunity to build and strengthen an international community of research practitioners invested in alternative future-creation, and developing stronger networks among them is a top-level outcome of this workshop. Second, this group can use the workshop as an opportunity to reflect on how design can work to engage with the future in new ways—from conversations here, we hope to learn more about what works and what doesn’t work when fabulating futures. Third and finally, this conversation about practice can ideally lead to new forms of theoretical knowledge about the capacities for design to engage in new kinds of future-making.

We will aim to visually document the materials and discussion that emerge in the workshop and disseminate them via the workshop website. At the conclusion of the workshop, we will explore the possibility of organizing a special issue for a journal. Beyond that, though, we intend to also explore other, more non-traditional



publication venues to disseminate broader accounts of fabulation and futures in design.

REFERENCES

- Coulton, P., Lindley, J. G., Sturdee, M., and Stead, M. "Design fiction as world building." (2017)
- Fisher, M. 2009. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Winchester, UK Washington, USA: Zero Books.
- Forlano, L., Ståhl, Å., Lindström, K., Jonsson, L., and Maze, R. (2016). Making, mending and growing in feminist speculative fabulations: Design's unfaithful daughters. In Book of DRS 2016 Conversations Design Research Society.
- Haraway, D. J. (2016). *Staying with the trouble*. Duke University Press.
- Helms, K., Juul Søndergaard, M. L., and Campo Woytuk, N. 2021. Scaling Bodily Fluids for Utopian Fabulations. In Proceedings of the 9th Nordic Design Research Conference. DRS Digital Library, Kolding, Denmark, 5.
- Homewood, S., Hedemyr, M., Fagerberg Ranten, M., and Kozel, S. 2021. Tracing Conceptions of the Body in HCI: From User to More-Than-Human. In Proceedings of the 2021 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '21). Association for Computing Machinery, New York, NY, USA, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3411764.344565>
- Kozubaev, S., Elsdén, C., Howell, N., Søndergaard, M., Merrill, N., Schulte, B., and Wong, R. 2020. Expanding Modes of Reflection in Design Futuring. In Proceedings of the 2020 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '20). Association for Computing Machinery, New York, NY, USA, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3313831.3376526>
- Light A., Brereton M., Roe P. (2015) Some notes on the design of "world machines." In: Proceedings of the annual meeting of the Australian special interest group for computer human interaction (OzCHI '15), Parkville, VIC, Australia, 7–10 December, pp. 289–293. New York: ACM. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2838739.2838832>
- Markham, A. (2021). The limits of the imaginary: Challenges to intervening in future speculations of memory, data, and algorithms. *New Media & Society*, 23(2), 382–405.
- Mazé, R. (2017) Visions of the Future: Critical practices of design fabulation. In: Gender Studies Conference, 23-25 Nov 2017, Jyväskylä, Finland
- Rosner, D. 2018. *Critical Fabulations: Reworking the Methods and Margins of Design*. The MIT Press.
- Russell, G., Lesage, F., and Badke, C. 2022. Fables for imagining: Critical storymaking and digital literacies. In Proceedings of Design Research Society. DRS Digital Library, Bilbao, Spain.
- Tonkinwise, C. 2015. 'Just Design'. *Medium* (blog). 21 August 2015. <https://medium.com/@camerontw/just-design-b1f97cb3996f>.
- Tsaknaki, V., Sanches, P., Jenkins, T., Howell, N., Boer, L., and Bitzouni, A. 2022. Fabulating Biodata Futures for Living and Knowing Together. In Designing Interactive Systems Conference (DIS '22). Association for Computing Machinery, New York, NY, USA, 1878–1892. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3532106.3533477>
- Wilde, D., van Gaalen, S., Dolejšová, M., Graham Raven, P., Karyda, M., and Trahan, S. 2021. Backcasting [Better] Futures. In Proceedings of the 9th Nordic Design Research Conference. DRS Digital Library, Kolding, Denmark.