

We Are Living in a Sci-Fi World

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In 1993, on NPR's "Fresh Air," science fiction author William Gibson famously said, "The future is here. It's just not evenly distributed yet." In the work of Gibson and his fellow writers, we often find the tension between two key pillars of future thinking: our future stuff and our future selves.

Science fiction (also known as SF, which for many purists refers instead to speculative fiction) has taken on both of those pillars. But to the uninitiated, it's presumed to consist only of the "stuff" —robots, aliens, gizmos, spaceships, and lasers that go pyew! pyew! (the noise that every boy can

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make from birth). To those of us who navigate interactions with people, a consideration of the future stuff is interesting, but exploring the future selves can be transformative.

As a form of communication, science fiction (especially written) presents its own usability challenge. Like many things, it's easier to use if you already know how it works (I think this is why I struggle with jazz). There are many recurring tropes that get little exposition. If we read that Jarr'ongHa goes into the virch, we need to know that Jarr'ongHa is probably an alien (although possibly human on another world or another time) and we also are expected to know that the virch is a virtual reality environment—perhaps a room with holographic capabilities like "Star Trek"'s holodeck, or perhaps a cabled connection between computer and brain like jacking in from Gibson's Neuromancer. The more we read and watch, the more interface standards we absorb, and the easier it is to quickly move past

this interface of tropes to the actual story.

Since science fiction has a relationship to science (and its commercial pal, technology), this interface is slightly easier to learn since we are likely exposed to some of those standards in our own lives: lasers from the planetarium, doors that automatically whoosh open from the grocery store, robots from the latest bomb-squad story on the news. The Web has a ton of examples, such as <http://www.technovelgy.com> (including a blog called Science Fiction in the News that reports on real things happening that were described if not predicted by sci-fi authors) and CIO's [http://www.cio.com/article/471261/What Science Fiction Writers Have Learned About Predicting The Future of Technology](http://www.cio.com/article/471261/What_Science_Fiction_Writers_Have_Learned_About_Predicting_The_Future_of_Technology), a piece that does what it says on the can. Meanwhile, a recent Oxford University Press blog, "Nine Words You Might Think Came from Science but Which Are Really from Science Fiction"

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(<http://blog.oup.com/2009/03/science-fiction>), illustrates the ambiguity between science fiction and science fact. The comments offer some strong challenges about the origins of some of these science concepts.

Alan Kay famously wrote, “The best way to predict the future is to invent it” and there are many examples where fiction inspires fact. Motorola’s 1996 StarTAC mobile phone, the first clamshell phone, is often assumed to have been inspired by the communicator used on Star Trek. In *Make It So* (in press) Nathan Shedroff and Chris Noessel remind us that “sci-fi is a powerful cultural influence. It affects designers’ ideas as well as those of our clients and audiences.” As an example:

“In the 1990s, when Douglas Caldwell, with the U.S. Army Topographic Engineers, saw a 3-D map system in the film, ‘X-Men,’ he realized it was a novel solution

*to an age-old challenge: how to represent any relevant topography in 3-D in the battlefield. His department’s request for proposals for development of something similar yielded the Xenotran Mark II Dynamic Sand Table, including the improvement of a smooth surface and overhead projection”*¹

Of course, science fiction has tackled this topic as well. In Bill Wesley’s 1958 short story “Crash Program,” a group of scientists is hurriedly summoned to a government facility, where they view scratchy footage of what appears to be a demonstration of Russian anti-grav technology. Realizing they are now dramatically behind in the arms race, the scientists frantically develop a working version of their own anti-gravity device. At that point (spoiler alert, but hey, you’ve had 51 years to read it yourself) the government agents reveal that they faked the footage in order to break the “it can’t be done” mind-

1. Shedroff, N. and Noessel, C. *Make It So* (in press), Experience Design.

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set. As Shedroff and Noessel say, “Viewers like what they see and seek to replicate it in real world.”

Allan Chochinov, editor at Core77, draws design inspiration from the film “Brazil,” which he recalls as a “hysterical mash of steampunk, Victoriana, and some just plain weird stuff messing with scale. It made me think about economy (making a lot from a little), irony (no need to dissect that!), and hyperbole (ditto). These elements of design—versus ol’ form or ol’ function, can be so much more potent. How fitting to find them, over and over, in a film filled with fictional design artifacts.”

In addition to inspiring technology and design, sci-fi can also influence business. As Michael Arrington writes,

“Every good entrepreneur needs a certain amount of imagination to envision the future. Science fiction books tend to keep the imaginative juices flowing. And

the better ones have moral or other life lessons that are a lot more fun to read entwined with the drama of an unfolding story that involves spaceships, time travel or other worlds.” ²

Science fiction, functioning as pop culture, can also provide the most impactful shorthand for the discussion of design principles. Sure, you can describe the need for graceful error recovery, but it’s so much easier to just drop in a “RoboCop” reference to ED 209 (a “self-sufficient law-enforcement robot”). If you aren’t geeky enough to remember, in the film, ED 209 is demonstrated to a group of executives in a boardroom. One of the junior execs participates in the demo, and is handed a loaded gun, which he’s instructed to point at ED 209. The bristling-with-machine-guns robot springs to life and in a deep mechanical voice intones, “Please put down your weapon. You have 20 seconds to comply.” The exec looks at his boss, who suggests this is good

² Arrington, M. <www.techcrunch.com/2009/04/05/grok-this-forget-the-business-books-go-sci-fi-to-stoke-your-imagination>.

For those who know ED209, a simple mention of the name evokes the cautionary tale, fictitious though it may be.

advice, and so he throws the gun on the floor. Moments later, ED 209 growls, steps forward, and announces, “You now have 15 seconds to comply.” There’s no chance to cancel or try again; the robot is moving forward with its programming! The hapless exec has already dropped his weapon; how can he do so again? Executives begin to scream, the soon-to-be-victim throws himself at his colleagues begging for help, they push him away, and eventually ED209 opens up with both barrels and pumps a thousand rounds into the poor guy. For those who know ED209, a simple mention of the name evokes the cautionary tale, fictitious though it may be.

I grew up reading Golden Age science fiction, including Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, Arthur C. Clarke, Frederik Pohl, Robert Silverberg, Clifford D. Simak, and Theodore Sturgeon. I read a mix of short stories and novels when I was young and the work was not yet old. Even if Heinlein was challenging sexual mores (as in

Time Enough for Love), I was much more engaged in the story than the ideas. Maybe I just liked stories about robots, spaceships, and planets.

This changed about 10 years ago when I read Neal Stephenson’s Snow Crash, a book that took the ideas of right now (or right then) and played with them, taking some notions to a slightly parodic extreme—the protagonist, Hiro Protagonist, delivers pizza for the Mafia and the CIA has been privatized as the Central Intelligence Corporation. At the same time, Stephenson maintained a clear line back to the current world of the reader. From my lengthy history with science fiction, this novel was a sea change.

But where’s that balance between author as visionary and author as storyteller? I tried to read Charlie Stross’s Accelerando a couple of years back, but I felt the story served only as a carrier for the torrent of ideas/social commentary he wanted readers to think about.

Of course, thinking about the future of thinking about the future is nothing new.

It was fun for the first 50 pages, trying to keep up with it all. After that, it started to get annoying, then ultimately untenable. I hurled the book across the room in frustration, giving up on ever finishing it.

Obviously, much of this has to do with how I'm engaging with the world when I come across these stories. Comments or ideas about culture are obviously more resonant now than when I was 10. But I wonder if this is how science fiction was always read and written, or if the landscape has changed?

Similarly influenced by exposure to science fiction in his formative years, Greg Breit of Qualcomm Incorporated had this to say: "My Cold War childhood was dominated by messages of unbridled optimism about what society could accomplish through science and technology (Monorails, moon landings, jetpacks, etc.). Seeing time travel on 'Star Trek' illustrated that a seemingly insignificant event in

the past could have unforeseeable catastrophic consequences in the future. Although my employer pays me to innovate without considering the societal implications of my work, I strive to remain aware of all sides of the story. Without a doubt, my favorite science fiction themes engrained that habit in me."

Nicolas Nova, user experience researcher for Liftlab in Switzerland, further explains, "Sci-fi is beyond technology forecasting. I love the genre as a sort of 'gedanken' experiment; a story that explores the implications of a certain phenomenon (e.g., the release of a new technology, the burst of a social trend, etc.). I like to read sci-fi alongside sociology/anthropology and try to draw parallels. Cyberpunk/postcyberpunk stories (Bruce Sterling, William Gibson) are great material for to me to explore the derivative uses of technologies in avenues that I would not have thought about." Nova is no doubt highly entertained by what he reads, but he's also actively seeking inspiration and new

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perspectives, and is spot on with his connection of sci-fi to social science.

Of course, thinking about the future of thinking about the future is nothing new. Back in 1961, Philip Roth wrote, "We now live in an age in which the imagination of the novelist lies helpless before what he knows he will read in tomorrow morning's newspaper."

I had a similar reaction when I watched John Thackara speak at IxDA's Interaction 09 (<http://vimeo.com/3869828>). He described the ecological challenges facing people around the planet and the ways that different individual groups were responding (e.g., Rainwater HOG modular tanks;

Landshare's social network to match up people with land with gardeners; or Bricolabs' movement to hack, mash up, and repurpose electronics and other hardware). The third installment of the Intuit Future of Small Business Report detailed that "using CAD and desktop manufacturing systems provides even an individual the ability to create complex product designs that can be efficiently turned into products by a third-party manufacturing firm."

It's hard not to feel like we are seeing elements of the future happening today, that we are living in a sci-fi world.

Note: for more examples, and a significantly more in-depth analysis, check out Julian Bleecker's <http://www.nearfuturelaboratory.com/2009/03/17/design-fiction-a-short-essay-on-design-science-fact-and-fiction>.

Note again: What are your favorite science fiction books, stories, movies, scenes, and what about them do you find inspiring or relevant? Email me at steve@portigal.com and I'll post them on our blog at www.portigal.com/blog. And keep watching the skies!

Steve Portigal is the founder of Portigal Consulting, a boutique agency that helps companies discover and act on new insights about their customers and themselves.

Steve has been studying customer behavior and corporate culture for more than a decade and has advised dozens of clients on the creation of new products, services, and innovation processes.

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