

Making Things Physical

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Abstract

In this paper we present a cross-section of FoAM and Time's Up's work with physical narratives (PNs), which draws upon experiential futures and experience design. We introduce PNs as explorable, multisensory spaces before discussing the importance of enabling social interaction. We describe a series of creative experiments with PNs to illustrate our approach to futures in an artistic context, including installations, exhibitions and festivals. The design of the PNs involve a range of futures techniques (such as scenario development or design fiction) to invite participatory explorations of the "visionary present". We do not intend to provide a critical analysis of the design process, methods or implications; rather, the article offers a reflection on our motivations and insights. As an invitation to further dialogue between transdisciplinary fields, we conclude with a call for futurecrafting at a human scale.

Keywords: Experiential Futures, Immersion, Futurecrafting, Physical Narratives.

Introduction

Physical narrative (PN) can be described as a theatre without actors, where spectators become engaged participants, playfully discovering futures by experiencing physical spaces, objects and media. A PN is an explorable world. An open scenario rather than a singular story. PNs take the form of immersive installations where entangled fragments of scenarios can be experienced through all the senses as a self-contained, aesthetically coherent reality. Direct experience of scenarios, when presented as physical prototypes, entangle the participants with alternatives to the status quo, and suggests that futures can be proactively influenced by those who engage with them (Candy, 2010; Dator, 2009; Inayatullah, 2005; Kuzmanovic & Gaffney, 2017b; Ramos, 2005).

As there are no human guides in a PN, visitors gather meaning and interpret situations in a similar way as they would in unfamiliar environments. They are invited to observe, investigate and discuss what it might be like to be a part of a possible future, in physical situations that can be freely explored. Reading a foresight report or watching design fiction videos assumes a distance between the scenario and the reader or viewer. In physical narratives, visitors become a part of the scenario, surrounded by it as if they were in a parallel world. The level (or depth) of immersion is important, allowing visitors to investigate the scenario using all their sensory, somatic, intuitive and cerebral faculties (Floyd, Burns, & Ramos, 2008; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991). Such immersive experiences can be intense and disorienting, especially with near future scenarios¹ (Superflux, 2017). The future can feel quite up-close-and-personal, eliciting strong emotional responses, or a desire to understand repercussions the experience may have for the visitors' own lives (Slaughter, 2008). Incorporating social spaces within PNs to decompress and share experiences is crucial for their critical assimilation. The visitors can exchange insights and extrapolate to their own aspirations and projections, thereby developing their capacity for (ambient) foresight (Candy, 2010) and contributing to the spread of futures literacy (Miller, 2011, 2015).

Elements of Experiential Explorations

With physical narratives we design speculative situations and scenarios (Curry & Schultz, 2009) as tangible environments. PNs generally incorporate three key aspects in their design: playful exploration, multisensory experience and social interaction (Time's Up & FoAM, 2013). The following paragraphs provide a brief overview of our rationale and several examples from our practice.

Explorable Spaces

In a PN, scenarios become ambient narratives, with no predefined beginnings or endings, and no linear progression from one story element to another. As the scenarios (future, present or parallel) are scattered across the space in hints and fragments, it is impossible to experience a PN as a clearcut, singular future: there are many possible stories hidden within, requiring the participant to be aware and active (Dator, 2009). Characters and storylines are implicitly discovered, rather than explicitly described. Like a good horror film, PNs affect the viewer just as much by what is left unseen as by what is presented (Nakata, 1998). They invite the visitors to actively uncover, interpret and co-create a range of possible scenarios; to weave the story-fragments together from physical artefacts, media snippets and dispersed segments of the characters' stories (Candy, 2010; Raford, 2012). They create meaning on-the-fly, akin to free play (Kane, 2004), where the making and breaking of rules and hypotheses about the world simultaneously creates the world itself.



Figure 1. Borrowed Scenery (2012)

In the PN *Borrowed Scenery* (FoAM, 2012) (Figure 1), visitors can unearth scenarios where plant cultures and human societies have become deeply intertwined to the point of becoming indistinguishable (Kuzmanovic & Gaffney, 2017a). The installation (presented in Belgium and Austria) is built around a *Patabotanical lab* inhabited by elusive characters, known only by their physical traces: experiments-in-progress, field-notes and prototypes, a collection of books, plants, disembodied scents and mysterious artefacts. Everything in the atemporal ambience of this verdant, biomorphic, technologically advanced world reflects an element of one or more scenarios. Traces of a plausible near future co-exist alongside evocative speculative fictions (Gaffney & Howse, 2013). A map of the city as edible landscape; instructions for a botanically infused psychogeographic drift. Translation of a vegetal communiqué concerning human extinction; archaic and contemporary devices for human-plant communication (Kuzmanovic & Gaffney, 2008; Essaïdi, 2014). From physical juxtapositions and connections between such artefacts, visitors tend to extrapolate their own versions of the initial scenarios. While some ideas can be directly related to existing initiatives, others delve further into the realm of science fiction (or speculative fact). The PN draws upon the visitors' personal experiences, with the intent to develop their relationships with plants and find ways of coexisting in the Anthropocene (Morton, 2016).



Figure 2. *Stored in a Bank Vault* (2011)

In *Stored in a Bank Vault* (Time's Up, 2011) (Figure 2), visitors take on the role of a detective, stumbling into the underground lair of a group about to rob a nearby bank vault. As visitors inspect the basement, they uncover various aspects of the story — in hacked computers, tapped surveillance cameras, architectural plans, sedatives, by overhearing a character's phone conversation behind a locked door, or chancing on a plan of attack. Dedicated investigators discover that the heist may not be just about cash, but some enigmatic seeds. They may find a trail of the group's previous exploits that reveal deeper layers of motivation. Like in a good thriller, this leads to surprises and unexpected plot-twists, seducing the visitors to delve deeper into the story.

Multisensory Spaces

PNs are interactive environments in which fragments of scenarios are transformed into physical spaces, objects and tangible media. When people explore possible futures by touching, standing on, handling or smelling speculative artefacts, they rely on their mental, emotional, as well as somatic faculties. Engaging all senses allows for embodied, multimodal learning and stimulates imagination (Floyd et al., 2008). The immersive, interactive nature of PNs invites visitors to “fill in the blanks” between scenario fragments (Miller, 2015). As in the adage “I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand”, in PNs the visitors can relate to abstract concepts as experiential phenomena, which makes them more approachable and easier to understand. Rather than read and analyse, or watch and absorb, they inhabit the scenario, learning by doing (Ramos, 2005).



Figure 3. Lucid Peninsula (2014)

In *Lucid Peninsula* (Time's Up, 2014) (Figure 3), visitors find themselves in a hotel room, in a future where pollution and environmental degradation have led to peculiar developments in medical and consciousness technologies. An airtight window is fitted with the *OrganoClean* air purification system, the room breathing mechanically, as the air bubbles past plants growing in oversized test tubes. The buzzing of a detox shower can be heard through the locked bathroom door. Clothing items are tagged as having been decontaminated. The bed is flanked with a *General Infection Negation* blood cleansing device and a *DreamNet* system for “sharing dreams with friends and colleagues.” Upon entering the room, visitors are absorbed in the hypnotic breathing rhythms; many lie on the bed with their eyes closed, while others pensively investigate the copper-tubed breathing apparatus and brass window viewer, showing an overlay rendering of the outside world.

Similarly meditative, *Stillness* (FoAM, 2016; Gaffney, Morton, & Kuzmanovic, 2016) was an exhibition and immersive experience designed to slow down the pace of visitors' hectic lives. A parallel present (or near future) where slowness, contemplation and idling are not seen as luxuries but rather as necessities to survive in a world of fragmented interconnectivity, distraction, displacement, and other forms of contemporary malaise (Tsing, 2015). Filmic sequences of photographs are laid out as parcours through the space, occasionally overlaid with sound and scent. Fragments of the ambient narrative could be uncovered in objects, images, food, drinks and texts found in improbable places, hiding under vegetation or scattered across the ceiling. The layout of the space and furnishings suggested a particular flow of experience, gradually decelerating and enveloping the visitors in stillness of sound, scent and light.



Figure 4. Stillness (2016)

Social Spaces

Physical narratives provide a shared experience of speculative scenarios. Before and after experiencing a PN, the visitors cross a “threshold” between their present and a possible future (Huizinga, 1970; Turner, 1991). A period of “compression” and “decompression” can help relate these experiences more closely to people’s lives. Like those who have shared an intense situation or peak experience (e.g. a natural disaster, mountain climbing or psychedelics) visitors often feel a need to spend time together sharing, comparing and making sense of their PN exploits. They may re-enter the PN after discussing it, looking for details which others alerted them to, things they may not have noticed previously. Social interaction can enrich the story and the experience for all involved (Inayatullah, 2005). This can be facilitated by surrounding the PN with familiar social situations, such as a lounge, a bar, or a waiting room. It can be as simple as including a pair of period chairs on a carpet in *Unattended Luggage* (Time’s Up, 2012), where the visitors would sit and closely examine elements of the story together. A more extensive approach was the bar of the *Sensory Circus* (Time’s Up, 2004) or the *SubCity* environment for *BodySPIN* (Time’s Up, 2001), where visitors reclined and quietly conversed over drinks. They were surrounded by small screens and other “windows” into the PN, keeping them connected to the actions taking place in the installation, only a few meters away. While these spaces are thematically linked to the PN scenarios, they are obviously in the here-and-now.



Figure 5. Unattended Luggage (2012)

In *Godsheide Futures* (FoAM, 2015), where we looked at possible futures for shared public spaces in a Belgian residential neighbourhood, fragments of scenarios were experienced as part of a reception. While visitors engaged in the usual mingling and networking, the scenarios began to enter their conversations via finger-foods and aperitifs. Translating scenarios into “edible futures” (FoAM, 2014) created an informal atmosphere that encouraged conversation between policy makers, urban planners and the inhabitants. Over food and drinks, almost imperceptibly, the first commitments were made to bring some of the scenarios into reality. A year after the reception, the inhabitants have successfully repurposed a local church into a community-supported school and plans are underway to form a co-operative for more ambitious projects.



Figure 6. Godsheide Apero (2015)

By “holding space” (Corrigan, 2006) and informally engaging with the visitors, we do not leave people “hanging” after experiencing (sometimes disturbing) futures. If we are interested in experiential futures affecting thoughts and behaviours in the present (Ramos, 2005; Inayatullah, 2004) hosting the visitors’ conversations and reflection is as important as creating a compelling futures narrative. Such (strategic) conversation allows the experiential insights to echo in the visitor’s work and life, raising ambient awareness of possible future repercussions (Chermack, Lynham, & Ruona, 2001; Gidley, Fien, Smith, Thomsen, & Smith, 2009; Haraway, 2016). This implies moving away from consuming futures as entertaining speculative fiction and towards a more widespread futures literacy (Candy, 2010; Miller, 2011).

Futurecrafting at a Human Scale

Working with physical narratives as a means to experience future scenarios has led us to understand the importance of working with futures at a human scale, connecting them to the mundane, personal, social aspects of everyday life (Calvin, 2009; Candy, 2010; Ryman et al., 2004). By diffusing fragments of futures in physical spaces, rather than spoon-feeding visitors a singular future vision, we aim to stimulate a sense of agency while experiencing the PN, as well as long after the experience has ended. Freedom to play with and interpret scenarios, also referred to as worldmaking (Vervoort, Bendor, Kelliher, Strik, & Helfgott, 2015), lets visitors uncover multiplicities of possible futures, and an ability to co-create them (Gidley et al., 2009). Social interaction within PNs can help focus our capacity to change things in the present. By collectively experiencing a “visionary present” (Ballard, 2001) people tend to be more open to cultivating preferred futures, futures that encourage wonder, hope and engagement (Montouri, 2011; Ogilvy, 2011). Away from monolithic dystopian visions and towards something more malleable and elastic,

from “an overly abstract concept lacking relevance” towards an “inspirational call to action with traction” (Ramos, 2005).

Physical narratives provide a structure within which we can approach futures with all the rich detail of corporeal reality, futures that are tangible and explicable, futures that emerge somewhere between scenario-planning and design (Selin, Kimbell, Ramirez, & Bhatti, 2015). Where visitors are encouraged to think about future possibilities and invited to deepen their involvement (Ogilvy, 2011; Kelleher, 2005). The exploration of futures through physical experience could be seen as an entry point into an expanding futures literacy. Where experiencing futures creates space to reflect and act today.

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Notes

1. Similar to the “uncanny valley” phenomenon in robotics and computer graphics: the more familiar the environment, the more the visitors may notice the “strangeness” of the scenarios.

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