

Using research products to anticipate future everyday life

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the potential of research products (Odom et al., 2016) – high fidelity prototypes designed to generate new knowledge – to anticipate future everyday life. A secondary aim of the work underlying this paper is to bring 'making' as a valid and recognized method to the areas of the social sciences that study future everyday life. The question central to the paper therefore is: 'what are the type of questions about future everyday life that research products are best and uniquely capable of answering?'

An important part of this uniqueness lies in design's exploration of the new. In reference to the future cone model (Hancock & Bezold, 1994), research artefacts are capable of expanding the range of possible futures, because they can materialize new alternatives that weren't imagined before. Moreover, because these research products are physicalized ideas, they enable embodied experiences that generate a different type of knowledge about future everyday life than for example future scenarios or narratives.

The paper addresses the main question by focusing on the process and outcomes of sixteen master student projects that use research products to study specific aspects of future everyday life. These include the future of dating, laundering, and gender divisions in the smart home.

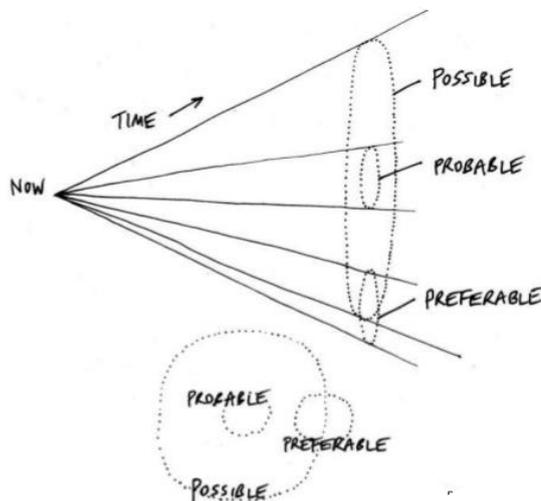


Figure 1: The "future cone"-adapted from Hancock and Bezold (1994) by Candy (2010, p. 35)

Background

The paper builds on earlier work in everyday futures (Kuijer & Spurling, 2017), in which I worked with Nicola Spurling to explore the challenges and state-of-the-art in researching future everyday life through a series of workshops, events and joint publications.

The first workshop, held in 2016 focused on exploring different approaches to studying future everyday life by bringing together researchers with highly varied backgrounds, from biology to

history and management. It resulted in a collection of nine essays published on our [Everyday Futures website](#), and a special topic in ACM Interactions (Kuijer & Spurling, 2017). This special topic highlighted three different approaches to researching future everyday life: (1) a historical focus (Wright & Pooley, 2017) in which the path dependency of infrastructures and ways of living implies looking at historic change as a means for anticipating the future, (2) a focus on the present (Chatterton & Newmarch, 2017), in which the idea that some of the diverse ways of living that exist today are likely to grow in the future and therefore form examples of how the future exists today, and (3) how the future everyday lives implied in powerful visions of the future, such as the circular economy, form an entry point for anticipating these lives (Welch, Keller, & Mandich, 2017).

The second workshop focused on a fourth approach to anticipating future everyday life, which was through the making of new artefacts. The [Making Everyday Futures workshop](#) was based on the idea of 'Designing to know' (Wakkary, 2016) that builds on the tradition of design research. Design research can be taken back to a series of essays published under the theme 'Design as a Discipline' in the 1980s (Archer, 1979; Cross, 1982; Nadler, 1980). The essays established design theory as a particular area of knowledge and research. A more formal design research methodology emerged in the early 1990s that uses design practice, the creative process of generating new objects, as a way of gaining knowledge. Today, these approaches are also referred to as Research through Design (Stappers & Giaccardi, 2017) or Constructive Design Research (Koskinen, Zimmerman, Binder, Redstrom, & Wensveen, 2011).

The majority of design research is directed at the design disciplines itself. In the Making Everyday Futures Workshop the focus was on exploring the possibilities of using processes of making objects, and the objects themselves, as an approach to generate original knowledge for the social sciences. This question remains central in my research on this topic and is further explored in a master elective course offered as part of the Industrial Design programme of Eindhoven University of Technology (NL). The aim of the course, titled 'Researching the Future Everyday', is to let students experiment with ways in which research products (Odom et al., 2016) can be used to make valuable contributions in the social sciences.

Material

In the course, students depart from a particular study published in a social science journal and formulate research questions on the basis of it. They design, make and deploy a research product after which they analyse results and produce a scientific paper about it. In this process, the students are guided and encouraged to keep an audience of social scientists in mind for their findings. The resulting papers are reviewed by experts from the social sciences (where possible the authors of the core papers). To ensure quality of the research products, they are critiqued half-way the course by design researchers in an exhibition style critique session.

In 2018, the course resulted in eight papers. Figure 3 shows three of the research products. AIMY is a tangible, audio-based dating device that responds to David and Cambre (2016). It forms an alternative to the casualness, quickness and ephemerality that Tinder 'promotes' through its interaction style of viewing and swiping, thereby shedding a different light on potential futures of 'assisted' dating. Smart Cup is a simple glass with LED lights programmed to randomly switch on and off. It responds to Strengers and Nicholls (2017) by exploring in more detail perceptions of smartness among consumers. Jack and June are two strongly stereotyped smart home characters that are marketed in an attractive packaging. Building on Strengers and Nicholls (2018), it was used to explore the implications of the continuation of the wife-replacement trend and the influence of marketing on stereotypical gender roles.

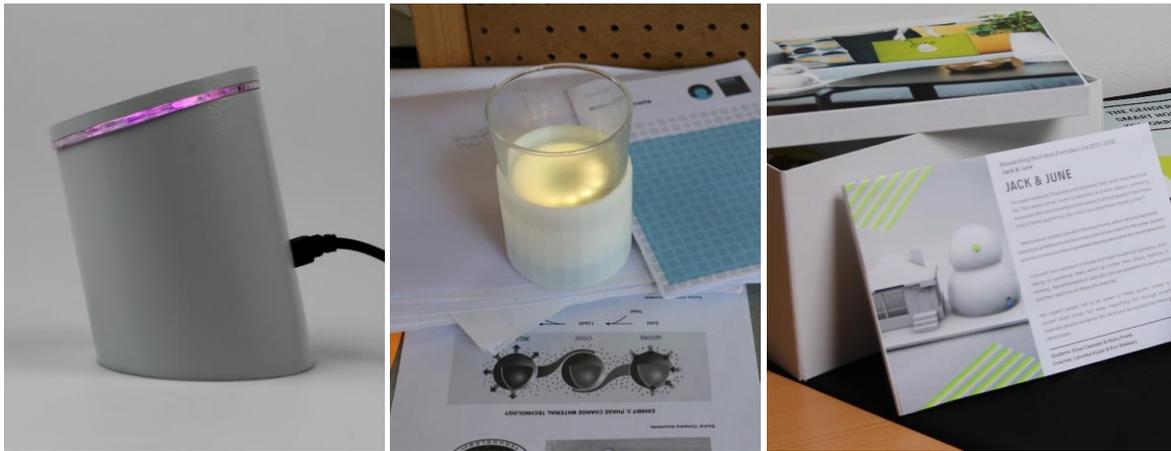


Figure 3: AIMY, Smart Cup and Jack & June

The course ran again from April – June 2019. In the session I will use these projects to reflect on the unique and potentially valuable role research products can play in contributing to our understanding of future everyday life.

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