Design Fiction tells more than a thousand facts

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Three and a half years ago, in the spring of 1995, a concept for a research programme called Future Home was born in the Media Lab. The seeds sown then have borne fruit and the future is now all over the University of Art and Design.

The original idea was to create a holistic approach and a user centered position to technology development as a reaction to the massive global effort to create an **information technology society**, so that there would be also research into how the technology **could and should be used**.

The industry has its own Research and Development (R&D), which guarantees that the technology will be there and will be developed in a way that generates more business for its developers. But do people have R & D needs that may not be met with this agenda? Future Media Home, the next incarnation of the original Future Home, a Media Lab research project, believes they do, and sees itself as **the R & D unit of the users of the future**.

The usability problems that plague technology today are just the **tip of the iceberg**. They require the industry to pay more attention to the consumer also as a user. This interest, first translated into a simple effort to design more attractive user interfaces, is now developing into a serious inquiry into what actually makes a product usable.

However, the journey of each product in the **ecosystem of the everyday life** is much richer than what is revealed by the stories engineers, marketers and designers develop, and contains many turns and trials that continually shape the **unique relationship** between the product and the user. This is the user's context for discussing usability, but is it too broad for the producers and designers?

As a consequence of complete digitalization, the electronic devices we know will eventually be transformed into computers. These will connect to the global network, creating a **universal digital platform** where **capabilities can move from device to device as software**. Because of this, our applications - the reasons why we use tools - become freed from the familiar devices that used to own them. For example, the telephone computer loses its exclusive right to enable remote speaking with a friend, the broadcast news may reach us through any device that can show an image, and so on.

For those involved in creating products, this demands a **complete reversal of the direction of thought** - the need to start with the applications, the needs, the functionality, and then develop scenarios on how the application can operate on different devices.

Also, a digital platform enables all products to be individually customized and personalized. Mass production of static products will change to mass customization on dynamic platforms. Each product can potentially be different, and the differences depend dynamically on the preferences, applications and situations of the user. This presents a promise of true user friendliness and allows **individual, unique designs**, but demands designers to develop deeper expertise in and sensitivity to everyday life situations of individuals.

The **next century will be one of ideas** and **software powered social processes**. Therefore also design will operate more and more with abstract concepts, processes, and mediated interactions, and its consequences will be immediate, politically powerful and socially tangible.

Although these are future trends, most **dominant designs** in our life today descend from isomorphic initial designs created decades ago (and very often, unfortunately, for a different purpose). The diffusion of innovations is slow, especially when it involves the most basic layers of universal systems, which have so many interdependencies. So for a young designer today, it may be just the time to consider these trends, and create a new personal approach to developing **truly and deeply usable technology based designs**.

I believe that designers can come up with a sense of direction by creating **Design Fiction**. Borrowing a flavor of its meaning from Science Fiction, Design Fiction also explores the future, but tells design stories that deal with applications, needs, ways to do things, from an individual's - not only the product's - point of view. Our scenarios will be based on shared premises and common building blocks that we continuously refine. What exactly is needed for good Design Fiction, we do not know yet, but we plan to find out.

Design Fiction is also a multidisciplinary study project, sponsored by Future Media Home and its industrial partners, with students from more than a dozen different university departments and will present its results in an exhibition in May 99.