

Napkin Futures: Fragments of Future Worlds

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Abstract

Every day archaeologists dig up fragments of past worlds and cultures. Through these they try to construct a bigger picture of life in times bygone. The incompleteness of their findings raises questions and catalyses hypotheses. The fragments project the beholder beyond the present timeframe and engage him/her in active reflection on the bigger picture potentially uniting or complementing the fragments in another timeframe. What if we could create a similar context of engagement around life in the future? In 'napkin futures'¹, micro-narratives sketched on paper napkins appear like excerpts from stories and happenings in the future. As if ripped from their broader context, each fragment invites to be unravelled into a bigger narrative. Both ultra-compact forms of design fiction and instruments of 'preflection', 'napkin futures' experiment with how a narrative fragment can be a powerful 'agent évocateur' and catalyst for debate with respect to futures.

Keywords: Design Fiction, Experiential Futures, Storytelling.

Origin

'Napkin futures' started as a side-project of the author to further explore, reflect upon and hold onto new ideas and speculations inspired by his work as a foresight and design practitioner. Gradually, the napkins developed from an instrument of personal use to an instrument for others to engage with new meanings arising from possible future worlds.

Each napkin features a rough sketch, generally accompanied by a small narrative, an excerpt from a seemingly larger story in which a future world is evoked.² Each story is in one way or another a rupture, a departure from today's world as we know it, at odds with the current state or logic of things. The story's estranging factor is a key enabler in luring people down the rabbit hole of their imagination.

The fragmentary nature of the napkin makes it clear that there is a larger narrative out there. As the reader takes in the image and the micro-narrative, he/she enters a process of hypothesis building, spurred by questions emerging from the apparent omissions. For example:

What does 'airbanification' mean (NF025)? Why does Italo Vishnu take it as his mission in life to dismantle old structures (NF019)? How would 'hovereyes' work (NF007)? What would a 'Chief Spiritual Officer' do in an organization (NF024)? What would have caused these things to emerge in our societies?

Thus the napkin futures can be considered catalysts for the imagination, ‘tools for thought’. It is worth noting however, that any depiction of the future is heavily shaped by — and thus reflective of — the lens through which we see and interpret reality today. Hence, the visions and questions raised by the napkins are likely to speak of and to the present as much as the future.



Figure 1. NF030 The Hendriksen Tree “Statistically speaking, the Hendriksen tree was genomically more human than plant. Deforestation of the area would hence be considered genocide. The Hendriksen case would be a turning point in history. Judge Chang could sense the sweet smell of fame in the air.”

Minimum Viable Narrative

In foresight, the notion of using a ‘minimum viable narrative’ to package different future developments in a single plausible context, can be discerned for example in the use of storylines in scenario development or visioning. In the case of the napkin futures however, rather than using storytelling to describe and/or explain a possible future, the emphasis lies most of all on provoking and raising new questions. This positions the napkins in the realm of more speculative approaches to design (Dunne & Raby, 2013) and design fiction (Bleecker, 2009).

The napkin futures are equally related to Marshall McLuhan’s notion of ‘probes’; word plays and bold perceptions used as exploratory tools, through provocation, raising awareness and questions. McLuhan describes them as follows (1967): “I tend to use phrases, I tend to use

observations that tease people, that squeeze them, that push at them, that disturb them, because I am really exploring situations. I am not trying to deliver some complete set of observations about anything.”

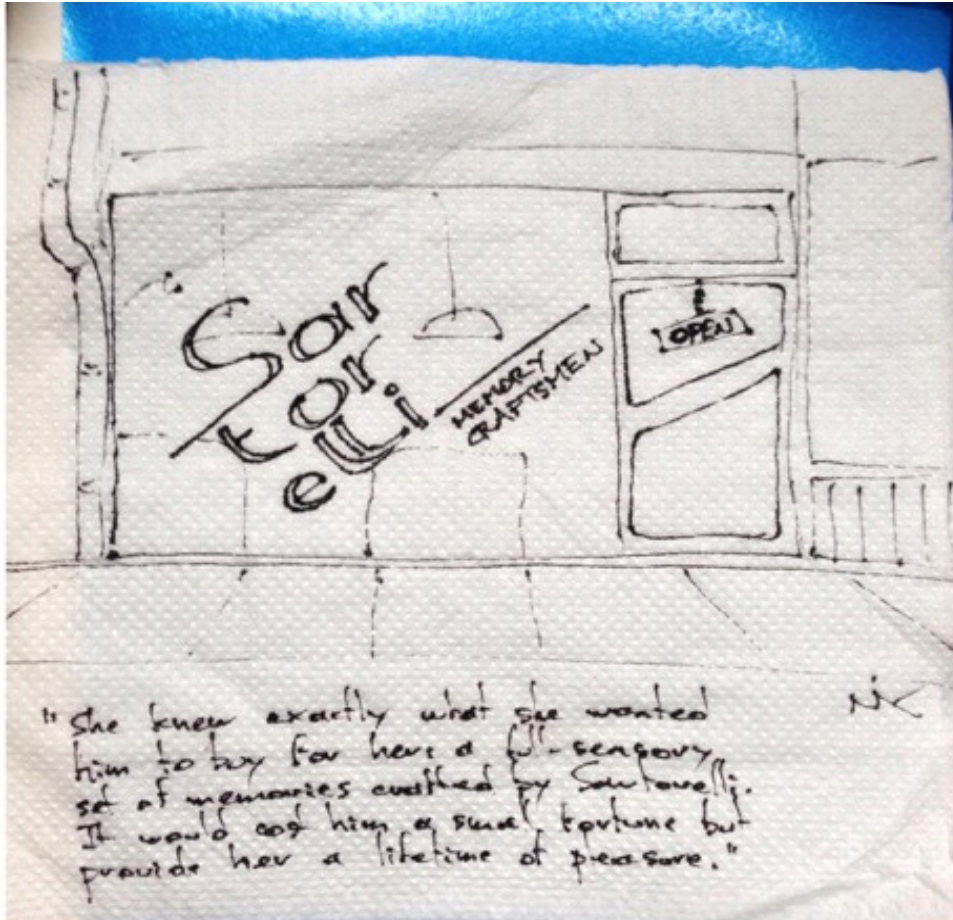


Figure 2. NF027 Memory craftsmen “She knew exactly what she wanted him to buy for her: a full-sensory set of memories crafted by Sartorelli. It would cost him a small fortune but provide her a lifetime of pleasure.”

From Verse to Multiverse

The fragmentary and hence ambiguous nature of each napkin opens the door to a variety of interpretations. Each person unravels the fragment into a broader story in a different way, focusing on different elements and interpreting their combined meaning differently.

The multiple images or notions in one napkin challenge people to build hypotheses regarding a plausible relationship between them. New meanings emerge from the semiotic in-between space thus created. New or previously hidden ideas and ways of reading reality emerge from the cracks of the broken present.

This process is reminiscent of Sergei Eisenstein’s interpretation of montage as generating new meaning by juxtaposing two images. He noted that “two film pieces of any kind, placed together, inevitably combine into a new concept, a new quality, arising out of that juxtaposition” (Eisenstein, 1957, p.4, original emphasis) and continues by saying that this is the case for any situation in which

two facts, two phenomena or two objects are juxtaposed.

Furthermore, as audiences engaged with the napkins³, people noted that they could see some napkins as describing different situations from the same future world. Like terracotta shards found on an archaeological site, people would attempt to reimagine what the complete vase looked like. This way of narrative building on the basis of fragments bears resemblance to the way in which writers such as Marcel Proust or W.G. Sebald compiled elaborate stories out of bits and pieces.

Of Words and Worlds

One way to evoke the future in storytelling is through the introduction of new, fictional terminology. It is a key strategy also to attain compactness, something also noted by Bruce Sterling in his reflections on the napkin futures when he wrote:

“I’ve been wondering what the ‘atomic element’ of a design fiction is. What’s the least thing one can do that constitutes a design fiction? A napkin sketch must be pretty close — but if it needs an explanation in order to make its point, then maybe it’s a *word* that’s the smallest possible element — a neologism.” (Sterling, 2013)

Either through the familiarity of their constituent parts or their context, neologisms can suggest new concepts or meanings. The use of words and language to evoke the future is an antidote to our infatuation with rendering futures tangible through mostly visual means (Baerten, 2016). In this spirit, inspired by the work of Polish science-fiction writer Stanislaw Lem (1976), *NF036 The Neological Institute*, explores the power of language itself. Its narrative suggests how words are able to generate new worlds. This napkin was recently elaborated in a workshop/performance bearing the same title⁴.

Also, when notions or concepts are brought together in a story in ways that defy past and present logics, it is a powerful trigger to unshackle readers from the present and allow them to see things in a different light, inspire new possibilities. Narrative — as a instrument of knowledge and sensemaking — is unique in its capability to bring thesis and antithesis together in a new synthesis, giving birth to new meaning.

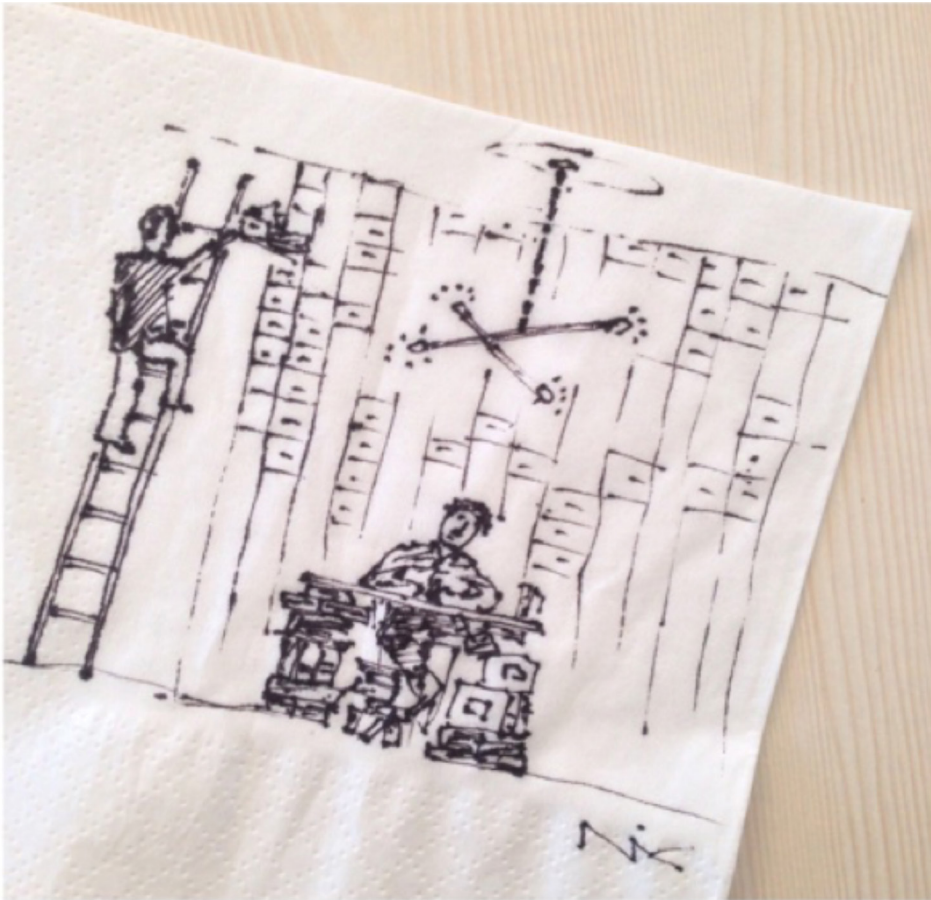


Figure 3. NF036 The Neological Institute “We are gathered here today to commemorate Stanislaw, the founding father of our house, The Neological Institute. We are here to perpetuate his legacy, the deep belief that new vocabularies and linguistics give birth to new times. Like the imagination precedes the image, new words breed new logics, language brings forth new futures. This is why we are here: to celebrate our role in the continuous becoming of our world.”

Last But Not Least

Walter Ong showed how storytelling, narrative is a way of knowing (Ong, 1982). For author as well as audience, the creation and digestion of design fictions such as the napkin futures feeds into a philosophy of gymnastics for the mind. Once an alternative reality has been uncovered, not only the presented alternative as such, yet the very existence of multiple alternatives can no longer be ‘unthought’. It is an escape route from dichotomy-based thinking, taking us beyond our tendency to exchange one model or logic for the world for another, to a way of thinking, knowing and acting based on diversity; which is not coincidentally one of the key points where foresight and design meet.

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Notes

1. See <http://napkinfutures.tumblr.com>
2. Sketch and text would not always originate simultaneously, hence some napkin futures only feature an image or text, some of which were combined at a later stage.
3. e.g. *Future Fictions* exhibition at Z33 Arts Centre in Hasselt, Belgium. See <http://www.z33.be/en/projects/future-fictions>
4. The workshop took place during the 50th anniversary conference of the Design Research Society, *Future-focused Thinking* in Brighton, UK, on June 30, 2016. The atmosphere of linguistic research and archival bureaucracy evoked in *NF036* was brought to life in a four-hour long experience shaped around an onboarding experience for new employees of the institute. Participants were initiated in the art and craft of *logogenesis*, *praxis*, *semiosis* and *constellography*. See <http://pantopicon.be/2016/07/06/the-neological-institute/>

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