Experiencing Utopia. A Positive Approach to Design Fiction.

Abstract
Design Fiction is known for its provocative and often dystopian speculations about the future. In this paper, we present an alternative approach that focuses primarily on the positive. We propose to imagine, enact, and evaluate utopia with participants. By doing so, we react to four main critiques concerning Design Fiction: (1) its negativity, (2) its contextlessness, (3) its elitist authorship, and (4) its missing evaluation methods.

Author Keywords
Positive Design Fiction; utopia; enactment; performative methods.

Critical Aspects of Design Fiction
Although the term Design Fiction initially described a literary method [24], today, it most often points to the widely popular practice of prototyping and visualizing artifacts of fictional worlds [5]. Most Design Fictions draw on the ideas of Anthony Dunne’s and Fiona Raby’s Critical Design [10,11] and Speculative Design [12]. These designs do neither optimize products nor solve problems but allow to reflect on a possible future [3,5,19]. To provoke discussions designers of Design Fictions often build on black humor, irony, and parody [6]. This tendency of being ironic, negative and fear-mongering has been an essential critique of Design
Fiction. For example, Tonkinwise states: “Everything they [Dunne, Raby & colleagues] make real is concerning at best and often just horrifying” ([25], p.187). He calls for fictions that are more suggestive: “[T]here should be much more readily identifiable moments of non-ironic endorsement, elements that make clear cases for what would be valuable (and not just sexy or fun) about these futures for significant sections of the population” ([25], p.186). And indeed, there are only a few Design Fiction approaches that explicitly reject irony to be destructive and argue for, e.g., a constructive critique [7], positive fictions [8], humorous, or ‘seriously silly’ design [6] instead.

A second critique of especially earlier attempts to Design Fiction [3,5,19] is that often only fictional artifacts are materialized, but not scenarios. The complex world of the artifact remains just imagination and is therefore hard to negotiate. This often results in vague anxieties. Just recently, some authors speak up for Design Fiction methods that embrace ambiguity, different perspectives, and complexity of fictional worlds [13,21,22].

A third critical issue with Design Fictions is that they are often presented in art galleries, magazines, or books [17], turning potential users and creators into passive spectators. Moreover, ongoing discussions accuse Design Fiction and the related Critical Design as being too elitist [16]. Designers often appear to act as moral agents who try to wise up people with their warnings inscribed into fictional renderings, 3D models, or photographs [4]. Consequently, a participatory version of Design Fiction is increasingly demanded and explored [1,9,13,14,17]. However, in most of those cases, participants do not create but only evaluate Design Fictions. Only a few approaches actually co-create Design Fiction by, e.g., creative writing [2], co-sketching [20] or enactments [9,13,26].

A fourth critique is that not many defined evaluation methods of Design Fiction exist. One of the few exceptions is called Anticipatory Ethnography, where experts (design ethnographers) observe fiction as if it were reality [18]. Beyond that, it is increasingly common to confront laypeople with Design Fictions and interview them afterward [1]. In all of those approaches Design Fiction is evaluated from a distanced point of view. People are observers of an extrinsic fiction, but they are not part of it.

In this position paper, we present an approach responding to our four described main critiques concerning Design Fiction: (1) its predominant negativity, (2) its contextless presentation, (3) its elitist authorship, and (4) its missing evaluation methods.

**A Co-Creation of Utopia**

We describe our three-step approach (imagining utopia, calling utopia into being, evaluating utopia) in the following and how we applied it in a workshop on the topic of ‘sustainability’. Five participants (3 male) took part.

**Step 1: Imagining Utopia instead of Dystopia**

We believe utopian thinking is essential to allow positive changes in society. Instead of provoking others with dystopian fictions, we need at least ideas of perfected versions of society. With our procedure, we build on theories such as Positive Psychology [23], Design for Wellbeing [14], and the already existing positive approaches to Design Fiction [6–8].
step (Figure 1), we made participants imagine themselves to live in an utopian sustainable setting. We asked them to complete the following sentence: “In a sustainable society I feel positive, because [...]”. The participants came up with about 20 reasons, such as “[...] I can help out others with the resources I own.” or “[...] I spend more time with people than with things.” In a discussion we specified the positive emotions and realized that the participants imagined themselves to feel more related or popular in a sustainable utopia. Only after specifying their emotions, we discussed what kind of technology could allow them to experience such an utopia. One participant, for example, came up with the concept Hyperpipe, an infrastructure connecting all future households, allowing them to share physical goods.

**Step 2: Calling Utopia into Being with contextualized Enactments instead of watching fiction passively**

The term utopia, coming from Greek, means ‘no place’ or ‘placeless place’. Utopia usually only exists in mind. We explore, what happens when utopia is materialized so that one is able to interact in it. We draw on the already mentioned approaches about tangible fiction [13,21,22] and participation in Design Fiction [2,15,16,20]. Thus, in the second step (Figure 2) of our approach we made the participants use some simple probes to co-construct utopia. We set some roles, elaborated a specific context and enacted the fictional world. For example, one participant acted as a salesperson of Hyperpipe, convincing a mayor of a small town to invest in it. Subsequently, a couple used Hyperpipe and sent winter clothes to people asking for it. While acting out utopia, several conflicts came up. For example, the couple started a conflict about what products they wanted to share. Sometimes we had to reset or change the initial utopian idea to make everybody (almost) happy again.

![Figure 1: Participants, discussing positive emotions and possible technology of utopia.](image1)

![Figure 2: Citizens of utopian Smalltown using the sharing system Hyperpipe.](image2)
Step 3: Evaluating Utopia from within the Fiction
Since reality is much more complex than visions are, utopia becomes complicated as soon as we try to live in it. There is not only one utopia, but there are several ones – depending on different stakeholders. For example, what young people would call a perfect society might not be perfect for the elderly. In the last step (Figure 3) of our approach, we evaluated the enacted utopia with our participants. Therefore we made use of Anticipatory Ethnography [18] and developed it further. Other than Anticipatory Ethnography we did not evaluate utopia from a distanced point of view, but from within the fiction. After the enactments took place, we asked our participants to step in front of a camera and talk about the fictional technology – keeping their fictional character and perspective. Participants commented on what they experienced in this way: “My name is Marvin and I am the mayor of Smalltown, when I heard of Hyperpipe my first thought was ‘this might be expensive but since our town is a little marooned we might benefit from it’. Since we installed it, people really enjoy sharing resources or even sending gifts with Hyperpipe. But I am increasingly getting the impression that people rarely leave their houses because of it. We really need to change our new habits before public life dies in Smalltown.” This way we could collect differing viewpoints and an ambiguous perspective onto the former utopia.

Conclusion
In this position paper we propose an approach that is (1) positive, (2) contextualized, (3) participatory and (4) evaluated from within the fiction. What started to be a utopian vision became a tangible and negotiable scenario with contradictory positive and negative emotions. Utopia developed a life of its own. Thus, we got insights into differing needs, hopes, expectations, and frustrations. We did not design fictional artifacts but fictional social interdependencies. The design of the fictional technology itself was not our focus.

In the workshop we would like to share our experiences with participatory, positive Design Fiction. Further, we would like to discuss the critical aspects of Design Fiction we identified and how far our approach is a constructive reaction to them.

References
[1] Naseem Ahmadpour, Sonja Pedell, Angeline Mayasari, and Jeanie Beh. 2019. Co-creating and Assessing Future Wellbeing Technology Using Design Fiction. Sho Ji 5, 3: 209–230. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sheji.2019.08.003
[2] Aloha Hufana Ambe, Margot Brereton, Alessandro Soro, Laurie Buys, and Paul Roe. 2019. The
Adventures of Older Authors: Exploring Futures through Co-Design Fictions. In Proceedings of the Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI ’19), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1145/3290605.3300588

[3] James Auger. 2013. Speculative design: Crafting the speculation. Digital Creativity 24, 1: 11–35. https://doi.org/10.1080/14626268.2013.767276

[4] Jeffrey Bardzell and Shaowen Bardzell. 2013. What is “critical” about critical design? Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems - CHI ’13: 3297. https://doi.org/10.1145/2470654.2466451

[5] Julian Bleecker. 2009. Design Fiction: A short essay on design, science, fact and fiction. Near Future Laboratory 29.

[6] Mark Blythe, Kristina Anderson, Rachel Clarke, and Peter Wright. 2016. Anti-Solutionist Strategies: Seriously Silly Design Fiction. In Proc. CHI 2016, 4968–4978. https://doi.org/10.1145/2858036.2858482

[7] Mark Blythe, Enrique Encinas, Jofish Kaye, Miriam Lueck Avery, Rob McCabe, and Kristina Andersen. 2018. Imaginary Design Workbooks: Constructive Criticism and Practical Provocations. In Proceedings of the Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI’18), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1145/3173574.3173807

[8] Mark Blythe, Jamie Steane, Jenny Roe, and Caroline Oliver. 2015. Solutionism, the game: Design fictions for positive aging. In Proceedings of the Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI ‘15), 3849–3858. https://doi.org/10.1145/2702123.2702491

[9] Judith Dörrenbächer and Marc Hassenzahl. 2019. Changing Perspective: A Co-Design Approach to Explore Future Possibilities of Divergent Hearing. In Proceedings of the Conference on Human Factors (CHI ’19), 1–12.

[10] Anthony Dunne. 2005. Hertzian tales: Electronic products, aesthetic experience, and critical design. The MIT Press, Cambridge.

[11] Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby. 2001. Design Noir: The secret life of electronic objects. Birkhäuser, Basel.

[12] Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby. 2013. Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction and Social Dreaming. MIT Press, Cambridge, London.

[13] Chris Elsden, David Chatting, Abigail C. Durrant, Andrew Garbett, Bettina Nissen, John Vines, and David S. Kirk. 2017. On Speculative Enactments. In Proceedings of the Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI ’17), 5386–5399. https://doi.org/10.1145/3025453.3025503

[14] Marc Hassenzahl, Kai Eckoldt, Sarah Diefenbach, Matthias Laschke, Eva Lenz, and Joonhwan Kim. 2013. Designing moments of meaning and pleasure. Experience design and happiness. International Journal of Design 7, 3: 21–31.

[15] Marie Lena Heidingsfelder. 2018. Zukunft gestalten. Design Fiction als Methode für partizipative Wissenschaftskommunikation. Retrieved from https://opus4.kobv.de/opus4-udk/frontdoor/deliver/index/docId/1157/file/Heidingsfelder_Dissertation_Design_Fiction_Online.pdf

[16] Netta Iivari and Kari Kuutti. 2017. Critical Design Research and Information Technology: Searching for Empowering Design. DIS ’17 Proceedings of the 2017 Conference on Designing Interactive Systems: 983–993. https://doi.org/10.1145/3064663.3064747

[17] Ilpo Koskinen, Thomas Binder, and Johan Redström. 2008. Lab, Field, Gallery, and Beyond. II, 1: 46–57.

[18] Joseph Lindley, Dhruv Sharma, and Robert Potts. 2015. Operationalizing Design Fiction with Anticipatory Ethnography. In Proceedings of the Conference of Ethnographic Praxis in Industry
[19] Matt Malpass. 2013. Between Wit and Reason: Defining Associative, Speculative, and Critical Design in Practice. *Design and Culture* 5, 3: 333–356. https://doi.org/10.2752/175470813X13705953612200

[20] Larissa Vivian Nägele, Merja Ryöppy, and Danielle Wilde. 2018. PDFI: Participatory design fiction with vulnerable users. In *NordiCHI’18*, 819–831. https://doi.org/10.1145/3240167.3240272

[21] Renee Noortman, Britta F. Schulte, Paul Marshall, Saskia Bakker, and Anna L. Cox. 2019. Hawkeye – Deploying a Design Fiction Probe. In *Proceedings of Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI’19)*, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1145/3290605.3300652

[22] Larissa Pschetz, Kruakae Pothong, and Chris Speed. 2019. Autonomous Distributed Energy Systems: Problematising the Invisible through Design, Drama and Deliberation. In *Proceedings of the Conference on Human Factors (CHI ’19)*, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1145/3290605.3300617

[23] Martin E.P. Seligman, Tracy A. Steen, Nansook Park, and Christopher Peterson. 2005. Positive psychology progress: empirical validation of interventions. *The American Psychologist* 60, 5: 410–421. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.60.5.410

[24] Bruce Sterling. 2009. Design fiction. *Interactions* 16, 3: 20–24. https://doi.org/10.1145/1516016.1516021

[25] Cameron Tonkinwise. 2014. How We Intend to Future: Review of Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming. *Design Philosophy Papers* 12, 2: 169–188. https://doi.org/10.2752/144871314X14159818597676

[26] Danielle Wilde, Jenny Underwood, and Rebecca Pohliner. 2014. PKI: Crafting Critical Design. In *Proceedings of the Conference on Designing Interactive Systems (DIS ’17)*, 365–374. https://doi.org/10.1145/2598510.2598603