

Smoke and ‘Miros’, Design and Magic

Alex Milton, Edinburgh College of Art – Scotland

Ben Hughes, Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, London – UK

Cristiaan de Groot, Unitec – New Zealand

Debbie Wythe, Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, London – UK

Abstract

Magic is the essence of creativity; of action that operates outside the boundaries of plans, programs and exact-techniques. Following the launch of ‘Design and Magic’ (DTG, London), four of the contributing authors expand the idea that designers are failed magicians and magicians are failed designers. Magic in all its various guises is seen to present an infinite realm of possibilities for design, not least its link with a readymade meta-reality. The power of transformation that drives the creative practitioner is not dissimilar to the power of the alchemist in creating precious substances. Their rituals and tools might be different, but the effect is the same. Faced with the apparent contradictions of functionalist technology and magical product narratives, the paper seeks to demonstrate that design can re-engage with the emotional and poetic. It asks whether practitioners should pursue the notion of design as deception, fuelling a gluttony of material desire, or should they look to a higher order, where magic provides a holistic view, at least 180 degrees of which is not accounted for right now?

Keywords: magic, design, creativity

Introduction

‘The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion, which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. Whoever does not know it can no longer wonder, no longer marvel, is as good as dead. And his eyes are dimmed.’ Albert Einstein (1931)

When we read this quote, we assume Einstein was referring to the mysteries of the universe, creation and the human mind. In an economy based on the production of goods and services the mysterious has a potent allure. As Einstein suggests, our appetite and fascination is hard-wired, but it can only make money if it is commodified. If you can sell the emotional experience, or make it part of your product, you are on to a winner.

Manifesting magic

Magic manifests itself where something holds ‘promise’ beyond straightforward expectations of appearance. It is the feeling that you are getting ‘something for nothing’. Magic objects and environments such as boxes, winged sandals, labyrinths and portals trigger our imagination because there is a suggestion that their appearance belies some other worldly power or mystery. Objects that conceal technologically enabled features seem to be rich in this ‘promise,’ although our familiarity and expectation has jaded a great deal of this wonder. We assume a capacity to perform ‘magical’ tasks in the most familiar, or mundane of designed objects (TV, refrigerator or computer).

This has not always been the case. We don’t have to look too far into the past to when ‘real’ magic was a highly tangible entity. Alchemical investigation was not only widespread but in some arenas, perfectly acceptable. One strand of the industrial designer’s or engineer’s branch of alchemy was (is) perpetual motion; many respected individuals devoted time to this problem: the production of a machine that generates more energy than is put in. All ‘successful’ attempts have subsequently proven to be fakes, complete with hidden power sources, much like magical automata, which were seemingly able to carry out complex tasks such as playing a musical instrument or a game of chess. Here it was believed that magical processes or materials were waiting to be discovered or synthesised that would reveal untold mysteries and unlock untold wealth. The vanity of some highly respected men was exercised by this problem, including Robert Boyle and Richard Arkwright.

With the benefit of hindsight, such obsessions are treated with ridicule. Some, like Boyle, escape this because of their significant achievements in other branches of science, but others pursued their quarry into debt, illness and an early grave. What it is difficult to appreciate is that at the time, the nature of philosophical investigation incorporated every area of science; not only the respected fields of astronomy, anatomy, chemistry, mechanics, fluid dynamics, but also more esoteric disciplines such as astrology and alchemy. It was all unknown, and all fair-game. The notion of a cosmos that could be understood by man had emerged, and was being relentlessly pursued, although the existence of hidden forces such as magnetism and gravity added weight to the argument of alchemists of the existence of other occult forces, particularly the ‘pneuma,’ or ‘spiritus mundi;’ the unseen ether that links all physical and the spiritual entities.

Magicians as designers

During the Second World War, magician Jasper Maskelyne recruited a band of unlikely tradesmen to his aptly named ‘magic gang.’ They successfully developed a number of innovations for the camouflage of sensitive locations and installations in North Africa (Maskelyne 1949). These included making up tanks to look like lorries, making up lorries to look like tanks, ‘moving’ the port of Alexandria, and making the Suez Canal disappear (yes - it was done with mirrors). Other techniques were also developed - many artists of the time, including Stanley William Hayter of Atelier 17, were involved in print design systems to protect military objectives from air bombardment by fooling the eye (Behrens 2002). The designs often took the form of abstract paintings (Yes – it was done with Miró!).

The discovery of the truth behind such tricks is an unpleasant experience for those on the receiving end, and a tough lesson to learn. Those who believe what they see or hear at face-value would seem to be a dying breed. Sales of such novelty objects as X-Ray Specs (which are increasingly hard to come by) would seem to attest to this. More suggestive advertising, insidious in nature, and preying on the shared ‘myths’ of our cultural environment has a significant audience, though. The magic on offer here is in the form of power, influence, respect, love; intangibles which we collectively find harder to police than pairs of magical specs which allow you to see through clothing and skin, facilitated by ‘magic dust’.

Designers as magicians, seers and illusionists

The profession of Design has positioned individuals as Dionysus like creators, shaping matter and indeed the ‘future’ for consumers. A blend of science and illusion, concept designs are contradictory affairs that perhaps best illustrate the role of magic in design. On the one hand they are products that can’t be consumed, tested, made to work or be bought by potential users, while on the other hand they are intended to fuel consumer lust, preparing us for new markets, looks or technologies.

While the focus of much research and development has been on internally consumed concept design, which explores user scenarios and nascent technologies to interrogate the commercial viability of designer’s creative predictions, other forms of product fortune telling exist. Many companies seek to provide a glimpse of the future, or even employ the industrial trickery of

spoiling a rival products launch by offering up a ‘concept’ alternative. All smoke and mirrors, promising deferred gratification, while the companies’ designers and engineer’s beaver away to get the concept to market.

As designers create new consumer products and directions for company’s intent on satisfying the desires of consumers, companies such as Sony have morphed from a manufacturer of products into a purveyor of experience, moving beyond mere product creation to a business model that encompasses fantasy, gaming, films and music. Such an approach demands new experiential and emotional design thinking; with designers as creative storytellers and mythmakers for experience hungry consumers.

Philips created a series of future design scenarios informed by multi-disciplinary teams consisting of an alchemic blend of sociologists, ergonomists, designers and filmmakers. These scenarios described product concepts and usability through five basic parameters: people, time, space, objects and circumstances. After analysing their commercial and brand viability, selections of these concepts were manifested in tangible products, interface simulations and short films. Providing in Marzano’s words ‘brief glimpses of people’s everyday lives – natural scenes in which the proposed products or services are being used in realistic future situations.’ (Marzano 1992:19).

But it could be argued that this desire for ‘realistic future scenarios’ merely keeps rationalist values in place. Could design not strive for more alchemic qualities hidden beneath the gloss and showbiz presentation of mainstream concept design and tap into the truly magical, poetic and emotional?

To quote Foucault (1986:12) ‘In it I see myself where I am not, in an unreal space that opens up potential.’ Making real the unreal, design concepts could refer to his notion of the mirror and offer an abstracted perfection of magical fantasy as design reality. Genuinely propelling design into the realm of the experience economy.

Some artists and designers seem to have been working with the idea that a product doesn’t have to work to be successful. Artists such as Wodiczko have played with the idea of fictional concept models. His design for a ‘homeless vehicle’ set out to highlight the

dilemmas of New York's homeless population by producing an apparently practical vehicle for tramps or 'city nomads'.

When the concept was displayed on the street large numbers of non-homeless individuals asked the question 'what is this for?' and while they had never previously questioned the issues relating to homelessness, they were now provoked through the 'homeless vehicle' to engage in a debate around the subject area. Wodiczko (2004) states that 'This vehicle is neither a temporary nor permanent solution to the housing problem, nor is it intended for mass production. Its point of departure is a strategy for survival for urban nomads-evicts-in the existing economy.

Building on this artistic technique, Dunne and Rabys' collections such as 'Placebo Products – The Secret Life of Electronic Products' (2001) and 'Weeds, Aliens and Other Stories' (1998) attempt to elicit narratives from imaginary or self-selected audiences. Mixing reality with fiction, borrowing commercial structures and combining different media in an attempt to engage and challenge the viewer.

The artist Paul Granjon in his series of short videos '2 Minutes of Experimentation and Entertainment' (1996-8) introduced a set of comic and impossible designs that exceed reality and manipulate the fictional qualities of video. Special effects and editing create a product veracity that is critically undermined by the sheer unbelievable nature of his inventions. Japanese comedian Kenji Kawakami engenders a similar effect. His comic designs called Chindogu, which translates as 'useless tools' present real solutions to unreal problems.

The work of Philip Garner, Chindogu, Paul Granjon's Z-Lab and other fellow illusionists set us thinking about possibilities beyond our immediate expectations. OK, so these things don't actually work in the conventional sense, but maybe that's the point. They have a nostalgia about them that suggests a more innocent time; the fact that we can see through the con is reassuring. This is another level of enjoyment – one afforded through sharing the understanding that the products are fake. Perhaps this is the same satisfaction as watching Tommy Cooper; although it appears that he is trying to fool us, he is very careful to keep his audience one step ahead.

The emphasis of the creative work described above is not on designing end products, but on magical scenarios, concepts, ideas and visions that go beyond the established design activities traditionally undertaken in industry.

But this could be perceived as an artistic retreat as designers disengage from commercial design, merely content to produce emotionally complex designs that operate as a critique or magical manifesto. Can designers create collaboration between the mythical and the real to create magic as commodity?

Magic as commodity

The creation of any product involves a transformation. The judicious application of land, labour and capital turns raw material into something to be traded at a price. In an age of over-abundance, mass-communication and market freedom, the end-product needs to squeeze as much out of the process as possible in order to turn a profit. This is where a touch of magic comes in handy. Judith Williamson in her book 'Decoding Advertisements' (Williamson 1994:140) tells us that 'Magic is the production of results disproportionate to the effort put in (a transformation of power - or of impotence into power)' but also that 'all consumer products offer magic, and all advertisements are spells.' Design and marketing are clearly central to this transformation, and only in performing this magic are they useful to the system.

Nowadays, magic, and its transformative properties are every bit as potent, but it tends to be imparted to objects through the associations we make with them. This is achieved chiefly through the dark arts of design, advertising and marketing. The magical promise of things like drinks, banking services and cars are that they will make us rich, healthy and popular with beautiful people. This is the modern interpretation of the power sought by magicians and alchemists, or that granted to Faustus after his pact with Mephistopheles. Our motivations are just the same; it's just that they tend to be sated through buying things, rather than trying to concoct them in a bell-jar, or holding a séance.

While blatant lies are rare in marketing, more often than not it is the imagery which creates the expectation in the viewer's mind. This image composition is often very subtle, very clever, but never accidental. The designers know what they are doing, and they do it very well. Their ability to understand this has its roots in psychology and psychoanalysis – which also inform

the strands of the magician's art known as suggestion and cold-reading. By buying this or that, we'll become that much better.

The magical and transformational element of this is not lost on Williamson (1994:141):
'[magic is] a transformational referent system, a short cut for moving between other systems'.
'Magic always involves the misrepresentation of time in space, or space in time. Time is magically incorporated into space, in such things as the crystal ball - an object which contains the future - and space is magically produced out of time, in conjuring up objects out of nowhere, instantly, by means of spells or alchemy. In the centre of these magical processes, the axis of their performance is the subject: you, the buyer or user of the product.'

This is hugely significant at a time when it is predicted that future economic growth will be focused on experiences and transformative experiences. Technology is already offering us things that the alchemists could not have dreamed of.

Technology and magic

The relationship between technology and magic is more intimate than we usually give credit. All prehistoric thought was located between the supernatural and the immediate world. Ancient foundational cultures combined spiritual wisdom with magical practices. Alchemical modes of enquiry and experimentation in medieval times brought about modern physics and chemistry.

Modern forms of designerly enquiry and scientific experimentation have caused an imbalance between the different dimensions of reality, of being, as they are enfolded into the lived experience. So called modern technology is symptomatic of this as it spreads a malaise whereby the future is conflated with the further advance of technology and the attendant aesthetics and techniques that will surround their accommodation.

Technique can be the scourge of the spontaneous, the chance happening, the sparkle of the everyday. Yet technique is most important if one is to free up enough attention to observe the magical whilst operating in a parallel, pragmatic realm.

It is only when technology becomes 'reified' (turned into a sacred object and venerated as such) that technique is turned into a form of spiritual, psychic and physical abuse. This is arguably the current situation. Mobile phones are worshipped over and above communication. The act of communicating whilst moving and/or paralleling other activities is perceived as befitting the occupied individual, little matter that one cannot actually converse.

An intriguing prospect of the self-referential system of technological development running into design difficulty or opportunity is when artificial intelligence, or perhaps artificial life systems, becomes complex and cheap enough so as to incorporate into everyday artefacts. The fuzzy logic chips embedded in Sony's artificial robot dog Aibo, point towards a future of smart, emotionally rich products.

Naturally, designers are beginning to envisage an age when our radios will know what we like to listen to and scan the airwaves for it, and finally our toasters will talk back. This is the animated robot filled world of Sam Slade or some other 2000AD comic book character. Indeed, it seems to lead us towards an environment of just so much 'robot-noise'.

However, think carefully on the shift of precedent whereby we move from a world of static, physical controls and physically evident technology – to a world of ubiquitous technology and control systems which are essentially interpretative and multi-sensory. It has the potential to reawaken our relationship with what is real by engaging us with what is poetical, and what is magical.

Children's books such as 'There's a Wocket in my Pocket' by Dr. Seuss (1974) encourage the young to animate the world in three dimensions. This is different from the 'fantasy' literature of JK Rowling, JRR Tolkien, Phillip Pullman and others in that it inspires a first hand account of 'making magical' rather than creating a separate world to escape into.

We lose the ability to animate the world of hidden forces and spaces early on in life. This is the waning of the imagination's ability to fill voids of understanding, which is particularly pertinent since never before have the most ordinary of objects become so incomprehensible, alien and divorced from our understanding. The simplest digital device is created by far than the work of one human mind.

In piping gas down the suburban street we banished the goblin from the hearth, and this mythical beast and its magical narratives can no longer be resurrected in this media savvy secular age. Yet there are thousands of new alliances to make with entities that might help us live in balance; psychically, physically, environmentally and emotionally.

The disappearance of the interface as we know it can sound the clarion call for a new marriage between science and magic in the popular realm – it is for design to become emotionally response-able.

Design as magical ritual

The active consumption of products has itself become almost religious, part considered ritual and part spontaneous spectacle of existence. As designers we work within disciplinary traditions, reshaping the past, and holding onto aesthetic beliefs and brainstorming rituals. These rituals allow for the communication of tacit knowledge, and semantic meanings across generations, even when those transmitting the message do not perhaps fully understand it. When a ritual is handed down, it remains possible for later generations experiencing it to look behind the performance to the essential pattern within it, even if the majority has forgotten the magic. Our problem as designers aiming to reshape our discipline is to rediscover the patterns of old rituals and to make them contemporary. Certainly, we observe the same presentation techniques, draw inspiration from the same idols of 20th modernism and collectively lust after the latest trends represented in the pages of Wallpaper* and its counterparts. These things cast a collective magical spell giving designers a homogenous identity and common language. But this shared foundation needs to be combined with the mindful creation and transformation of design rituals, processes and methodologies that fittingly express emotional development as well as continuity.

It is essential that designers fully engage with consumer desire, myth and speculative design, demonstrating their capacity to present informed, imaginative responses to the irrational, the immaterial, and the desirable, utilising notions of magic as drivers of emotionally mature design concepts.

Conclusion - secrets and lies

‘Magic has never really been my thing – too new age, too Las Vegas, just too damn voodoo. Design on the other hand, I like. Its modesty, amateurism and almost total lack of intellectual ambition has a certain charm – it’s hardworking and straightforward. The thought therefore, of a seductive magic finally consummating its long and flirtatious relationship with design has always been too scary to contemplate. Seduced by magic, design leaves behind practicality and function and engages with a world of imagination, narrative and ideas.’
Anthony Dunne (De Groot, Hughes and Wythe 2004).

Our evolution as a design community can be magically expressed and affirmed in our rituals, myths and illusions. As members of the Design Transformation Group we were participants of a singular event entitled DesignQuest: Magic and the tumult of experience and sensation has been collated in the recent publication ‘Design and Magic’, an initial textual foray into the curious territory between two terms that obstinately elude linguistic definition. The theme of ‘magic’ aimed to trigger tangential design-led explorations, adventures into the ‘what’ and the ‘why’ of creative action and intent.

The book proposes that Magic is an especially resonant theme since it captures the incredible experience of the design community in full flow, points to a heart of creative purpose and action, and demarcates the difference between the adept and master as designers learn to become ‘shamanic sorcerers’. The book captures the debates that emerged during the DesignQuest, reflecting a coming to terms with the event, and draws attention to the groups hunt for clues and emotional affinities. The editorial approach aims to create a critical distance to aid comprehension of the varied papers, design concepts and manifestos housed in the publication. Not that the contributors were speaking in tongues, but rather that language arrives much later when you’re operating at the design disciplines edge.

As members of the Design Transformation Group we aim to discover new design languages, speaking the unspeakable. We facilitate, we experiment, and we learn. We trace the parameters of possible forms of interaction and new ways of working together. We aim to seek out the building blocks for a new design culture and community. Our work aims to reveal emotional truths while being mindful of the need to maintain the magical wonder of design.

Indeed the most mundane conjuring trick is the greatest illusion if you don't know how it's done. For this reason, we should listen to Robert Harbin (1957:12):

‘Magic is only magic when its secrets are secrets. If every boy in the world had this book and read it, then its contents would no longer be secret. The fact that there will only be a limited number of copies available ensures that the secrets explained here will not be widely spread among the rest of the world. You, too, must keep these secrets, and so - NEVER TELL ANYONE HOW A TRICK IS DONE.’

Or even the motto of the magic circle: *Indocilis Privata Loqui* (Not given to disclosing secrets).

In some ways it is too late, though. Einstein knew that we have a craving for mystery, and through magic, we want to be fooled. Unfortunately, if Toto subsequently reveals Frank Morgan (The Wizard of Oz) behind the curtain, operating the wizard machine, it is very hard to put him back there and carry on like nothing had happened.

Credits

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Alex Milton is Head of Furniture, Product and Interior Design at Edinburgh College of Art. He has previously taught at Napier University, University of Dundee and Central Saint Martins and continues to undertake creative and theoretical consultancy work.

Ben Hughes Ben Hughes is an industrial designer who has worked in the UK, Taiwan, Australia and China. He is Course Director of MA Industrial Design at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design

Dr. Cris De Groot is a Senior Lecturer in Product Design at Unitec. A founding member of the Design Transformation Group he has taught at a number of UK institutions before moving to New Zealand.

Debbie Wythe is a Lighting and Product Designer and tutors on the BA (Hons) Product Design course at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design.