ARCHEOLOGY IN REVERSE: USING DESIGN FICTION TO BUILD AND INHABIT PREFERABLE FUTURES

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ABSTRACT

This article synthesises a lecture by Julian Bleecker, a leading practitioner in design fiction, on the critical importance of making futures tangible. The central thesis is that conventional methods of foresight—relying on abstract forecasts, trend lines, and reports—are insufficient for navigating complex challenges like climate change, AI policy, and social inequality. Instead, Bleecker advocates for design fiction, a practice that involves creating mundane, everyday artifacts from possible futures to make them feel visceral, relatable, and debatable. The core methodology, described as "archaeology in reverse," involves "bringing back" objects like product catalogues, HR manuals, or newspapers from a speculative future. These tangible artifacts act as powerful storytelling prompts, translating macro-level visions into the lived, everyday experience and allowing diverse groups to "see themselves in" a potential world. The article explores key concepts such as the "Go Over Backwards" mindset, a call for the creative courage to defy convention, exemplified by Dick Fosbury's revolutionary high-jump technique. It also examines the power of detailed worldbuilding, as seen in the Star Trek Technical Manual, which inspired real-world innovations like the flip phone. Ultimately, the article presents imagination not as a frivolous activity but as an essential, practical skill for innovation and societal change, concluding with Bleecker's urgent call to resist living in "someone else's future" and to actively build and articulate our own preferred worlds through the creation of tangible, story-rich artifacts.

INTRODUCTION

In an era defined by accelerating change and unprecedented complexity, the practice of foresight—how we anticipate and prepare for the future—has become a critical function for organisations, governments, and societies. Yet, the dominant methods of future-planning often rely on abstract models, statistical forecasts, and analytical reports that fail to capture the lived, human experience of what is to come. These approaches can leave decision-makers and the public alike feeling disconnected from, and passive within, the very futures they are supposed to be shaping. This article synthesises a compelling lecture by Julian Bleecker, an engineer, designer, and founder of the Near Future Laboratory, who presents a powerful alternative: design fiction.

Bleecker's central argument is that to truly understand and influence the future, we must first make it tangible. We need to move beyond asking "What will the future be?" and instead focus on "What will the future feel like?" Design fiction is the practice of answering this question by creating concrete, everyday artifacts from speculative futures. Co-developed with science fiction author Bruce Sterling, this methodology is not about predicting the future, but about prototyping it. By creating objects like product catalogues, instruction manuals, or newspapers that seem to have arrived from a possible tomorrow, design fiction provides a visceral, story-rich entry point into complex debates about technology, policy, and society.

The lecture reframes the creative process as "archaeology in reverse," where the practitioner's job is to "dig through the future" and bring back mundane fragments that can tell powerful stories about the world from which they came. This article will explore the core principles of this methodology, including the importance of tangibility, the power of speculative storytelling to challenge existing paradigms, and the necessity of creative courage—what Bleecker calls the "Go Over Backwards" mindset. Drawing on examples from his work with organisations like Apple, IKEA, and Bloomberg, as well as iconic cultural touchstones like the 1968 Olympics and Star Trek, this synthesis will illuminate how design fiction serves as a practical tool for fostering imagination, provoking dialogue, and empowering communities to actively build the futures they prefer, rather than passively accepting a default trajectory shaped by others.

PRESENTATION HIGHLIGHTS

Bleecker's presentation dismantled conventional approaches to foresight and offered a compelling, hands-on methodology for making futures tangible, debatable, and actionable. The following sections synthesise the core concepts and illustrative examples from his talk.

THE METHODOLOGY: ARCHAEOLOGY IN REVERSE AND THE POWER OF MUNDANE ARTIFACTS

The cornerstone of Bleecker's practice is a methodology he terms "archaeology in reverse." He argues that instead of trying to construct a complete, top-down vision of a future world—a task that is often overwhelming and prone to abstraction—it is more effective to act like an archaeologist who has travelled to the future and brought back a single, mundane object. This artifact, whether it be a product from a future IKEA catalogue, a page from a company's HR manual, or a simple receipt, becomes a "totemic object." It is a tangible fragment that serves as a powerful prompt for storytelling and dialogue.

The power of this approach lies in its focus on the ordinary. By creating artifacts that reflect the everyday, lived experience of a possible future, design fiction translates macro-level concepts (such as AI policy, climate regulation, or new economic models) into a human-readable format. For example, in a workshop with AI policymakers, Bleecker's team created a future newspaper. Instead of writing a white paper on the implications of a policy, participants wrote news articles, opinion pieces, and even advertisements that reflected what it would be like to live in a world shaped by that policy. This

process forces a connection between high-level strategy and on-the-ground reality, revealing the "unknown unknowns" and human impacts that are often missed in conventional analysis.

Bleecker insists that tangibility matters. These artifacts are not just illustrations; they are prototypes for conversation. When a diverse group of people can hold, read, and interact with an object from a possible future, it makes that future accessible and relatable. It allows them to ask critical questions: "Who used this? What was it for? What does its existence imply about the values, systems, and social arrangements of the world it came from?" This process surfaces hopes, fears, and practical considerations that abstract reports simply cannot.

THE MINDSET: PARADIGM INVERSION AND THE COURAGE TO "GO OVER BACKWARDS"

Beyond methodology, Bleecker emphasised the critical importance of a particular mindset: the courage to challenge deeply entrenched conventions. He illustrated this with the story of Dick Fosbury, the American high jumper who revolutionised his sport at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics. At a time when all high jumpers used the straddle technique (going over the bar face-down), Fosbury had developed a new method: going over the bar backwards, head and shoulders first. This technique, which became known as the "Fosbury Flop," was a radical departure from established practice.

Bleecker uses this story as a powerful metaphor for innovation. "Going over backwards" represents the willingness to take a disciplined, instinct-driven risk, even in the face of skepticism and potential failure. It is about challenging the assumption that there is only one correct way forward. This is not, Bleecker stresses, about "woo-woo imagination," but about a focused, committed effort to execute a new approach that one senses is right. Fosbury's success was not an accident; it was the result of courage, conviction, and the discipline to perfect a radically different paradigm.

This mindset is crucial for tackling today's complex challenges. The language and metaphors we currently use, Bleecker argues, are often insufficient for the new territories we are entering, such as the governance of AI or the transition to a post-carbon economy. To break free from these outdated frameworks, we need to be willing to "go over backwards"—to question our fundamental assumptions and explore unconventional paths with rigour and focus. Design fiction provides a safe and structured space to practice this kind of paradigm-inverting thinking.

THE IMPACT: HOW TANGIBLE REPRESENTATIONS SHAPE REALITY

Bleecker provided compelling historical examples to demonstrate that creating tangible, detailed representations of a future is not merely an academic exercise, but a powerful force for shaping reality. These stories underscore how making a future imaginable is the first step toward making it achievable.

One key example was Bill Bowerman's 1968 paperback, Jogging. At the time, jogging was not the global phenomenon it is today. Bowerman, a track and field coach, wanted to sell the public on a future where jogging was a normal, accessible form of exercise. Instead of writing a dry medical text, he created a book filled with rich, aspirational photography and simple, relatable instructions. This

artifact, Bleecker explained, did not just describe a future; it depicted it in a way that allowed people to see themselves participating in it. The book made the abstract idea of "fitness" feel concrete and achievable, and in doing so, helped catalyse a worldwide movement.

Another powerful example came from Bleecker's own childhood: the Star Trek Starfleet Technical Manual. This book, filled with detailed engineering schematics of starships and equipment, made the fictional universe of Star Trek feel real and operational. It focused not on the dramatic adventures on the bridge, but on the mundane, "service and repair" aspects of the world. This level of detail, Bleecker argued, creates a profound "sense of possibility." It makes a fictional world feel inhabitable. The impact of this worldbuilding became clear years later when the lead designer of the iconic Motorola StarTAC flip phone, a Star Trek fan, explicitly stated that he was trying to create the communicator device from the show. A fictional representation, made tangible through detailed worldbuilding, directly inspired a landmark piece of real-world technology.

These examples demonstrate that the act of creating a detailed, tangible vision of a preferred future is a critical form of innovation. It provides a concrete reference point that can guide and inspire action over the long term.

THE PRACTICE: IMAGINATION, COLLABORATION, AND PERSISTENCE

Finally, Bleecker addressed the practical and existential dimensions of this work. He framed imagination not as a soft skill but as an "existentially vital" and "evolutionary gift." He argued that imagination is like a muscle that often atrophies in adulthood due to social conditioning but is essential for breaking free from outdated paradigms. In a world grappling with unprecedented challenges, the work of "imagining harder" is not a luxury but a necessity. He even posited a future where one could earn a PhD in "practical imagination" due to its immense value.

He also emphasised that the process of creating design fiction artifacts is often as valuable as the output. The most fascinating outcomes emerge from the collaborative dialogue that happens during workshops. By bringing together diverse groups—engineers, artists, policymakers, students—and giving them a shared, creative task without the pressure of solving a specific problem, a rich and generative conversation emerges about the kinds of futures people actually want to inhabit. This collaborative, interactive process allows organisations to "sense into" the future in a way that reading a static report never could.

In response to a question about overcoming societal impasses like systemic inequality, Bleecker stressed the importance of persistence. He acknowledged that even well-articulated, evidence-based visions for a better future can fail to gain traction or succeed in the market. The response, he argued, is not to give up, but to "keep trying different ways." If a product fails, tell the story as a film. If a film doesn't get made, write it as a short story. A commercial failure is not a total failure if the work succeeds in making a different future tangible and visible. The act of creation itself is a form of progress.

CONCLUSION

Julian Bleecker's lecture offers a powerful and timely challenge to conventional modes of thinking about the future. In a world saturated with abstract data and disembodied forecasts, the call to make futures tangible, visceral, and debatable is both a practical strategy and a deeply humanistic imperative. The methodology of design fiction, grounded in the concept of "archaeology in reverse," provides a clear and accessible pathway for organisations and communities to move from being passive consumers of the future to active creators of it.

The core insight is that stories, embodied in mundane artifacts, are the most effective medium for navigating complexity and inspiring change. By translating macro-level challenges into the language of everyday life, design fiction democratises the future, inviting diverse voices into a conversation that is too often confined to expert circles. The mindset of "going over backwards" serves as a crucial reminder that transformative innovation requires not just analytical rigour but also creative courage and the willingness to challenge fundamental assumptions.

Ultimately, Bleecker's work is a call to reclaim imagination as a core competency for the 21st century. It is a rejection of the notion that the future is a predetermined destination to be predicted, and an embrace of the idea that it is a malleable medium to be shaped. For any leader, educator, or citizen concerned with building a more preferable world, the message is clear: stop trying to analyse the future into existence. Instead, pick up the tools of the storyteller and the archaeologist, and start building it, one tangible, conversation-starting artifact at a time.