‘Pata-design’: Prototyping a pataphysically infused critical design practice.

Please note: This position paper was originally written in spring 2014 for the DRS2014 Doctoral Colloquium, where it was presented on June 15th 2014. One minor change has been made in the ‘Methodology’ chapter for clarification of the argument. No further changes/updates have been made to reflect the current state of my research.

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Background

‘A critical design practice’ entails a criticality towards something: society, technology, sustainability etc. In being critical, the design discipline is actively addressing the fact that the current status quo is simply one version of how things could be, one rendering out of a multitude of possibilities. From this perspective, ‘design fictions’ is an especially interesting sub-discipline, as it leverages this basic premise into a conscious temporal dimension. With its capability of extrapolating weak signals of the present into desirable as well as undesirable futures, presents and pasts, design fictions expand and reflect on our ability (and desire) to produce change. In asking the essential question: “what if?” design thus imagines and articulates alternatives to the current, unfolding trajectory. Pataphysics, defined by its inventor Alfred Jarry as: “(…) the science of imaginary solutions, which symbolically attributes the properties of objects, described by their virtuality, to their lineaments” (Jarry, 1965 [1911]), is highly interesting in this respect.

Pataphysics is a notoriously challenging concept that proudly denounces any kind of traditional understanding: “To understand pataphysics is to fail to understand pataphysics” (Hugill, 2012). In this light, it is rather impossible to even summarize it sufficiently in this brief context. That said, I will try and provide a bit of background:

Dating back to 1893 when Jarry first used the term, pataphysics is “fundamentally a literary concept with philosophical overtones” (Hugill, 2013). Escaping any kind of exhaustive ‘-isms’ throughout the years, pataphysics has proven itself highly durable. Nowadays a vast array of different colleges, institutions and initiatives exist. The first of these was The Collège de ‘Pataphysique, founded in Paris in 1948. While the last century shows numerous examples of pataphysical influence (in particular in literature, theater, music and art), recent years has seen a pataphysical revival in academia as well, with notable works such as Christian Bök’s “Pataphysics: The Poetics of an Imaginary Science” (2001), Alastair Brotchie’s “Alfred Jarry - A Pataphysical Life” (2011) and “‘Pataphysics” by Andrew Hugill (2012). Further, the Internet accounts for a notable rise in pataphysical studies and activities online and offline.

Going back to design fictions’ ability to imagine and articulate alternatives to the current trajectory, it seems clear that pataphysics offers a radically different position. It does so by defying the objectivity of empirical science that underpins and pervades the vast parts of the (imaginary and non-imaginary) world, arriving at a position of infinite, equivalent positions, or rather exceptions. This shift has intricate, profound implications for the design discipline, and I hypothesize that pataphysics provides a particularly fertile ground for questioning and advancing a critical design practice. Thus, my thesis is concerned with prototyping a pataphysically infused critical design practice through the following research questions:
• How can pataphysics inform design understood as a critical practice?
• What is a pataphysical design practice?
• What methodological vocabulary does the process of prototyping this practice produce?

**Motivation**

Design as a critical practice continuously evolves. From a rich recent history of critical practice and research (Superstudio, Alchemia, Memphis, Droog and others) (Redström & Maze, 2007), the term ‘Critical design’ was coined in Hertzian Tales by Anthony Dunne in 1999. Indeed, by now it is possible to talk of a certain ‘Critical design’ tradition championed by the Design Interactions program at The Royal College of Art, with Dunne & Raby as its foremost advocates. However, this particular understanding of a critical design practice has recently been challenged from different sides (e.g. Bardzell & Bardzell, 2013) and Dunne & Raby themselves continue to develop and further their argument, most recently in the brand new book Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming (2014).

The Western world is increasingly defined by its unsustainable nature. The studies on climate change reaching and surpassing the critical limits are numerous and well documented. In the wake of the most recent financial crisis, the levels of built-up debt, the austerity measures imposed and the fact that 1% of the human population owes 46% of the world’s resources, altogether creates a dire situation for many. Adding to all this, Edward Snowden, and the series of whistleblowers that preceded him, has revealed that we live in a surveillance world far surpassing most dystopian sci-fi narratives.

My motivation lies in the prospect of developing a critical design methodology that can benefit the design discipline while finding (critical) application in this world. Having identified an initial set of interesting convergence points in-between pataphysics and the design discipline in general – and the design fictions sub-discipline in particular – I’m highly motivated to explore this further. It’s important to stress that I have no ambitions of merging design and pataphysics into a new hybrid discipline, but rather use pataphysics as a catalyst for design. Also, I don’t set out with any naïve assumptions of saving the world through design solutions. Indeed, asking the right questions can sometimes be much more important than providing any sort of “right answers”.

**Methodology**

I started my PhD in design as critical practice at Umeå Institute of Design in October 2013 as part of ‘Prototyping Practices’, a research program concerned with prototyping “practices in order to experiment and explore the implications of social, cultural and technological changes and challenges to design” (Redström, 2014).

Following my research questions and the Prototyping Practices research program, my doctoral studies follow an explorative, constructive design research methodology. In other words, I’m researching through design experiments. Further, by doing a series of design experiments I’m interested in prototyping a pataphysically infused critical design practice. In this way the project outcomes (research findings) and the applied methodology will engage in a continuous dialogue throughout the iteration cycles. It is in this space I hope to answer how pataphysics can inform a critical design practice.

The design experiments will vary in nature, scope and duration. Throughout this spring I will engage in a series of short exercises that will test and expand the possibility for
Application horizontally. From here a gradual shift will happen towards more long-term in-depth projects (vertical expansion and horizontal contraction). It is of course worth mentioning, that this is a tentative plan rather than a solid step-by-step manual.

**Application and results**

At the current stage of research I'm mapping out particularly interesting areas for applying a pataphysically infused critical design practice. At this point in the process, certain pivotal points start taking shape, such as the post-capitalist condition, the (meta)data society and the alternatives to a (collapsing) capitalist economic paradigm. All these themes are of course very rich while also being somehow interconnected.

At this stage the research has produced the following results:


- **Project Proposal:** ‘Meta(data)morphosis’.

- **Article in the making:** ‘Negotiation through design(ing) fictions: Reflections & Perspectives from the Urban IxD Summer School 2013’.

**Future steps**

The next step in my doctoral research is to further clarify and articulate how pataphysics can inform design in the above-mentioned subject areas. A part of this process consists of further reading and synthesizing across various literature, design projects, etc., while simultaneously initiating a series of small-scale design experiments. The main frame for this ‘first wave’ of shorter design experiments will be a 3-week-long artist residency at Rupert: "a centre for Art and Education devoted to establishing close cooperation between artists, thinkers, researchers, and other cultural actors through interdisciplinary programs and residencies," in Vilnius, Lithuania (Rupert, 2014). The residency is scheduled in April, and so I plan to be able to present the initial results together with an evaluation at the Doctoral Colloquium in June. I’m applying exactly for this reason: DRS2014 and the Doctoral Colloquium will act a great first point of contraction in the continuous iteration, and I hope that the feedback and questions can help inform the forthcoming iteration cycle (which is likely to be deeper and narrower).

**Final remarks**

Constructive design research (or research-through-design) is a relatively young (at least as an explicitly formulated) design research methodology that finds broad application across design and the neighboring disciplines, while concurrently being the subject of a continued design methodological discussion (see e.g. Bang et al, 2012). Infusing constructive design research with pataphysics produces further questions both regarding methodology and design outcome. Perhaps it makes sense to talk of the fundamental nature of the design experiment format.

These more foundational concerns and questions are countered with a desire for making the research instrumental and applicable to the overwhelming societal challenges we currently face as designers and human beings. I believe (and hope) many design researchers find some resonance and importance in addressing this shifting balance between opportunity and conflict.
References


