

## **No Futures: design for a renewed focus on the present**

By Larissa Pschetz

In *No Future*, Lee Edelman (2004) critiques the familiar idea of acting in the present in order to meet the needs of the 'future child', discussing how this attention to the future is problematic in the present. Acting in the name of the future child, he argues, produces a heteronormative form of investment in the future that fundamentally excludes those outside these narratives. Furthermore, the mobilisation of the future child serves to undermine political dialogue about the needs of the present. Instead of attempting to find ways to include those outside these narratives into a political discourse of the future, Edelman invites us to say 'no' to this orientation towards the future. He calls for an embrace of the present in all its complexity and potential negativity, freeing those who fall outside the familiar narratives of future horizons to enjoy their own identities and find meaning in the frustration of expectations. This refusal, he argues, can promote greater acceptance of the present condition, and the inclusion of elements that are peripheral or may not fit ideals of what the future should be like.

Designers have long looked at the future as a domain of action. Similar to the act of designing for the future child, designers traditionally attempt to improve what is yet to come, through direct action or critique. This chapter draws from Edelman's suggestion and invites designers to rethink the process of making or pluralising futures and instead shift their attention from the future to the present. It draws attention to recent theories that look at the present as a thick, multi-layered site of possibility and suggests them as a method for design exploration.

### **The future in design**

In their attempt to place the future in the design practice, designers tend to follow two main approaches. In what we might call practical approaches, they look at near-future conditions and the development of products and services for these contexts. In what we could call visionary approaches they are concerned with potential long-term consequences of existing practices, and look at ways to generate designs that represent these visions, reinforcing, drawing attention, or criticising existing practices. I argue that each approach includes assumptions about the future, which could be problematic in different ways.

In the practical approaches, the future is treated as tangible, describable, and open to designers' influence. Designers are able to report, process, and respond to anticipated scenarios, creating products and services that can influence these scenarios and therefore 'change' the future. Several methods are used to achieve these scenarios, some of which are influenced by future studies, including trend research analysis of market and consumer preferences, scenario development, and storyboards.

The visionary approaches look at more distant futures, often including the possibility of multiple outcomes. The role of designers here is to help make visible, reinforce, or draw attention to potential problems of these outcomes. Such approaches are often influenced by Hancock and Bezold's (1994) use of the Futures Cone, which was made popular in descriptions of speculative and critical design (Dunne & Raby, 2013). Drawing on traditions in Futures Studies, Hancock and Bezold (1994) discuss different kinds of futures as possible (what may happen), plausible (what could happen), probable (what will likely happen), or preferable (what we want to have happen). Visions of the future, they argue, are part of preferable futures and 'can be a powerful technique for mobilizing an organization or community around a common purpose' (Hancock & Bezold, 1994). The aim is not to turn these visions into reality but to use them to influence the present towards a preferable outcome. Here, designers become mediators, who can apply their skills in order to make these visions more tangible in the present, and therefore anticipate or enable more

informed discussion on different kinds of futures. Such approaches include methods such as product and vision concepting, and the development of speculative and so-called diegetic prototypes (Bleecker, 2009). While vision concepting is often adopted by technology companies such as Microsoft and Philips, diegetic prototypes have been extensively adopted in design-related research as a way to embody aspects of near-future worlds, allowing people to experience these scenarios and to provoke reactions and raise questions (Bleecker, 2009).

The practical and visionary approaches complement each other in a bidirectional way. In the first, the present is projected into the future, redesigning and ultimately altering it for the benefit of all. In the second, the future is brought into the present for scrutiny and discussion.

### **Problems of future-oriented perspectives**

While the incorporation of future thinking in the design process can have a role in avoiding short-term thinking, the increased focus on the future is problematic. Practical approaches project the present, and its values, into the future, reducing future possibilities to the scope of the design project or brief. A designer of kitchen appliances, for instance, would carry out consumer and market analysis of similar appliances, as well as studies of existing practices and new technologies, which are more likely to result in proposals for new versions of the same appliances than in radically new approaches. A radically new approach, after all, might not include these appliances or even a kitchen. The brief-led version may deploy a technology that promises a better way of cooking, which may eventually be deployed in similar ways by competitors, therefore providing a narrative of the future that is intrinsically connected to a technological trend as well as to those who can afford to influence its design. Although the intention is to promote a 'better' future, the design itself helps to shape imaginaries of what the future will be like, which in turn shapes behaviour into a predictable future. As long as the future holds such appliances, the design, as well as investors and corporate interests that support it, are safe.

While practical approaches tend to reduce the future to the present, which is inevitably narrowed to the project brief, visionary approaches tend to reduce the present by changing the focus of attention from the present to the future. Designers may talk about a critical future of resource depletion, economic crisis, or technology dependency, but sometimes fail to acknowledge that aspects of these futures already exist and, to paraphrase Gibson (2003), are just not evenly distributed in the present. These aspects, however, may involve unexpected actors and outcomes. For instance, a project may depart from a future of food scarcity to discuss issues that may affect food production in the present, but by placing the issue in the future, it fails to acknowledge the reality of food scarcity in many parts of the world today. In an attempt to describe the future as a continuation of a particular framing of the present, designers may disregard different actors, materials, and realities that are outside this framing, ultimately failing to embrace the complexity of the present. In other words, a focus on 'futures' may lead to a simplification of the present, which can compromise creative possibilities and the impact of their designs.

### **Attending to the thick present**

As we turn our attention to the present, I find it useful to refer to recent ways of describing the present as 'thick'. By exploring the notion of a 'thick present', Haraway (2016) is critical of the temptation to anticipate the future as a response to a sense of time pressure:

*"in urgent times, many of us are tempted to address trouble in terms of making an imagined future safe, of stopping something from happening that looms in the future, of clearing away the present and the past in order to make futures."*

Instead, she invites us to *"stay with the trouble"*, which

*“does not require such a relationship to times called the future. In fact, staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings.”* (Haraway, 2016).

In everyday language, the present is often referred to as a more or less defined dimension that could range from a split second to a historical moment. This could invite the question of how to best define the scale of this present. Here again the notion of thickness comes to help us move away from the idea of the present as a single, predefined, and potentially neutral dimension. In Haraway's view, the past and future are latent in the present through experiences, social realities, materials, bodies, and environments. Similarly, Barad (2016) uses quantum physics as an inspiration to introduce the notion of the 'thick now' inviting us to imagine that 'at each point in time there is an entire world in a very specific configuration, a thick now simultaneously made up of pasts and futures'. In this 'thick now' the past exists not as a pre-condition of the present but as an ontological part of it. The past is contained in the present and so is the present in the future, all forming an intricate interdependent body. Rather than trying to delineate where the present starts and finishes, we would define a focus of attention and look at how elements interconnect within this focus, expanding and narrowing our scope according to shifts in attention.

Rather than trying to anticipate the future, potentially leading to a simplification of our current reality, I suggest that designers might do better to look at the breadth of configurations in the present, as Haraway recommends in *Staying With the Trouble*, and stay open to outliers and the unseen. Instead of attempting to describe the future and respond to it in the present, invariably recurring to simplifications, designers might better consider how artefacts and systems could reveal and respond to a complex present, a revelation which will nevertheless open up new ways of discussing pasts and futures, in social, structural, and more-than-human terms.

### **Intervening in the present**

To exemplify this approach, I refer to two projects that I worked on as part of the Connected Communities research project; *The Time of the Clock and the Time of Encounter*, which became an important part of my PhD (Pschetz, 2014). The premise of the research project was the recognition that 'communities are structured along a plurality of regimes of temporality and that these different regimes may conflict, reinforce each other or interact in other ways' (Siebers et al., 2013). The project aimed to employ arts and design methods to reveal the ways time is expressed and experienced in different communities, investigating assumptions about time and how they can shape community life, ultimately shaping our understanding of communities. It was set to take place in collaboration with Woodend Barn, a community arts centre in Banchory, Aberdeenshire, and Holmewood School, a special needs school in London. Given my research interests, I worked with Chris Speed on different concepts for the school context, which I developed into working prototypes that were taken into this and other schools for further activities with the students.

This exploration was important to frame the notion of Temporal Design (Pschetz, 2014), which aimed to move away from a temporal critique focused on pace, direction, and experience, which was often framed as part of movements such as slow design and slow technology. As a designer critical of dominant narratives of speed and acceleration, I was influenced by these movements and attempted to design objects that incorporated longer scales of time and expanded time presence. For instance, I designed a chair that could record its own history for about 100 years (Pschetz & Banks, 2013), and tools that captured movement as a way to reward crafters' efforts (Pschetz, Banks, & Molloy, 2013). I noticed, however, that despite my intentions, these objects were still interpreted within a logic of efficiency, time saving, and acceleration. It was therefore clear to me that a more radical shift in the way people understood time would need to take place, and that designers could help to support this shift, but would need to expand their focus of attention to address the real issue. Rather than looking at how artefacts,

systems, and interfaces could influence the time, as a uniform entity, designers would need to expand the repertoire of temporality, drawing attention to alternative notions of time, their dynamics and significance (Pschetz & Bastian, 2017). A renewed focus on the heterogeneity of the present towards greater awareness and analysis of what makes each present moment would therefore be essential to move away from assumptions of single times and help us, designers, turn our attention to the temporal variety that exists in the world (Pschetz, 2014).

The context of the school in this project was particularly interesting as schools are often seen as a place for strategic intervention. Schools have been both recognised and criticised for influencing the establishment of social norms (e.g. by Mumford, 1963 , p.269; Thompson, 1967 ; and Thrift, 1996 , p.173). Schools are an important place in which, through basic rules, children get habituated to living within quantified time, and where they learn to place themselves within a culture of temporal discipline (Adam, 1995). While the rhythms of the body and of one's natural, constructed, and social environments are all grasped intuitively through everyday interactions at a very early age, in schools some expressions are expanded while others are consciously or unconsciously suppressed. It is also at a very early age that children learn to build temporal strategies. They learn that there are right times to do things, and that they need to wait for these times and switch attention when appropriate. Although these practices are first rehearsed at home, it is within the temporally quantifiable environment of the school that they become more valuable; it is in the school that they are refined, expanded, and legitimised within wider social groups and become part of a wider sense of community. Such temporal behaviours are profoundly future- oriented, directed towards disciplining bodies to fit into an assumed future society.

This habituation and temporal discipline makes the school an optimal environment to carry out a Temporal Design intervention. As argued by Adam (1995) , far from being restricted to timetables, buzzers, and timed tasks, classroom time is a fusion of personal times, rhythms, and temporal forces:

*Class-room times are not exhausted by how long members spend on certain activities, not even by the daily, weekly and yearly timetables that structure every aspect of educational activity. Rather, they are constituted on the basis of individual and collective histories and futures which, in turn, have a central bearing on any one moment of time generated by the group. (Adam, 1995 , p.67)*

Therefore, working with schools provided us with an ideal opportunity to investigate the ways in which design could help reveal the multiple expressions of time that exist in the present, and to demonstrate that the classroom is more than a place to engender future- oriented temporal discipline. This was the starting point for the development of the Printer Clock and the TimeBots.

### **Printer Clock**

Focusing on the present, we considered how each individual in the Holmewood School contributed to create the present moment. Each individual brought in themselves a myriad of histories, realities, and subjectivities, which constituted a present dimension that went beyond the visible. By focusing our attention on individuals, we made a conscious choice to temporarily set aside other aspects that contributed to the thickness of that present, such as the infrastructure that helped each individual, and the school itself, to 'be there', policies that enable and disable certain practices, among others.

Our ambition was to design a clock that, instead of the usual readings, would tell what people did at each particular time, therefore revealing aspects of the lived and intricate nature of that moment. When looking at a clock, individuals usually think about their actions and what they need to do next, and seldom consider what that moment in time may represent, or what that moment would be in the eyes of others. We wanted our clock to change this and represent time through the practices of different people in the school.

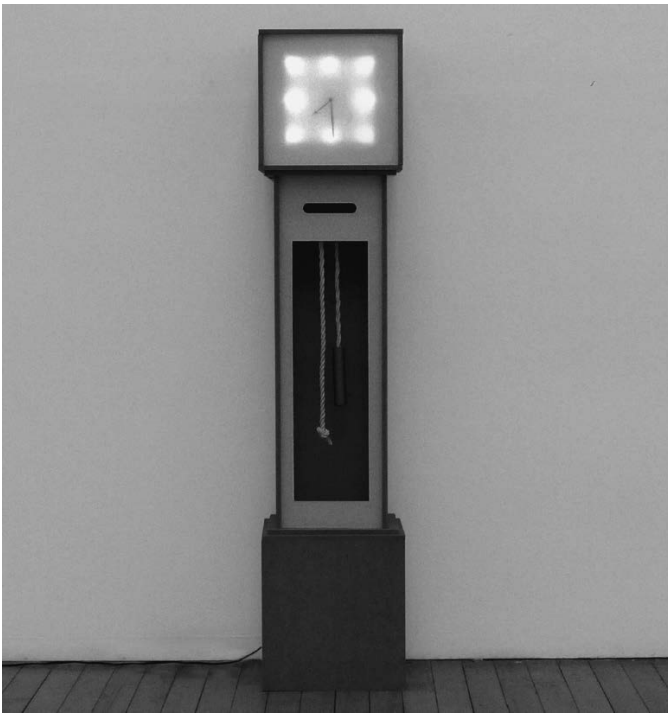
To start capturing these moments, we distributed kits containing a small clock and a camera and invited staff and students to document their routines across a period of two to five days, from waking to bedtime

(see Figure 2.1 ). Most importantly, we asked them to make sure that the small clock was somewhere featured in each photograph. This would allow us to recognise the time each photograph was taken. Once the photos returned, they were reviewed for sensitive content, scanned, time- stamped, and used to build a database of moments, from which our clock would draw.



Figure 2.1 Kits with clocks and cameras (top), and documentation of activities (bottom).

The next step was to consider the design of the clock itself, and how to present these moments back to the school community in a way that would facilitate understanding of our concept. We were aware of the increasing prominence of the clock as an artefact that allowed students to read ‘the time’ and decided to keep it as a starting point to access the school ‘lived time’. We opted to build a grandfather clock as it would become a prominent object in the environment of the school. Furthermore, we could use the lever of the grandfather clock to activate a ‘request’ for a time reading through an image of an activity. We opted to initially hide the clock- face to demonstrate that this was no traditional clock, and embedded it with a photo printer, so that each time the clock lever was pulled, the clock face would light up showing the time reading and printing an image taken by one of the students or staff members at that particular time in the past (see Figure 2.2 ). This way, if the lever was pulled at 11:30, the clock would search the database for a stored picture taken by someone in the school at 11:30 and would print it.



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Figure 2.2 Printer clock: lit up after request (top) and in use (bottom).

The fragmented experiences from days in the past expressed themselves as the time-readings and invited the children to establish connections with the moment of the request. By exposing the multiple activities through requests of time readings, the printer clock invited students to think about different temporal expressions within the classroom. By replacing usual clock readings with the activities carried out by the students and staff members, it emphasised the mesh of activities, characters, and things that come together to make the present, bringing the life of each individual into awareness.

As we placed the printer clock in the main hall of the school and let students interact with it, we could see the expectation of the students waiting for their turn to 'ask' the time. Faced with the images, they mostly looked for identification, becoming excited when faced with their own images. The search for familiarity

was sometimes achieved, but in many cases they were faced with pictures of activities with which they were less familiar, and activities that they would potentially not notice, but which gained a new significance once printed to that particular time. This way, they were taken out of their comfort zone, and it is in this dislocation that an expansion of concepts of time and the reality of others, takes place. The intervention drew attention to the way practices do not simply occupy but also create time. By exposing several practices, such as classroom activities, commuting, having breakfast or dinner, studying, playing, relaxing, etc., and associating them with 'the time', students and staff were exposed to the complexity that comprises each moment represented on the clock, ultimately fostering a form of temporal empathy within the classroom. The clock not only used the present to make visible a different social reality, but also used social realities to make the present more visible.

## TimeBots

The second intervention looked at how students experienced speed in different ways. We designed small three-wheeled robots that could be programmed, with the help of small tokens, to run as slow, medium, or fast in a five-step sequence. The programme should, however, align with what each student felt about time during five periods of their day. The aim was to emphasise that activities, people, places, and objects are polyrhythmic and that this polyrhythmia is too often concealed by dominant narratives that lead us to regard acceleration as an inevitable aspect of 'our time'.



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Figure 2.3 Students decorating (top) and programming (bottom) the bots.

The intervention started with a series of warm-up questions about the way the students felt about speed. For example, we asked when they felt they were fast and slow, whether they could think of different times in the day as having different speeds, what speed they felt was expressed in the present moment etc. The students were then invited to describe activities, people, places, and objects considered slow, medium, and fast, and mark them on a form. Finally, they were asked to focus on a typical week- day and describe their feelings of acceleration for five periods – morning, late morning, afternoon, late afternoon, and night – marking them in a dedicated form. Following this reflection, the TimeBots were distributed, decorated, and each child recorded their feelings of speed on their bots using the dedicated tokens (Figures 2.3 and 2.4). The bots were then released into the pen (Figure 2.5), which illustrated the subjective rhythm of the classroom in that present moment.



Figure 2.4 Decorated bots.



Figure 2.5 Bots illustrating the collective rhythm of the classroom.

The reported experiences of speed from similar situations varied greatly among the students: similar activities, places, people, and objects were in some cases considered fast, medium, slow, or all at once, depending on the situation and the people involved, the mood of participants, the time of day, etc. The students' teacher, for example, was considered slow, medium, and fast by one participant, while others considered homework, television and even horses to be slow, medium, and fast. Even activities and places that might intuitively be associated with speed were sometimes considered slow. Athletics, for instance, was reported by one participant as 'quite slow because one minute it's six o'clock and then you

come back in and it's still about five past six', while 'high streets' were considered very slow by another 'because there is so many people and I walk towards them and I just try to get through them'.

Particular senses of speed were not intrinsically related to specific activities, people, places, and objects and were constructed by actors through their personal experiences. However, it was still possible to identify the predominance of narratives that attribute a negative connotation to slowness and a positive one to acceleration. In the 'activities' topic, slowness was frequently associated with displeasure and boredom and acceleration with pleasure and enjoyment. In 'people', slowness was occasionally associated with 'inefficiency': '[he is slow] because he kind of can't really bother getting to work to get paid and he lives at home and doesn't pay the bills', and acceleration with 'efficiency': '[dad is fast] because he gets right off the bed and ... he already had his breakfast, brushed his teeth, and is ready to go to work'. In other cases, however, slowness in people was also associated with pleasure 'my grandma ... I like that she is slow', or tranquillity 'because [fellow student] is really peaceful, she never shouts or anything'. Being busy, in this case, was associated with both acceleration 'my mum [is fast] because she is always busy working' and slowness 'he just spends most of his time on the computer and once he is on it he doesn't go out'. In some cases speed was considered in its literal form, for example better runners being considered 'fast' people.

In the forms where students marked how they felt about five different periods of their day, there was a tendency to start the day slowly and portray this speed as accelerating till the end of the day, but the three speeds were relatively balanced for all stages. The speeds programmed into the TimeBots were admittedly too personal and subjective for others to connect to the behaviour of their owners in the final performance, and the owner of each robot was mostly recognised by its decoration. As the robots ran inside the pen, however, the children could observe the representation of their own rhythms, as well as the variety that composed the polyrhythms of the classroom. As affirmed by Adam (1998, p.10) it is through the intersection and accumulation of various rhythms that contextual temporal practices become tangible. The network of rhythms created by the TimeBots in the pen enabled a unique glimpse into the combined subjective experiences of time that did not and could not exist for an observer simply watching the routine of those students. In the pen, the TimeBots interacted with each other on a different level, revealing the subjective timescape of the group. ■

The variety of speeds pointed to the richness of temporal experiences within the group. While the use of dominant narratives around speed and slowness as a way of expressing feelings of pleasure or displeasure demonstrates the difficulty of breaking with a pervasive culture of time, overall, the children did not experience their lives solely as accelerated, and explored the occurrence of multiple rhythms. The recognition of this multiplicity shows that acceleration may have become a normative model embedded in our language, but speed is still experienced in multiple ways.

#### **Four steps into the thickness of the present**

The two examples show the possibilities that emerge from attempting to reveal the complexity of the present, suggesting a four- step method where we:

1. **focus** our attention on a particular case. Here, we focused on a group of individuals. The notion of thickness helps to demonstrate that the aim is not to present this case in an overly accessible way, simplifying the route to a potential core experience of the present. Instead, we would look for ways to draw attention to its increased complexity and the myriad of elements that contribute to shape the moment. In this case, we looked at how each individual carried a world of experiences, practices, ideas, and emotions that contributed to making each moment unique. Similarly, one could look at how relationships are made of multiple conflicting layers, how substances interact within materials and things, etc.
2. look for ways to **reveal** the uniqueness of the present moment, what Keri Facer (2019) has called the 'richness of the meanwhile'. In our case, we attempted to communicate the relationship

between temporality and what students see, feel, and do in a way that was understood by them. In the first case, we kept the clock readings as a window to the lived time. In the second, we associated each student's sense of speed to the speed in which their bots moved across the room. One could similarly think about how to communicate aspects of the identified thickness in a way that is at the same time surprising and accessible.

3. attempt to draw attention to the ways in which these elements **interconnect**, e.g. the way the experience of one individual becomes an integral part of the whole; which would be significantly different if one student changed their way of being.
4. consider how a design could **incorporate** these features.

Key to this process, however, is to suspend consideration of how the present feeds into the future and vice versa. To paraphrase Edelman, the task is to say 'no' to designing in pursuit of a future condition that has been predetermined by partial and limited views from the present. Put simply, its aim is to shift attention from the future to look for ways to explore the present through different lenses, attending to different groups, realities, materialities, and the perspective of other beings that create each distinctive and unique moment. This way, the present becomes ever thicker and the future potentially ever more surprising.

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