**Design is Fantasy Reader**

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A theory for designing better realities, paved through fantasy, authenticity, and the elevation of Filipino design.

- Act I – Personal Mythologies
- Act II – The Western Canon
- Act III – Towards Unreality

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# Design is Fantasy Reader

A talk by Chia Amisola, for UX+ 2021

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When I proclaimed myself as a designer, I had no idea what a career made of ambiguity would mean to my personal identity.

At first, I thought entering design as a career turned my love for creativity into something hollow—turning me into a jaded designer working under a system that prioritized numbers over creativity, and metrics over ethics.

What I learned from my experiences in the western design world left me disillusioned and dissastisfied for the harm it brought. Corporations around me are complicit in the teardown of

nations. Design is never neutral. Platitudes to ease my fears over the field. Then, I realized that the way we learn about and practice design could use a radical shift. But how?

The point of me nerding out is to hammer how this made me think a lot about how religion and institutions work. Trade-offs and ethics, the world being morally gray. Essentially, a lot of the same questions in our world posed in unreality.

And somehow, this can be achieved by being as unrealistic as possible.

# I. Personal Mythologies

When I think about how I, and many other designers entered the field, we often joke about how we learned the practice through Medium articles, the same flashy names, and the same communities.

Obfuscation
I learned about the field of design from self-teaching; a lack of formal design education led me to pave my own; though my influences were more like, DeviantArt and a variety of other texture resource sites to paste on my 100x100 anime icons on GIMP. I was shaped by the tools that were available to me: and to a wandering pre-teen, these tools were most accessible in the form of W3Schools and step-by-step coding guides contained in textareas that were accessible and plain language—especially in contrast to the tech jargon that inundated the field.

Moreover, design was *accessible*. There were little to no barriers that came with putting up a fansite on the internet. You could even say that part of it is because *everything easy is hard again[1],* where then, god forbid—I could actually inspect a page and understand what was going on within its source code.  It was a world dominated by teenagers.

It often reminds me of how computer programming used to be the work of women. When 4500 kilogram computers were operated by punch cards, largely employed women in their computing groups. Operationally, they were labeled as "human computers", relegated to doing what was then considered grunt, clerical work used for World War II.[2] This happened until women were led away from STEM fields; leading to drastically widened gender gaps amongst the recipients of Computer Science degrees. "Geek culture" drove women away, computer programming then became *the* flashy job.

Does this sound familiar?

Tools & passion

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[1] https://frankchimero.com/blog/2018/everything-easy/
[2] https://www.inc.com/magazine/201710/maria-aspan/how-women-once-ruled-computing.html

Sites like Neopets, the ability to edit (albeit messily) CSS on Friendster and Myspace—social spaces that were dominated by women, became the DIY spaces in which a generation of designers, artists, creators, writers, entrepreneurs and everyone in between have emerged.

My relationship to the web was shaped because it was the medium in which I digested the things I loved. From here, I shaped my identity and being.

Our most personal relationships with technology affect us. And if you take a step back and look carefully, you may see that we perhaps are orchestrating our own extinction.
The illegibility of the web was by design. We design our future, and then become overwhelmed by the present we've left for ourselves—perhaps in part because we have trouble comprehending the implications and potentialities of our work, and of course for the young designer, the systems they exist under…

## II. The Western Canon (and the third-world identity)

The field of design has largely evolved from my Neopets glory days. UX design, our conference namesake, is a relatively new field. We want to bring more young designers into the field, and thus carve up new pathways–just as the way we engage with technology changes.

Today, I joke around with friends about how everything you need to get a design job is learnable in Medium articles. What would we be without its UX tag?
On the surface, this may seem like a great thing — parts of our design education are more accessible. But what kind of education and learning is flourishing? Perhaps it's as questionable as the <textarea> copy-paste, GIMP journey I led myself, only more shiny and decorated.

Indeed, in the past year I saw more and more students seek out resources to kickstart their careers in UX. They build in public, pen Medium articles along the way, post 30-day UI challenges, and create case studies redesigning food delivery apps. In interviews, we memorize the right thing to say when articulating our process, stories and anecdotes from classes, and decorate our resumes with the same potent action verbs until we speak the same ideals—often ones carved up by the west. UX careers become a formula, its education delivered in bite-sized pieces focused on the highlights of the process and an ever-expanding toolkit far from reflective of the real-world.

Our design practice is overwhelmingly western. We've laid out an industry minimum of "do this bare minimum to get you a job." To be a designer is to learn the case study factory formula, know the buzzwords, and have the necessary skill set — indistinguishable from many others.

- Design leaders dictate the world, mostly from the pedestal of the west. Design Twitter is one giant stage where only a select few are given voice; open criticism is hard to find, and straying from the beliefs of the books and threads when they dominate design discourse is almost sinful. Their ideology reigns supreme. We fall to the cult of hero worship.[3]
- Daily UI challenges skip over the skills necessary to create a real product, and place designers on the pressure of "brand-building" that is far from necessary for the field. They're more of contests to appear pretty on the Dribbbl home page and exercises on mimicry—often applied in misguided ways.
- Hackathons teach us to solve problems in three days. The entire practice around case studies compels designers to fall into techno-solutionism, treating everything as a design problem to be solved—and one you can get rewarded for, especially under narrow reward categories.
- We do UX for the sake of doing UX, with little genuine interest in a user-centered practice. @spydergrrrl coined the concept of the 'UX Theater', where fancy design methodologies without the inclusion of any actual user are becoming more and more prevalent. A equivalent then, is the encouragement of young designers to draw out Crazy 8s and brainstorming notes to show process for the sake of process—with little depth in understanding how these should be employed or used.
  - Spydergrrrl stresses how "we think" becomes a substitute for "we saw" and "we heard".
- Silicon Valley mantras of speed and "move fast, break things" that espouses irresponsibility and has long been used to absolve technologists from the dangerous repercussions of their work.
- Communities put together workshops, hiring events, and talks for students, offering more realistic routes to design jobs. Rarely are these cohorts and groups shaped meaningfully (recall that the biggest sell of an education is primarily the network), perhaps because people are often there for a singular desire—to get a job, or to help people get jobs—which is not an unnoble goal alone, but is hardly riveting. The recent trend of monetizing 'community' further complicates this.

*A guy in Palo Alto shapes our tools, and our tools in turn shape us.[4]*

. So why have we let one of the most human acts with infinite potential for self-realization become colonized?

We dare say that our designs transform lives or even tell a story, yet contend with changing a single dark flow, and are afraid to actually perform a process that respects the complexity and breadth of human experience, beng, culture.

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[3] https://eyeondesign.aiga.org/can-we-teach-graphic-design-history-without-the-cult-of-hero-worship/
[4] https://twitter.com/ctbeiser/status/1383667146006302723

*Everyone can be a designer* is simply wrong when the "design" that we're advocating for is built atop of western standards and capitalism (all design at scale is in service of capitalism[5]. *Everyone can be a designer* is wrong when the statement promises that following methods and frameworks designed by men in Palo Alto is anything remotely inclusive.

*Technology might be the most human thing about us, since only the human invents tools to make tools and has always used its own artifacts to reinvent itself.* [6]

Knowledge changes, our notion of 'best' amongst all these practices will drift, just as trends do. Nowhere in the quick-paced rush towards a 'design education' are people taught to develop a personal philosophy and method—which I'd argue, is actually the most important thing for design students to identify and hone. **Our philosophy, approach, and mindset is more critical than ever.**

I theorize that why I continued falling into tech is because the early web was conducive for shaping my personal philosophy: I fell into the web through adjacencies, from the things I loved.

So what now? I want to believe that we can rewrite the script of design saviorism; in the fact that young designers are supposed to articulate that they design for 'social good', as if these products are not the default. That young designers are forced to reinvent their language and interests, as the path to design now looks like design for design's sake.

I want to paint you a picture of something that might be controversial.

*Today, the designer who designs for the sake of design itself might look like this:*
…

*The designer's path then might have looked something like this:*
- Yes, the unpredictability and chaos is what makes it good.

We miss out on designers informed by real-world experiences, systems and thought processes from far more refined fields; design is nothing if done for the sake of design alone — especially when what most of us know as "design" are shaped by western ideals.

How many times have I seen Filipino designers be passed over for one with more Western prestige signals? Of founders and makers who bend over backwards, figuring out ways to make Filipino problems palatable to a white audience when they area truly serving Filipino needs? To the designers-in-the-making resorting to academic commissions and who turn Microsoft Powerpoint into the most advanced motion graphics software you've ever seen—bending design over, glossed because these standards are not made of the west?

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[5] https://twitter.com/jopas/status/1050312056392507392
[6] Beatriz Colomna

Or, even in traditional education—what does the standard of design education in our nation look like? Does it prepare students for FMCGs and outsourced studios, or does it provide the theory and history needed to let these students enrich culture as they see fit? What kind of designers are we shaping today? Are they here solely for the corporate machine?

# III. Towards Unreality

I've witnessed the third-world designer underestimated for far too long.

*For the world to be interesting, you have to be manipulating it all the time.*

**So what am I going to propose?**
For designers to be uplifted. For designers to actualize that their imaginations can shape our world. To be political, and dare I say, radical. And in doing this — to be as unrealistic as possible.

*When the word 'unrealistic' often simply means 'undesirable' to those in charge, rendering alternative realities impossible for everyone else.*[7]

In a time when many people's lives are shaped as much by fictional entities as supposedly real ones, designers can consider absorbing the power that fiction holds, the circumstances in which unreality became the narrative we live—and what it means to subsequently embrace unreality. For designers to be political, and to do this—we need to embrace radical futures, alternative worlds.

After all, what has incrementally subscribing ourselves to western belief closed us out to? (Advocating for unreality in a country plagued with a tenuous present – is this disingenuous?) Hear me out...

**Unrealism when in need of reality**
Looking back to my work, I realized that every piece of my being was rooted in faith towards the unreal.

What if we lean into the things of fiction? Unreality can teach us many things, especially if it's simply framed as a completely distinct, possible future.

Take politics, which essentially has the objective to undermine the stability of what most people think as reality. Radical political shifts can seemingly happen overnight, but often build up on years of tension.

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[7] Anthony Dunne & Fiona Raby, Design for the Unreal World

- In the Philippines, Duterte carefully designed an image that promised a pristine nation that he would achieve through radical methods, if he must: posters with "GUTS AND GLORY[8]", "NO TO DRUGS[9]", and "TUNAY NG PAGBABAGO" framed the streets, his signature fist pumping. The populist tendencies[10] of his administration capitalized on the Philippine's discontentment with the liberal crowd, turning public hatred and frustration into a new form of hope — in his reality, with new iron fist-like methods unseen in decades, he would transform the country overnight.
- Politics is a battle over the imagination. You can think of the popular Overton Window as an application of this principle; wherein a range of policies that are generally acceptable to a mainstream population fall under a certain range. As Duterte took over in a time where the window was veering more and more to the right, disillusionment with the liberal Philipppines and all, he capitalized and seized public interest.
- What is unthinkable becomes possible. Something that can be actualized closely. A fantasy no longer a fantasy.

In real life, the differences between the real and unreal aren't as clear as they present themselves in our traditional fictions. Intangibility is a fluid concept, one that we have the power to actualize.

- At the surface, one might say that the lack of realism in the Silicon Valley ethos — and the blind faith in it — is what sets us back. This unrealism and incrementalism is damaging–taking ages to unlearn. So what if we take further leaps backwards?
  - Slow movement isn't going to repair the world—it's time to take leaps forward.
- Unreality isn't just envisioning a utopian Philippines that seems far from our grasps (that is—until we unrealize it as so), it's also thinking that the Philippines can make a moral leap that directly contends with its nature of being the most Catholic nation in all of Asia—living in it every single day. This is a proven one that we now take as our present.


- These new realities can be fashioned by our desires. Magic realism, the form of literature that I enjoy likening to a dream—grounded in naturalism, yet just the right amount of surreal and fantastical, is defined by Ursula Le Guin; one of my favorite writers. In one of her last interviews, she says this about writing:
  - Anybody can hear a story or read a myth. The ones you remember are the ones that reflect something deep within yourself, which you probably can't put into words, except maybe as a myth.
- Our deepest desires that are inexplicable, yet can be conveyed and carried in myth. In design. When we open ourselves to constructing new realities, we welcome new alternatives that root from our deepest desires—ones free from the constraints imposed by current realities.

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[8] https://www.pri.org/file/rtx2dqovjpg
[9] https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-07-15/president-duterte-poster/7630818?nw=0
[10] A Duterte reader, Abao

Let me introduce you to the definition of worldmaking (or worlding, for short), something we can embed unto our design practice. It sounds exactly like what it suggests, though in the design context it's used as a bit more generative than in its critical studies counterparts:

- **Worldmaking** refers to the ways we collectively make the spaces we inhabit through collective practices.[11]
  - As opposed to assessing the stringent nature of reality, we open ourselves up to more interpretive frames and practices; new ways of being.
- Be it in the creation of new products, experiences, paradigms, systems, or institutions--we can apply and manifest worlding in our practices.
  - Because human nature and design is so rooted in our relationship with artfacts

*If realities are constructed rather than given, can they also be designed, and what does this mean for design?*

- Unreality also takes place as the promotional scenarios we see in teleseryes, commercials, movies. Nations that ascribe to cult of personality-like hero worship are especially susceptible to this: game shows where people dance as two dollar bills are streamed in the air above them, picturesque family moments during the holidays sealed with canned food or seasoning. These are however, limiting and repetitive – they present tired dreams that we cry and laugh to, romanticized scenarios are normalized encounters and "that would never happen"s—the worlds that these are designed in are designed to be trite and close to home, and thus don't assert entirely new features.
- We can design for worlds unknown. We can design beyond our closed-off view of what design is.
- The issue is that as designers, if we only construct narratives that fall under the realm of reality—we will naturally only operate under its constraints. If we fashion new modes of thinking, a transformative new way of being—then we can create new dreams, hopes, and futures.
  - We have to discard the western design canon. Redefine the borders of what is in reality. Take away the memorization of standards.
  - Question our being. Put forth the desires and needs of humanity. Think about our process the whole way through.

Take this, why is Filipino design relegated to Jeepney lettering, loose religious themes (and its following guilt), and shiny consumer goods labels? When can we encounter deconstructed, alternative realities? When can we actually broaden what our visual landscape looks like—or investigate it without the western lens?

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[11] https://medium.com/the-design-of-things/learning-through-worldmaking-the-design-way-b0ed38cefc12

The crux is that I want Filipinos, people of marginalized backgrounds, etc. to be as unrealistic as possible—even if we live in a country that feels like it needs realism. The thing is, idealism has been used by the administration and counterforces to shape a new narrative that was once a dream of the Philippines—and is now a critical reality; many of these imaginations that were being presented by the administration also seemed more like the resurfacing of beliefs that have always been shrouded.

- See, any work that operates on the imagination by ether maintaining reality or challenging is inherently political. Design maintains itself as a political act.
- When we redesign ourselves, we subsequently redesign reality. Vice-versa.
- Designers have this powerful force that has long been sheltered for the sake of conforming to processes and narrow worldviews; it's time to consider worlding and design for the new world.

I'm here to advocate for design where our internal philosophy champions alternate worlds and futures; where we vouch for a transformation of the way we see life and technology as a tool itself. Where we use design to question authority. Where we use design to seek the best possible world for ourselves. If we do not envision one, after all, we're never to live in it.

*This speculative philosophy towards design and technology questions the meaning of technology itself.[12]*
Speculative Everything

Why has the designer now become stagnant? Why have we abandoned the pursuit of philosophy and the true value that individual designers can bring in for the sake of UX theatrics?

- Our actual world is surrounded by an infinity of other possible worlds.[13]

- Realities are constructed, they are not given. And as they are constructed, designers have the tool to shape them—our future is a malleable, designable thing—especially if we orient ourselves in terms of the unthinkable.

- While design alone won't be the solution to anything, it certainly will be a *part* of any solution—just as it can be a part of any problem.

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[12] https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/speculative-everything
[13] Lubomir dolezel, Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds

- Designers must divorce ourselves from the idea that we are the saviors of the industry; a voice of reason, anything more than another tool when our industry is currently. built atop of capitalism and western desires
- let alone the idea that everything must be solved, or that design can even touch on it,
- but also acknowledge how–-if we let ourselves—may become the best people equipped to build new realities
- so far all the powerlessness we may feel or be rendered as—be unapologetically radical.