Design Noir: The Secret Life of Electronic Objects

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Beneath the glossy surface of official design lurks a dark and strange world driven by real human needs. A place where electronic objects co-star in a noir thriller, working with like-minded individuals to escape normalisation and ensure that even a totally manufactured environment has room for danger, adventure and transgression. We don't think that design can ever fully anticipate the richness of this unofficial world and neither should it. But it can draw inspiration from it and develop new design approaches and roles so that as our new environment evolves, there is still scope for rich and complex human pleasure.

Corporate futurologists force-feed us a 'happy-ever-after' portrayal of life where technology is the solution to every problem. There is no room for doubt or complexity in their techno-utopian visions. Everyone is a stereotype, and social and cultural roles remain unchanged. Despite the fact that technology is evolving, the imagined products that feature in their fantasies reassure us that nothing essential will change, everything will stay the same. These future forecasters have a conservative role, predicting patterns of behaviour in relation to technological developments. They draw from what we already know about people, and weave new ideas into existing realities. The resulting scenarios extend pre-existent reality into the future and so reinforce the status quo rather than challenging it. Their slick surface distracts us from the dystopian vision of life they wish for. By designing the props for the videos produced to show us what the future could be like, design works to keep official values in place.

An occasional glance through almost any newspaper reveals a very different view of everyday life, where complex emotions, desires and needs are played out through the misuse and abuse of electronic products and systems. A mother shoots her son after an argument over which television channel to watch; a parent is outraged by a speaking doll made in China which sounds like it swears; the police set a trap for scanner snoopers – people who listen in to emergency radio frequencies illegally – by broadcasting a message that a UFO has landed in a local forest, within minutes several cars arrive and their scanners are confiscated. Many of these stories illustrate the narrative space entered by using and misusing a simple electronic product, how interaction with everyday electronic technologies can generate rich narratives that challenge the conformity of everyday life by short-circuiting our emotions and states of mind. These stories blend the physical reality of place with electronically mediated experience and mental affect. They form part of a pathology of material culture that includes aberrations, transgressions and obsessions, the consequences of and motivations for the misuse of objects, and object malfunctions. They provide glimpses of another more complex reality hidden beneath the slick surface of electronic consumerism.

Amateur subversions and beta-testers

When an object's use is subverted, it is as though the protagonist is cheating the system and deriving more pleasure than is his or her due. The subversion of function relates to a breakdown of order; something else becomes visible, unnameable, unable to find a correspondence in the material world. This subversion of function is related to not being able to find the right word, leading to the coining of neologisms that bend language to accommodate something new. Desire leads to a subversion of the

environment creating an opportunity to reconfigure it to suit our 'illegitimate' needs, establishing new and unofficial narratives.

Some people already exploit the potentially subversive possibilities of this parallel world of illicit pleasures stolen from commodified experience. They seek out (ab)user-friendly products that lend themselves to imaginative possibilities for short-circuiting the combinatorial limits suggested by electronic products. This ranges from terrorists fashioning bombs and weapons out of mundane everyday objects, many of which are listed in the Anarchist Cookbook, to Otaku magazines showing Japanese gadget geeks how to modify standard electronic products to squeeze extra functionality out of them. There are no futurologists at work here. The main players in this world are beta-testers, tweaking and adjusting reality on a day-to-day basis. They are dissatisfied with the version of reality on offer, but rather than escaping or dropping out, they adjust it to suit themselves. Concerned with software not hardware, they invent new uses for existing technologies and promote interaction with 'designed' objects that subvert their anticipated uses. In doing so, they challenge the mechanisms that legitimise the conceptual models embodied in the design of the product or system and demonstrate behaviours towards technology that invite others to follow.

Beta-testers have learnt how to derive enjoyment from electronic materiality, from rejecting the material realities on offer and constructing their own. They display a level of pleasure in customisation currently limited to home DIY and custom car hobbyists. Many specialist magazines and books are already available that show readers how to modify or tweak everyday electronic products. Most of them are a little technical, but only because knowledge of electronics is still not as common as other forms of practical know-how. After all, an ever-growing number of home improvement magazines and TV programmes thrive on the pleasure people get from modifying their environments themselves – of customising reality. Maybe in the future we will see popular electronics magazines that show us how to turn our mobile phones into eavesdropping devices in three easy steps?

Consumers as anti-heroes: some cautionary tales

The almost unbelievable stories reported in newspapers testify to the unpredictable potential of human beings to establish new situations despite the constraints on everyday life imposed through electronic objects. We are interested in people who have assimilated electronic technologies so fully into their lives that they feel comfortable doing things others would think of as almost too sacred or highly charged for technology. These individuals can be thought of as sad, based on the view that playing out deeply human narratives through technological objects is degrading and inferior to more traditional media. Or they can be seen as early adopters, able to find meaning and recognise the potential of new technologies for supporting complex human emotions and desires.

Teenagers are now using their mobile phones to intimidate each other. A new form of bullying has emerged since Christmas 1999, when a huge number of teenagers in Britain received pre-paid mobile phones as gifts. Earlier in the year, a 15-year-old was driven to suicide after receiving up to 20 silent calls in half an hour. The teenager left a suicide text message on her mobile phone the night before she died. The fact that her suicide note was in the form of a text message rather than handwritten will seem even more tragic to some, but to this girl text messages played a more vital role in her life than letters.

As a society we are struggling to define and communicate the safe use of new media to teenagers. Just as we have developed models of safe behaviour for the street and for dealing with strangers in cars, we will have to do so for phones and computers. It is not that these technologies are in themselves harmful, it is their use and misuse that we need to understand. Another distressing example is that of the 16-year-old schoolgirl raped by a man she chatted up with phone text messages. She swapped messages for weeks before agreeing to meet the stranger in a car park. For many teenagers, the mobile phone is a gateway to romance, and new hybrid services are fusing the lonely hearts column with text messaging. It is only a matter of time before purely text-based romancing matures as a genre of its own.

A more humorous example is the man in Australia who married his TV. During the ceremony, he placed a gold wedding ring on top of the TV set and one on his finger. He even promised to 'love, honour and obey' the product. One day it just occurred to him that his TV was the best companion he had ever had – he watched up to ten hours a day. It is easy to criticise people who watch so much TV, but in many ways this form of happiness shows what might be in store for the rest of us as society becomes even more electronically mediated. Though it is not necessarily a good thing, some people clearly find the company of electronic products more satisfying than that of people. These individuals are not rejecting other people because of technology; they have found happiness with technolgy instead. Before the advent of television and the web, they might have been lonely.

Maybe these obsessive behaviours provide glimpses of a future where electronic products have been fully assimilated into everyday culture and our psyche. They are cautionary tales; they push our relationship with the medium of electronic technology to the limit. This is despite the design of the products: in fact there is a contrast between the banal design of many electronic products and the extreme misuses they are subjected to. Products could offer more complex and demanding aesthetic experiences if designers referred to this bizarre world of the 'infra-ordinary', where stories show that truth is indeed stranger than fiction, and prove that our experience of everyday day life lived through conventional electronic products is aesthetically impoverished.

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When objects dream...

Electronic objects, from mobile phones to washing machines, are often described as 'smart'. But using this term to describe objects with enhanced electronic functionality encourages a bland interpretation of the things that are an integral part of our daily lives. Electronic objects are not only 'smart', they 'dream' – in the sense that they leak radiation into the space and objects surrounding them, including our bodies. Despite the images of control and efficiency conveyed through a beige visual language of intelligibility and smartness, electronic objects, it might be imagined, are irrational – or at least they allow their thoughts to wander. Thinking of them in terms of dreaminess rather than smartness opens them up to more interesting interpretations.

The dreams of electronic objects are made from electromagnetic radiation. These dreams radiate outwards from the object, creating a new, invisible but physical environment that we call hertzian space. It is here that the secret life of electronic objects is played out, secret not only because we rarely glimpse it, but also because we are only just beginning to understand it. The electromagnetic spectrum covers an enormous spread of frequencies, ranging from the fields given off by electrical wiring (50 Hz),

Design is ideological

When technology is developing as rapidly as it is now, reflection and criticism are particularly important. We need to consider alternative visions to those put forward by industry. Design, being accessible, contemporary and part of popular culture, is perfectly positioned to perform this role. But in order to achieve this, some significant shifts need to occur. We need to develop a parallel design activity that questions and challenges industrial agendas.

Most designers, especially industrial designers, view design as somehow neutral, clean and pure. But all design is ideological, the design process is informed by values based on a specific world view, or way of seeing and understanding reality. Design can be described as falling into two very broad categories: affirmative design and critical design. The former reinforces how things are now, it conforms to cultural, social, technical and economic expectation. Most design falls into this category. The latter rejects how things are now as being the only possibility, it provides a critique of the prevailing situation through designs that embody alternative social, cultural, technical or economic values.

Critical design

Critical design, or design that asks carefully crafted questions and makes us think, is just as difficult and just as important as design that solves problems or finds answers. Being provocative and challenging might seem like an obvious role for art, but art is far too removed from the world of mass consumption and electronic consumer products to be effective in this context, even though it is of course part of consumerist culture. There is a place for a form of design that pushes the cultural and aesthetic potential and role of electronic products and services to its limits. Questions must be asked about what we actually need, about the way poetic moments can be intertwined with the everyday and not separated from it. At the moment, this type of design is neglected and regarded as secondary. Today, design's main purpose is still to provide new products – smaller, faster, different, better.

Critical design is related to haute couture, concept cars, design propaganda, and visions of the future, but its purpose is not to present the dreams of industry, attract new business, anticipate new trends or test the market. Its purpose is to stimulate discussion and debate amongst designers, industry and the public about the aesthetic quality of our electronically mediated existence. It differs too from experimental design, which seeks to extend the medium, extending it in the name of progress and aesthetic novelty. Critical design takes as its medium social, psychological, cultural, technical and economic values, in an effort to push the limits of lived experience not the medium. This has always been the case in architecture, but design is struggling to reach this level of intellectual maturity.

(Un)Popular design

Developing a critical perspective in design is made difficult by the fact that the design profession, and product designers in particular, see the social value of their work as inextricably linked to the marketplace. Design outside this arena is viewed with suspicion as escapist or unreal. At the moment, the only alternatives to the Hollywood genre of corporate design are design consultancies promoting themselves to corporate clients with slick mocked-up products that are never intended to be developed any further. These objects are purely about PR, they are designed to sell the consultancy's potential for innovative and creative design thinking.

To be considered successful in the marketplace, design has to sell in large numbers, therefore it has to be popular. Critical design can never be truly popular, and that is its fundamental problem. Objects that are critical of industry's agenda are unlikely to be funded by industry. As a result, they will tend to remain one-offs. Maybe we need a new category to replace the avant-garde: (un)popular design.

The design profession needs to mature and find ways of operating outside the tight constraints of servicing industry. At its worst, product design simply reinforces global capitalist values. It helps to create and maintain desire for new products, ensures obsolescence, encourages dissatisfaction with what we have and merely translates brand values into objects. Design needs to see this for what it is, just one possibility, and develop alternative roles for itself. It needs to establish an intellectual stance of its own, or the design profession is destined to loose all intellectual credibility and be viewed simply as an agent of capitalism.

We are not against industry, although it could direct more of its profits into serious design research rather than facile PR exercises. Industry is after all in the business of making money for its shareholders. More disturbing is the unwillingness of the design profession to take on a more responsible and pro-active role within society. Before this can happen, designers will have to redefine their role, embracing and developing new methods and approaches that simultaneously appeal and challenge in the way a film or book does. More could be learnt from fine art where there is a history of critical strategies for asking questions through objects and stimulating debate in engaging ways.

Instead of thinking about appearance, user-friendliness or corporate identity, industrial designers could develop design proposals that challenge conventional values. But critical design must avoid the pitfalls of the 1970s by developing strategies that link it back to everyday life and fully engage the viewer. Things are far more complex today than they were 30 years ago. It is not enough to simply offer an alternative, new strategies need to be developed that are both critical and optimistic, that engage with and challenge industry's technological agenda.

Global corporations are becoming more powerful than states, as Noreena Hertz points out in The Silent Takeover (2001) – the annual values of sales of each of the six largest transnational corporations, ranging between $111 and $126 billion, are now exceeded by the GDPs of only 21 nation states, and as a result, governments and politicians are loosing power. Corporations have a bigger influence on reality than government, and buying power is more important than voting power. A world where shopping has more political impact than voting is a threat to democracy.
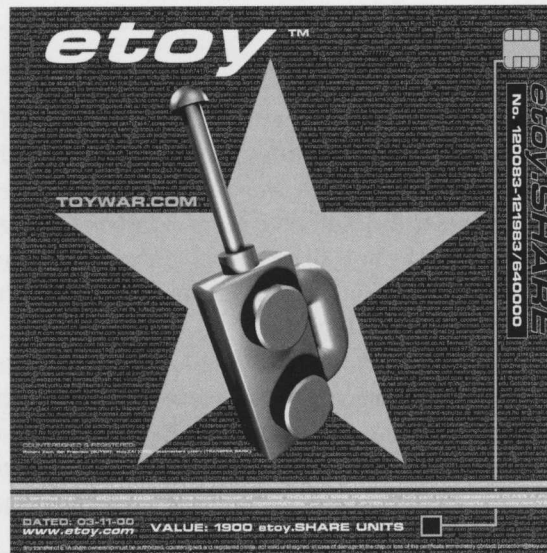
There has also been a shift in the intellectual landscape as relations between popular culture, the market and critical positions have changed. The marketplace is viewed as the only reality, or as Thomas Frank writes in One Market Under God (2001) a form of 'market populism' has taken hold, where people's true desires are expressed and fulfilled through the marketplace. Anything outside of the marketplace is regarded as suspicious and unreal. This state of affairs makes critical positions almost impossible, they are dismissed as elitist. It is almost taboo for an industrial designer to reject what the market wants.

As the intermediary between the consumer and the corporation, the design profession is in a perfect position to host a debate in the form of design proposals about technology, consumerism and cultural value. But first designers will need to develop new communication strategies and move from narratives of production to narratives of consumption, or the aesthetics of use. That is, they will have to shift emphasis from the object and demonstrating its feasibility to the experiences it can offer.

Designers can learn much about this from the approaches developed by artists during the 1990s, when a general blurring of distinctions between fine art, design and business began to develop. For instance, the artist collective Atelier Van Lieshout has worked on the design of a Dutch abortion ship to be anchored off the coast of Ireland and other catholic countries where abortion is illegal. Liam Gillick, who explores decision making mechanisms in corporate culture and their impact on history, also designs exhibitions, interiors and is working on a building.

Other artists have concentrated on appropriating the business world's organisational structures to produce work that fused fictional and real, legal, economic and cultural systems. Probably the best known example is etoy, a corporation, art group and brand formed in 1994 by a group of architects, lawyers, programmers, artists and designers. Their original aim was to create a purely digital identity (www.etoy.com) and break out of narrow art world constraints. All participating artists agree to sell their individual identity to etoy corporation for shares and to live an anonymous life as etoy agents.

It is not possible to buy etoy products, its art exists solely in the form of stocks. The value of etoy in share units is equivalent to the cultural value of etoy corporation which in turn consists of the electronic brand etoy.

Etoy do not merely adopt the rhetoric of the corporate world though, they play big business at its own game. In 1999 etoy embarked on a campaign called Toywar, financed through experimental investment strategies. This campaign was directed against the multi-national corporation eToys, an on-line toy store (www.etoys.com) that attempted to use its superior size and financial power to force etoy to give up its domain name, even though the artists' site had been established long before the retailer's. Afraid that potential customers might confuse the two similarly named sites, eToys originally tried to buy out the etoy brand, but their $500,000 offer was turned down. The toy company then set out to sue etoy, accusing the internet artists of unfair competition and trademark delusion. With the help of 1,800 volunteer etoy agents and activists, who served the cause by publicising the case on the net and in the news media, filing counter suits and establishing alliances, etoy succeeded in getting eToys to back off. During the course of the Toywar campaign, the value of the on-line toy store's stock dropped from $67 to $15 a share.

Not all artists choose to wage war against the corporate world. Instead of seeking arts funding, Lucy Kimbell preferred to present one of her projects as a business proposition and look for investors. Her proposal was for a vibrating internal pager (VIP) using the same technology as vibrating mobile phones. If you liked someone, you could give them your VIP number and receive a gentle buzz when they called you later. The product was never realised, in fact there is not even a picture of what it looks like. VIP exists as a description, a business proposal and an on-line application form.

Artists presenting themselves as employees of imaginary organisations or companies can also yield some interesting results. Originally from an engineering background, Natalie Jeremijenko now describes herself as a staff engineer working for the Bureau of Inverse Technology (BIT). She has left the idea of artist as individual behind to work on a fictional organisation where she is just one employee. In Suicide Box (1996), BIT installed a motion detector and video camera near San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge to count the number of people jumping off. Later, a report was produced (engineer's report SB03: Jan 23-97) with recommendations for how the BIT Suicide Box data could be used to calculate a 'robust and market responsive value of life'. There is something more sinister about the idea of an organisation rather than an individual carrying out subversive work like this.

One of the most comprehensive fusions of art and corporate culture has to be Maywa Denki, an art unit set up in 1993 by two Japanese brothers, Nobumichi and Masamichi Tosa. Describing themselves as 'parallel world electricians', they are organised as a business whose core activity is producing a variety of devices. They even produce a Maywa Denki company profile explaining all the company's activities for potential job applicants. During their performances, or product promotions as they like to call them, they wear costumes designed to look like those of a typical Japanese small to medium sized enterprise (SME). Maywa Denki produce three kinds of object: prototypes (NAKI), which are one-of- a-kind products and are not for sale; multiples (GM-NAKI), which are reproductions of NAKI products and are for sale; and industrial Goods (TOY-NAKI) which are mass-produced in a factory and sold in the mainstream marketplace. They also produce CDs, videos, books, uniforms and stationary.

Their NAKI series is a collection of fish-inspired nonsense machines. Many of the products in the NAKI series have a darkly humorous side. Uke-Tel is a cage with a tank at the bottom, with two or three fish swimming around in it. The cage is connected to a speaking clock. When the number is dialled, a spike is released and drops on to the fish below. It may or may nor kill one. Sei-Gyo is a cross-shaped, water-filled container mounted on a robotic vehicle. The direction the vehicle takes depends on which arm a fish inside the container swims into. Grafish consists of a sheet of paper surrounded by a box into which a living fish dipped in ink is placed. The dying fish leaves a graphic pattern on the sheet: 'as each fish has a unique life, it also has a unique death'. Maywa Denki's industrial goods (TOY-NAKI) are so popular that some Japanese department stores have a dedicated Maywa Denki department. Most of these products are not unlike the merchandising used to promote a new film – plastic miniature versions of fictional characters.

Although their work borders on entertainment, Maywa Denki offer another way of thinking about design in relation to both art and product markets, cutting across several genres and types of activity. Originally signed to Sony Music Entertainment as musicians producing CDs and performances, they later transferred to the amusement and entertainment division of Yoshimoto Kogyo Co. Ltd, a well-known agency for managing TV personalities and comedians. In 2000 they were awarded 'A good design award for theme category' by the Japan Industrial Design Promotion Organisation. Maywa Denki use design as a form of entertainment, a dark counterpoint to the 'happy-ever-after' world of Alessi products.

Similarly subversive, Surrender Control is a poetic service by Matt Locke and Tim Etchells that was delivered to participants through their mobile phones. An experimental narrative in the form of SMS messages, Surrender Control drew users into an evolving game of textual suggestion, provocation and dare through instructions such as 'break something and pretend it was an accident', or 'call somebody and tell them something that you have already told them. Don't explain'. The idea was to invite people to live life in a strange dialogue with a distant other; to surrender some control.

Television is medium ripe for subversion. Watched by millions, it touches nearly everyone's life but is heavily policed, in the US especially. The fear of being boycotted by the extreme Right, of alienating sponsors and incurring the wrath of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) means serious issues are rarely addressed on the main commercial TV channels. One attempt to change this situation was a project to infiltrate the American soap opera Melrose Place, which is set in a Los Angeles apartment complex. Artist Mel Chin had the idea of using TV as a medium for 'public art' that raises important issues about gender, violence and infectious diseases. He approached the set designers of Melrose Place and offered to provide free art to put in the background. When they agreed, Chin formed the GALA Committee, made up of students and teachers from University of Georgia and CalArts (Los Angeles), to collaborate on the design of props for the show which they called non-commercial PIMs (product insertion manifestations).

On closer inspection, many of the GALA paintings hanging in the Melrose Place apartments turn out to depict infamous LA locations where horrible violence or death occurred – Marilyn Monroe's bungalow on the day she died, the apartment from which Rodney King's beating was videoed, Nicole Brown Simpson's house. Having noticed that characters on the show have a lot of sex but are never shown using condoms, GALA produced bed linen for one bedroom scene that is covered in images of unrolled

condoms. Although it is not clear how many people actually noticed these subtle interventions, it is a fresh and playful combination of set design and art.

Complicated pleasure

We believe that in order for conceptual design to be effective, it must provide pleasure, or more specifically, provide a type of experience that Martin Amis has called 'complicated pleasure'. One way this could happen in design is through the development of value fictions. If in science fiction, the technology is often futuristic while social values are conservative, the opposite is true in value fictions. In these scenarios, the technologies are realistic but the social and cultural values are often fictional, or at least highly ambiguous. The aim is to encourage the viewers to ask themselves why the values embodied in the proposal seem 'fictional' or 'unreal', and to question the social and cultural mechanisms that define what is real or fictional. The idea is not to be negative, but to stimulate discussion and debate amongst designers, industry and the public about electronic technology and everyday life. This is done by developing alternative and often gently provocative artefacts which set out to engage people through humour, insight, surprise and wonder.

The suspension of disbelief is crucial – if the artefacts are too strange they are dismissed, they have to be grounded in how people really do behave. The approach is based on viewing values as raw material and shaping them into objects. Materialising unusual values in products is one way that design can be a very powerful form of social critique. The design proposals portrayed in value fictions derive their interest through their potential functionality and use. One of the main challenges of using value fictions is how they are communicated: we need to see them in use, placed in everyday life, but in a way that leaves room for the viewer's imagination. We don't actually have to use the proposed products ourselves, it is by imagining them being used that they have an effect on us. Value fictions cannot be too clear or they blend into what we already know. A slight strangeness is the key – too weird and they are instantly dismissed, not strange enough and they're absorbed into everyday reality.

The following examples, drawn from recent graduate projects at the Royal College of Art in London, show how design proposals like this might work. The projects explore the psychological and behavioural dimensions of our relationship to objects and services, rather than the technical, formal or structural possibilities of consumer technologies. The emphasis is shifted from the aesthetics of production to the aesthetics of consumption, an imagined aesthetics of use. Like the examples from the art world described earlier, these projects mix fiction and reality, borrow commercial structures and combine different media in an effort to engage and challenge the viewer.

Ippei Matsumoto uses product design to explore the powerful need for individual identity and meaning within a context of global culture. With Life Counter (2001), you choose how many years you would like to or expect to live for and start the counter. Once activated, it counts down the selected time span at four different rates: the number of years, days, hours or seconds to go are shown on different faces. Depending on which face you choose to display, you may feel very relaxed as the years stretch out ahead or begin to panic as you see your life speed away before your eyes. The counter is designed to be visually unassuming and could easily fit into the slightly retro-futuristic style of the moment. It is a classic noir product, its power lies in its precise function and low key display of disturbing information.

In After-Life (2001), Jimmy Loizeau employs design to dramatise a taboo subject. Although he is an atheist, Loizeau felt a need for an alternative idea to a spiritual afterlife when a relative and then a pet died. He imagined the consequences of a long term cultural shift where people fully embraced an electronically mediated culture, a time when electrical culture took on some of the dignity of more traditional cultures. Could a battery be as significant as a ceramic urn? Loizeau's exploration of value resulted in a device for maintaining an 'after life'. It consists of a raised bed/trolley, body bag, zinc/copper wet cell battery, extraction tube, voltage meter and 1.5v battery and holder. When someone dies, their stomach contents are drained off to provide acid to charge a special 'after-life' battery, which is engraved in the way a gravestone might be. As an object, it allows an atheist to grieve. Once the battery is charged, it can be used to power all sorts of existing and specially designed devices: night lights, torches, vibrators.

In Noam Toran's short film Object for Lonely Men (2001) the protagonist desires to be at one with Jean-Luc Godard's 1959 film A bout de souffle. Toran explains: 'In the film, the whole set-up was that the character was preparing for his night out, which was no more absurd than our normal nights out. He stays in, and goes out in a different way.' The project explores not only our relationship to electronic objects but how these objects mediate fantasies. The physical design consists of an extended TV dinner tray which includes among other things a child's steering wheel, a female head and a cut-out gun. It could be used as a kit you borrow when you rent a video, or it could be a place-setting in a special restaurant for lonely men where you choose your meal, and you interact.

Another project by Noam Toran, Accessories for Lonely Men (2001), consists of a collection of eight products designed to provide some of the incidental pleasures of shared existence for those who live alone. The idea for these products arose when the designer began to wonder whether we missed an individual or the generic traces they leave. During the night, the Sheet Stealer winds the bedclothes up into a tube attached to the side of the bed. Once woken by the cold, the sleeper can pull the sheet out again and reclaim it for himself. In another piece, a cut-out female silhouette is placed in front of a light to throw a shadow. The lamp even has a small drawer to store the silhouette in. Other objects are devised with more intimate moments in mind: once placed on the user's body, the steel finger of the Chest-Hair Curler starts to rotate gently, playing with his chest hair, while Shared Cigarette comes into its own after a solitary sex act. This device has two holes, one for the cigarette, and the other for exhaling smoke. The rapid-fire Plate Thrower, on the other hand, is to be used in moments of high passion. The collection also includes a pair of cold feet-like objects to place at the bottom end of the bed, an alarm clock that wakes you up by flicking a strand of hair across your face, and a device that expels breath-like bursts of warm air, to be placed on the pillow while you drift off to sleep.

These objects are clearly not intended for production, but are designed to provide mental pleasure and stimulate reflection. They are products for the mind. Their generic form raises issues about the use of form in conceptual design. If they are too realistic – that is, if they look as if they really should be used – objects like these can quickly become ridiculous. Their abstract form signals that they are intended to be used in the imagination.

Rather than designing objects that mimic people's actions, James Auger explores the psychological aspects of technologically augmenting our bodies, and uses value fictions to draw attention to values that could well emerge in the future, even though they are very different from anything we have now.

He is interested in how new technological possibilities will affect the way we treat other people in our search for new pleasures, and asks us to think about the desirability of his scenarios becoming reality.

Auger's device allows someone to be somewhere they are not. Wearing a head-mounted display, the user receives information from a second person whose own headset is equipped with a video camera and binaural microphones. So for example, a person might be hired to spend time in a peep show, attend a meeting, go on a blind date or even shopping on somebody else's behalf – verbal instructions would be relayed from the user to the host via a speaker in their helmet. Should the host be able to enjoy the experience too, or are they just renting out their body? One version of the device masks the host's ears and eyes, dehumanising them and clearly reminding them that they are just a rented body. In another scenario, a dog is used as a host, transmitting images and sounds of the countryside back to the customer. A more advanced service might allow the customer to tune into a range of different hosts as though they were TV channels. Of course, this device could have socially beneficial uses too, providing the housebound with a means of connection to their environment, for instance.

Design proposals like these can really only exist outside the marketplace, as a form of 'conceptual design' – meaning not the conceptual stage of a design project, but a design proposal intended to challenge preconceptions about how electronics shape our lives. These ideas might even be expressed in the form of films and books rather than products. Designers need to explore how such design thinking might re-enter everyday life in ways that maintain the design proposal's critical integrity and effectiveness, while facing accusations of escapism, utopianism or fantasy.

One way this could happen is if the design profession took on more social responsibility and developed its own independent vision, working with the public to demand more from industry than is currently on offer. This would require not only a shift in the way designers view their own position, but also how professional design organisations and associations see their role. Perhaps they could follow the lead of some architecture institutions, and focus on the need to encourage diverse visions through competitions and workshops for practising designers, as well as trying to engage the public through more challenging exhibitions and publications.

Or is this a role for 'academic' designers? Rather than writing papers and seeking conventional academic approval, they could exploit their privileged position to explore a subversive role for design as social critique. Free from commercial restrictions and based in an educational environment, they could develop provocative design proposals to challenge the simplistic Hollywood vision of the consumer electronics industry. Design proposals could be used as a medium to stimulate debate and discussion amongst the public, designers, and industry. The challenge is to blur the boundaries between the real and the fictional, so that the conceptual becomes more real and the real is seen as just one limited possibility among many.