

# The Near Future Design Methodology

Near Future Design (NFD) is a transdisciplinary methodology through which is possible to face with a present in rapid evolution and experience near future scenarios, in order to improve the quality of decisions about which futures we want.

# Near Future and Design

Nowadays design is less and less related to manufacturing.

It goes further the creation of products and visuals, working with companies and organizations to produce something more powerful: visions, alternative realities, fictional worlds.

These visions, if well-designed, could have a main role in manufacturing the common view of how the future will look like.

In this frame, NFD aims to open up the process of shaping the near futures to critics, collaborations and global discussions.

It enables people to express opinions, feelings and choices about multiple possible futures.

Indeed, one of the basis of the NFD methodology is that there isn't a unique Future: the future is a plural object.

Near Future Design is about co-design the near futures.

By its tools and its methodology NFD facing the next step in evolution in a participative way, working in a period of time from 3 to 5 years in the future.

While keeping its approach to the subject, the NFD could be placed in the frame of other practices of exploration of the future like the Design Fiction, the Critical Design and the Speculative Design.

## Present context

Nowadays there is a common sense of uncertainty about the future. In its essay "Welcome to postnormal times", Ziauddin Sardar finds the motivation in the complexity and chaoticness of our present.

**Postnormal times exist in an epoch of chaos, where acceleration is the norm, predictability is rare, and small changes can lead to big consequences.**

Z. Sardar, *Introducing Chaos*, Icon Books, London, 1999

Our is the era of exponential change: technologies, systems, hardware, software, methods, website styles, dress codes, eating habits, destinations, working modalities and more, are changing very fast and very often. These changes aren't fully understandable in their essences and implications. Humans are plunged in a continuous, powerful, flow of innovation.

**Since everything is linked up and networked with everything else, a break down anywhere has a knock on effect, unsettling other parts of the network, even bringing down the whole network.**

Z. Sardar

In this context, it's very difficult to face with the complexity of the present in its flux, and the opportunity to share clear visions about the future becomes incredibly powerful.

Big corporations have understood this and, thanks to their power on mass media, they are spreading their own visions about the future.

This has tremendous effects: an organization is able to shift hundreds of millions of people's perception of "what is possible" and of "what is normal".

**Because today we live in a society in which spurious realities are manufactured by the media, by governments, by big corporations, by religious groups, political groups — and the electronic hardware exists by which to deliver these pseudo-worlds right into the heads of the reader, the viewer, the listener.**

Philip K. Dick - *How to Build a Universe That Doesn't Fall Apart Two Days Later*

This is the background to the Near Future Design action.

It is crucial to avoid being stuck in the present and recover the ability to imagine new possibilities for the near future. It means what will happen in 3-5 years and NFD works on near future because the exponential innovation doesn't allow us to work on a further time period. The innovation flux is so fast that the huge changes that shape our reality are shifted closer to our present.

People have a tendency to believe that the investigation of the future is a subject restricted to sociology or technology science.

However, arts have always played an important role in the broadcast the evolutions of the present to the general public.

Contemporary arts are sensors of the present trends and the near future. Artists expose their own interpretation of reality to the audience, stimulating discussions and imaginations.

Performance and artworks are also an opportunity to change the perception of "what is possible" and activate people in thinking about new scenarios for the future.

Near Future Design works with imaginary, combining arts, sociology, anthropology and technology science, to create the performance of the futures.

# The NFD Methodology

A process of Near Future Design is always thematic and referred to a simple group. It's articulated in 8 steps. The first 4 steps are the research phase, the last 4 are the design phase.

## 1. The Consensual Reality

The theme is studied starting from the observation of Consensual Reality.

Given a certain culture, historical era, or context, the Consensual Reality is constituted by all of those things for which there is a shared, common, understanding for.

It is the "normalcy" field.

The Consensual Reality concerns the perceptions of things, and it can be observed in qualitative and quantitative ways. It's the field of anthropology, sociology and ethnography /netnography studies and tools.

## 2. The Curious Rituals

Consensual Reality is dynamic: it changes according to the transformation of our communities, cultures, technologies and organizations.

This changes can be foreseen through the observation of the Curious Rituals (CURI).

The Curious Ritual are the things which people and organizations are doing now, in our present, but for which we don't have a shared, common and easy understanding yet.

They may be large or small, disruptive or moderate, local or global, fast or slow.

### Curious Rituals

**The future is already here – it's just not evenly distributed.**

William Gibson

The CURI step is one of the most important of the Near Future Design Methodologies. CURI represent the weak signal of the future in the present and are crucial to understand the evolution of the Consensual Reality.

If the Consensual Reality was a circle area, they would be its indistinct edge.

The passing of times modifies the size of the area, so some CURI could become Consensual and vice-versa.

The research of the CURI can be not easy because it is very linked with the cultural, sociological, psychological point of view of the observer. One behavior can be very odd for one person, and very normal for another. In this phase is important to refer to the sample and act on qualitative and quantitative strategies to define the level of curiosity of a phenomena.

CURI are also very linked with technology.

This is very well explained in the book "Curious Rituals, gestural interaction in the digital everyday" by Nicola Nova, Katherine Miyake, Walton Chiu and Nancy Kwon.

It collected gestures, postures and digital habits occurring in daily routines.

One of the best case from the book is called: the periscope.

"This is a common pose when people take pictures, record videos or use Augmented Reality applications that show an overlay of information on their cell screen. Many users have become accustomed to holding the phone at arm's length, in order so see the screen, compose a shot, or simply read the content displayed."

Thinking about a case of a public event it's easy to understand how the periscope Curious Rituals has become a Consensual Reality. It's very normal nowadays to see a crowd doing the periscope gesture at concerts or sport events.

### 3. The State of the Arts and Technologies

The State of Arts and Technologies (SAT) describes the evolution in technologies and practices referred to the explored theme.

This evolution is strongly linked with the CURI research. In fact, technology innovations lead to new behaviours and subjects in very different ways.

### 4. Strange Now

The Strange Now is defined as the result of the ethnographic observation on Consensual Reality, CURI and SAT.

The Strange Now is the current scenario with all the things we (think) fully understand and the things which exist, but which we don't understand fully or easily.

The Strange Now is the starting point to understand how the Consensual Reality is elbowing its way into the future.

### 5. New Normals

Observing the Strange Now is possible to recognise some pattern of futures, highlighted by the tensions between Consensual Reality, CURI and SAT.

These are Possible Futures.

Them there may be really odd futures: innovative ones, conservative ones, dangerous ones, wonderful ones, sustainable ones or disruptive ones.

The most credible or attractive ones are the New Normals.

A New Normal is an hypothesis of how the next-normalcy field could be or how the next step of the Consensual Reality might be.

### 6. Pre-totype

The New Normals, and its implications, are implemented using pre-totypes (something before the prototypes). A pre-totype is a simulacrum, it aims to materialize the New Normals into the world, create an hyper-real simulation.

It could be a product, a service, a brand identity or something else, anything that could compose a transmedia process.

### 7. Transmedia Narratives

The Transmedia Narratives are manifestations of the New Normals which seamlessly go back and forth through different media to implement a state of hyper-reality. Not only designing a prototype of a certain object or service which will be in the "New Normal", but also its manifestations in our cities, online, in our daily lives, in our work-life, in the environment.

#### Transmedia Design

**Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story.**

Henry Jenkins definition of Transmedia Storytelling

Drawing a parallel with the Near Future Design methodology and the Jenkins' quote, the fiction is the Pre-totype, and its integral elements are the Transmedia Narrative.

Why is it so important represent a Pre-totype through a transmedia narration?

Because this allows to create a state of hyperreality.

According to Jean Baudrillard, hyperreality is “more real than reality”. It’s a simulation of reality that people perceive as real.

A Pre-totype creates a state of hyperreality, locating a New Normal (a possible near future) into the present, so people can explore it, think about it and make value judgments about it.

This allows us – as described by Deleuze – to establish a privileged position, which allows us to observe the phenomena of our world, and to open new spaces for their critical discussion.

## 8. Disseminations

These actions provoke a shared performative space. When faced with an hyperreal pre-totype, people have to deal with it and with its implications.

At this point discussions and emulations will start. New models will be discussed and re-invented. Critique and appraisals will take place.

All the feedbacks aroused from our Pre-totypes are collected, whether they happened online, in cities, in rural areas, in conferences or somewhere.

Finally, the collection of these reactions is made available, so that everybody can use it to extend the discussion, going beyond the limit of understanding what the possible futures are, but also discussing what the preferable and desirable ones are, and for which communities, organizations and individuals.

## Co-performing the future

Near Future Design involves people in a participative and collaborative process of exploration of possible futures.

Indeed, the design phase of the methodology (from New Normals to the feedbacks collection) is focused on people.

People aren’t just the audience of an event, they are the active (and unaware) part of a performance. They are assisting of an inversion of cause and effect. The effect comes before the cause, causing people to take action and starting global conversations about their desired, preferred futures.

But being part of the Near Future performance they aren’t just expressing opinions or thoughts about the futures they want. They also are shifting their perception of possibility, learning different ways to think about the future. Going further the perception of an unique possible future, and broadening their ability to image multiple futures.

Then, there is also another crucial element in this process.

The future is about possibility, desires and performance.

The global discussion, generated thanks to the Pre-totypes, can be the starting point to a process of co-creation of desired futures.

Companies, organisations, governments, communities, can benefit of all these to design the preferred futures.

The Design becomes, thus, a platform for other people’s expression. It becomes a participatory performance.

The future doesn’t exist. It’s a performance.

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