

VOLUME #01 | 2016

# THE PEARL DIVER

the designer  
as storyteller

DESIS PHILOSOPHY TALKS:  
STORYTELLING & DESIGN  
FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION

EDITED BY

Elisa Bertolotti, Heather Daam,  
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FOREWORD BY Marisa Galbiati & Ezio Manzini

**DESIS**  
**NETWORK**  
Design for  
Social Innovation  
and Sustainability



*To our beloved friend and colleague Mika 'Lumi'  
Tuomola. Words as smooth as stones from the sea,  
thoughts deep as the ocean, generosity without end.*

*Thank you, Mika.*

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**POLITECNICO  
MILANO 1863**

DIPARTIMENTO DI DESIGN



**IMAGIS  
LAB**



**LUCA**  
SCHOOL  
OF  
ARTS



**INSTITUTE WITHOUT  
BOUNDARIES**

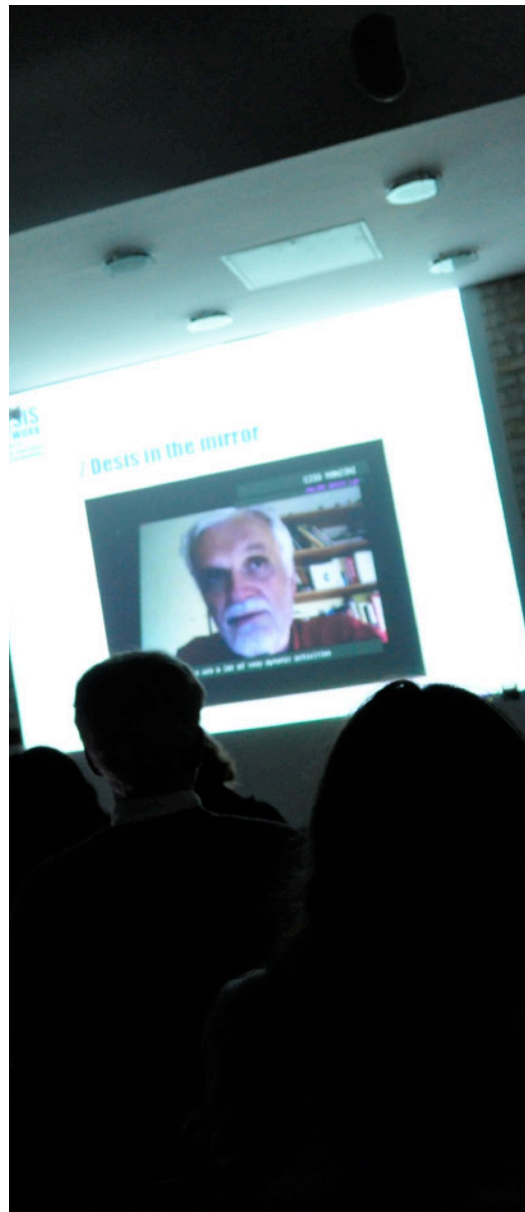
## THE PEARL DIVER

*“This thinking, fed by the present, works with the ‘thought fragments’ it can wrest from the past and gather about itself. Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths of the past—but not in order to resuscitate it the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of the extinct ages. What guides this thinking is the conviction that although the living is subject to the ruin of the time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what was once alive, some things suffer a ‘sea change’ and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune from the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up into the world of the living—as ‘thought fragments,’ as something ‘rich and strange.’”*

Hannah Arendt

## DESIS PHILOSOPHY TALKS

Since its start, DESIS Philosophy Talks have been performed in a variety of places by a bright network of researchers, professionals and students and hosted by different Schools or research centres dealing with design for social innovation and sustainability. The Talks have always kept a spontaneous form as invitation seminars addressing a variety of themes. The Storytelling series, then, introduced new experimental formats for eliciting the discussion such as the video-statements, which provide contributions also from testimonials (designers or philosophers) that are not able to join the conversation in person. Therefore, we started to collect thoughts as digital videos and also documentation repertoires as tools for continuing the self-reflection experience with a process of open and continuous discussion. One of the main goals for the DESIS Philosophy Talks is to make all this material available to the large community of interest and to keep the tension between theory and practice using that footage as fragments of the “design for social innovation narratives” which we are contributing to build and co-generate.



DESIS Philosophy Talk Dublin, 2013



DESIS Philosophy Talk Eindhoven, March 2014



DESIS Philosophy Talk Milan, May 2014



DESIS Philosophy Talk Eindhoven Dutch Design Week, October 2014

**01 | DESIS Philosophy Talk Series:  
Storytelling and Design for Social  
Innovation**

**Storytelling & Social innovation**

November 2013

Dublin, National College of Art and  
Design Dublin, Cumulus Conference

Virginia Tassinari, Francesca Piredda, Elisa Bertolotti, Walter Mattana, Andrea Mendoza

*with* Eleonore Nicolas, Ezio Manzini, Davide Pinardi, Mika 'Lumi' Tuomola, Francesca Valsecchi, Yongqi Lou, Anna Meroni, Sonia Matos

**02 | DESIS Philosophy Talk Series:  
Storytelling and Design for Social  
Innovation**

**Designers Telling Stories**

March 2014

Eindhoven, DAE

Virginia Tassinari, Elisa Bertolotti, Francesca Piredda, Heather Daam

*with* David Hamers, Liesbeth Huybrechts, Sophie Krier, David Parkinson, Bas Raijmakers, Marja Seliger, Andrea Trimarchi and Simone Farresin (Studio FormaFantasma)

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**03 | DESIS Philosophy Talk Series:  
Storytelling and Design for Social  
Innovation**

**Designers Telling Stories and  
Making Meaning**

May 2014

Milan, Politecnico di Milano

Virginia Tassinari, Elisa Bertolotti, Francesca Piredda, Heather Daam

*with* Luigi Ferrara, Davide Pinardi, David Parkinson, Walter Mattana, Elisabeth Sikiaridi & Johan Frans Vogelaar (Hybrid Space Lab), David Hamers, Joana Casaca Lemos, Valentina Anzoise, Nik Baerten

**04 | DESIS Philosophy Talk Series:  
Storytelling and Design for Social  
Innovation**

**A Conversation About Time**

October 2014

Eindhoven - DAE - Dutch Design Week

Virginia Tassinari, Elisa Bertolotti, Francesca Piredda, Heather Daam

*with* Bas Nik Baerten, Pablo Calderón Salazar, Alastair Fuad-Luke, Michael Kaethler, Bas Raijmakers



05

| **DESIS Philosophy Talk Series:  
Storytelling and Design for Social  
Innovation**

**Pearl Diver, Designer as Storyteller**

June 2015

Milan - IED - Cumulus Conference

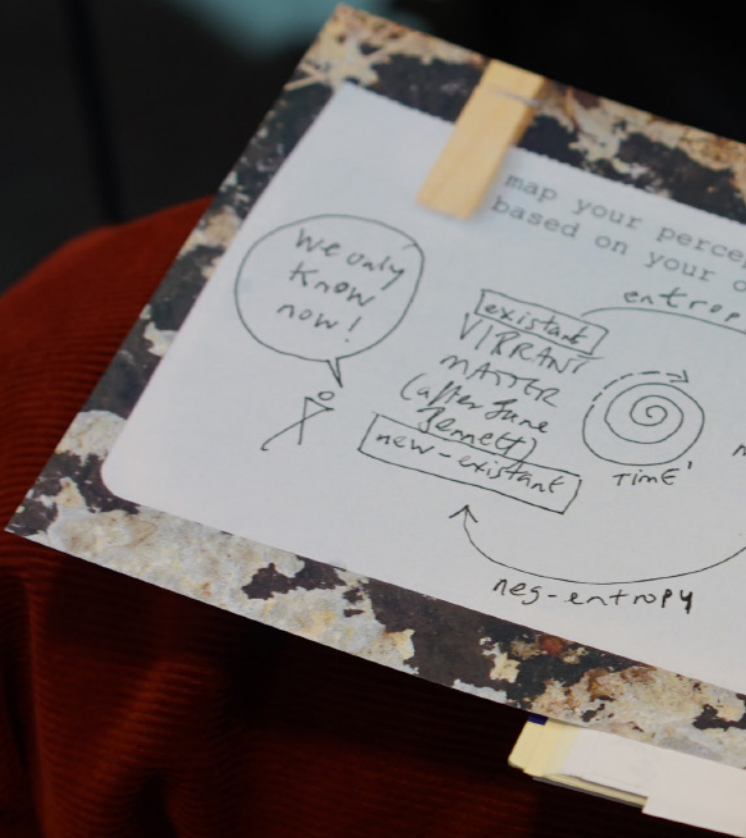
Virginia Tassinari, Elisa Bertolotti, Francesca Piredda, Heather Daam

*with* Francesca Antonacci, Valentina Anzoise, Sophie Krier, Donatella Mancini, Ilaria Mariani, Walter Mattana, Andrea Mendoza, David Parkinson, Davide Pinardi, Daniel Anthony Rossi, Roberta Tassi, Francesca Valsecchi, Susan Yelavich

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...tion of time  
...wn practice

different  
VIBRANT  
MATTER

my

Note: Time ≡  
- astronomical  
- geological  
- organism  
- molar  
- molar  
- scale ≡ PHENOMENON  
- Measurable Time

PLASTIC  
LUKE-Luke



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## About the Editors



# Storytelling & Worldmaking: The World-building Activity as a Design Practice

**Mariana Ciancia**

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Politecnico di Milano

## **ABSTRACT**

*Living in a highly mediated world, we are witnessing the rise of new consumption behaviour and the spread of multichannel narrative forms. A scenario in which audiences enter vicariously imaginary worlds, exploring the fictional spaces conveyed through multiple channels. Starting with the recognition of the difference between story and storyworld, this article aims to describe the world-building activity, the process of creating imaginary worlds, as a design practice.*

## **TAGS**

Transmedia, Storyworld, World-Building, Design Practice

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## 1. Towards a Narrative Mediascape

In the current mediascape (Appadurai, 1991), changes in business and social environments have led people towards a complex landscape where the relationship between mainstream media (top-down) and participatory culture (bottom-up) have completely changed, undermining the notions of authority and authorship (Burnett, 2011). Due to the rising number of multimodal devices and the higher number of messages being conveyed across several channels, we are witnessing the rise of new consumption behaviour and the spread of multi-channel narrative forms. This, in turn, has allowed for the development of a spontaneous practice of engagement through the collaborative creation and the collective consumption of narrative worlds because people are used to crossing the boundaries of single-line stories (Murray, 1997) by vicariously entering the imaginary worlds.

The development of compelling storyworlds, which can be fully explored just through multiple media windows, lead to multichannel works, such as transmedia phenomena. The term 'transmedia' was used for the first time in reference to the franchise entertainment super-system that works 'to position consumers as powerful players while disavowing commercial manipulation' (Kinder, 1991, pp. 119–120). Jenkins (2003) went further, coining the term 'transmedia storytelling', later defining it as 'stories that unfold across multiple media platforms' (Jenkins, 2006, p. 293) that are based not on individual characters or specific plots but rather complex fictional worlds which can sustain multiple interrelated characters and their stories' (Jenkins, 2007).

According to all the definitions coming from academics and practitioners, it is possible to say that transmedia systems are phenomena concerned with the building of a story universe through different channels and the collective consumption of narrative worlds. This means that 'storytelling has become the art of world-building' (Jenkins, 2006, p. 114), as story architects create compelling environments that are conveyed across several media.

## 2. From Storytelling to Worldmaking

Since the dawn of mankind, stories have allowed people to shape and share their experiences by structuring the surrounding reality. This power has increased through the ages as a result of developments in technology and in media habits, giving strength to the storytelling practice itself.

Living in a highly mediated world means that most of the audience's experiences are conveyed through media. This is why, now more than ever, we are surrounded by compelling imaginary worlds in which the audiences enter vicariously, spending a certain amount of time in the speculation and exploration of the narrative space. As a result of these developments, designers can be cast as mediators, playing a dual role in the contemporary mediascape: as story listeners, they collect stories from the audience and their repertoires and, as storytellers, they organise these stories into experiences. Furthermore, the designer will become a real agent of change if he or she goes beyond the storytelling activity by starting to act as a worldmaker in his or her design practice. Hence, it becomes necessary to

recognise that there are differences between story and storyworld. This is especially important because, in terms of the richness of audience engagement, the experience of a storyworld is different from the experience of a story, even though narrative worlds are usually experienced through stories set within them: 'it is the world [...] that supports all the narratives set in and that is constantly present during the audience's experience' (Wolf, 2012, p. 17). However, story and storyworld must work together in order to enrich each other and to create a compelling narrative space (Ryan, 2004; 2001; Ryan & Thon, 2014; Wolf, 2012).

Stories are self-enclosed arrangements of causal events that come to an end in a certain period of time. Storyworlds, instead, are mental constructions shared between recipients and authors in which new storylines can sprout up. They are dynamic models that evolve over time and whose believability is based on three properties: invention, completeness and consistency (Wolf, 2012). The first, invention, is related to the degree of change of the constructed world (secondary world) compared to our own world (primary world): 'invention, then, is what makes a secondary world "secondary"' (Wolf, 2012, p. 38). Changes can be related not only to the nominal and the cultural realm, in which authors can give new names to things or invent new artefacts, objects, technologies and cultures; but also to the natural and the ontological realm, in which new flora and fauna appear in worlds led by new physical laws. The second one, completeness, refers to the degree of development and feasibility that a world reaches through details and additional information. If a world is sufficiently complete, audiences will continue to find answers to their questions and the narrative space itself will be believable. Finally, the feeling of completeness is connected to the consistency, that is, the degree to which a storyworld is arranged by interrelated and not-contradictory elements.

### **3. Implication for Design Practice: The Designer as Worldmaker**

In the design field, both storytelling practice and world-building activity can be seen as a way to enrich design practice, giving the designer tools for the expression of ideas (storytelling) that can be set within a huge storyworld (worldmaking) in which the audience can immerse themselves and participate in the meaning-making process. The world-building activity is an innate creative practice that serves an evolutionary aim (Holland, 2009). This practice usually occurs as a background activity, allowing stories to unlock people's potential, but sometimes it can take the lead in the design of audience experiences. In these situations, '[w]orld-building results in the subcreation of new things and the changing of assumptions regarding existing and familiar things that are usually taken for granted' (Wolf, 2012, p. 32).

Thus, the world-building activity sets out to be a strategy that includes tactics of consumption that are led by people (De Certeau, 1984). On the one hand, there are designers who create storyworlds for envisioning possible worlds, using tools from the storytelling practice. On the other hand, there are people acting within the constructed worlds defined by strategies by using tactics for the development of a new 'glimpse' of a situation and the changing of taken for granted assumptions. Accordingly, the world-building activity as a design practice can lead to the creation of narrative spaces that are able to unlock the potential of people and contexts.

### **About the Author**

Mariana Ciancia holds a Ph.D in Design from Politecnico di Milano and she is currently research fellow at Design Department, School of Design (Politecnico di Milano, Italy). Her research activity deals with new media and participatory culture, with the aim of understanding how multichannel phenomena (crossmedia and transmedia) are changing the processes of production, distribution and consumption of narrative environments. Publications include articles and book chapters on transmedia phenomena, narrative formats, and audiovisual artefacts.

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