Choice Architecture within a Technological Puzzle

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Abstract

The presentation elaborates on the technological puzzle in which we are all enmeshed. The interplay and complex, simultaneous interactions of our world, amplify, annihilate and trigger possibilities and windows of opportunities, or irreversibly eliminate opposite choices and alternatives for preferred future developments. The question remains; can we increase our agency within the process of the realization of future images, in order to access previously sealed options for alternative directions? Can we still coherently reveal the actual condition of a complex and confusing reality, while manifesting humanity's potentialities to the fullest? More than just overcoming the opaqueness of Richard Nixon's 'Madman Theory' or Vladislav Surkov's 'Confusion Politics', choice architecture in Futures Studies can enable us to comprehend the multiverse of options, the concepts of choiceless choices, meaningful choices, and the illusion of choice. With the currently available tools and methods, we are just at the beginning of deciphering yet unimaginable future possibilities and probabilities. Imagineering the economic and social fictions, ideas within our reach, not yet realized, but depending on scale, obstacles, and limitations, are consequence of the choices we make. The hypothetical and theoretical occupation of the concept of the future(s) provides in that context the very key of solving the riddles of the technological puzzle of complex and emerging issues

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The main reason of architecture is to control the very experience of a person or a group. Even the decisions we make are influenced by the environment that surrounds us and with which we are inextricably intertwined. There is indeed a growing body of literature that recognizes the importance of ontological designing, as it describes that the world we design, designs us back, and that the tools we create, create us in return[1] [2] [3] [4]. Additionally, as Thaler et al.[5] illustrate, the choices we make are informed and defined by noticed and unnoticed factors of influence. It is thus, the task of a choice architecture to create the environments for others to experience, in order to be inspired and encouraged and to arrive at particular decisions and choices to the benefit of our future development.

Following the famous words of H.G. Wells[6] that civilization is a race between education and catastrophe, it must be in our interest to overcome the deep regulatory capture of education based on an authoritarian and ideologically infused financial infiltration mechanism, as well as to end an archaic form of factory learning, where divergence is regarded as pathological-blasphemous dissent and not as creative opportunity. In the context of education, either changing or accepting these developments, we are confronted with choices that are defining and informing our future. There are furthermore old and established techniques (*panem et circenses*, *divide et impare*) as well as new versions (Madman theory, confusion politics) to obscure reality and distract from those areas of agency that could make the difference in quality for our lives and for our future. Apart from whether these mechanisms are intentionally applied for the benefit of power hierarchies and interest groups[7], or are accidentally embedded in the very infrastructure of our systems, a future oriented discourse can nevertheless enable us to visualize these architectural design outcomes, and consequences of our actions, in order to build pathways and roadmaps through a transparent and distributed-interactive process.

The technological puzzle in which we are living, implies that those choices regarding how we apply technological advances offer the whole range between dystopian and utopian scenarios, and therefore we can anticipate a severe impact penetrating all spheres of our lives. The challenge lies in becoming cognitively equipped for malleable future realities, about which we are not yet certain how they will emerge and manifest. Moreover, the challenge is also about the acquisition of the literary capacities to actually be able to influence the development towards preferable and desirable images of the future. It is built around the empowering of individuals regarding their unique capabilities through post-traumatic and post-ecstatic growth, and aligning the energies of groups and masses towards positive and beneficial results as non-zero sum games. Here the words of Huxley[8] in Brave New World resonate well;

"Back to nature. Back to culture. Yes, actually to *culture*. You can't consume much if you sit still and read books."

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We can accordingly endlessly consume and re-invent culture without exhausting the planet's resources, creating a form of hedonistic sustainability, playful thinking, a sense of possibility, to allow to surface the rage to master, all as a version of pragmatic utopia. It essentially follows the reciprocal arrangement of mutual learning, where learning becomes the currency par excellence, which should (always described in the subjunctive) lead towards alternative forms of socio-economic organization and essentially the transformation of our current model.

Fundamentally, it is all just a question of design, and since our brains are craving for experience and despise boredom, I personally cannot see any reason why aiming at qualitatively enriched environments should not be possible within our lifetimes. An important aspect in the process will be, especially since our senses are already overwhelmed by the information load of exponentially accelerating times, to learn to distinguish between the multiverse of options, the concepts of choiceless choices, meaningful choices and the illusion of choices. This should help us to begin dismantling and deconstructing the chaos, which is order yet to be deciphered, in order to make sense of the complexity of our time, all in all, leading us towards a path of possibilities, where novel and transformative ideas can be realized.

We are dealing with choiceless choices when we are continuing to consume in the current materialistic form (space), then we are collectively consuming our future (time), as time and space are intertwined, or more precisely, we are consuming the future of the next generations.

Meaningful choices begin by being conscious that there is a choice. Options are perceived. The consequences of the chosen options are then experienced in drastic, dramatic, immersive, and embodied forms. It follows the historic moment when a particular choice is made and the decision for a specific development is set in motion. Time and Space intertwine and define the particular event leading to an outcome which will remind us of the initial choice. What comes next is irreversibility. Advances after a choice are irreversible, which means one cannot go back in time. Examples are fresh air or polluted air, clean water or contaminated water, ownership of private data or extraction of private data, transparent and distributed socio-economic systems or centralized systems, peace or war.

The illusion of choice is a distorted reality. It is not about that we think we have a choice, it is more about that we think we chose ourselves, while the choice as such has actually been made for us. Examples are products without essential differences (Coca Cola, Pepsi Cola), while a healthy mind would never ingest a black sugary drink, since it takes repeated indoctrination to believe that it is even drinkable. Also, the occasional purely symbolic participatory act of voting is a good example (the puppet on the left or the puppet on the right).

It is here my privilege to provide an eloquent confirmatory quote by the exceptional Umberto Eco[9];

"[…] to read fiction means to play a game by which we give sense to the immensity of things that happened, are happening, or will happen in the actual world. By reading narrative, we escape the anxiety that attacks us when we try to say something true about the world. This is the consoling function of narrative – the reason people tell stories, and has told stories from the beginning of time."

Fiction and games are in my opinion, as forms of such a perspective, serious investigations, mental stimulations and thus preparations of future events. Future events are as Taleb[10] describes, events of rarity, extreme impact and high improbability in prospective predictability. The paradigm shift in education consists thus paradoxically of both, first of all the acknowledgement of low predictability and large impact of future events, and secondly of comprehending our vast technological abilities to actually govern the evolutionary process of mankind. Instead of continuing a process of past-oriented and affirmative approaches, it is our task in education to unleash the true potential of humanity and let the creative urge of designing the future by beginning in the here and now to unfold.

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