

Chapter 16

Making design research *work* by flourishing through disappearance

Joseph Lindley

From its roots, which were established in the middle of the last century, design research has grown, is alive and kicking (Rodgers and Yee, 2016), and is blossoming in design-led research centres around the world. One reason for its relevance at this moment in history is its ability to provide insightful lenses and viewpoints on challenges and issues that the dominant science-oriented paradigm struggles to make sense of. But what of the future? What should we expect of design research? What does it mean for the discipline to flourish?

But before we get to that, I want to take a moment to consider *science*.

Many would agree that science represents an astonishing set of traditions that underpin a cornucopia of human achievement. So many wonders of the world have been delivered through scientific endeavour. But science has a cousin, a concept called *scientism*. And while science represents a rich tradition of curiosity, experimentation, and knowledge, its descendant, scientism, is the dangerously hubristic belief that the *only* way of making sense of the world is through a scientific lens. In 2022, I performed a comedy set about my research, during which I introduced the concept of scientism by musing that the 'ism' suffix has a habit of transforming concepts that people generally approve of and refiguring them as unpleasant nasties. For example, sex is generally considered to be a good and healthy thing in one's life. *Sexism*, however, reflects the realities of millennia of female oppression. Alcohol can be delicious and is, for many, an enjoyable social lubricant. Meanwhile, *alcoholism* is an addiction that, in countries like the United Kingdom, causes more societal damage than pretty much anything else. The same pattern, of the 'ism' suffix turning a good thing into an anathema, is also true for science and scientism. Scientism takes the spirit of open exploration characterised by science and turns it into a blinkered and closed-minded position that, although it believes itself to be championing the scientific endeavour, has a totally different and far more sinister character.

But why does scientism matter? Well, if we look closely, it turns out that scientism isn't rare. In fact, it's infused into the very core of most organisations and institutions. Scientism both tints and, arguably, taints our view of the world.

Almost every site of power, education, knowledge, and government is imbued with this tacit alignment to a worldview coloured and informed by scientism (and its underlying philosophical foundation, positivism). It is because of this deep infusion that over-simplistic sentiments such as political regimes' declarations to

‘follow the science’ seem palatable to the masses despite their intrinsic flaws. We are societally conditioned to accept, seek, and desire, the tempting certainty that scientism promises. Of course, *proving* my position would be rather difficult, and I do not suppose anyone should consider my argument to be ‘true’. However, for the purposes of this chapter, please bear with me. At the very least, let’s agree that it’s possible that there are some places where scientism exerts influence.

In support of the validity of my line of reasoning, I can cite as evidence that I have presented this argument to several hundred scholars and professionals over the last year. The conceit that scientism, or something like it, informs the prevailing view of the world is something that my audiences have rarely contested. In isolation, you might just think this could be explained by the individuals making up the audiences being polite. However, given how forthright they have been about challenging other matters, I have taken their acceptance as adding credence to the position. I should also point out that I believe there are many circumstances in which science *does* offer the best way to make sense of a situation, for example, in establishing the efficacy of a new vaccine or proving the existence of subatomic particles. However, there are many situations where science is not the *only* pathway to making sense of the world, for example, formulating policy in response to a pandemic, making ethical, aesthetic, or moral judgements, and virtually all conundrums that involve imagining the future.

These are the thorny quandaries that science needs help with; these are the challenges that we mustn’t let scientism blinker our view of; these are the issues that design researchers are perfectly placed and poised to help address. The reason that design research is so aptly paired with such tricky problems is that, by being grounded in the generative and creative act of design, design research has a natural tendency to break free from the tendrils of scientism’s positivist reach. Positivist approaches strive for facts, testability, and research questions that can be shown to be true or false. In contrast, design researchers hope, expect, and embrace the fact that each time they run an experiment, they would get a different answer. This is not to say design research is devoid of evidence but rather that the evidence is of a different type and constitutes a different kind of knowing.

There is much debate and a healthy amount written about what it is ‘under the hood’ that makes design research work. Some examples include Frayling’s categorisation of different types of design research (1993); Schön’s conception of the reflective practitioner (1983); Deweyan pragmatism as a foundational epistemological framework (Dixon, 2019); not to mention a cornucopia of models, methods, theories, and diagrams that pop up in specialist publications, conferences, and journal articles. Through the work I’ve done with *Design Research Works*,¹ I’ve been exposed to many of these ways of looking, and they’re great! But there’s a subtle irony that cuts through these attempts to formalise design research in a scholarly manner. Almost all these disciplinary accoutrements tend towards a kind of certainty and surefootedness that seems reminiscent of the positivistic outlooks that the kernel of design research rejects. This, in my view, is the biggest current challenge for the world of design research. Theories, models, and methods are needed to make the practice accessible; however, over-theorisation that doesn’t allow for emergence and draconianly methodical methods undermine

the very nature of design research's value proposition. Finding a sweet spot will pay dividends. The ideal balance will allow design research to be widely taught, shared, and applied, but all the while sustaining the emergence, dynamism, and flexibility that offers a productive counterpoint to science. This is the challenge that I and my team aspire to tackle.

I estimate that, in the short term, design research centres will continue to grow. Alongside the rhetorical argument for design research's relevance I've presented in this chapter, the *impact* of the kind of research we do is even more compelling, and those impacts will continue to attract partners and investment. We're already seeing that design research is more frequently the lead discipline in large multidisciplinary research schemes. Historically, it was often a supporting act to more established disciplines, but these days, it can be the linchpin at the centre. In the medium term, in part driven by the climate emergency, the unsustainability of capitalism, and an increasing awareness of the need to 'defuture'² (a concept that rejects the assumption that the future simply 'is'), I think the dominance of positivism and scientism will gradually wane. The existential necessity to meaningfully engage with the wicked problems of the 21st century depends on this rebalancing of our knowledge ecosystem. The space that the rebalancing will create will be filled by practices like design research. In the slightly longer term, as design research truly flourishes, perhaps it will start to disappear. By this, I don't mean cease to exist but rather cease to be so visible, cease to be an exception, and cease to be confined to specialist centres. The ways of seeing, knowing, and exploring that specialist design researchers operationalise may, one day, become a significant tenet of that day's presiding knowledge paradigm. With this potential in mind, the case is put; design research will truly flourish through its own disappearance (Lindley and Green, 2021).

When he was chief executive of the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce, Matthew Taylor introduced the strapline '21st-century Enlightenment' (2010). The concept resonates here. The original Enlightenment was a time when ideas, thoughts, and cataclysmic shifts in understanding took place. The ripples of these shifts still bounce around our culture and society today. Right now, however, we live among new sources of agitation—e.g., the climate crisis, huge geopolitical shifts, the advent of the Internet and artificial intelligence—and these require new modes of response. We are being forced to live differently, and to live differently is to *think* differently. In Taylor's words, "As the architects of the Enlightenment understood this means being able to see our world and ourselves from a new perspective" (2010, p. 9). I hope, and I believe it is possible, that in some version of the future, on the other side of a 21st-century Enlightenment, our descendants will look back on a time *before* design research flourished and disappeared. If they did that, they might wonder what it was like to live in a world under the spell of scientism. They might muse on how the pioneering work coming from the design research discipline helped disrupt the status quo. If any of them happened to research this question, then there's a chance they would find a copy of this book, and if they did, then I would say, "*Hello from the past!*"

Notes

- 1 See <https://designresearch.works>
- 2 See www.youtube.com/watch?v=mpFhpuK3vIc

Reference list

- Dixon, B. (2019) 'Experiments in experience: towards an alignment of research through design and John Dewey's pragmatism', *Design Issues*, 35(2), pp. 5–16.
- Frayling, C. (1993) 'Research in art and design', *Royal College of Art Research Papers*, 1(1), pp. 1–9.
- Lindley, J. and Green, D.P. (2021) 'The ultimate measure of success for speculative design is to disappear completely', *Interaction Design and Architecture(s)*, 51, pp. 32–51. <https://doi.org/10.55612/s-5002-051-002>
- Rodgers, P.A. and Yee, J.S.R. (2016) 'Design research is alive and kicking', *Design research society conference*.
- Schön, D. (1983) *The reflective practitioner: how professionals think in action*. New York: Basic Books.
- Taylor, M. (2010) *Twenty-first century enlightenment*. Available at: www.thersa.org/globalassets/pdfs/reports/rsa_21centuryenlightenment_essay1_matthewtaylor.pdf (Accessed: 14 March 2023).