Snippets: Writing fictions in the format of collections of shorter texts

ABSTRACT
Writing long fictions with a good plot and a satisfactory ending can be hard for someone not skilled in creative writing. Here I will describe an alternative approach: to instead show various facets of a fiction in the form of very short snippets of text. Using snippets can be a good way to highlight very disparate parts of a fiction, parts may not necessary be easy to incorporate in the same story. It also engages users to “fill in the holes” of what is not mentioned in the fictions.

INTRODUCTION
There are numerous documented approaches to writing design fictions. One is to utilize the viewpoints from multiple characters (Hannah & Ashby 2016), another is to use a diary format or time line to show how events play out over time (Kozubaev 2016, Edwards et al 2016), another too use the interview as format (Schulte et al 2016), yet another to present positive/negative or at least alternative scenarios covering the same future (Derboven & Vandenberghe 2016, Vines et al 2012, Cheong & Su 2018, Nathan et al 2007). What I propose here is along the same veins; to create numerous, very brief glimpses of a future.

CONTEXT
I have been using snippets in two cases. The first study was part of a large research program called “Design for Value ” (2017-8) where eleven Finnish companies and nine research organizations worked towards an ecosystem around an autonomous supply chain. It was a part
of the first stages of the project, and aimed to provoke discussions and thoughts about topics like automation; and ethical, ecological and societal effects of world-wide transporting in the future. Here, the inspiration from the snippets came from interviews, and they were later used in workshops – meaning that the project had strong traits of participatory design.

The second project is called “Tales from Corrodia” (or just Corrodia for short) and were snippets describing a post apocalyptic future on the planet Corrodia. It was used in a teaching context to inspire interaction design students to come up with speculative designs. In this, the project was not participatory, but I describe it here as it still features the main point of this position paper: the snippets.

EXAMPLE

Basically, the point of the snippets is to provide numerous different glimpses of a future. They can be contradictory, describe different points of view, or describe events from different points in time. Some of the benefits of using snippets are as follows

- They provide a rich overview of a future world or society
- They can be written in different styles; some can be journal entries, some can be news articles or dictionary entries, others can be post cards, and so on.
- It is easier to write short snippets than to come up with a full-fledged narrative.
- Providing only snippets gives the incitement for users to co-create the missing parts of the fiction, engaging them in this particular future.

Writing snippets

When ideating snippets, first come up with a great number of scenes, artifacts or phenomena worth describing. Together, they should give you a sense of what this future world is like. Ask yourself what it would be like to live in this fiction. How do people meet or travel; what do they value in life; how is the world governed; what is the general attitude to various topics (e.g. marriage, sexuality, inheritance, power structures, education, climate, technological advancement) and so on.

Then, choose the scenes, artifacts or phenomena that are, for some reason the most intriguing and highlighting and start toying with them. Choose format, write, rewrite, maybe change format again. Once you have a collection of good snippets you might need to make a second draft, picking the ones you wish to use for a specific workshop or exercise. Be careful to choose snippets that at the same time give an overview of the world and address the chosen topic or task.
Using snippets

Like any other fiction, snippets can be used as discussion tool, as basis for a task, or as inspiration for ideation. As mentioned, their character of being only glimpses invites users to speculate around aspects not mentioned in the snippets, which can be great for ideation sessions – as I have seen with my students.

Case: Tales From Corrodia

Corrodia was inspired by several post-apocalyptic and/or future worlds, like Stephen King’s Mid-World (as described in the Dark Tower-series), the Mad Max franchise, the Firefly TV-series and many more. In summary, Corrodia is a place that features left-over artifacts from a high-tech era, several different sentient species, (what seems to be) magic, and lots of strange weather phenomena. Below I’ll give a few examples that highlight various aspects of Corrodia (to read all 160+ snippets see https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/talesfromcorrodia/).

The Maze (first-person diary entry, on the topic of technology)

There it was; the maze of the Ancients... a left-over miracle, or playground, or experiment. Made of pale red rock it stood in a perfectly circular pit in the midst of the carbon pans. It was huge; it was said to have a thousand entrances and a million exits. No map had been drawn of it... it defied all sorts of charting, changing its nature invisibly and incomprehensibly. Anyone who entered between its high walls and the reddish dusk between them, did it as if it was for the first time ever. You could go as many times as you wanted, but most only did it once or twice -- thrice of you were really adventurous. But here I was for my fifth attempt, since the previous had been most unsuccessful; I had come out very close, and I really, really, really needed to go far this time, further that during my first walks.

For this was the Magic of the Maze: it sent people off, alone or in pairs if they held hands. Once you had entered, there was no return -- eventually you would come to an exit gate and when passing through it you would be transferred. Usually, travelers would end up fairly close, within a month's trek or so. But sometimes they were sent farther: to the windy archipelago of the Cuso; to the ice cold arctic with its roaming Borealis monsters; or to the heat of the Lava Plains where the Fire Drinkers reigned. Or even to the markets of Tnannet or the wonders of CT’oh. Some even said that you could be sent elsewhere in time...

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Browncoated Wanderers (dictionary-like entry, on sentient species)

The Browncoated Wanderers were highly appreciated as storytellers, although just as many stories were told about them, symbiotic as they were. Some of their children grew
Tall, others Small. As they came into adolescence, they would form matching pairs -- based on minds, not on gender. Once paired, the Small would never set foot on the ground again; ey would forever be carried by the Tall counterpart, becoming seemingly(?) two heads, one body. Via a complex biomental process the two would then slowly build a strong mental bond, forming a mind that would surpass those of other humans. With that mental capacity their people could have ruled the world, but as a side effect of the linking process they were both kind and driven by an immense curiosity. Consequently, they were unwilling to get settled or serve under others; instead they lived most of their lives as nomadic wizards, messengers or bards... or all of it at the same time.

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**The Weathering (observation-style, on the topic of religion)**

The old mage waited patiently at the top of the path to the Temple of the Planets. Like all its other holy oracles he had undergone the Ritual of the Weathering, spending a lunarity of his life strapped to a copper disc, preserving parts of its surface with his body whilst the rest was corroded by acid rain and blistering salt storms. The discs hung in the temple, providing silent testimonies of the endurance and stoicism of the Members of the Order.

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**The Large Cycle (first person, on measuring of time and Ancient remnants)**

They came at dusk, only once a year; and every year one day earlier, painting a Large Cycle. In my lifetime they had passed through the evenings of the early autumn and deep summer. When they came back to the autumn again, I would be long gone.

In perfect formation the crossed the sky like a very lengthy parade; one without the bells and whistles. Silently they passed over us, these abandoned remnants of the Dark War, these ships, still held in place and in pace by the programmed commands of the Ancients. They were beautiful and mysterious in so many ways but the biggest question was: For how long would they fly? Would there be a day when they came crashing down onto Corrodia with a vengeance?
CHALLENGES

One critique against snippets is that they may not be as engaging as a strong narrative. This may be true, but as mentioned, I have found that at least with creative people (i.e. designers), it can be just as engaging to co-create the fiction, as just being immersed in them.

Another issue is that some might find it exhausting to come up with the great amount of ideas needed; a good collection of snippets contains at least 25 initial stories I would say, of which maybe 15-20 will be developed into texts and some 5-10 will be finally used (as per dependent on event and how long the snippets are).

Yet another con is that some participants might find it confusing to jump between texts of different styles; in the Corrodia-case this is mitigated by not formalizing the formats (i.e. some could have been written like proper dictionary entries).

QUICK FACTS

Resources needed: It depends. Given a satisfactory source of inspiration (interviews, a premise, set of values or similar) coming up with ideas for snippets can be done by a few people in a few hours. Writing and perfecting snippets may take longer time however, say at least an hour per snippet on average.

Hashtags: #writing_fictions, #design, #inspiration, #ideation


Here, the snippets used and created for the Design for Value-project are described in detail.

REFERENCES


