



## Shaping Things

*Bruce Sterling , Lorraine Wild (Designed by)*

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**A guide to the next great wave of technology--an era of objects so programmable that they can be regarded as material instantiations of an immaterial system.**

"*Shaping Things* is about created objects and the environment, which is to say, it's about everything," writes Bruce Sterling in this addition to the Mediawork Pamphlet series. He adds: "Seen from sufficient distance, this is a small topic."

Sterling offers a brilliant, often hilarious history of shaped things. We have moved from an age of artifacts, made by hand, through complex machines, to the current era of "gizmos." New forms of design and manufacture are appearing that lack historical precedent, he writes; but the production methods, using archaic forms of energy and materials that are finite and toxic, are not sustainable. The future will see a new kind of object; we have the primitive forms of them now in our pockets and briefcases: user-alterable, baroquely multi-featured, and programmable, that will be sustainable, enhanceable, and uniquely identifiable. Sterling coins the term "spime" for them, these future-manufactured objects with informational support so extensive and rich that they are regarded as material instantiations of an immaterial system. Spimes are designed on screens, fabricated by digital means, and precisely tracked through space and time. They are made of substances that can be folded back into the production stream of future spimes, challenging all of us to become involved in their production. Spimes are coming, says Sterling. We will need these objects in order to live; we won't be able to surrender their advantages without awful consequences.

The vision of *Shaping Things* is given material form by the intricate design of Lorraine Wild. *Shaping Things* is for designers and thinkers, engineers and scientists, entrepreneurs and financiers; and anyone who wants to understand and be part of the process of technosocial transformation.

## Shaping Things Details

Date : Published October 7th 2005 by Mit Press (first published 2005)

ISBN : 9780262693264

Author : Bruce Sterling , Lorraine Wild (Designed by)

Format : Paperback 149 pages

Genre : Design, Nonfiction, Science, Technology

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### Tao says

In this book, Sterling proposes a very interesting idea that objects can remember its own journey of life. Some inspiring or thoughtful quotes are:

"Why do we want to make this effort? It's because a metahistory is the ultimate determinant of the shape of things. It's through metahistory that people come to realize that new things are proper things. New objects that can fit into a metahistorical context are seen as progressive advancements." -- p. 39

"They have the capacity to change the human relationship to time and material processes, by making those processes blatant and archiveable." -- p. 43

"A SYNCHRONIC SOCIETY synchronizes multiple histories. In a SYNCHRONIC SOCIETY, every object worthy of human or machine consideration generates a small history. These histories are not dusty archives locked away on ink and paper. They are informational resources, manipulable in real time." -- p. 45

"Generating new knowledge is very good, but in a world with superb archives, accessing knowledge that you didn't know you possessed is both faster and more reliable than discovering it." -- p. 47

"A SYNCHRONIC SOCIETY has a temporalistic sensibility rather than a materialistic one." -- p. 49

"Thanks to improved capacities of instrumentation, things are no longer perceived as static--they move along a clocked trajectory from nonexistence to post-existence." -- p. 50

"Trash is always our premier cultural export to the future." -- p. 58

"But suppose I show them how the object came to be, and I link that information to the object. That would be 'transparent production.'" -- p. 73

"The data it generated remains available for historical analysis by a wide variety of interested parties... The SPIME is a set of relationships first and always, and an object now and then." -- p. 77

"A SPIME is, by definition, the protagonist of a documented process. It is an historical entity with an accessible, precise trajectory through space and time." -- p. 77

"In a SPIME, value transmutes into a public interaction with past and future. It's not about the material object, but where it came from, where it is, how long it stays there, when it goes away, and what comes next. And just how long this can go on. Every market is a futures market. Really? Yes. Consider your credit history. Your insurance. Your retirement funds." -- p. 109

"You want to know the identity of the early adapters, alpha geeks and stakeholders." -- p. 126

"It's a fully documented, trackable, searchable technology."

## **Iamreddave says**

I loved this book. Environmental, visionary, entertaining. IOT described 14 years ago but with a great vision for how it will evolve

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## **Patadave says**

Really, a design manifesto. Sterling sees the world unlike anyone else. His insight into design in this work completely changed the way I thought about environmentalism and the green movement.

Sterling's fiction can often be clunky and his characters awkward and wooden. He's at his best in a work like this where he's allowed to spin out future scenarios firmly rooted in a comprehensive grasp of the present.

The design of this book, appropriately, is also magnificent.

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## **Frank Caron says**

Interesting if obtuse read about a projection of what the future holds beyond our current era of software gizmos and end-usership. Somewhat heavy-handed and neologism-laden, Sterling's missive did give me an interesting eureka parallel to my work which I'll be writing about soon, so in that respect it was neat, but otherwise, it's a bit too cool for school for my tastes, like the nerd at your cafeteria lunch who condescends to you about Magic cards.

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## **Olaf Kowalik says**

This book is easier to read if you've seen Sterling talk about spimes. There are a couple of his talks on YouTube that give context. The upshot of the book is his vision of a technology called spimes which, by nature of their ability to track themselves and be recycled, are environmentally sustainable. He describes a set of technologies including digital fabrication and RFID that contribute to the goal of sustainability. His other point in the book is that designers are uniquely able to create this future of self-aware and self-managing objects that do not harm the planet as they are manufactured and decommissioned. The book includes a history of objects--from artifacts, to machines, to gizmos, to spimes, to biots (some form of biological machine that can be engineered). He's a stream-of-conscious writer so you have to go with the flow on this book. If you're familiar with the various technologies he identifies, there isn't much new here, but if you keep his ultimate goal of sustainability in mind, it's an interesting vision to consider.

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## **Paige Ellen Stone says**

Wow! I just sat down and read this book in one sitting. Formally it is described as a "pamphlet," but how many pamphlets run on to 150 pages? I will make no secret of being a fan of Mr. Sterlings scifi work, but

this is non-fiction that invites us into the world of a scifi like future. To quote liberally from the cover: "This book is about created objects and the environment, which is to say, it's a book about everything. The ideal readers for this book are those ambitious young souls (of any age) who want to constructively intervene in the process of technosocial transformation. That is to say, this book is for designers and thinkers, engineers and scientists, entrepreneurs and financiers, and anyone else who might care to understand why things were once as they were, why things are as they are, and what things seem to be becoming." This book is all that and more, in that it offers real solutions and dreamably real solutions to the crisis we have gotten ourselves and our planet into. It is a page turner just as much as his scifi novels can be. It is a fascinating look into metahistory and into thinking about thinking. Actually, it is a book beyond the insult of a brief review. If you care about the present and the future, read this book.

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### **Ethan says**

Unextraordinary, but full of vocabulary that helps to prepare you to think about the future and how to perceive the paradigm shifts to come.

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### **Diamond says**

This guy is a genius.

Does that mean I agree with everything he says? Absolutely not. But damn, really was a cool read (esp for a class reading...)

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### **Yates Buckley says**

Internet of Things contrarian views from Bruce Sterling are more than a warning about the issues we open by transforming everyday objects into sensing machines. The book should shape the base criticism of IoT for any analysis of society and technology use in the future. The book is basically somewhere between a philosophical text and a manifesto, where the format can actually lead to confusion and makes some of the content easy to misunderstand.

In this book we miss the positive dream of IoT which is easy enough to access from popular culture, or many other texts.

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### **Christian says**

Bruce Sterling is a science-fiction writer and he should stay that way. I still cannot understand why he was commissioned to write this book. He doesn't really seem to grasp what design really entails. Rather, he speaks about it like an outsider would speak. His comments are often unsubstantial--lacking much relevance. However, he does make some interesting insights into a future world of spimes and bots. And, on some level, I did appreciate his matter-of-fact way of discussing the field.[return][return]In general I was confused what his point is. He makes some vague statement that the book is about 'everything' but to me it just amounted to nothing. My views are subjective as I've heard him in interviews talking on these subjects previously.

Nonetheless he himself seems too technologically-centered and misses many philosophical points of design (or, over-simplifies them). Specifically, I do not understand his fascination with RFID (or arphid as he calls it). In the book he basically constructs a world centered around these types of things and proposes hypothetical questions about how this will affect design. [return][return]I have problems with people who forecast in almost any field--especially technology. Predictions and models for the future can be useful in terms of creating scenarios for use (as he mentions well) but this book goes beyond into the realm of science-fiction. He creates a world that is based on too many assumptions (such as the pervasiveness and ubiquity of arphids). I suppose if I am to read futurist perspectives I like to buy what I'm being sold and Sterling did not sell me on his construction.

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### **Tim Belonax says**

A beautiful marriage of form and writing that still holds weight over ten years after its writing (which is impressive for technology writing).

I'd recommend this book to anyone entering digital product design or those interested in technology and its interplay with society.

Some of Sterling's language can feel obfuscated by his style, but writing clearly about a future yet to happen can be a complicated endeavor.

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### **Joe Milazzo says**

More a manifesto that it might initial appear to be (it does take a while for Sterling to get to just what a spime \*is\*), Sterling here proposes a reification of informatics so radical it just might alter the infrastructure of our consumptiveness.

I wonder what might happen if Sterling were to put science fiction aside for a while and concentrate on something a bit less "generic".

The design of the book is crucial to the meaning it aims to make, and, while it might not be for every taste -- some might find it a bit cute -- there's no denying its intelligence.

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### **DWRL Library says**

Sterling offers a historical overview of "things," a history, he says, that's moved from more sustainable methods (in the age of handmade objects) to the unsustainable age of "gizmos" where we find ourselves today, and into the future of design. He argues that the next phase, or technoculture, we will enter will be an age of more sustainable "spimes," which he characterizes as primarily virtual objects (information-based) that will materialize physically when necessary. Anyone interested in digital media or design will find this book useful for its insight into the past and future relationships physical and virtual objects (and objects' relationship to information) as well as the vocabulary Sterling offers for talking about that future. Those interested in textual studies might find Lorraine Wild's integration of digital textual and navigation elements into the printed text worth a look.

## Craig Jaquish says

One disappointment I encountered--not quite a demerit--is that I'd really hoped Sterling would breathe a sci-fi writer's imagination into the topic, but it was on par with a Vint Cerf YouTube presentation (which would be a fair substitute for this book if you prefer--also, Cerf's "IP on Everything" T-shirt is much funnier than any of Sterling's humor). The book's continuing plus is that it's a short read, and even if you find it dull or passé, you'll have it finished before you can really hate it too much. Also, I didn't find that the book's flashy and integrated graphic design particularly added much to the message, but nor did it distract from the content.

Only three stars because in 2010 Sterling's ideas require a bit more flesh than what he provided here in 2005. Not that this isn't still fresh and inspiring--it's still a prognostication of things to come--but five years later we're much closer to that future date and should expect a little more depth.

Along those lines, can anyone recommend a more current work on similar topics? Something fairly layman oriented...

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## Alex says

Much like Bruno Latour, Bruce Sterling understands that neither sociology nor technology can be discussed as separate topics. There are even parallels in the way that Sterling personifies technology in his writing to Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory.

Technology acts upon society while society acts upon technology at the same time. He describes this system as "socio-technical". He lists off the 4 different ages of technosociety leading to the present day (Gizmos and End-Users) before going off into detail about his envisioned technosociety of the future (Splime and Wranglers).

This exploration of technosociety done through design fiction leads to interesting revelations about the role of Designers as well as the future. This ranges from understanding how information is critical (He discusses it through the lenses of cognitive load and opportunity to cost which reminds me of Tristan Harris' work on the attention economy) as well as sustainability and economics. Many of the way he discusses Design is made possible because he is not a Designer himself and the perspective he is able to have with it.

I appreciated the book a lot, but I do admit to getting lost at times with his style of writing, new vocabulary, and just abstract nature of writing about the future. He does provide a sense of humor that is rarely found in Design books.

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