

Designing the Digital Futures We Want



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By Christian Villum

The ThingsCon report [The State of Responsible IoT](#) is a collection of essays by experts from the inter-disciplinary [ThingsCon](#) community of #IoT practitioners. It explores the challenges, opportunities and questions surrounding the creation of a responsible & human-centric Internet of Things (IoT). For your convenience you can read it [on Medium](#) or [download a PDF](#).

New technologies are being developed at a pace which even the most native of digital natives find it hard to follow. The future is not just digital, it's super-digital, and we cannot even begin to imagine what our lives will be like in 15 or 20 years, or better or worse. While those of us who enthusiastically follow — and create — new tech look to future with teary-eyed excitement and almost child-like anticipation for flying cars, teleporting and interstellar travel (please let us have all three in my lifetime, pretty please—and phazers), we are all acutely aware that the future can just as easily become something completely different. A future in which privacy and security decisions, made back in 2017, turned out to be devastating. A future that like Marty's trip to Biff's dark, alternative 2055 in Back To The Future Pt. II, sent us in a totally different direction and turned out to simply blow up in our face. Indeed we must remember the wise words of Sarah Conner, the only human being to ever truly kick Terminator-ass, that the future is not set. Multiple futures are indeed possible.

We need IoT to be responsible. But more than that we need all of the digital future(s) to be responsible, no matter what path we end up on. How do we do that? Either we (A) wait for the time machine to be developed and then continue to iterate until everything

is totally Avatar-like (without the marines...and, err, other humans) or (B) we realize that now is the time to make the right decisions.

Making IoT and digital futures responsible is the biggest and most important design brief in the history of homo sapiens. Bigger than iPhone and the hover board combined. Bigger than the Trump business empire. Bigger than beating the Borg. Bigger than 42. We need to design the digital futures we want.

I am not just talking about designing better privacy and better security in our products. We need that, yes. But what I am talking about goes way beyond IoT and smart objects. I am talking about applying design strategically in our thinking and, in every way we approach the digital future, always think about people before we think about technology. That, dear friends, is and has always been design's biggest virtue. Today we need that more than ever. It is that simple: We need to put people at the center of digital development and make new technology human-centric, not tech-centric. We've all laughed at the Internet of Useless Things. But what about the Internet of Deadly Things? As biotechnology, neural implants and exoskeletons proliferate, as our flesh and the machine merge and as we seek to outsource vital decisions to microchips, it is so easy to keep pushing technology faster and faster, and forget ourselves in the process. The Internet of Artificially Intelligent Self-Righteous Killer Nano-Pacemakers, anyone?



We don't have to design a future of killer robots. (Image: [Unsplash](#))

Let's not go to that future. Even Biff wouldn't want to live there. Instead let us remember to give ourselves classic design challenges: Always, always, always have the end user be part of developing that thing we want to shape the future. Always prototype and iterate. Maybe open source it, let the hive-mind test it out for you? Imagine if Skynet had been open source: Anonymous would have DDoS'ed the living excrement out them way before anyone would have even thought of calling Arnold

Schwarzenegger. My point is this: If you design for people and with people, your fancy IoT toaster really has a much lower risk of turning into a killer robot.

Let me give a present-day, non-science fiction example from the currently buzzing arena of autonomous vehicle development, where cities and companies worldwide are racing towards fully autonomous level 5 self-driving cars. Billions of dollars are being poured into accelerating technological development and fine-tuning the artificial intelligence to run it, so that we can have these new cars mitigate rush hour traffic, serve under-served communities, make time more efficient and generally run cars into Chris Villum (autorunk.dk) is driven by a keen interest in exploring new boundaries for humans much less frequently. But what is being done to actually ensure that these strategic design His work as Programme Director at the Danish Design Centre involves things meet the needs of people? What exactly are the needs of the people that this will examining new trends and ideas in the span between technology and design thinking. affect? How will they use the technology? Will they understand the technology? Will With a background in areas such as maker technology, sharing cultures, new business they trust it? Will they change their habits to accommodate the tech? We need to hear models, open data and open design, internet culture and hacktivism, he enjoys from them to know for sure. Simply developing the darn things and putting them out developing communities and bringing people together with the purpose of sharing new there while hoping for the best seems to be way too hazardous for what is at stake ideas and generating change. His work explores future currents in technology from a design perspective in order to discover what design can be and should be, now and in. Let's make the sentient toasters of the future more like Mr. Data, Bishop and Wall-E (for the future. His previous roles include co-founding and heading the experimental non-geeks: These are kind, lovable robots). Let's bring design's biggest merit at the Platform4 Art & Technology hub, being a front-runner in the use of Creative Commons center of the future we envision and put people first. Let's design the digital futures we content licences, building global communities for the UK-based non-profit organisation want. Open Knowledge (Foundation) and initiating a wide range of entrepreneurial projects and companies.

ThingsCon is a global community of IoT practitioners dedicated to fostering the creation of a human-centric & responsible Internet of Things. Learn more on ThingsCon.com, join an event near you, and follow us on Twitter.

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