



Edge School: A Speculative Design Fiction

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Prologue

This short piece makes no major contentions, offers no proofs, presents no evidence and advances no arguments. There is no ‘learning outcome’ for the reader who is simply invited to read with no strings attached. What follows is a short story of a teacher (who is also a student) in an imagined higher education future. Whilst this future alludes to education at scale, unbundled and unchecked, there are also hatches opened onto deschooling, rewinding and personal growth. The approach employed is design fiction, a form of speculative inquiry that has been the focus of increasing attention of late in educational research and scholarship (Houlden and Veletsianos 2022; Ross 2022; Suoranta et al. 2022). Such approaches are useful to explore not just new ideas but indeed the forms in which we express them. They may allow us to stray a little further than we normally would. We may end up on the edge of something, transitioning between one thing and another, feeling confused about what our true purpose was. Or, as we wander out to the cusp, we may suddenly come across something growing there, something deeply connective, rising up as it always does, from the very ground of our being.

Keywords Design fiction · Speculative design · Educational futures · Educational rewinding · Social Science Fiction · Critical EdTech · Education Fiction

Now, you must be one thing or another. But when I was young, you could be both. Like my Dad. He was a farmer and carpenter. We called him a farpenter. He was always making or growing something, changing one thing into another.

When we had cucumbers for lunch, Dad would bite shapes into the slices. ‘What’s this then?’, he’d say.

‘A dog! A boat! A shoe!’, we shouted back.

‘A pencil,’ I said one day, but my Dad did not hear me.

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‘Don’t worry,’ my mother said later, ‘you were right – I saw the pencil too. And you know what? That means you will be a teacher one day.’

Now things are more complex. You must be only one thing or another; you cannot be both. I teach up at the tip of things, in a web hung by its centre. I work in a mesh of people where everyone has a special job to do. Some are curating ideas for my keynote address, some are building my slides, some are testing content on audience segments, some are modelling my follower counts, and some are tending to fissures in my paywall. But there are people spread out above me too. We are interdependent. We inter-be. I am here, but I am also swimming down with the toxic content moderation team. They follow the deepest comment threads, diving through the long troughs. The higher I climb, and bigger I grow, the longer and the deeper those undersea valleys stretch. I am big enough now to have full-time trolls, people who make their entire living from me.

As I get bigger, I generate more light. I reach more students, I employ more people, and I teach and share more and more. But part of me also obscures for some reason, some of the machinery spins in strange orbits, casts shadows, and grows trenches. I guess that is what happens when you grow up, right? When you get to be a man.

But on the whole it is good, I think. This is the future my mother dreamed for me: that I would teach. ‘You won’t end up like your father,’ she said, ‘dying with his hammer in his hand.’

But I have another life too – I go to Edge School. It is not strictly legal. I go there for the stuff that you cannot learn in university anymore. There are no real teachers there. People are learning from each other. Which is a bit chaotic! We have a no-digital code. No electrical devices allowed. You can only bring yourself.

We meet out at the edges of places. In the in-betweens. In old buildings or patches of wasteland. There are transitions, ecotones, where one habitat turns into the next – places that are neither one thing or another yet (Ryberg et al. 2021).

Edge School is also a play on ‘hedge schools,’ back from colonial times, when Catholic education was banned (Fernandez-Suarez 2006). Illicit schools sprung up, in barns or in private houses, in woodlands and hedgerows. Eventually, a state system came in and hedge schools faded away. But... well, be careful what you wish for is all I will say.

In some ways, the hedge schools were always on a cusp, ad hoc utopias – never viable, just part-time teachers supplementing their income trying to make ends meet. Once the state came in everything got standardised, systematised – for better and for worse.

So we have this hope that our Edge School will not last. It is transient. It is not in the places where we meet. It is not about place. It will be gone someday. We are trying not to leave a legacy – no footprints, benefactor buildings, or transcripts. It is hard because people want to believe in things that will endure – that we can build something and pass it on and that we can have things to be proud of. But Edge School is more like... childhood. It ends and you can never go back.

Some days, I think about walking away from my job in the university and spending the rest of my life in the Edge School. But sometimes when I am walking out to the edge, I find myself in a place... like that feeling just before the lecture, looking



Fig. 1 Under the rose apple tree

up into the lights, in the in-betweenness, the not-yetness (Ross 2017), when everything is still possible. I am walking out to the edge of somewhere – just before sunrise.

Before I go there I must leave my partner. He is sleeping. So beautiful. And I feel only peace in my heart.

I cannot see his green eyes, which are his best feature. But the thing is that... when he is awake, and I am looking into his eyes, and they are bouncing around, it is almost too much. So when he is asleep, I hold a different picture of him. Maybe he sees me that way sometimes – maybe that is the real me.

So I keep walking. The sun is at my back, still coming up – all the morning trying to find me. I get to the rose apple tree and I sit in its shade (Fig. 1). I look up into the leaves until I see faces looking down at me. The faces are my teachers, my benefactors, some living and some dead. Anyone who ever taught me anything is looking down on me wishing me well. And I know I am taught something

every day from everyone I work with, from every interaction I have. Each one changes me.

I know I need to be better. There are things I do that I am not proud of.

I close my eyes and feel the well wishes of people I care about. The feelings bleed down like green blood. The tree is my body. Light finds its way through the leaves above, shining warm onto my hair. Sap from my benefactors courses down me. I am sure of them. I channel their well wishes and their love through me through two wooden channels that follow the bones of my legs before rupturing my body and spreading into the ground, finding the soil, and binding me to the earth.

I am sure of everything. I take myself seriously. I know what is right. I just know.

An intention arises – a *sankalpa* – a promise that a piece of this incarnation will live on.

And then I go back. I climb back into the centre. But this time, instead of feeling myself in a web, I see leaves with faces peering down through them, green warm feelings in my body, and a dream of roots connecting us all together.

All the dreams that my mother had for me, just so that I would not turn out like my father. She knew I was different perhaps. She was trying her best in her own way to protect me I suppose.

But who knows how to grow a man? Who knows when we need to become one thing or another? Who knows what we will learn and when we will need to learn it? When we meet, out on the edge, who or what will be there to teach us?

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