

Achille Mbembe Challenge

Case discription

The Achille Mbembe Challenge invites students to develop an idea or solution that contributes to a more equal and just world for all, with a fairer distribution of the right to breathe. That solution can be anything: a podcast, an app, a work of art, a ritual, a video, a product, a campaign, advice to a museum or a minister, and so on.

The central question of the contest is: how do we ensure the right to breathe for everyone, regardless of where you live and who you are?

Breathing can be understood both literally and figuratively. It includes having access to your own stories and traditions, not being stifled by someone else's version of your history or technological development, and giving everyone an equal opportunity to experience their heritage.



Case 3 - Digital colonisation - is there an alternative to the narrative of big tech companies?

Today's technological developments are generally a continuation of the colonial legacy in which land, resources and wealth were conquered or looted. Today, colonialism is not only about the annexation of geographical territories as in colonial times, but mainly about virtual space. Virtual space is claimed by a limited number of multinational corporations. They own the data, hardware, and software, forming a monopoly known as GAFAM (Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, and Microsoft). Digital colonialism involves the exploitation of human and non-human species and the commercialisation of all possible forms of life using data.

Digital colonialism does also refer to the exploitation of material resources that are necessary to support the infrastructure of digital technologies. For example the need for cobalt, necessary for the batteries in smartphones, mined in Congo, often by children under dangerous circumstances. Another component of digital colonialism is the erasure of languages, cultures and worldviews. AI programmes such as ChatGPT, are mainly trained on Western European languages and sources, reinforcing the worldviews these sources represent. Through digital colonialism Big Tech continues the erasure of stories, worldviews and cultures, both off and online.

Technological developments are often presented as an irreversible and unstoppable process. Something that is going to happen anyway. However, there are plenty of examples of other views on technology and other ways of dealing with resources. However, these are often labelled (negatively) as 'primitive,' 'magical' or 'spiritual'.

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Case discription

Examples

LO-TEK

The American landscape architect Julia Watson, argues that instead of focussing on High-Tech, we should look at LO-TEK: Local, traditional ecological knowledge. She looks at technologies and knowledge that are symbiotic with nature, such as root bridges. Bridges that are not built but grown from root systems of trees in northern India.

Black Panther Movie

Marvel Studio's Black Panther (2018) movie tells the tale of Wakanda, a fictional African country that's technologically advanced and very wealthy. Their advanced technology is based on the rare metal vibranium. In the movie both technological developments and traditional culture are represented. The movie shows an alternative high-tech society, built on technology that is not erasing traditional local culture and does not exploit the planet.

With this case, we want to explore forgotten, pre-modern technological practices and actualise them for our current society. How can these practices enrich and adjust our image of technology? What would our (digital) technology look like if we start thinking from root bridges and tradition?

What we can learn from Achille Mbembe

In his book *Critique of Black Reason*, Mbembe introduces the concept of 'necropolitics'. That concept is about the power to determine whose stories, culture and history are allowed to exist or disappear. Mbembe argues that true freedom is only possible if we recognise that all human cultures are equal and entitled to their heritage and stories.

In *Brutalism*, Mbembe focuses on the destructive forces of capitalism. In our digital age, humanity has now become mechanised and machines humanised. This blending of the natural and the artificial poses an existential, planetary threat, according to Mbembe. Yet Mbembe's message is also hopeful. He draws hope from what he calls 'the African archive'. African art and artefacts offer a different, animistic perspective in which humans and the earth cannot live without each other and are connected in a sustainable way.

CHALLENGE - from extractive to regenerative

Design assignment

Design a policy, product, service, game or story that challenges the dominant idea discourse about technology that big tech companies present to us.

Explanation

Think about a policy, product, service, game or story that wants to be something different than the digital technologies we have today; that wants to be more regenerative than extractive, meaning it wants to give back to the planet more than it takes (or at least give as much as it takes). Or that is

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Case discription

built on indigenous technology such as the root bridge (or your own example), or that amplifies a diversity of cultures - instead of only a Western European culture.

In the spirit of Mbembe's African archives, you can draw inspiration from indigenous practices that revolve around the stewardship of the earth for future generations. It does not have to be a totally new policy or product; it can be a new design for an existing product that incorporates the above values. It must also be suitable for our Western contemporary culture.

