

Fashion Fictions: unmaking the mainstream fashion system

Amy Twigger Holroyd, Nottingham Trent University

Corresponding author: Amy Twigger Holroyd, amy-twigger.holroyd@ntu.ac.uk

Dr Amy Twigger Holroyd is Associate Professor of Fashion and Sustainability at Nottingham School of Art & Design, part of Nottingham Trent University in the UK. Her research focuses on fashion transitions: the participatory exploration of alternative, open and plural fashion systems that respect earth's capacity to support life. Amy's current project, Fashion Fictions, is supported by an Arts and Humanities Research Council Research Development and Engagement Fellowship. She has edited and authored several books, including *Folk Fashion: Understanding Homemade Clothes* (I.B. Tauris, 2017) and the forthcoming *Historical Perspectives on Sustainable Fashion: Inspiration for Change* with Jennifer Farley Gordon and Colleen Hill (Bloomsbury Academic, 2023).

Abstract

Purpose:

Fashion Fictions is an international participatory research project that aims to influence and energise the emergent post-growth fashion movement by bringing people together to create, experience and reflect on fictional visions of enticing alternative fashion cultures and systems. This paper considers the ways in which the project's generative activity, in the form of discursive world-building, practical prototyping and embodied enactment, provides a platform for participants to question – or “unmake” – the socioeconomic order of the real-world fashion system.

Design/methodology/approach:

This paper focuses on the second stage of the project, where participants work in small groups to create an object or image to represent life in a fictional fashion world. It draws on qualitative data generated via four two-day prototyping workshops run between November 2021 and March 2022, each involving up to twelve participants.

Findings:

The making involved in the collaborative prototyping activity provided fertile ground for unmaking the status quo. The focused act of speculating about an intentionally outlandish fictional world acted as a conduit for a more open-ended and powerful sense of wonder that led participants to question the assumptions and structures underpinning the mainstream fashion system.

Originality/value:

The paper introduces the notion of “unmaking” to the post-growth fashion context and argues that taken-for-granted norms must be challenged as a necessary precursor to change. The participatory workshops discussed provide a practical and accessible way to support unmaking.

Keywords: ethics and aesthetics, processes of change, speculation, post-growth, unmaking

Article Classification: Research paper

Post-growth fashion

The fashion industry is deeply implicated in the devastation of earth's life-supporting systems, with negative environmental and social impacts generated at every stage of a garment's lifecycle (Fletcher, 2014). As Hickel (2020, p. 20) explains, the global economy – which of course includes the fashion industry – “is now dramatically overshooting what scientists have defined as safe planetary boundaries, with devastating consequences for the living world.” This activity is far from evenly spread: the majority of ecological damage since 1970 has been caused by high-income countries (Hickel et al., 2022). To address this grave situation, we need to dramatically reduce the overconsumption that has become the norm in the global North. The scale of change required is staggering: a 75% to 95% reduction in resources used (Fletcher and Tham, 2019). The challenge is amplified by the fact that the production of clothing is growing: the number of garments produced globally doubled between 2000 and 2015 (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017), and continues to increase. Hence, even if the impacts of a single garment can be reduced, the cumulative impacts of the fashion industry will rise as long as the volumes being produced continue to grow.

The rise in clothing production is driven by the capitalist economic system within which the globalised mainstream fashion system operates. As Hickel (2020, p. 20) explains, this system is “organised around the imperative of constant expansion, or ‘growth’: ever-increasing levels of industrial extraction, production and consumption.” Sustainability initiatives put forward by the fashion industry such as transparency schemes and circular economy take-back programmes overwhelmingly fall within the domain of “green growth”. The central idea of green growth is that ecological systems can be protected by “decoupling” economic growth from resource use, through improved efficiency and the use of emerging technologies. Yet scientific modelling has shown that this decoupling is impossible: if we continue with a growth-driven economy we can slow the increase in resource use, but not reverse it. Ward et al. (2016) unequivocally state that economic growth “cannot plausibly be decoupled from growth in material and energy use.” Fundamentally, green growth does not challenge the extractivist mentality that enables the capitalist system. As Hickel (2020, p. 40) explains, “The ecological crisis is an inevitable consequence of this system.”

An alternative approach is proposed by the academic and activist degrowth movement, which identifies capitalism’s ethos of growth and extraction as the root cause of unsustainability and envisions a managed transition to a post-growth economy. A post-growth economy would be guided by the aim of meeting the fundamental human needs of the global population, rather than an ideological focus on growth. Transition to an economy of this type would require a managed process

of degrowth: “a planned reduction of excess energy and resource use to bring the economy back into balance with the living world in a safe, just and equitable way” (Hickel, 2020, p. 29). Leaders in the fashion and sustainability field argue that if we are to develop fashion systems that respect the planet’s biophysical limits, then the “growth logic” of the capitalist system must be challenged (Fletcher and Tham, 2019). As Fuad-Luke (2009) states, “This demands a transition of societies that is equally as profound as the one experienced in the late 18th century at the emergence of the Industrial Economy.” We must look beyond isolated strategies for design, manufacture and disposal to reimagine the entire fashion system.

Fashion Fictions

Fashion Fictions, an international participatory research project founded in 2020, aims to influence and energise the emergent post-growth fashion movement by reshaping academic, professional and public understandings of the possibilities for sustainable fashion. It brings people together to generate, experience and reflect on fictional visions of enticing alternative fashion cultures and systems. The project’s concept is driven by a recognition that, as Wright (2010, p. 23) argues, “the actual limits of what is achievable depend in part on the beliefs people hold about what sorts of alternatives are viable.” Its focus is not the generation of readily realisable ideas for fashion business or practice, but rather the playful exploration of positive yet implausible scenarios as a way of broadening our collective vocabulary of ways that we might live with our clothes and building a sense that very different systems could be possible.

It can sometimes be hard to imagine alternatives that are radically different because the status quo feels so entrenched. The project creates a safe space to explore what alternative fashion systems might look like and to think through the possibilities critically and creatively. To do this, participants are invited to ask “what if” questions to imagine contemporary realities in parallel worlds: worlds that have split off from our own at some point in history, and taken a different path. They imagine positive and enticing worlds, in terms of individual satisfaction, social justice and sustainability. They imagine worlds that are physically possible, but push beyond what feels plausible to us today. This participatory process for collective speculation has a three-stage structure, with Stage 1 inviting people to submit 100-word written outlines of worlds in which invented historical junctures have led to familiar-yet-strange sustainable cultures and systems. These fictions are conceived as parallel present-day worlds, rather than real-world futures (Howell et al., 2021). In Stage 2’s prototyping workshops, diverse groups of participants add complexity to these fictions, while in Stage 3’s “everyday dress” projects, participants performatively enact the prototyped cultures and systems.

The invitation to participate in the project is open to all, and contributions have been received from scores of participants in six continents, catalysed by online and in-person workshops and affiliated projects in various higher education institutions.

Participatory speculative design

Fashion Fictions falls under the broad umbrella of speculative design. Speculative design, most famously associated with Dunne and Raby (2013), commonly takes the form of artefacts, models, films and documents that “imagine, speculate on, and represent alternate visions of design and the world it inhabits” (Galloway and Caudwell, 2018). Speculative design thus interrogates the status quo and opens a discourse about the future. Critics of speculative design highlight various issues including the uneven power dynamics embedded in many projects: “the designer, as the enlightened subject, speaks and exhibits; the silent spectators in the audience merely listen and observe” (de Oliveira and Prado, 2018).

Participatory approaches to speculative design, which emerge in a range of disciplinary contexts including design anthropology and futures studies, address this gap between designer and audience. Some work takes the form of temporary immersive installations and encounters (Halse, 2013; Kuzmanovic and Gaffney, 2017; Lockton and Candy, 2018), creating possible futures “as a landscape to venture into” (Binder, 2016, p. 267). Other projects invite participants to experience speculative propositions in their everyday lives (Bardzell et al., 2012; Lindström and Ståhl, 2020; Scott et al., 2012). Whatever the format, these experiments are based on “a playful mode of trying out how everyday life might play out differently” (Halse, 2013, p. 182) and seek to examine the embodied experiences of participants as they encounter fictional situations made real. Another approach is to involve participants in the prototyping process via creative workshops (Andersen and Wakkary, 2019; Davies et al., 2015). As Gatehouse (2020, p. 134) explains, participatory speculative design workshops use “techniques that lessen the gravity of the ‘real’ world” and thus “prepare the ground from which speculative jumps can be made”.

Unmaking

Recent work by Lindström and Ståhl (2020) uses participatory speculative design not to inform the design of a product or service but rather to “unmake” the established norms that structure both design and society more broadly. Through their Un/Making Studio, Lindström and Ståhl seek to “unmake often taken for granted practices and imaginaries within design in order to ‘make space’ for alternative ways of figuring design” (2020, p. 29) and – drawing on the work of Fry and

Tonkinwise – focus on the notion that design both creates and destroys. Lindström and Ståhl discuss two of their projects that explored unmaking in different ways; one focused on composting plastics, while the other investigated polluted soil. They explain that the first project “did ... not result in knowledge ready to be used in the next iteration of a design process. Instead, the prototype became part of generating multiple and at times conflicting speculations on how to un/make plastic waste” (2020, p. 32). The second project similarly generated speculations and questions, rather than solutions.

In their discussion of unmaking, Lindström and Ståhl reference Feola’s writing on “unmaking capitalism” (Feola, 2019). Feola’s work is situated in the academic and activist degrowth movement, which identifies capitalism’s ethos of growth and extraction as the root cause of unsustainability and envisions a managed transition to a “post-growth” economy. Feola argues that this transition will require us to unmake the current socioeconomic order at the same time as building the alternative systems and imaginaries that will take its place. Unmaking is thus described as “a diverse range of interconnected and multilevel (individual, social, socioecological) processes that are deliberately activated in order to 'make space' (temporally, spatially, materially, and/or symbolically) for radical alternatives that are incompatible with dominant modern capitalist configurations” (Feola, 2019, p. 979).

This paper explores the concept of unmaking within the Fashion Fictions project. I discuss the generative making activities that take place in Stage 2 of the project, where participants work in small groups to create an object or image to represent life in one of the fictional fashion worlds invented at Stage 1, and consider whether these activities create space for unmaking assumptions about the real world. I am particularly interested in questions about the economic status quo: the consumer capitalist system and the behaviours that this system inculcates, such as overconsumption and status dressing. Could generative creative activity provide a platform for participants to question – or unmake – the socioeconomic order of the real-world fashion system?

Prototyping workshops

For this paper, I analyse data generated via four two-day prototyping workshops that I facilitated between November 2021 and March 2022, each involving up to twelve participants. To recruit participants I issued a number of open and targeted calls and received over 100 responses. I then invited a selection of these people to join a workshop, with the aim of forming a diverse group with a variety of positionalities. Each event included academics with expertise in fashion and

sustainability, fashion theory and fashion history; professional fashion/textile practitioners; and people whose experience of the fashion system was personal rather than professional or academic. As the list of those expressing interest was significantly imbalanced in terms of gender, relatively few men took part.

The workshop design was informed by work exploring participatory textile making as a form of research (Shercliff and Twigger Holroyd, 2020); writing on experiential futures, including Candy's *The Thing from the Future* activity (Candy, 2018); and reflective accounts of participatory speculative design initiatives (Davies et al., 2015). These influences are used within a qualitative paradigm, guided by an emphasis on process and meaning and appreciation of nuance, complexity and contradiction (Braun and Clarke, 2021). The research therefore places a focus on the experiences and ideas of the participants. In terms of research questions for the project as a whole, I seek to explore the material practices and social norms that are envisaged in the fictional worlds, as well as problems that the participants think would arise there, and to understand the participants' feelings towards the fictional propositions.

Five Stage 1 fictions were selected for each workshop (based on an initial sift by me and subsequent voting by an international panel of six advisors) and participants were asked to choose one to explore in collaboration with others. In each workshop, four of the worlds were explored, with group sizes ranging from two to four participants and, occasionally, an individual working solo. Groups were asked first to develop their understanding of their selected world through discussion and then to plan and create a visual or material diegetic prototype to represent its fashion system. Groups were encouraged to extend, adapt and reinvent the Stage 1 fiction – "to untangle and weave them into any direction they see fit" (de Oliveira and Prado, 2018, p. 110) – to suit their interests and understandings.

A selection of basic materials and equipment was provided within the workshop space, including assorted papers, stationery, art supplies, haberdashery and textile tools. Two iPads were available and participants were welcome to use their own digital devices. A photographer was on hand to support groups to create still and moving imagery, if they wished. Each group was given a small budget to spend on additional supplies; some groups bought nothing, while others purchased secondhand clothes and other objects; magazines; and sundry small items. Some participants also brought items from home, typically craft supplies and samples. Using these materials, the participants created a great variety of prototypes, including crafted objects, photographic images,

digital mock-ups, analogue collages and short films. The prototypes represented diverse aspects of life in the fictional worlds, from garments to many kinds of media, ephemera and household objects.



Figure 1: Fashion photograph created to represent World 54, in which conventional garment production has ceased. In response, a resourceful yet opulent fashion culture that celebrates the inventive re-use of textiles has arisen. Prototype created by Johnny O’Flynn, Gillian Allsopp, Kate Harper and an anonymous Fashion Fictions contributor, developed from a fiction contributed by Wendy Ward.

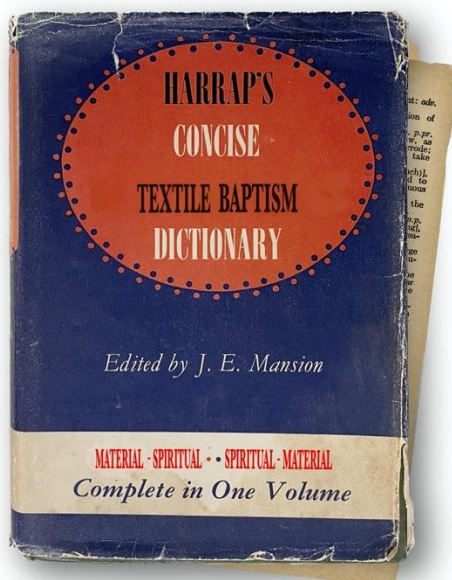


Figure 2: A digital image created to represent World 45, in which a superstitious culture surrounds the use of fabric. The Textile Baptism Dictionary (Material–Spiritual / Spiritual–Material) is used to aid expressive conversations about the cutting of cloth into garments. Prototype created by Gautham Krishna, Rachael Matthews and an anonymous Fashion Fictions contributor, developed from a fiction contributed by Amy Twigger Holroyd.

Data generated at the workshops comprised audio recordings and transcripts of whole-group discussions facilitated at intervals through the workshop; notes documenting small-group activity written by the two facilitator-researchers and one dedicated notetaker; photographs; participant-generated notes; and the visual and material prototypes. These various forms of data were compiled into a single document for each world explored, arranged in chronological order to construct as comprehensive an account as possible, plus another document compiling data relating to the workshop as a whole, including reflective participant notes and discussions from the final part of the workshop. These “story” documents were imported to Atlas.ti qualitative analysis software and are being analysed via reflective thematic analysis, a method which suits the project’s qualitative paradigm and embraces researcher subjectivity (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Initial codes, generated inductively from the data content, have been used to inform the discussion in this paper. In the next two sections, I will describe the making of worlds, prototypes and performances at the workshops and then discuss the ways in which unmaking emerged alongside this generative activity.

Making

The first type of making that happened at the workshop was world-building. Participants were asked to flesh out their understanding of their chosen world, using the information provided in the original text but also bringing in their own ideas. Notes from the small-group discussions in the first part of the workshop record frequent questioning, with participants tentatively proposing possible interpretations and probing them together. Through this process they developed a shared, though often unresolved, understanding of the fashion system in their fictional world. While building this understanding, they often consciously discussed how close or far their world felt in relation to real life – and whether this fitted their desires for the speculation. As part of these conversations, the participants often considered common clothing practices in their world – if and how clothing was bought and sold, for example – and therefore implicitly gave consideration to the economic system. Discussion of socioeconomic factors tended to be highlighted more explicitly when work in progress was shared with the wider group – either in the informal presentation or in questions from other participants.

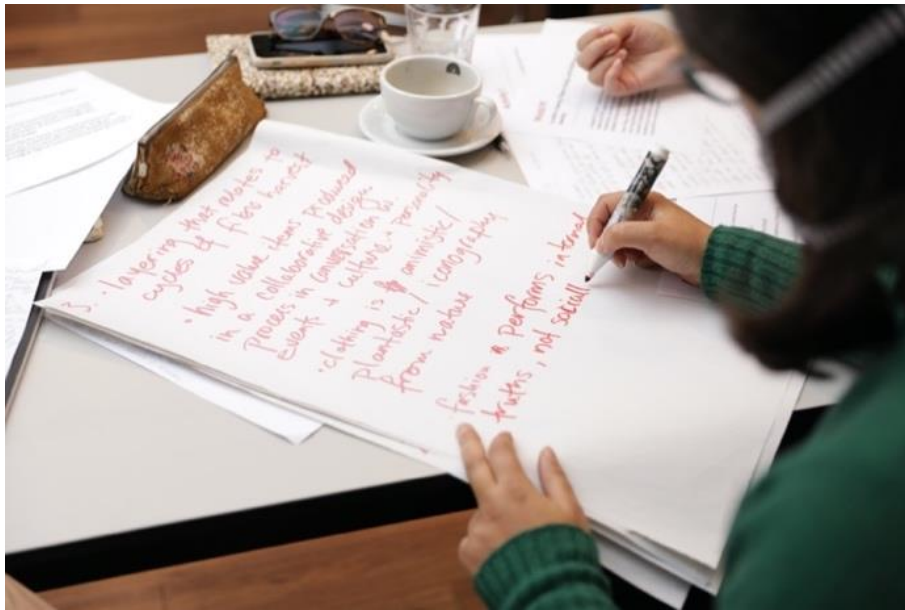


Figure 3: World-building discussions in the first part of the Stage 2 workshop. This group is exploring World 91, in which mushrooms are recognised as spiritual guides for all aspects of society – including fashion. Photograph: Sanket Haribhau Nikam.

After world-building, the participants moved into the prototyping activity, first planning and then constructing their prototypes. At this stage they focused on the details of the items they were creating; debates about the world seemed to become settled, or at least set aside. This shift corresponds with Candy and Dunagan’s Experiential Futures Ladder and their observation that “As we move down the ladder [from ‘scenario’, through ‘situation’ to ‘stuff’] and an abstract future notion is made concrete, thinkable and feelable, we lose contact with alternative possible instantiations” (Candy and Dunagan, 2017, p. 14).



Figure 4: Creating a prototype to represent life in a fictional world. This participant is collaging a magazine cover to represent World 19, in which fashion is in the service of nature. Photograph: Sanket Haribhau Nikam.

Entangled within the physical and digital making processes were miniature acts of embodied performance, which can be framed as a third type of making: making experiences of the fictional world. Some performances were obvious, as when a participant acted as a model for the photographic prototype shown in Figure 1. Less noticeable but equally significant were the many acts of holding items to the body or quietly trying things on, which gave the participants fleeting embodied insights into aspects of the fictional world. Another type of performance arose when participants handcrafted items that would be handcrafted in the fictional world (as in Figure 5), thereby enacting speculative practices.



Figure 5: This participant is hand-stitching her group's prototype to represent World 50, in which garments are embellished as a sign of social connection. Photograph: Sanket Haribhau Nikam.

In the final part of the workshop, the participants reflected on the experience of making another world. One participant, Alison, described the overall experience of building her group's world, and the freedom that she felt to imagine otherwise:

We had to go there and start from there, rather than trying to take [our world] with us. And it gave it a slightly different perspective than if we'd just been asked to change something here – when you've got all of here already around us ... even in your head, it feels quite a safe way of doing that, that exploring. And you can be quite radical with it all.

Other reflections indicated that these creative and performative engagements with the concrete helped to make the world feel closer. As Annabella noted, the fictions "might seem sort of off the scale initially, like these mad fantasies. But once you start breaking them down into the detail, they're only one step away from wherever you already are." She continued, "Our fantasies are really conditioned by our present realities ... our utopias are very much rooted with one foot in the present."

Wonder

Facilitation at the workshops focused on the playful imagining of alternative worlds rather than the challenging, or unmaking, of established assumptions. Even so, multiple participants noted that the workshop activities prompted them to reflect on the real world. As Leah suggested with reference to

the prototyping process, “it’s kind of making a story real ... it makes you then reflect back on where we are now.” Another participant, Maz, noted that this reflection extended beyond fashion, into philosophy and economics, and Katherine observed that it highlighted participants’ own blind spots and assumptions. Alis similarly recognised that the workshop prompted even those familiar with sustainable fashion debates “to broaden our minds and think more radically”.

These thoughts were particularly prevalent in the final, reflective, part of the workshop: participants highlighted various taken-for-granted aspects of the real-world fashion system. Julie reflected that the activity had prompted the group to see the fashion system in a new light: “all of these worlds made us realise how easy it is in our world to just buy stuff and not really think about it.” Elly described a more focused realisation, revealed through conversations about language in the prototyping process. Her group, whose early notes are shown in Figure 3, created a prototype to represent a cyclical system in which natural materials are routinely returned to the biosphere and found that they needed to invent a new word – “revest” – after feeling that other options all had negative connotations. The reflections described by the participants correspond with the concept of wonder, framed by Ahmed (2014, p. 179) as an emotion felt in the body that is triggered by “seeing the world that one faces and is faced with ‘as if’ for the first time.”

For some, the thoughts prompted by the workshop extended to active questioning. For example, it made Julie reflect on real-world history: “When you think about what, how you’d like [the real world] to change, it makes you think well, what was the tipping point that made these things as they are?” Again, this corresponds with Ahmed’s understanding of wonder, which considers historicity by asking “How did the world come to take this shape?” (Ahmed, 2019, p. 182). Another participant described questioning fashion itself: “it then made me think about, well, what really is fashion and what does that mean, and do we all sort of walk around in the same clothes, and why?” Johnny, meanwhile, described newfound questions about consumer capitalism:

looking at this fictional world ... made me really question my own habits around clothing I’ve held for ages. ... we’re all from birth, I guess, especially my generation, brainwashed to be good little consumers, constantly feeding the capitalist system. ... through doing the workshop, made me realise that there are other possibilities than the status quo. Things can be different; they don’t have to be what they are now.

Thoughts shared during the reflective period of the workshop sometimes extended beyond questioning the real-world system into ideas for real-world action. One participant, for example, described an intention to help others to start mending their clothes, whether working informally with friends or via a more organised community initiative. Others described a desire to think further about the issues raised in the workshop and to develop their own skills. Ideas for future research and activism were generated and shared, framed as tentative suggestions and lines of enquiry rather than resolved solutions or propositions.

Overall, I observe that the playful speculative task framed by the workshops led, to varying degrees, to the unmaking of existing norms and simultaneous contemplation of how the real world might be configured otherwise. These dynamic processes coexisted and overlapped: conversation about fictional worlds intermingled with discussion of experiences in the real world, fragmented and unresolved. The activities prompted participants to notice, question and challenge embedded assumptions about the mainstream globalised fashion system, including its underlying economic structure and social norms. Thus, the making involved in this participatory prototyping activity provided fertile ground for the unmaking of the status quo.

Conclusion

This paper has examined four Fashion Fictions prototyping workshops, considering the various generative activities involved and the discussions which accompanied them. Through the clearly defined task of making an item or image from a specific fictional parallel world, the workshop implicitly created space for the participants to notice, question and challenge embedded assumptions about the mainstream fashion system – including its underlying economic structures – and triggered new lines of thinking about real-world action. Making, therefore, can make space for unmaking; focused speculation can produce open-ended wonder. In more recent workshop activities I have started to capture the questions and ideas relating to the real world that are generated when participants reflect on their speculative experience, compiling them to form a resource for inspiration and courage that sits alongside the repository of speculative work [i].

As I explained earlier, the project does not aim to generate readily realisable ideas for fashion business or practice, but rather to broaden our collective vocabulary of ways that we might live with our clothes. The speculative activities that the project facilitates – world-writing, prototyping and enacting – are helping to build this extended vocabulary. As discussed here, the project also contributes to the unmaking of the current system by generating a fresh perspective – a sense of

wonder – which leads to the questioning of that which we usually take for granted and seeds new ideas for action. Unmaking is crucial if we are to transform the fashion system to work within the planet’s biophysical limits. We cannot expect to shift directly from where we are to a radically different system without unravelling the assumptions and understandings that underpin and emerge from the ways of acquiring, living with and disposing of clothes to which we have become accustomed. As the project develops and the workshop activities are rolled out more widely, I will continue to explore how the powerful processes of unmaking can be harnessed to drive change in the real-world fashion system.

Notes

[i] The repository of speculative work can be found on the Fashion Fictions website, <https://fashionfictions.org>, under the Worlds, Explorations and Enactments tabs. The resource of real-world questions and ideas can be found under the Wonder tab.

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