

STICKY FICTION¹

¹ All of our ideas have developed gradually, from an apparently throwaway comment or idle speculation. The way I remember it, this project really took off when the phrase “FICTIONAL BOMBS” was written in marker pen on a piece of paper, which was then pinned to a wall. Then Jimmy made the cardboard vest, and here we are. I will almost certainly be contradicted on this point. That is our standard operational mode. At the heart of this text is a confession (of sorts). An admission of weakness, or of susceptibility, which I would really rather not have discovered. The collaborative process we have developed is stealthy, and at times I think we have all experienced unexpected revelations of a blatantly obvious kind. In my case, this work has forced me to accept that my ingrained scepticism is not – as I had previously imagined – an impenetrable force field. Microscopic bits of fiction slip past my cognitive defence mechanisms on a daily basis, and once inside they regroup to form self-generated delusions. This is not what I expected to find when we decided to burst some balloons.



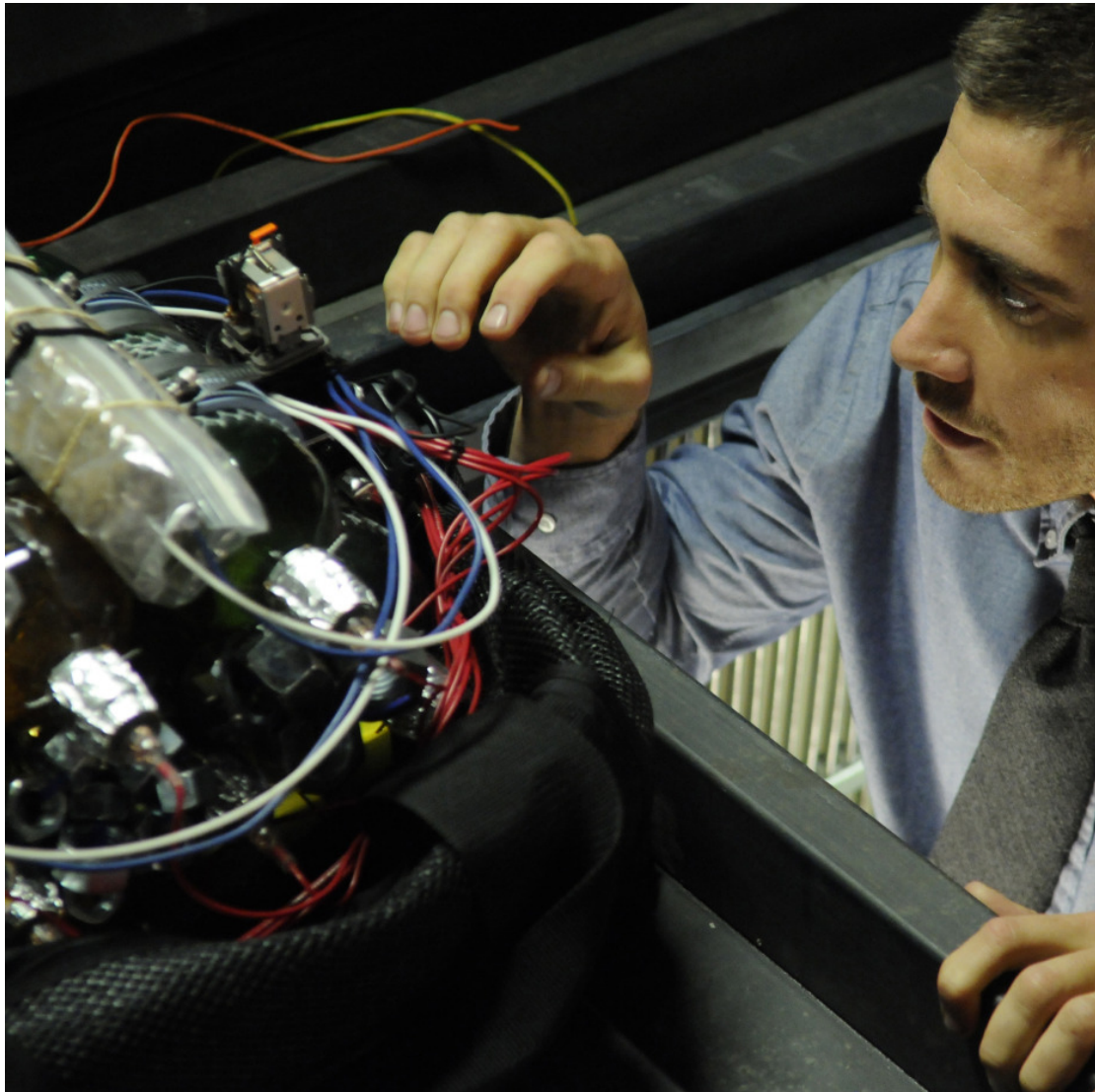
WAR CRAFT²

² When we first began the discussions around bomb making, before the cardboard vest and any notion of balloons or mild jeopardy, I was thinking about the materiality of an explosive device: the substance of a bomb. Given that my background and independent practice are craft-based, and I generally express my ideas in small-scale objects manufactured in reasonably low-tech ways, I suppose this seems natural. I was imagining an object that looked like the sort of explosive device you would see in a film, without considering any kind of interaction or functionality whatsoever. On reflection this is perhaps because of the way I watch film and TV. I tend to notice objects and artefacts manufactured to convince an audience of their functionality, which are neither genuine nor real. I think about the props (company property); the artificial products and services designed and built in support of a fictional narrative. So when we started talking about these issues, I had a basic idea of what a bomb or an improvised device might look like, because I had seen enough movies with convincing enough props.



FORM BEFORE FUNCTION³

³ It turns out that the sum of my knowledge was this: There would be something explosive, contained in cardboard tubes or looking like a brick of plasticene; There would be a countdown timer, like a kitchen timer or perhaps a flashing digital display, or both; There would be curly wires. I had no understanding of how any of these separate parts were connected, nor that my list failed to address a number of important considerations. This endeavour was clearly destined to expose my ignorance. After all, I was basing my bomb model on vague recollections of devices I had seen in films like *Speed*, *Die Hard* and *Fight Club*. So one of my first realisations through the development of the *Recreational Bomb* premise was this: I think I understand a lot more than I actually do, because of my exposure to various forms of entertainment media. On the face of it, this seems obvious and even a little naïve, which is why I think it is important.



THE CONSUMPTION OF AREALITY⁴

⁴ I know that the things I watch are **not real**. I have never had any trouble separating entertainment-driven 'fact' from 'fiction'. I would go so far as to say I do not believe that anything I ever consume through a screen is literally factual. There are countless layers of subjective influence and technological translation, combined with the effects of temporal and geographical dislocation. These layers form a composite filter, obscuring my direct perception of any viewed event or situation. When I watch the news, I know that I am viewing each report through a series of editorial lenses. I am extremely aware of my mediated existence. Likewise I understand that, in the course of a fictional narrative where some sort of explosive device is called for, its visual characteristics must acknowledge the presence of an audience. Seeing the object, we must be able to apprehend the implications immediately: the spectacle, materiality and aesthetic architecture of the device is therefore extremely important. The viewer needs to know instantly what this object is and what it means for the characters and plot. It must be blatantly obvious that it is a bomb.



FOR DRAMATIC EFFECT⁵

⁵ In reality, anyone who wanted to inflict harm through the detonation of an explosive device would take every precaution necessary to hide the true nature of the weapon they intended to unleash. A real bomb is supposed to be invisible, whereas a prop bomb is designed to draw attention to its own lethality. If films were to reflect a more 'realistic' idea of what a bomb might look like, the audience would be less likely to appreciate its implications and would not experience the appropriate level of narrative tension. And yet despite this discernment, despite my acute awareness that I have never (ever) seen anyone making or disarming a real bomb, I still had a sense that I knew something about the anatomy and operation of an explosive device.



AN AESTHETIC OF INEFFICACY⁶

⁶ Anyone who has ever watched a cartoon can draw an explosive device that would function. The classic animation-style black ball with a burning fuse is a stylised derivation of the ball grenade: the type of weapon that gave the Grenadier Guards their name and insignia. Hollow, spherical projectile weapons filled with petroleum are thought to have originated as far back as the Byzantine period (around 700AD), where incendiary grenades were made of ceramic and then glass. The Chinese are reputed to have produced the first cast iron explosive grenades, by filling cannonballs with gunpowder. English soldiers are first thought to have used hand grenades during the late 17th Century, by which time the iron ball was more cricket-ball sized and a fuse had been fitted to ignite the gunpowder. This is precisely the form we now universally associate with cartoon bombs: with cats chasing mice and endless slapstick violence.



WEAPONS OF MASS ABSTRACTION⁷

⁷ This shape has become a symbol, not only of the archetypal 'thing that will explode', but also of ineffectiveness and incompetence. In cartoons the 'BOMB' never means death, or even injury beyond a bit of charring and a loud bang. It is used to create comedy tension, and its effect is often subverted by the intended target: symbolic of the protagonist getting it all hopelessly wrong. In reality, ball grenades were highly effective when used in the right context. However, when someone draws a black ball with a fuse and the word "BOMB" on it, I doubt they are thinking about its historical precedent or functional capacity. They are drawing an abstraction, rather than a representation of (a bygone) reality. The ball grenade has been wrapped in so many layers of cultural reference that it has been stripped of its original meaning: it epitomises the ultimate in 'fictional' bombs.



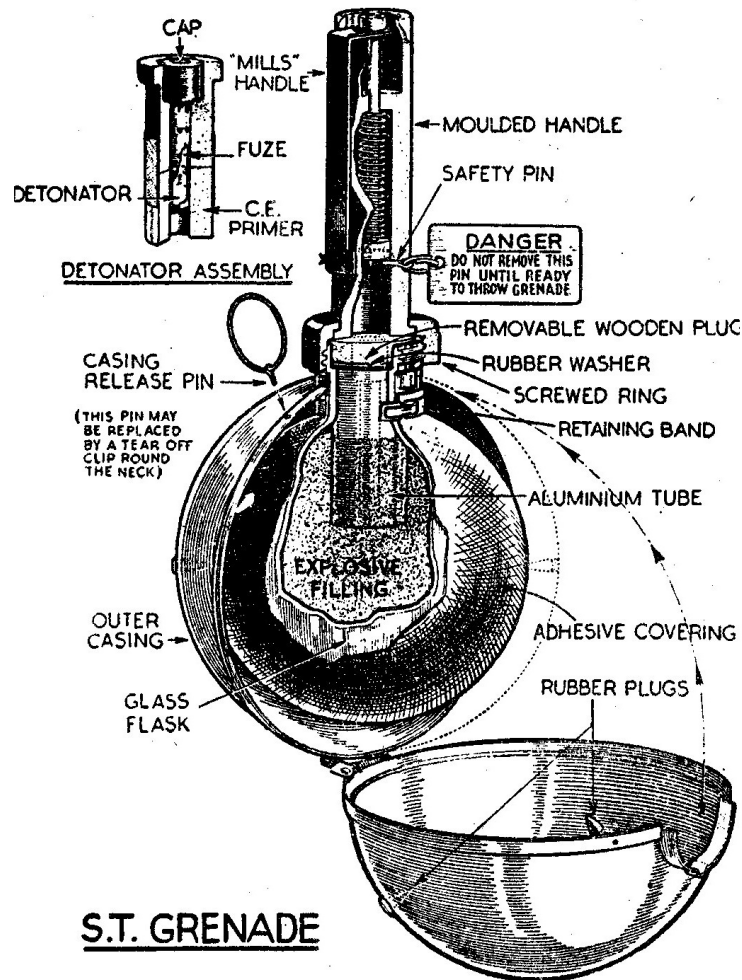
REALITY IS RIDICULOUS⁸

⁸ During World War II the British designed and manufactured an anti-tank hand grenade, known as an S.T. Grenade or sticky bomb, which was essentially a glass sphere filled with nitroglycerin. The sphere was covered with a knitted jacket and coated with a viscous adhesive called birdlime: so-called because it was spread onto branches or twigs in order to catch birds. A protective outer casing was then fitted around this sticky inner sphere and a wooden 'throwing' handle attached, which held a retaining pin (to keep the outer case in place) and also a five-second fuse to ignite the nitroglycerin once applied to its target. To deploy the sticky bomb, you would release the outer casing by removing the retaining pin, whilst still keeping the ignition lever depressed. Then you would either throw it at the target hoping it stuck, or run up and physically smash it in place. After letting go of the handle the delay-fuse would be activated, leading to the detonation of the nitroglycerin mixture.



REALITY IS RIDICULOUS 2⁹

⁹ This device embodies the ridiculousness of real life (bombs) in a number of ways. Firstly, the materiality is somewhat friendly – the language of craft – and not one naturally associated with warfare. These artefacts are elegant constructions of blown glass, knitted textile and wood. Sans nitroglycerin, they look like they might be lampshades or enormous Christmas decorations. Further to this apparent material eccentricity, they are coated with a layer of super-sticky glue: the original purpose of which was to catch birds (Wile-e-Coyote employs this exact tactic on numerous occasions). The fact that we also see them being painstakingly hand-assembled by women, adds a further visual component to the air of domestic ‘handicraft’ that surrounds them.



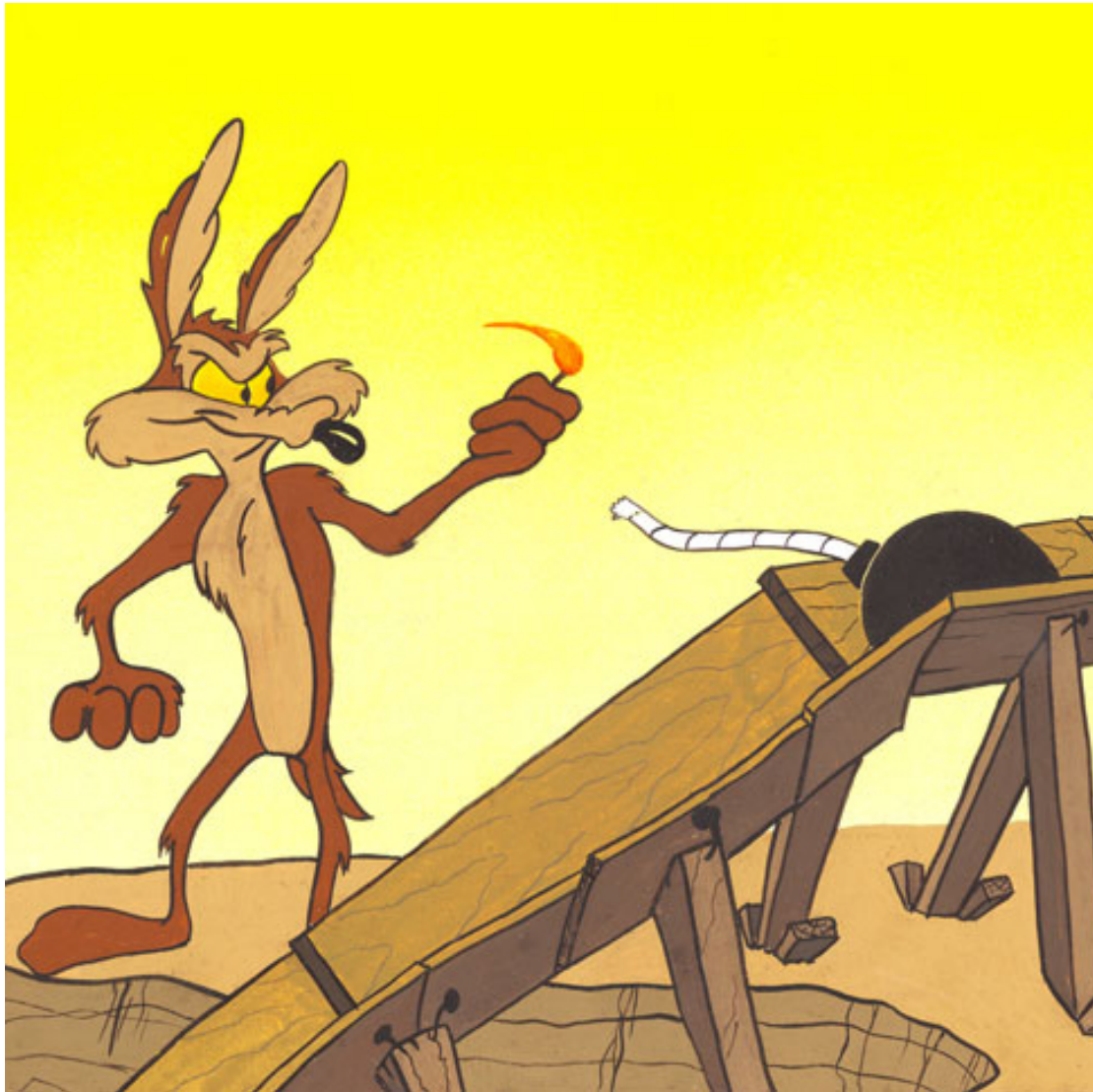
REALITY IS RIDICULOUS 3¹⁰

¹⁰ Then, we discover that the sticky bomb took a great deal of time to develop because it was difficult to refine functionally. There were problems with deployment, due to the extreme stickiness of the birdlime adhesive. In trials, the bombs had a tendency to bond with the clothing of those trying to deploy them, which led to a number of unfortunate self-inflicted injuries. The slapstick potential of this particular design fault is quite easy to envisage. It also appears to have been difficult to throw; it did not stick well to vertical surfaces and was best dropped directly on top of its target. If successfully placed by hand, the blast could fire the wooden handle off in the direction it was pointing, which was usually towards the person who put it there.



REALITY IS RIDICULOUS 4¹¹

¹¹ Last but not least, the sticky bomb is an archetypal ball grenade. So, due to the aforementioned layers of cultural reference, it now reminds us of a cartoon bomb: the type of object we have come to associate with animated animals blowing up things for the entertainment of children. It must be said that in no way am I making light of the sticky bomb, nor am I mocking its inventors or (most importantly) its consequences. What I find compelling is that the whole story of the sticky bomb, from the 'homespun' manufacturing images to tales of its inefficiency, extends the limits of believability. It looks and sounds like a made-up thing. It would not be given an important role within a fictional narrative because it doesn't appear to be a convincing enough bomb.



THE SLIDING SCALE OF PLAUSIBILITY¹²

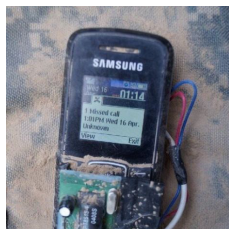
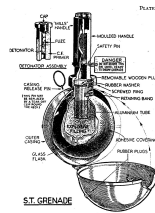
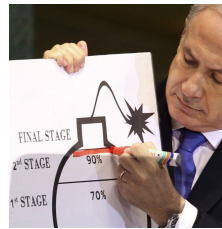
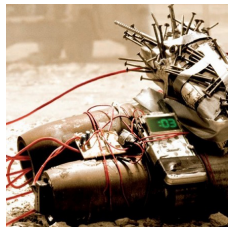
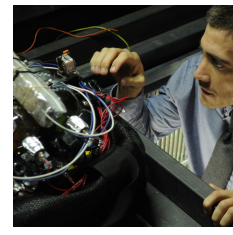
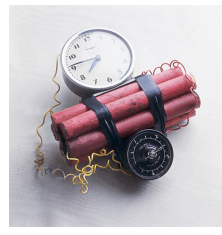
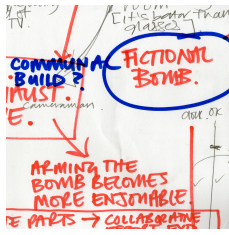
¹² When I began my primitive cardboard and tape model of a bomb, I tried to make something that looked like a prop from *Hurt Locker* rather than an ACME bomb, which I now know has equal basis in reality. The reason is that I have watched a lot of cartoons and Hollywood action films, and I believe that one form of entertainment represents reality more closely than another. This is not to say that I think *Hurt Locker* actually portrays reality, or gives me a true insight into what it means to be a bomb disposal expert. It is just that I have mentally processed the props from this film as representing something closer to the truth than anything I have seen in a cartoon. Deep down, despite my acute awareness of the over-saturated 'areality' of my screen-based visual consumption, I am subconsciously fooled into believing that I possess real knowledge as a result of watching something that is designed to look real. Over time, and through exposure to many different fictional versions of 'realistic looking' scenarios, I have gradually begun to build a database of on-screen moments using a sliding scale of plausibility.



UNKNOWN¹³

¹³ All of which brings me to consider the following: How do we process the vast amounts of visual information we receive on a daily basis? When we are watching something we know is a fictional construct, do we unconsciously separate out the more credible elements and retain these as 'ballpark-knowledge' or 'near truth facts'? How do we pick and choose from cinematic fiction the things we feel are closer to being real or true? Is there a temporal solidification of 'near truths', whereby tiny crumbs of fiction combine to form a nugget of perceived knowledge? Do we in fact experience an accumulation of disbelief, rather than a suspension, due to a build up of marginally true fragments? This is not only the case for bomb disposal; day-by-day we are able to access and witness more of the harsh and sometimes violent 'realities' of the World. We are told that this increase of information is empowering and Ultra-modern: that if globally we are more connected we will have greater knowledge, leading to deeper understanding and empathy. We believe that through the proliferation of mass media channels, we are more able to perceive the truth of what's really going on around us. However, I suspect that what we are actually being bombarded with are increasingly fine and subtle particles of sticky fiction.

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Words © Laura Potter 2012

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