

THE OWL BODYPROPS FITTING SESSIONS

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“Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”

Arthur C. Clarke's Third Law of Technology Prediction

“Ah! It's like if we ask someone 200 years ago and they describe a vacuum cleaner.”

OWL participant



Figure 1. OWL Bodyprop.

ABSTRACT

We propose a bite-sized version of the OWL interview processes for the PDC poster/demo session. The OWL Bodyprop devices were developed and tested in the initial cycle of the ongoing OWL project. Opening up the process for scrutiny to the PDC community will allow us to question and extend our thinking as the project continues to evolve.

Author Keywords

Participatory design, body objects, ambiguity, magical thinking, sculptural process, motivational desires.

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.2 Information interfaces and presentation: User Interfaces: User-centred design and Prototyping
H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation: Miscellaneous.

INTRODUCTION

The OWL Bodyprops is a series of open and speculative body-devices designed without a predefined function and tested as design 'probes' in order to ascertain their functionality. While the initial forms emerge from an investigation of the body, their functionality are determined through use. The OWL project emerges out of a desire to discover what might happen if we let people use their embodied experience and imagination to assist

us in the creation of unknown technologies. We hoped that doing so would allow us to leapfrog ordinarily incremental technology development and propose speculative devices that suggest large technology shifts. Thinking in terms of scenarios of use makes it difficult to make radical conceptual leaps. We ask if Clarke's rule holds an important key. Might magic and desire facilitate such leaps? (Clarke, 1984).

PROJECT BACKGROUND AND RELEVANCE TO PARTICIPATORY DESIGN

The project fuses fine art and contemporary design processes to arrive at ambiguous outcomes whose functionality is being ascertained 'after the fact' through interviews, or 'probing'. The methodology contrasts with traditional design processes, where the purpose and broad functionality of 'that which is being designed' is usually known in advance. Our field of concerns includes enchantment and ambiguity as resources for design, encouraging 'magical thinking' and 'making strange'. The OWL project is an ongoing process of which the OWL Bodyprops form a part (Wilde & Andersen 2009). Instead of beginning with a design brief or a particular set of technologies, we created a small series of upholstered fabric dummies that could operate like 'placebos'. (Dunne and Raby, 2002) These props are designed to be worn on the body in such a way that they would challenge the wearer and might provoke or support a strong emotional reaction. The OWL Bodyprops are exposed and evaluated through a fitting and interviewing process that is designed to encourage and record elements of lateral thinking and subconscious associations.

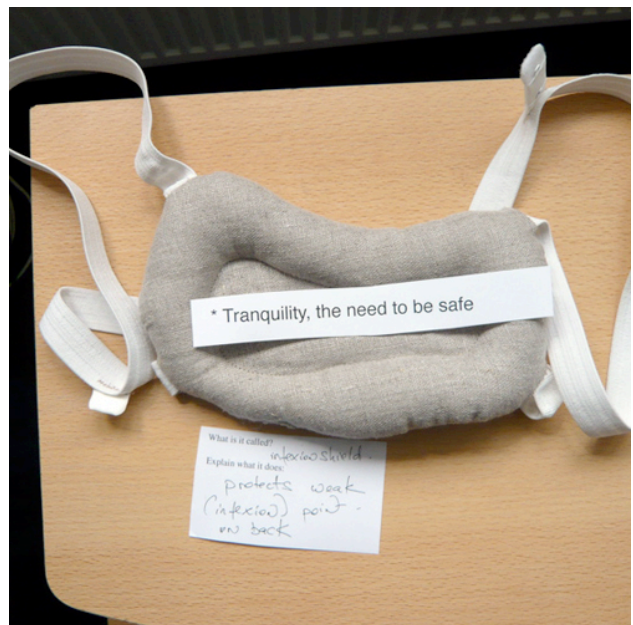


Figure 2. Prop and associated desire.

PLAN FOR AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION

During the PDC conference, we will be conducting the newest stage of the OWL project at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS). To complement this process, and invite the PDC community deeper into the thinking

that underpins the OWL project, we propose a series of simple “fitting sessions” of the OWL Bodyprops. These “fittings” form part of the more complex interview process we do with OWL participants. Willing conference audience members will be interviewed or ‘probed’ at the stand in order to expose them to our design process and invite them to become part of the research. This type of process draws strongly from participatory design especially Gaver et al.’s ‘cultural probes’. (Gaver, Dunne & Pacenti, 1999) The “fitting” will be playful and yet formalised in order to highlight the ambiguous nature of what we are requesting. It will also remain open, to shift in response to participants reactions and needs. The aim is to create an emergent, imaginative space where people will both discover and articulate what each body-device is. We ask simple questions like: How does it feel? What is it? What does it do? As we are trying to encourage magical thinking, we attempt a shift from the banality of everyday to a more fantastical mindset where our subjects can give themselves extra ordinary powers in response to what they imagine the body-devices might make possible.

GOAL

Since a major part of our project is devising and testing processes, our goal is to expose and open up the “fitting” process itself to the scrutiny of the PDC community. We are deeply interested in methodological practice, how the processes we execute in the field differ, evolve or even compromise the intended theories and stated methods. We hope to gain further insight into how our method compares with other existing or emerging methodologies of the field. We will use an open and theatrical staging to allow conference participants to join us both as subjects with private desires and concerns but also as observers and inquisitors who have deep experience with user methodologies and theory. By executing the process in public and thereby scrutinising the process itself we hope to gain insights into whether our system does indeed afford co-creation and collaborative imagining of that which does not yet exist.

TECHNIQUE AND SETUP

We would like to propose a setup in which we are interacting with the audience from a table or plinth in front of a poster detailing the OWL project. These fittings will not be full OWL Bodyprops interviews but rather a bite-sized version that exposes the experience of the longer, more complicated interviews. On the table we will have different types of response cards, the devices themselves and a selection of index cards with the name of 16 basic motivational desires (Reiss 2000). Working in tandem we will engage and convince audience members to be fitted with one of the OWL devices. After the fitting, the participant will take a self portrait with the device, pick an associated motivational desire and fill out a response card asking: What is it called? What does it do?

Audience members who observe the process or just talk with us will be offered the opportunity to fill out different types of response cards. We will exhibit all responses next to our poster and later at the associated OWL exhibition.



Figure 3. Bodyprop self portrait.

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Raw OWL Bodyprops data can be seen here: <http://magictchnologies.blogspot.com>

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