



Figure 1. OWL device self-portraits

Doing things backwards: The OWL project interviews

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ABSTRACT

The OWL project is inspired by Arthur C. Clarke's Third Law of Technology Prediction: Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. (Clarke, 1984) It consists of a series of open and speculative body-devices designed without a pre-defined function and tested as design 'probes' in order to ascertain what exact functionality they might have. While the initial forms emerge from an investigation of the body, their functionality are determined through use. 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'. While not necessarily anti-design, the methodology contrasts dramatically with traditional design processes, where the purpose and broad functionality of 'that which is being designed' is usually known in advance. This proposal is to open up the OWL process, to interview or 'probe' members of the OZCHI community in a semi-formal conference setting. The aim is to ascertain what kind of 'magical functionality' such a setting might afford and to plumb the willingness of this particular community to imagine through their bodies in movement. It is also to expose our methodology to the scrutiny of the OZCHI community, and to gain deeper insight into whether our system affords strongly engaged moments of co-creation and collaborative imagining of that which does not yet exist

Author Keywords

Making strange, magical thinking, participatory design, body worn devices, enchantment, ambiguity, body objects, sculptural process, desires

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

INTRODUCTION

The OWL project emerged 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 Arthur C. Clark's rule holds an important key. Might magic and desire facilitate such leaps?

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 & Raby, 1999). These objects were 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 objects are exposed and evaluated through a fitting and interviewing process that is designed to encourage and record elements of lateral thinking and subconscious associations.

Our intention was to begin with devices that complete and are completed by the body, to arrive at a space that invites contemplation about that body in turn. Working from this premise, with a contemplative and open relationship to the body, we have ended up with objects that invite the same, from the other direction, from the people who are experiencing the objects as they wear them. The entire process seems to mediate a reflective space as it frames it. The objects are evocative, and the interview format seems to slow down the moment of perception, 'making strange' that moment of considering an object as a worn presence within each personal space. As makers there is something inherently pleasurable about not telling people what something does but rather

asking them, and discovering the answers through them. It affords a shared reflection that will hopefully create complex and interesting results.

INTENTION, RATIONALE AND LOGISTICS

Our proposal is to 'interview' or 'probe' willing conference participants within the exhibition space, to expose them to our design process and invite them to become part of the research. This draws strongly from participatory design and also the process of probing, which evolved out of Gaver et al.'s 'cultural probes' (Gaver, Dunne & Pacenti, 1999). The interview itself will be formalised in order to highlight the ambiguous nature of what we are requesting, as well as of the devices themselves. 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 allow them to do.

Desire

During the interview process we introduce a second element, a series of paper strips each with the name of a basic human desire and it's associated need. Reiss proposes that human behaviour is guided by a limited number of basic desires (Reiss, 2000). These sets of motivations, each linked to a basic need, reads as a surprising shorthand of a complex emotional field and as such provides the OWL project with a useful list of "words" to relate the OWL devices to.

The desires are used to 'seed' the interpretations of the devices. They slow down the process of experience and speed up the lingual labeling during the probing process.

The interview

A table is laid out with the 16 desires, blank forms and a pen. Making sure the test subject is comfortable, the interviewer explains to them that the intention of the project is to 'design backwards', to discover what things do starting from within an embodied experience, and to encourage magical thinking. A short overview of the interview process is then given:

The devices are tried on one at a time. There are 6 in total. Before moving on to the next one, the interviewer and test subject discuss what it feels like to wear each device. The aim is for this conversation to extend beyond a simple answer, allowing the test subject to discover deeper responses as they deepen their relationship to the object.

The participant sits, and writes down their thoughts, answering the questions: *What is it called?* and *What does it do?*

They then choose one or more desires that they associate with the object. This does not have to be coherent with the other comments or responses, rather we are looking for associations between the objects and the desires.

A self-portrait is composed and taken with each of the objects. The participant chooses the pose and framing, verifying the shot on the camera to confirm that the image is appropriate.

A research consent form is signed indicating that we can use the material provided, noting that the interview can be stopped at any time and permission can be withdrawn, in part or in full up until the point of publication.

REQUIREMENTS

In order to conduct the interviews in an appropriate manner, a large table and some chairs are needed, set a little apart from other demos in order to give a modicum of privacy. A clear wall is also desirable, against which the participants can be photographed in a simple studio setting. The interview space can be seen as a small stage where the process can be seen but the conversation cannot be overheard.

CONCLUSIONS

Since a major part of our project is the devising and testing of a process, our goal with this submission is to expose and open up the process itself to the scrutiny of the OZCHI community. We will use the open and theatrical staging of the interview process to allow the conference participants, our peers and associates, 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 scrutinizing 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.

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