

Ignorance is Bliss

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“The concept of the Matrix isn’t much different from our reality. We wake up, carry out habits and go to sleep only to wake up and do it again. It’s like you exist but you don’t feel alive.” – Keanu Reeves

In this paper, I will be explaining how we are losing or even have lost appreciation (in some cases) of products that are of a massive benefit to us. I will be describing; the issue of how we value items, how covering the workings of is leading to a lack of interest in the items, and how we are detaching from them. I believe these aspects are important at building relationships with our items and ultimately making them more personal and to get more out of them. From these points, I will delve into how I intend to change this with design, how it can make a difference to individuals and society.

What is the problem?

As we have, and are evolving, we bring technology along with us, now this is both good and bad. Our lives are being made more and more simple everyday by new inventions, from paying for goods or services with a simple tap of a card or phone, to being able to access billions of different articles, images, songs, videos through the internet with a few taps of a button. There is now doubt that technology has made our lives easier and/or better, but as it does, we slowly lose touch with the actual personal value of artefacts. It’s no longer what you have, but more of how much you have. Fashion being a good example, where people own numerous amounts of shoes, watches etc. and as the numbers increase, less the value of each item becomes. This shows that we don’t often care about a lot of the items we have, we somewhat take them for granted.

Designs should be able to connect with the user, and not just become *another* object.

The Oxford Dictionary definition of ‘Connection’ is “A relationship in which a person or thing is linked or associated with something else”, in this sense of my previous statement, this connection is referring to users building a relationship with items, and valuing them.

Why is it a problem?

Devaluing

Value has many aspects to it; it has been debated by many as to where the root of value in products lie. It’s either symbolic, monetary worth, or of emotional, experience worth. The former views value as the monetary type, what a user gets for what they lose, and social aspects of it come into play here too. “Value does not necessarily reside in an object’s tangible materiality, but rather in the message it communicates” (Boztepe, 2007), people would buy vastly expensive products purely to show them off to others. This means that all the value of a product comes from its production. The latter type of value is more of emotions and the experiences gained from use of artefacts. “Since products enable an experience for the user, the better the experience, the greater the value of the

product to the consumer” (Cagan & Vogel, 2002, p. 62). People value items from what they gain from it, and the monetary value has nothing to do with it, but instead it’s mainly sentiment or nostalgia, or usefulness. Personally, I have huge sentimental value of my bracelets, given to me by my then-girlfriend of 5 years, and although we’re not together anymore, I can’t bring myself to cut them off purely because of the value I hold them to. However, I have had other bracelets in the past which I didn’t wear for long, and I didn’t mind because I had no sentimental value. They simply became ‘the other ones’.

I believe the monetary side of value is a shallow way of approaching artefacts, these are the types of items that I feel do not carry much connection with its users, and at the beginning of ownership, the only value that they carry is the fact that it cost money. I believe this to be the case with technology; as nearly everything is mass produced nowadays, there isn’t the sentimental value. Sure, there is value, if we lost our phone we would be upset, but we could go and buy another one. More interesting is the fact that if we lose our phones, it’s what is on the phone that we hold so dear rather the phone itself. With the introduction of cloud storage, this value we hold of our phones is less.

I feel that most artefacts are valued with the symbolic, monetary view in mind as a lot of items nowadays look almost identical, examples crossing from mobile phones, cars, and technology, over to clothing and fashion in general. This is because of ever-changing trends and users wanting to be part of the trend. With technology especially, I feel this is partly due to the concealment of it.

Concealing

Around the 1950’s, two companies, Piaggio and Innocenti were competing with each other to produce the best motorised scooters; The Vespas and The Lambrettas respectively. Both had the engines and internal exposed underneath, until in 1951. “Innocenti’s decision to launch the (“dressed”) CL and (“undressed”) C Lambrettas simultaneously in 1951 determined once and for all the direction in which the consumer preferences were moving in the transport field” (Hebdige, 1988, p. 96), and the results showed that the vast majority of consumers preferred to have an encased engine, as it was more convenient and looked better. Scooters became more of a fashion statement than a means of transport, and were often displayed in fashion shops, as Hebdige calls it “Jewellery on wheels” (1988, p. 99). This further shows how the value in terms of monetary terms is more prominent as cars have become a fashion statement and their purpose and function is very often disregarded.

A term created by German philosopher Martin Heidegger explains that there are two types of relations in which people and their items relate: Present-at-hand or Ready-to-hand, where you are either concerned purely by the item and observe it, or where you are involved with the item and use it. The problem with many items currently, with devices they “function well when they work with maximum independence from human involvement.” (Hinte, 1997, p. 113), they don’t ask for our engagement with how they work, but purely with what they produce. Phones, laptops, tv’s, gaming consoles, all are like this, but when they break/ malfunction “The absorbing engagement with it is suddenly transformed into a distant attention to it” (Hinte, 1997, p. 111), or in other words, it becomes present-at-hand. Unusable for its intended purpose and now just an object to look at. Repairing these items, yourself is possible but companies deter you from doing so by making you aware that taking the machine apart will void the warranty of the device, and so, along with the overwhelming aspect of the insides, people tend to either live with a poorly functioning/ broken device, or send it off to get repaired, or buy a new one. What has this/ is this leading to? Lack of interest. Lack of curiosity of how something works, how it operates. To know how to fix some

electronic items now, you need to have a huge amount of knowledge in what you're doing, to the point of maybe even learning how to code; which is almost an entire new language.

I believe that new generations of children are being brought up looking at screens without any real knowledge of what's happening behind the scenes, not only with technology but also with more mechanical items such as clocks, or bikes, or even toys as examples. This is having a knock-on effect on their curiosity, and ultimately their creativity to some degree. An instance of this is, a few years ago, I went to see family that live the other side of the country for the first time in about 2 years; the last time I had seen them, their youngest (my youngest cousin on that side), who was maybe 6. He used to have all his toys spread across the floor and would get in a tantrum when something would come up which stopped him playing. Not exactly unusual for that age, but when I went to see them the later time; no toys, but his *own* iPad, and his *own* game console. He sat there for the entire visit glued to his iPad on same game, he barely spoke, and then got in a tantrum when he had to stop 'playing'. When I was that age all I can remember is drawing, making, drawing again, playing with Lego or Brio, and making some more, and I know I didn't exactly have the choice of using an iPad when I was 8, but the addition of technology shouldn't hinder a creative mind. Yet it does. This concealment is causing us to detach from artefacts.

Detaching

As we break away from being involved with products, with technology, we are losing appreciation of it. People do not appreciate the time gone into saving their time. For example, it took Apple 5 years to develop the very first iPhone released in 2007, plus the years prior to that which lead Apple to the initial development of the phone. Now? A survey by Mobileinsurance.co.uk (2013) showed that of 2400 iPhone users as many as a quarter had broken, cracked, or smashed screens, 31% of which said they'd probably never bother to fix it. We are detaching in the sense that we no longer care, nor are interested about what products do for us, as almost all of them are ready-to-hand, and are rather an extension of us. It will reach the point where we don't actually need to do anything ourselves, especially with the huge advancements of technology such as A.I. "According to [Albert] Borgmann, the ongoing replacement of things that ask for instant consumption, may eventually result in an impoverishment of our lives" (Hinte, 1997, p. 113), obviously this isn't 100% true as it would mean our lives would be awful without any engagement, whereas I think there is a limit in where autonomy should and shouldn't be applied, for example, a parent wouldn't like a robot to raise their children for the reason of that it should be the parent's job, and in that case, would hinder the relationship between the child and parent.

How do I propose to solve it?

Designs should be able to connect with the user, and not just become another object.

Valuing

Holbrook (1996) described a sense of value which I believe help create more personal relationships with items: Active-Reactive, "In the first, I act upon it; in the second, it acts upon me", an example of an active relationship is a pencil, where the user uses it as a means of writing or sketching, and an example of the reactive relationship will be of a sculpture, where the user observes and appreciates the item. However, I believe if an item can hold both relationships with a user then it will ultimately make a stronger bond with them.

Not only, should the item be of use to the user, as well as visually pleasing to them, but it should also evoke an emotional reaction from the user, giving it emotional value. Desmet and Hekkert (2007)

refer to the eliciting of emotions such as happiness, anger, love, etc., furthermore, when an item has a similar personality to that of the user, an attachment is formed (Govers & Mugge, 2004), a great example of this type of attachment is the title of their article “I love my Jeep, because it’s tough like me”. This can even go further with the item representing a feeling, or a memory of the user (Desmet & Hekkert, 2007), amplifying the attachment between the user and item as it would not only appeal to them due to the likeness of the item to the users’ personality, but go an extra step as to show off the users’ personality.

Disclosing

I believe products should be able to be repaired to a certain extent, “our relation with products does not have to disappear when they withdraw in readiness-at-hand” (Hinte, 1997), where a lot of products currently need to be repaired by a professional/ expert, due to the specific tools required, specifically with even opening up the exterior casing, it creates almost a modernist approach to products, where they are only cared for due to their function, but once this function is removed, the product can be replaced or thrown away with hesitation from the user, purely because they had no attachment with it other than the usability and/ or cost. This also doesn’t have to apply simply to maintenance of the product but also its function, with being able to at least see inside, having knowledge of how the product works

Reattaching

To attempt at reversing this sense of detachment, products need to be engaging, because currently they are almost autonomous in what they do, they are doing activities for us and we are engaging with the output of this, be it, watching T.V, or driving car; even driving a car is becoming more and more autonomous as we start to introduce A.I. Products should be dependent on us to work, this will create engagement, and therefore a bond between the user and the product.

Solutions

So, to summarise the last three sections, in order to create a relationship with products and connect with them, they need to be of value to us in a sense more than monetary or symbolic value, they need to be of value to us psychologically. This can be by representing our personalities, an emotion or memory, however the function is still important, “things should direct attention towards themselves instead of just being a material embodiment of meaning” (Hinte), and by reaching this equilibrium of meaning and function, we can imbue an emotional attachment to the product as well as an engagement with it. This engaging value also continues over to the concealment aspect; the product must allow maintenance from us, allowing us to care for the product. Regarding evoking emotions, if the said emotion was curiosity, for example, being able to repair or even just to see the workings of the product would allow that emotion to be applied and explored. Reattachment comes from all these aspects, having a bond with the product will bring further appreciation of them, and ultimately, a connection.

“To deny our impulses is to deny the very thing that makes us human”-Mouse (The Matrix, 1999). I firmly believe that this impulse should be curiosity when it comes to design, trying new ideas without the mindset of the possibility of it going wrong, or worrying about what people may think. Breaking the rules is what makes changes in the world. Examples of this include; The Television – 1925, John Logie Baird gave a public demonstration of a T.V in London, however a year later Lee De Forest, a radio pioneer stated it was a “commercial and financial impossibility”. 20 years later, with people still seemingly unconvinced, Darryl Zanuck, a film producer said, “people will soon get tired of staring at a plywood box every night”. (The Culture Trip). Personal computers – 1948, the first

small scale computer, at the time an experiment, was shown in Manchester, and within one year a mathematician claimed, “we have reached the limit of what is possible to achieve with computer technology”. (The Culture Trip). The iconic design of Apple products, specifically the iPhone, which was very different at the time, but now has caught on so much that many of its competitors look very similar if not near identical. This took someone to step outside of the box at that time and propose the simplistic design, and from comparing figure 1 and 2, you can see where the mainstream mobile phones ended up.

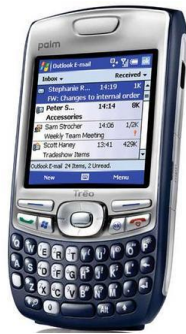


Figure 2 Palm Treo 750 (2007)



Figure 1 iPhone 1st Gen (2007)

Design Solutions

Modular Design

A way of making a design more personalised is by designing it with customisable modularity, where the user can mix-and-match their product how they see fit. There are products that exist which do this, such as NERF blasters where sections can be removed and different parts can be purchased, so with each blaster there are dozens of combinations. Some cars, namely people carriers, have modularity in some sense where seats can be folded and stowed away to create a larger boot space, or vice versa to fit more people.

Adaptive materials/sections

This is very relevant with products such as shoes, where they are worn almost every day, they soon have depressions where the users' feet sit inside, and even if they are comfy when first used, they soon become more so after use, this is almost from interacting with the user. The user uses and engages with the shoe; therefore, the shoe becomes more comfortable for the user.

Transparency

Having transparent sections on products, to me, is a very good way of getting interested. This approach is very much applies to the function of the product, as it can be utilised to show off the internal workings, this works extremely well with more mechanical products, for instance the controllers for the Xbox game console. Also, it can be used purely as decorative panels to perhaps create different effects on the surface of the product.



Figure 3 Transparent Xbox 360 controller

With these points in mind, I do believe that products shouldn't be made purely for the function, as previously stated; if the user is only concerned with the function then the product can be replaced easily. Therefore, I feel, not only is the function key, but also visual appearance because ultimately if the product does its job but doesn't fulfil its aesthetic side, the user won't develop an attachment to it.

Major project

For my major project, I am designing a car to be transparent. The aim is to pick up on emotional responses that people get when looking at car, but add another factor other than mere aesthetic qualities of the car. Through making it transparent, being able to see all the internals such as the engine, the transmission, suspension etc. I am to evoke a sense of curiosity, where the viewer will be intrigued by that's happening inside. Currently, the engines especially, are covered with plastic covers, within the body of the car so are generally well hidden from sight. Both passers-by and the driver will be able to see the engine working inside. The end goal of this car is not to be very luxurious nor sporty, but rather to be a statement, to act as a spark to potential cause the trend of being more involved with cars, instead of them purely being a functional tool to get from A to B.

Conclusion

In conclusion, to design products to enable a connection between it and the user, we need to find the equilibrium point between active and reactive; function and form, respectively. This will be through creating value for the user via emotional design; evoking specific positive emotions in which they will imbue on the product, therefore creating a bond. Also, through showing off the function of the product, making it available to be fixed by the user, by this the user will create a bond with the product in a physical sense, being hands-on will make them appreciate the product for what it does for them. Interacting with the product in this way is beneficial as it works both ways; appreciating the product, caring for it, allows it to do work at its highest potential for the user.

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