

Perpetual Perspectives

On Designing For Aesthetic Engagement

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates aesthetics of engagement in interaction. Aesthetic refers to the aesthetic experience, based on a phenomenological and pragmatist understanding: dynamic and personal, appealing mutually to - and formed inseparably by - our bodily, emotional, as well as intellectual faculties. Engagement signifies this experience as forming a deeply involved relationship between people and an artefact in interaction. The theoretical background upon which this work is based, asserts that we perceive the world in terms of how we can act in it. Action, through the body, is how we make sense of the world around us. To be congruent with these foundations and the topic at hand means that the research program was investigated through a constructive design research process. The research program anchors and outlines the goal of this investigation: to contribute shareable knowledge of how to design for aesthetic engagement in interaction by leveraging a first-person perspective. The findings of this research form two contributions to the overlapping fields of Human-Computer Interaction and (Interaction) Design Research.

The main contribution is methodological and is concerned with generating knowledge through design. The methodological structure of this dissertation builds on a programmatic approach that centres on the first-person perspective of the designer, who learns from experience by reflecting on design action. Such an approach is fundamental to the design tradition, but its dependency on subjectivity is also a source of epistemological conflict since design, as mode of inquiry, matures and comes in contact with more established disciplines that have their own academic traditions. For design research, to develop its own intellectual culture, alternative and bi-directional relationships between theory and practice need to be further shaped, articulated, and debated in the field. This dissertation contributes to this discussion around designerly ways of knowing by exposing how skillful coping and intuition, through mechanisms of reflection-on-action, generate a multitude of perspectives on a complex design space. These perspectives reveal parts of the complexity of designing for aesthetic engagement, while leaving it intact. Exposing and consolidating the first-person (design) knowledge embedded in these perspectives allows this knowledge to be articulated as a shareable academic knowledge contribution.

This shareable knowledge forms the second contribution of this dissertation. Reflections on the process and results of eight constructive design research projects describe a design space around aesthetic engagement. Individual reflections are consolidated into themes that describe how a design may elicit aesthetic engagement in interaction. These themes are experiential qualities: conceptual values that can be leveraged for a design to appeal to both mind and body in ways that are rich, open-ended and ambiguous. The findings propose strategies for interactions with digital technologies to open up the complexity of relations in the world between artefacts and people. Designing for aesthetics of engagement proposes ways to respect people' skills in making sense of the complexity of the lived world. In respecting the uniqueness of their body and the subjectivity of their experiences, to design for aesthetic engagement is to support the expression of personal points of view in interaction. This points to ways in which designers can open up interactions with digital technologies to be more beautiful, respectful, and liveable, as it touches what makes us human: our personal being in the world.

Keywords

design, interaction design, design research, aesthetics, embodiment, engagement

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