IMPACTFUL EXPERIMENTAL AND DISCURSIVE DESIGN
GUIDELINES FOR PRACTITIONERS AND CRITICS

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PAPER ABSTRACT: The goal of experimental and discursive design is not to create products ready for release, but instead to use design to explore new techniques, materials and products or serve as provocations for discussion, unconstrained by the usual burdens of designing for the real world. However, many projects existing in the experimental or discursive arenas fail to achieve the impact they could have had. Many are hampered by unclear areas of exploration, exploring well-trod terrain or failing to reach a significant audience. In this paper, the author attempts to suggest ways to improve the utility of experimental and discursive design as a tool for other designers to use and be informed by. Reviewing existing literature and both successful and unsuccessful examples of practice, the author proposes a rubric that designers working in discursive or experimental practice can use to better understand and critique their work before release and to make sure that it has the most impact on the thinking of other designers in the future. In this paper the rubric is applied to two examples, to determine its utility in promoting effective and impactful Experimental and Discursive Design projects and conclude with a discussion of its future applicability.

Keywords: Speculative Design, Design Impact, Experimental Design, Discursive Design

INTRODUCTION

In Bruce and Stephanie Tharp's *Discursive Design: Critical, Speculative and Alternative Things,* the authors propose what they term the four-field framework of design. Instead of arranging design by industry (e.g. transportations, toys, consumer electronics), Tharp and Tharp propose classifying design by its intended audience. They identify four "fields" of design differentiated by the project's intent and audience, termed "Commercial", "Responsible", "Experimental" and "Discursive" Design.
They define them as follows: Commercial Design is design aimed at creating a profitable product. Designers operating in this field use the process and skills at their disposal to create compelling products that consumers want to buy. Responsible Design uses the same tools as Commercial Design, but instead of focusing on the profit motive, it is concerned with helping those in need.
Experimental Design is concerned with exploring a small facet of design, perhaps a manufacturing process, a new technology or unexplored concept . The (RED) Desk by Marc Newson and Johnny Ives is a great example of this type of design. The desk began life as a commission for the (RED) auction to create an object to raise money at auction. The desk's *raison d'être* is to explore new possibilities with no regard to commercial viability or social good.
Discursive Design is concerned with communicating ideas. Tharp and Tharp identify this field as most closely aligned with art, saying, "These are tools for thinking; they raise awareness and perhaps understanding of substantive and often debatable issues of psychological, sociological, and ideological consequence." A good example of Discursive Design is the Circumventive Organs project by Agatha Haines. The project proposes that "hybrid organs could be put together using cells from different body

parts or even different species." (Haines, 2013). The project raises questions about medical augmentation, the origins of medical devices and even what makes humans human. The project contains a vague proposal of how these synthetic organs could be created, but the purpose of this project is to raise questions and provoke discussion, not to create a device ready to submit for FDA approval. Design without utility is not, the author believes, inherently sinful. Pure math is a worthwhile field and has produced a number of discoveries that later found utility in the real world, with applications in cryptography (Robinson, 2003), and numerous other fields. Industrial design too should be allowed this freedom of exploration, but this freedom of exploration should not excuse a lack of rigor on the part of designers. Experimental and Discursive Design should strive for greater impact beyond mere existence. The purpose of this paper is to explore methods by which Experimental and Discursive Design can find a stronger voice and to propose a rubric to guide designers and critics alike in judging the potential impact of Experimental and Discursive Design projects.

WHAT DEFINES SUCCESS?

Success in design can be defined in a number of different ways. In *Framework of Success Criteria for Design/Build Projects,* Chan et.al., perform a meta-analysis of previously proposed success criteria and count three objective and 14 subjective criteria that had been previously proposed. Most commonly cited were "Time and Cost", "Quality" and "Satisfaction of Client, etc.". Chan et.al., were focusing on the projects that would be considered Commercial Design, but criteria for success can be constructed for all four fields.

For the first two fields in Tharp and Tharp's framework, definitions of success are easy to propose. For commercial design, success can be determined by return on investment, market share or, for a money-losing product, how it pulls its weight in a business plan.

Design for Social Good should not be measured in purely monetary terms as Commercial design is. However, since it generally aims to change measurable problems, measures of success could be determined based on the problem they focus on. One of the examples Tharp and Tharp highlight is the Hippo Water Roller. The Hippo Water Roller is a roto-molded water carrier, designed to help those without running water carry water to their homes more efficiently. Since the design aims to reduce the amount of effort and time it takes to transport water, success could be quantified by confirming that users of the Hippo Water Roller do indeed take less time to gather an equivalent amount of water to users without access to the device. Many of the problems that these types of projects aim to tackle are multi-faceted and while a more rigorous definition of success in this space is a worthwhile endeavor, it is outside the scope of this paper.

However, just as there is no clear definition for success in artistic endeavors, there isn't a clear definition of success for Tharp and Tharp's last two fields, Experimental and Discursive Design. Tharp and Tharp define their purpose as to "explore" and to "express ideas" respectively, but this yields little guidance for what qualifies success. Carl DiSalvo notes in *Spectacles and Tropes"* that "without connection to actual practices or issues, spectacles [in this case referring to two examples of discursive design that he profiles] can quickly disappoint."This provides the beginning of a path towards success, but is by no means complete. Further work has been done by Matthew Kiem, Pedro Oliveira and Luiza Prado, pointing out a number of failures on the part of the Experimental and Discursive Design "greats" to consider viewpoints other than their own. While their work is immensely valuable, it highlights ways to

fail as designers working in these fields as opposed to paths to success. However, in their essay *Futuristic Gizmos, Conservative Ideals*, Prado and Oliveira come closer to what the author believes is a recognizable goal for Experimental and Discursive Design. Condensing the thoughts of a number of other authors, they say, "it [Experimental and Discursive Design] needs to penetrate public discourse beyond the 'art and design exhibition' setting, in order to become an instrument of the political."
This is a powerful thought to be sure, but how to achieve this? How is one to quantify the quality of material exploration in a project whose brief is to explore the capabilities of concrete as a furniture material? The author believes the impact (in the sense of long lasting penetration into public discourse) of a designer's work can serve as a stand-in, a somewhat measurable metric, for the ability of their work to "explore" and "express ideas". Drawing from the works cited above and personal experience as noted in the examples below, the author proposes the following rubric as a guide for designers to maximize the impact of their Experimental and Discursive Design work. The author has attempted to keep this rubric ideology agnostic, being more interested in making sure they provoke the conversations the designer desired and that they have a long life beyond their initial publication, so that they can continue to inform designers in the future. To accomplish this, the author proposes the following four points:

1. THE PROJECT HAS A CLEAR (AND POSSIBLY NARROW) AREA OF EXPLORATION.
For a discussion of a project to begin, its critics must know what area the project is attempting to explore. Projects that attempt to examine the nature of humanity are likely to be less successful in sparking conversations than projects that examine the meaning of humanity after the potential implantation of animal organs (as Haines does in her Circumventive Organs project). Projects must be clear in the *specific* area they intend to explore for critics to determine if the project is worthwhile and for other designers working in the same space to be impacted.

2. THE PROJECT CAUSES THE CONVERSATIONS OR ACTIONS THE DESIGNER DESIRED.
Since Experimental and Discursive Design aims to change or question the thoughts and beliefs of others, its impact can be judged on how many viewers change or question their views. If viewers remain unmoved, or potentially worse, misunderstand the designers area of exploration the design misses its opportunity. A successful example of this is Project Graham, commissioned by the Australian Transport Accident Commission. Graham, as it is sometimes known, is a realistic sculpture of a new human body, redesigned to better survive car accidents. The sculpture, designed by a trauma surgeon, a road safety engineer and an artist, depicts a human specifically designed to survive a car accident. The sculpture is grotesque and arresting, but the creators were careful to tie the project to the issue of road safety. Almost all media coverage of the project was tied to Graham's ability to survive a car accident and for the casual viewer his disconcerting form invites further discovery of his purpose rather than continued ignorance.

3. THE PROJECT REACHES THE AUDIENCE THE DESIGNER INTENDED.
It is likely that the best silent film ever made is lost due to the instability of nitrate film, careless handling and even intentional destruction. Because of this, critics and filmmakers have been robbed of the ability to be influenced by or study it. Likewise, a project that fails to find an audience or be kept alive and accessible by its creator has no hope of impacting future design works. Many of the potential projects

the author wished to analyze for this project could be considered "partially lost", preserved only in a single book or a few photos on an archived website. A project with so little reach has no hope of impacting the thinking of practicing designers. Though it is often difficult to find information about older Experimental and Discursive Design Projects, for work to impact future designers it must be easily discoverable.

4. THE PROJECT EXPLORES NOVEL TERRAIN, UN- OR UNDER-EXPLORED BY OTHER METHODOLOGIES. Design possesses a different toolset than other forms of inquiry (scientific, rhetorical, etc.) and should operate in a different way. Whereas science thrives on testing and re-testing the same experiment, design is not falsifiable in the same way, dealing as it does with multifaceted "wicked problems". Designing the same product as another designer is poor form, and, in countries with rigorous patent protection, a crime. Instead, designers should strive to explore new terrain, or if they feel a previous Experimental and Discursive Design project is incomplete, add or remix it enough that it is easily recognizable as a new work, building on the previous project. While this may seem obvious, rigor in this area can spur Experimental and Discursive Design to unexplored frontiers and is worthwhile to remember.

WHAT DIDN'T MAKE THE CUT

A few potential points did not make the cut to the final rubric but they are worth discussing. One of the last to be cut was "The project serves a purpose beyond self-promotion." While this is good advice for design in general, the author does not believe that intent of self-promotion is a hindrance to the impact a project could have. Indeed, while a project entirely guided by self promotion often lacks the necessary intellectual rigor, a desire for self promotion often drives a desire to reach as many people as possible, and with a large reach, a project guided only by self promotion and lacking in real-world grounding will have its faults discovered.

In addition, an informal peer review was considered, having an uninvolved party sign off or propose improvements to the project before it is released into the wild. However, this idea was dropped since it also focuses on some form of success instead of serving as a useful guide to increase the reach and impact of a project. As this paper is concerned with impact instead of an artificial definition of success, both of the above ideas were dropped.

Finally, many other practitioners, most notably Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, have worked to define non-commercially motivated design. While the work in this area is informative for practitioners and critics, for the purpose of this paper, Tharp and Tharp's four field framework fit the best to both define the scope of products intended and exclude the products that were out of scope.

THE RUBRIC IN PRACTICE

Too, as it were, "test drive" the proposed rubric, this paper will apply the proposed rubric to a number of examples of Experimental and Discursive Design. Running existing projects through the rubric, while keeping in mind the ultimate goal is to create projects that impact the work of future designers, should help others see how the proposed rubric can guide their own work.

THARP'S NUTRI-PLATE

The first example to profile is Tharp's Nutri-Plate. The Nutri-plate is a standard ceramic plate with nutrition information printed on the rim of a standard ceramic plate. When food is served on these plates, the food is surrounded by information about activities, caloric intake, dairy, fruits, grains, meat, prepared foods and veggies providing, in Stephanie Tharp's, words: "an important step to promote healthy eating among youth and their families." (Tharp, 2005)

The intentions of the Nutri-Plate are noble, grappling with causes of the then current obesity crisis, but by the above rubric it lacks the impact a better considered project could have had. To be sure, these plates explore a clear area, using their decorative features to spark conversations or behavior modification in users with regards to eating habits. However, there is little evidence that these plates ever made it to the intended users. In *Discursive Design,* Tharp and Tharp concede as much saying "A weakness of this particular project lies with its poor *dissemination*, having never gone beyond basic web circulation." So while it is clear what conversations the designers intended to provoke, there is no evidence that these conversations happened. This could be partly because of the lack of press coverage in either the popular or design press.

According to Ryan Holiday in his book *Trust Me, I'm Lying*, gaining media coverage is not exceedingly difficult, especially when dealing with advertising-funded online blogs. Holiday, a former Director of Marketing for American Apparel and consultant, argues that the need for online news outlets to generate page views, and thus advertising revenue, leaves them perpetually on the hunt for content. A good project with enticing visuals would not be hard for designers to gain at least some press coverage for. While media coverage is not a sure sign of an impactful project, it is necessary to keep a project alive and available for future generations.

However, moving onto the next metric yields more disappointment. Food consumption has been an area of interest to researchers for years and is covered, most interestingly in regards to this project, in Huges, et. al., (2017) and Holden, et. al., (2016). It is a problem that has been analyzed through multiple methodologies, Huges, et. al., using optical illusions and Holden, et. al., using a meta-analysis of 56 existing studies on the effect of container size on self-served portions. In this landscape, the poorly tested proposal (a small study was performed, but its results were inconclusive) that the Tharps' propose is notable in its lack of testing, proposed as a thought piece, while other authors were subjecting their ideas to testing and the peer review process.

Using this rubric the project can be considered unsuccessful, well intentioned as it might be. While the project represents an earnest attempt to propose a new method to solve issues associated with overeating in the developed world, it fails to make itself known to others or to explore new terrain that would advance the conversation on projects related to healthy eating.

THE FISHER PROTOCOL

The second example strays outside the field of industrial design to the world of political science. Roger Fisher was a law professor at Harvard Law School. Included in his prodigious output on the fields of negotiation and international law is a unique and, so far, untested proposal in the field of nuclear arms control. In an article published in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientist*, Fisher begins by talking about the distance that then-current nuclear strike jargon creates between desire and reality. In his example the President might say "On SIOP Plan One, the decision is affirmative. Communicate the Alpha line XYZ."

(Fisher, 1981), when the reality of the situation is that the President has decided to turn the Fulda Gap into an irradiated sheet of glass.

While discussing how to make those with the power to launch nuclear strikes more cognizant of the weight of their decision, he proposes: *"Put [the] code number in a little capsule, and then implant that capsule right next to the heart of a volunteer. The volunteer would carry with him a big, heavy butcher knife as he accompanied the President. If ever the President wanted to fire nuclear weapons, the only way he could do so would be for him first, with his own hands, to kill one human being... He has to look at someone and realize what death is—what an innocent death is. Blood on the White House carpet. It's reality brought home.*

"When I suggested this to friends in the Pentagon they said, 'My God, that's terrible. Having to kill someone would distort the President's judgment. He might never push the button.'" (Fisher, 1981)

Fisher's proposal contains many of the hallmarks of Discursive and Experimental Design. It is shocking, playing with violence and human sacrifice, while using these taboos to provoke thinking about the processes by which weighty decisions are handled. It draws interesting comparisons between the savage violence of hand to hand combat and the "emotionless" process by which missiles are launched. Applying the above described rubric, the author would judge this project an unqualified success. It is targeted, dealing in the specifics of nuclear arms control and how to make sure that the gravity of actions is appropriately communicated. To any reader it is clear that the proposal is both beyond the pale but, perhaps, worth consideration. The topics of discussion are clear, namely emotional distance from violence and how to safeguard society from catastrophic decisions. While it is hard to quantify how many people have been exposed to this proposal, its impact can be surmised to be significant. It was published in a highly regarded journal on the topic of American arms control, the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientist*, and continues to enjoy wide discussion in popular media to the present day. It continues to be mentioned in articles from *Popular Mechanics*, the *Irish Independent* and *National Post* as well as being incorporated in *The Leftovers* TV series as a plot point. The terrain it explores is completely novel, much of the arms control thinking up to that point had been focused on cowing an adversary into inaction, rather than on how to control inadvertent launches. Mutually Assured Destruction, as a form of Nash Equilibrium, is based on at least one actor, usually perceived as one's own country, being sane, rational and free of inexact judgment (Jervis, 2002). Fisher's proposal is different in that it focuses on how an actor can ensure that its own decisions are free from irrational judgment. The combination of a slightly transgressive approach to an unexplored area could be responsible for the longstanding interest in Fisher's proposal.

DISCUSSION AND GUIDANCE FOR FUTURE DESIGNERS

Fisher's proposal, and its subsequent fame, contains a number of interesting lessons to be learned for future speculative designers. The first lesson is in its presentation, roughly covering points 2 and 3 on the rubric. It was published in the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, a well regarded journal. The journal is entirely concerned with the impact of nuclear weapons on human existence and political science, giving context to the proposal. No doubt it would be interpreted differently if it had only been published in the Greenpeace newsletter. The language of the paper, and the journal, is clear and readable, Fisher's paper in particular is almost conversational, containing personal anecdotes and cartoons, it is understandable

to almost anyone, without losing its specificity and insight. The proposal has lived on and continued, without intervention from Fisher, to remain in the current consciousness.

For future designers, it is paramount that their projects make it into the hands of those who would benefit the most from hearing about them. Attempting to get their work in the blogs, newsletters and minds of tastemakers that reach their desired audience will increase the impact their work can have compared to posting a short article on one's own website. In addition, using the language (both written and visual) of the target audience will allow a potential audience to better understand what is being proposed. When scoping their projects, developing a clear, narrow area of exploration will facilitate productive conversations about their designs. A viewer who knows what area a project is trying to explore (though not necessarily what position the project takes) is much better equipped to consider and internalize it, and from there have it inform their own future work and thinking.

Secondly, Fisher's proposal presents a clear, specific area of exploration without giving an explicit answer on whether it should be implemented, roughly covering point 1. His proposal functions as a "mindworm", living on in the audience's head unresolved, refusing to leave like a half-remembered bar of music. Like the famous trolly problem, there is no unambiguously right answer, so the proposal sits, continually examined and reexamined by its audience. "Mindworm" problems such as these have a better chance of spreading. Phenomena such as this are examined in *What Makes Online Content Viral?* by Jonah Berger and Katherine L. Milkman. In their paper, Berger and Milkman find that strong feelings of awe, interest, surprise and emotionality in a newspaper article increase the likelihood of that article being shared by between 14% and 30%. Sadness is the only emotion negatively correlated with a desire to share.

For designers without Holiday's experience in manipulating the media, making sure that their work provokes strong emotions or contains a tantalizing contradiction, thereby creating projects that others want to share, further cementing them in the popular imagination, seems like a clear way to allow projects to have a life of their own after they have been released into the world.

Not all the points must be fulfilled for a project to be impactful, or each of the points be understood as yes/no dichotomies; rather they are spectrums that can be more or less fulfilled. They serve as guidance, distilled from observation of Experimental and Discursive Design projects that either managed to stay in the popular imagination to help future designers set their work up for continued influence or, instead, faded away.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, the author has proposed a rubric to guide practitioners and critics of Experimental and Discursive Design. The author has done his best to design a rubric that does not hinder experimentation or outlook on the part of designers, but merely guides them towards projects more likely to have the impact on the world and the work of other designers, both Experimental/Discursive and Commercial, that they wish to produce. Returning to Tharp and Tharp's contention that the purpose of Experimental and Discursive Design is to variously "explore" and "express ideas", and without applying an external value system to work of designers, the author believes the best way for designers working in these fields to succeed is by maximizing the impact of their work, allowing as many people as possible to absorb and respond to their ideas.

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