Designing Products for Everyday Rituals

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Abstract: The user’s experience of his or her interaction with a product is becoming an increasingly important aspect of product design. In the ‘experience economy’, experiential factors have become major discriminants affecting the success of new products. Industry is well aware of this, and likewise design schools are adjusting their curricula to better train their students to take into account factors of product experience. Areas of entertainment culture, such as theatre and cinema, have long developed theories and techniques to approach the design of experience. However, because product designers facilitate (rather than control) experience, these theories and techniques must be adapted for use by designers. On the poster we present a possible approach for this. The experiences involved in everyday activities such as brushing your teeth, buying a ticket can be understood by approaching them as rituals: human-product interactions which have a meaning and value beyond their primary (technical) function. In order to design for such rituals, designers need to attend to contextual factors such as the situation of product use, the people involved, and the unfolding of the interaction over time (including the time that the user doesn’t explicitly manipulate the products). In a project course, 150 Bachelor students of Industrial Design Engineering analyzed experiential factors concerning everyday rituals, and designed products that elicit and enhance these identified factors. On the poster we present examples of the techniques used in the analysis and conceptualization (e.g., product design storyboards), and the resulting designs.

Key words: Design Education, Product Experience, Storyboarding

1. Introduction

A hot topic in nowadays product design is designing ‘product experiences’ [1]. In this view products should evoke experiences that go beyond the fulfilment of their primary, technical function. For example, a simple object such as a champagne glass is in its essence just a container for fluid. However, by giving it certain aesthetic and material qualities a designer can make the use of the glass richer than just simply poring champagne out of it. The glass could ring festively and clear when touched with an other glass; the stem could give the tips of your fingers a little tingle of pleasure; the rim might feel just right against your lips etc: all interactions between the user and the product that make the context and experience of using the glass much more meaningful.

Designers should therefore direct their attention to creating contexts which enable users having such experiences. And because experiences are individual, such context should be open and flexible to adapt to and evolve with the idiosyncrasies of the user. Thus the focus shifts from the results of an interaction towards the interactions themselves, taking all senses into account [2]. Areas of entertainment culture, such as theatre and cinema, have long developed theories and techniques to approach the design of experience [3]. However, because product designers facilitate (rather than control) experience, these theories and techniques must be adapted for use by designers.
In a student project we have explored a possible approach for this. This poster will present the approach taken in the project, the format used, as well as some of the resulting product ideas.

2. Context

Within this project everyday interactions between people and products are considered as ‘rituals’: interactions that have a meaning and experience attached to them, which give them a value which surpasses their primary, technical function. Some examples of such everyday rituals will illustrate this concept.

Drinking tea with your mother after coming home from school is not just taking in a warm fluid, but much more a social event, in which attention, comfort, rest and contact with other family members are important elements. Before and while drinking the tea, cookies are past, stories are exchanged and thoughts are shared. Much care and attention is paid to the quality of the interaction between the participants.

The same cup of tea can also be acquired from a vending machine. Here, however, the interaction is much less richer in terms of meaning, and can even be uncomfortable. The user first has to select a number of options, after which the cup is ‘thrown’ down by the machine into some kind of funnel to be filled. Taking the hot cup out off the machine can be a cumbersome and even painful action (spilling the hot fluid over your hands), that does not contribute to the whole experience of enjoying a nice cup of tea.

Going to bed or getting up, shaving, brushing your teeth, taking the dog for a walk: all these routine activities might be perceived as a set of interactions, in which time, context and causality play an important part. A designer can enable or enhance these interactions through his design of the product. Everyday rituals are therefore used in this project as frameworks to analyze and design meaningful human-product interactions.

3. Format

In total 150 Bachelor students Industrial Design Engineering, which were assigned to smaller groups of five students each, participated in the project. Each group was given a specific ‘domain’ of rituals, such as ‘shopping for clothes’, ‘preparing dinner’, ‘paying at the counter’ or ‘having lunch’. The project, which had a total span of 80 hours, was spread over 4 weeks.

In the first week, after a lecture in which they were introduced to the concept of everyday rituals, the students had to make an inventory of possible rituals in their specific domain. Special attention had to be given to aspects of context, place, meaning and time. The results of this analysis had to be presented in a short and concise form on three sheets of size A3. At least two storyboards had to be part of the presentation, to ensure a focus on visualizing interactions. Each group was given a large door, on which they could stick and arrange their materials. Besides on their content all material was also evaluated on their presentational qualities. Figure 1 shows the presentation format of week 2 to 4.
At the start of the second week each student group had to give a short talk accompanying their visual presentation for their supervisor and fellow students. Based on the discussion that followed each presentation, one specific product ritual was selected for further development. For this product, ideas were then generated on how to enrich the interaction with the product in terms of experience and meaning. In contrast to the regular design courses functional aspects (how does it technically work?) were not taken heavily into consideration.

In the third week these ideas were then presented in the same format as in the second week. Besides their own ideas, the students were also encouraged to study the ideas of other groups and integrate some of these ideas as ‘visual quotations’ into their own presentations. The visual material that was presented the week before also had to be incorporated, reduced in size, into the presentation. The same large door again served as presentation platform.

One idea was then further developed into a final concept, in which the ritual aspects of the interaction between user and product were highlighted. For the final presentation in week 4 the students were given full freedom as to the format of their presentation: the whole door could be used as a background to highlight certain aspects of the product, 3-dimensional elements could be added to the design, playacting could be used to illustrate the interactions etc. Figure 2 shows two doors from the final presentation.
4. Results

Although somewhat reluctant at the start, the students quickly learned to set aside the functional aspects of the product in favor of the more experiential aspects. Concentrating on the ritual qualities of the interactions which they identified and analyzed in the first week, they were able to design a new range of products in which these qualities were highlighted and supported. Among these new products were the Pizza-Chew, a machine that makes waiting for a pizza which is in the oven a pleasurable experience; the Door of Emotions, a door that responds by means of it’s appearance and interactions to the person who is ringing the doorbell; the Crate, that uses crates of beer to support the ritual of setting the table; and the Cookie Plate, to enrich the ritual of serving cookies or cake. Figure 3 shows the entire development of the Cookie Plate, starting with storyboards and concept sketches and ending with computer visualizations and a physical model.
5. Conclusions

In this short project design students were encouraged to consider everyday activities as ritual experiences in order to design products to enrich these experiences. Focusing on the meaning of the interactions between user and product opened up many new possibilities for product ideas. Discussing these possibilities with their design tutor and fellow students made the students more aware of qualities which otherwise get easily neglected in favor of the more functional and technical aspects of a product. The presentation format, using a door as the main platform, provided for concise presentations, which work very well in the open, market-like atmosphere in which the presentations were held. Both students and staff thus could quickly get an overview of all projects, which facilitated the discussions.

In all the students reacted very enthusiastic to the project. The freedom given to them in both exploring and presenting was highly appreciated and led to products that fell out of the scope of the regular design courses. Although a number of them do maybe lack a sense of realism, they should be considered as study objects, allowing the students to explore and integrate their ideas on ritual product interactions. In this sense all products did serve their purpose well.

It is hoped and expected that participating in the project will encourage the students to integrate aspects of experience and meaning more into their regular design projects and courses as well. In the near future we will therefore further explore both the educational and the presentation format of the project.

References