Reflection – M1.2 Design Research Project

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1 OVERVIEW OF THIS SEMESTER

During this semester I conducted design research, guided by the Systemic Change research group. As I did an open project under the supervision of Javed, I had no strict requirements or guidelines as to what this project would eventually entail.

1.1 Vision: Towards an Egalitarian World

From the start I was inspired by Javed's vision on innovating design research processes, and wanted to find a way to make design research easily available to all companies, regardless of their employee composition- or size. A trend I've noticed in society is the power shift to large, international corporations. Increasingly few companies (i.e. tech giants such as Apple, Amazon, Alphabet and more) control a large share of the global market. I do not necessarily believe that this is a bad thing, although recent scandals [1, 7] have made me lean towards believing it is.

A part of my design vision is the desire to *contribute to a more egalitarian world* – offering smaller organisations the tools to compete with the giants. One of the greater problems I identified as a result of the contextual enquiry was the fact that in order to conduct impactful user research, one needs to have access to representative users.

1.2 Reflecting: Taking a Step Back

However, as I progressed through this project, I realized that the problem identified shared characteristics with a wicked problem [4]: it's extremely difficult to motivate people to invest (i.e. time, efforts) into a small company, unless they have a sense of connection to the company. In other words, this means that unless you have made it as a company, it's very difficult to get there.

When I realized I would not be able to solve this bigger problem, I experienced a feeling of defeat: the goal I was working towards seemed unattainable. However, through coaching I learnt that instead of solving the full problem at once, I could also contribute to the design community by focusing on a subset of the problem.

Instead, I started focusing on the *communication* of research. With the help of professional design practitioners, I was able to better understand this design context, develop a living hypothesis in the form of the *Live Persona* and evaluate it with other practitioners. In the end, I feel I have been able to do valuable work, and contribute to an eventual solution.

2 COMPETENCY DEVELOPMENT

Considering the fact that this project was a design research project, it is no surprise that I attribute most of my growth to *Design and Research Processes*. However, in order to conduct worthwile research, I also had to leverage my skills in *User and Society*, and *Creativity and Aesthetics*, which are competencies I have chosen to focus my efforts on during my *Research, Design and Development* Track. In the following section I discuss my growth in these areas.

2.1 Design and Research Processes

Throughout the project I based my approach on the Constructive Design Research methodology [8]. I became familiar with this during the *DCM100 – Constructive Design Research* course at the start of this academic year. Especially the *Field* methodology proved helpful: I used the described techniques such as *ethnographic-style observations* and *stakeholder interviews* as the foundation of my work. Additionally, I used *Experience Prototyping* [3] to explore functionalities of the Live Persona I would have otherwise not been able to.

The nature of my work was very exploratory, which is something I experienced as difficult. I used a *Thematic Analysis* [2, 6] to make sense of the qualitative data produced in evaluation studies. While I had utilised this methodology in the past, I still find it challenging because of the inferential nature required to operate it. Nevertheless, the experience gained in the methodology during this semester and the feedback given to me by peers makes me confident this is a powerful tool that I am able to operate in the future.

2.2 User and Society

I experienced the development within the *User and Society* competency as one of the more exciting things in the project. With this being an individual project, it meant I had the sole responsibility of reaching out to people, which is something that conflicts with my personality.

Nevertheless, throughout this project I came in contact with a total of 16 participants, spread over two studies (contextual inquiry and in-context evaluation). With all of these having some form of past professional design expertise, this was a very interesting learning experience, and resulted in great discussions. During this project, I spent a lot of my time on preparing for-, executing- or analysing user studies. Reflecting on the level I had at the start of this semester, I feel I have become a lot more well versed in the full process of conducting user research.

2.3 Creativity and Aesthetics

Finally, the last significant growth this project caused me to have is in *Creativity and Aesthetics*. Even though this was a research project which results in a lesser focus on the aesthetic qualities of my design, I tried to re-imagine design practice, using the insights derived from the research process as input for ideation for how I believe we could improve our design practice.

In the end, I do not think the Live Persona can be considered a piece of radical innovation [5]. Nevertheless, I really appreciated the process in which I dealt with insights throughout this project,

in how the user-centered approach helped me generate- and refine ideas.

3 CONCLUSION

Looking back on this design research project, I see a challenging, yet rewarding project. Personal highlights for me were the close collaboration with the professional designers, and making sense of the qualitative data. I look forward to taking the insights gained with regards to conducting design research with me towards approaching future projects.

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