Meta-Ethical Design

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Problem Statement

The design we ought to create is one that creates a high level of expectation from the user, shaped by manipulating the anticipation of a fulfilling of intrinsic prudential desires and continually surpassing those expectations throughout the life of the solution, ultimately creating intrinsically pleasurable experience for the user. Also, there has to be a high-level expectation from the designer established by positioning that expectation in a preferable speculative future. Through speculative consideration, the solution should continue to surpass the designer’s established expectation while the designer fulfills his considered intrinsic desires. Finally, it should push forward to the field of design by investigating and defining the affordances and behaviors of a digital medium through the application of the solution. Also, it ought to help the user obtain their life goals by maximizing what the solution enhances, and minimizes what the user will be left vulnerable to and what aspects of their lives will be suppressed.

More just, a designer out to create a solution this is pleasant for the user and designer, and useful for the user and designer.

Abstract/Preface

The practice of design is still a relatively new practice, especially compared to other professions like doctors and lawyers. With design still being relatively new, the recent adaptation of digital design would be in its comparative infancy. I use the term digital design and design interchangeably throughout this paper, but the focus throughout this thesis remains in digital design. I use the term “Design” with a capital “D” to refer to the design practice as a whole.

I chose the term, digital design, over terms like interactive design, interaction design, or other attractive terms spawning during this digital age, because I want to focus only on the design that is utilizing the power and affordances of digital computing and processing. It is evident that any medium that a human interacts with has some level of interaction that can be designed for, but I want this thesis to be focused on mediums that utilize the processing power of modern day computers and processors.

Although my paper will focus on digital design, other design areas may be able to use the core concepts of my framework to evaluate the ethics of their solutions.

As a designer, I continue to battle internally about what justifies a design solution. As I experience Design evolve from graphic design to communicate design capable of transforming behaviors and cultures, I question the handling of such an overwhelming influence. I have grown to understand that changing habits and cultures are an inevitable byproduct of creating artifacts that will be interactive. Every designed interaction cements an established behavior, creates a new action, or innovates an old practice. I believe such influence requires an ethical system of evaluation that not only allows a designer to gauge the effectiveness of a solution but provides a subjective framework that can allow a designer to create design solutions they ought to make.

I use the word “ought” intentionally. Regardless of the decision, you make any given moment; there probably was a better choice. Let us take witnessing a visibly starving homeless man on a street corner as an example. You can deliver him a portion of your earning to help temporarily alleviate his starvation. The best action could probably be to allow him to live with you, figure out his ailments and why he is in that position, and get him a job so he can provide for himself. Both those scenarios are possible, but the most ethical choice is the decision you ought to make. The decision you ought to make is simply the best decision you can make, in a moment, with what you have. Maybe you do not have the extra space in your home. Maybe your not one of the few people who can create jobs at will. Giving the homeless person a piece of your earnings was the best decision you could have done, at that moment, with what you have. Designers are in a very similar position.

This paper does not focus on where a designer is employed because that isn’t important in determining the decision you ought to make. McDonalds, for example, is a well-known contributor to the obesity crisis the United States is experiencing (Holguin). They recently hired their first Head of Digital, Julia Vander Ploeg. Julia Vander Ploeg has joined the McDonald’s digital division to improve their user experience design efforts (Dillon-Scott). Her additional brought about the new touchscreen kiosks at select McDonalds locations. Even though all of McDonald’s food is not healthy, what the digital design team ought to do is find a way to give people more control over their diet choices and health experience, which the kiosks does. Ethical design should work for any designer no matter where she. If there is no possible way to justify any design solution under the framework that will be described, only then should the location of the designers effort be considered.

This paper is an invitation into my internal debate as I explore meta-ethical theories and concepts of classic and contemporary philosophers, biology, and interaction/interactive design writing to develop a framework that can help designers gauge the implementation of one’s ethical foundation.

Ethics, as a term, is most commonly associated with applied ethics. Applied ethics issues are those that require reference to one's individual moral grounds to come to a solution. Some examples of applied ethics issues include abortion and capital punishment. It’s a familiar term that most people associate with absolute right and wrong, and often leads people down a path of subjective beliefs. To avoid a surface level debate of cultural preference, my paper is discussing meta-ethics. Meta-ethics is an investigation of the foundations of our ethics. It aims to dissect our actions and beliefs into definable attributes to ultimately define what ethics is in itself, as oppose to whether individual actions are moral.

My investigation throughout the development of my thesis continually ran into dead ends when I aimed to evaluate an action and prescribe a set of rules. Although all cultural foundations are based on a core set of values (taking care of our young, not killing one another, etc.), it's not the moral code that separates right and wrong, but rather how we interpret them. For example, it’s a universal ethical foundation to care for our children. It is essential to the advancement of our species and resonates as morally wrong to do otherwise throughout every culture. With the understanding that it is immoral not to care for your children, it would appear that an Eskimo mother killing her child would be immoral. Interesting enough, an Eskimo mother has to carry her children since they are nomadic culture. Once the mother has produced more children than she can care for, she has to make the decision to continue to care for the children she can carry and not allow the addition of a child they can’t support to end up killing all of the children. (Fieser, 13) Tough decision? Absolutely. Unethical? Depends on your cultural lens.

The dilemma of the Eskimo mother is an excellent example of how focusing on merely the action, the applied ethics, and not its foundation, meta-ethics, opens up a subjective dialog that invites people to judge actions through their cultural lens and eventually in end up in a fruitless debate.

Design has many parallels to the Eskimo mother’s situation in the way they are ethically judged. The aim of this paper is to break down a design process into the Platonic framework of an ethical action (an action that is useful to the agent, pleasant to the agent, useful to society, pleasant to society) and discover, justify, and exemplify a structure that would allow designers to criticize the ethics of their work in any context they are in.

This paper enters the reader directly into my internal debate as I have been prompted to create a digital artifact and begin questioning my justification, responsibilities, and ultimately the ethics of the project and my process. The format of this paper is representative of the internal debate we have human beings when we are battling to commit to a decision. I am guiding you along this discussion because I want you to understand more than just my conclusion but also experience my journey there.

Introduction

Naomi: There is a deficiency in my design process. I feel as though I am striving to create solutions for people’s lives without the ethics to support my endeavor.

Abram: A stimulating proclamation, where is the cradle of this reservation?

Naomi: I am not sure. As I navigate through the process of gathering ethnographic and traditional research, prototyping, testing and developing solutions, it feels like I have also manufactured authority. This fabrication of power is disconcerting. It is most unsettling because of its lack of constraint.

Some of the worst crimes against humanity can be attributed to lack of restraint, like slavery in the United States for example (Dyer, 101). Personally, this is an abnormal sensation. There feels like there should be some guidance.

Abram: The struggle, or lack thereof, of authority, routinely presents the darkest shades of humanity. Your inquiring of design’s home within those shadows compels me to probe the legitimacy of the path there.

Naomi: Very understandable. Follow my train of thought. We as designers receive prompts, whether internal or external. These prompts are self-interested. They materialize purely out the interest of the creator. As prompt transfers from the creator to the designer, there are no filters in the design process. The humanity of the Designer is the only tool that determines whether the prompt is just.

With the understanding of people being so unique, there should be something embedded into Design that synchronizes the higher moral standards of man into our work.

Abram: I see, your fretfulness lies within the moment of conception. Elaborate on a designer’s personal prudence and professional discretion being dissimilar? It is as though you are dishonoring a designer’s pronouncement not to conceive.

Naomi: It’s less about how they are different and more about their actuality. A competent designer is trained to identify the best solution to a prompt. It is part of what separates a competent designer from an inept designer. An inept designer isn’t going to question the prompt and create solutions with less foundation in evidence and logic than a competent designer. At the conclusion of both designers’ projects, we can judge and critique a designer’s discretion. At no part of the designer’s choice does the morality of the design come into play. We, designers, judge how well a design communicates, and it’s effectiveness, but not the virtuousness of a design solution.

With a designer’s personal discretion, there is no system. Take the Russian media star and socialite Tina Kandelaki’s agency, Apostol Media Group, re-branding of Kalashnikov and the Avtomat Kalashnikova 1947(AK-47) as an example. Apostol Media Group re-branded from Kalashnikov to Kalashnikov Concern, also known as the Concern, and attached the tagline “The weapon of peace” to the AK-47 following the United States and Europe sanction on the company. They were sanctioned by the United States and Europe because of their unmonitored sales to terrorist and other conflict areas of the world (Brennan). Instead of changing policies, they used Design as a vehicle to continue the business, using the new branding as a way to focus their marketing efforts on African & Asian areas of the world.

Design is one of the few professions that could have stepped in and allowed this to continue.

Abram: I would be imprudent to accept as true that designers are faced with the re-branding the tools of terrorism, Plan B, or companies pro-global warming strategies regularly. Nonetheless, entrenched in the design process, Ms.Kandelaki’s agency ought to have been deterred by ethical guidance? Professions with codes more publicly known, like the medical oath to do no harm, have doctors who perform to the contrary. Before and after the Second World War, American physicians carried out several unethical experiments of vulnerable humans resulting in severe injuries and death (Perper, 87). You are more trying to direct the moral code of a person than a designer. All professions have individuals who use their positions as a means to perform evil; there are beloved caregivers who kill children and national heroes that rape (Alt, 83)(Smith, 260). How does Design eliminate such possibilities?

Naomi: We can’t eliminate the possibility. Evil is as much of society as good. I do feel like there should be a boundary or identifiable gauge of the morality of my work.

Abram: It does not appear that the carefulness of the designer has any disconnection from the morality embedded within her. Moral systems are comprehensive of humanity. Every culture has a moral contract that is agreed upon by all members actively operating within a given civilization.

Your grievance is with the defining the actions of your work. In your design work, you are striving for a way to justify its meaningfulness.

Naomi: Ultimately.

Abram: Let’s start by defining moral actions. Moral actions are founded on four universal principals; the usefulness of the action to society, usefulness to the agent, pleasantness to society, and pleasantness to the agent (Fieser, 2). The design practice meticulously concentrates on perfecting half the spectrum. Through ethnographic research and prototyping, the usefulness of a solution is continuously being evaluated, perhaps shortsightedly. It’s the pleasantness that is less of the focus.

Naomi: Why does the usefulness of the action to society, usefulness to the agent, pleasantness to society, and pleasantness to the agent define a moral action? Aren’t the definitions of a moral action dependent on the individual and the culture they are in?

Abram: I’ll start with the second half of your query. When you are describing culture dependent judgment, you are describing cultural relativism. Cultural Relativism is the concept that two different cultures can’t judge each other’s moral code because they are looking at the same action through various lenses. Cultural relativism has a couple of issues. The first issue it has it never comes to a conclusion. Two people can simply say they subscribe to a different culture when any action is being evaluated they instantly become immune. If one subscribes to the theory that every society’s morals and values are isolated, also known as cultural relativity, and then one would have to endorse the idea that slavery, the Holocaust, and African pirates can not be considered immoral. One would have to condone these activities because according to cultural relativity theory, they don’t exist in the same culture or time we are in, and there for one can’t judge it. One would also have to subscribe to the notion that societal moral progression is unwarranted, given that one's ethical code is always appropriate.

You can see how this starts to break down quickly.

Naomi: I see. A person who belongs to two cultures also has the dilemma of choosing a culture when justifying a decision. It doesn’t appear to be counter-intuitive.

Abram: Also, cultural relativism lazily avoids determining right from wrong. Let’s look at the story of Fauziya Kassindja in 1996. Kassindja came to the United States to avoid having her genitals mutilated in a popular African tradition of female circumcision. She was imprisoned for two years while the United States government decided what to do. It was a very popular controversy because some media outlets, like the New York Times, immediately condemned female circumcision while others were wearier of being “culturally intolerant” (Fieser 18).

Naomi: I can understand the viewpoint of being culturally intolerant. If we judged everyone’s practices using our cultural, ethical code, we’d end up condemning the entire world for not being like us.

Abram: Not exactly, just because we are culturally unfamiliar with an action doesn’t mean we can’t examine it. Once we allow the some investigation of an action to take place, at looks at its core goals, it becomes clear that the culture has less to do with us intrinsically cringing about how wrong female circumcision appears.

Female circumcision permanently eliminates the pleasures of sex for women; it also results in infections, scars, and permanent walking damage. The reason given for this act is to ensure a woman is focused on her family. If she can not feel the pleasures of sex, she will not become promiscuous and unfaithful to her husband. Secondly, without her focus on sexual pleasure, she will concentrate more on taking care of her family and would be less likely to have children.

After evaluating the action, we can see it isn’t a natural necessity for the survival of the group. Also, we rationalize that female circumcision isn’t the most efficient way to accomplish the goals I describe. Now we have bases outside of our respective cultures to open a discussion up about female circumcision. Once we bring the discussion outside of culture, we discover that every person, in every culture, has the same moral foundation.

Naomi: Where do our moral values stem from if not from our culture?

Abram: You agree that we inherently know the previously mentioned events are immoral.

Naomi: I can agree that female circumcision loses it's cultural immunity when we start talking about the goals of the practice. Are we concluding that if we perform an action, and a more practical option was available, we were wrong in what we did?

Abram: Unquestionably. If there was a better method available, even if you are unaware of it, then you made the wrong choice. There are parallels to this in design. Have you ever looked back on earlier projects you have worked on, and deemed it “not the best collection of choices” based on your expanded knowledge and experience?

Naomi: I do go back and look at projects and consider them the wrong choices based on my current knowledge and expertise. Are you saying that I did the morally wrong action on all my previous projects?

Abram: We haven’t fully elaborated on the components of an ethical design but without much deliberation we can conclude that your former projects were less ethical. What I mean by that is that those designs weren’t what you ought to have done.

Naomi: Its as though you have created a paradox. Wouldn’t all designs be less ethical as time progresses?

Abram: No. We have to discuss more in-depth the components I introduced earlier to understand really why. To put a bandage on that for now, let us consider a design artifact in two periods of time. If in the earlier period you were useful in accomplishing a goal with the tools you had, and in the latter you’ve determined a way to be slightly more efficient, then it's slightly less ethical. If there a more dramatic swing, than the condemnation of the project is more severe. There is also a possibility that, with the tools of the time, it's what you ought to have done, regardless of the new knowledge and technologies obtained.

Going back to your earlier question, morality doesn’t stem from culture. Morality and Design exist in an absolute realm like other intangible phenomena of nature. Rocks, trees, and rivers are all tangible examples of nature. Ideas, thoughts, spirituality, are also natural but can’t be touched. Like mathematics, Morality exists in this realm that is true regardless of the culture or time. For example, 1+1 is always equal to 2, honesty is required for any society to be built, and black and white contrasts each other.

The concept of ethics and design becomes thought-provoking when one’s prejudices are marginalized, to survey the inherent values in design.

Naomi: Ok, I can come to terms with moral actions being independent of the individual and the culture they are in? That still doesn’t explain why do the usefulness of the action to society, usefulness to the agent, pleasantness to society, and pleasantness to the agent define what we ought to do?

Abram: Let’s start by defining the characters in this scenario. The agent is you, or anyone performing an action. Society is the person being affected directed and everyone else indirectly. There are many philosophical theories that have argued for centuries about what defines a moral action. Plato’s description we are using best describes a moral action, or what we out to do because incorporates both the effector and the affected. When we separate the two, we have two attractive and problematic theories, Utilitarianism, and Egoism.

The problem with Utilitarianism has been debated a lot recently with the advent of self-driving cars, so I’ll use their dilemma to illustrate the issue. If a driverless car gets into a situation where is has to choose to either kill four innocent people or drive off the cliff to kill the passenger, what should the car do?(Goldhill). This has been discussed in great detail in the Trolley Problem. In a similar situation, there is a trolly out of control and five track workers on two different tracks. The train will hit the four workers on track one unless you pull the lever to kill the one worker on track two. Most people seem pretty content with pulling the switch and killing the one person versus the four. In the same situation, a trolley is out of control and headed to hit the four workers, but, this time, you are on a bridge with an obese person. This person is so fat that your one hundred percent sure that if you push him off the bridge, into the train, you would stop it but kill him. In this very similar situation, most people don’t choose to push him. This dilemma is a “clear example of the tension between our moral duty not to cause harm, and our moral duty not to do bad things” (Goldhill).

What interesting about the driverless car scenario, research lead by psychologist Jean-François Bonnefon from the Toulouse School of Economics concluded that six hundred and seventy-five out of nine hundred people thought the passenger in the car should always be the one to experience the fatality, even if there is just an innocent bystander. These challenging point of view illuminate the flaw inherent in only focuses on the affected.

Egoism argument is that you are only motivated the do the things that will make you life go better, therefore, those are the actions that you ethically should do. The second argument is that your need to have sufficient reason to complete a task for you to morally have to do it (Suikkanen, 58). For example, if you made a promise earlier and can’t find any self-interested reason to fulfill it, then it would be morally wrong to fulfill that promise. There is a contradiction in this theory. Follow me here, it gets tricky.

First we have to define what is meant by good for you. Let us look at exercising as an example. If we are pursuing what good for us based on it’s on in inherent goodness, then everyone would also pursue those good things. Also, it would be good for people to have good those good things. Since your only goal is to pursue good things, and people having good things is good, then you should also pursue helping people have good things. As you can see a conclusion that leads to helping people is an obvious problem for egoism.

So, to return to your question, Plato’s formula combining the usefulness of the action to society, usefulness to the agent, pleasantness to society, and pleasantness to the agent to define what we ought to do works because it combines the best components of each side of the argument while considering the frailties. Although Plato’s theory was created before Utilitarianism and Egoism, it still is as valid as it was when conceived.

Naomi: I have a better understanding now of how the alternatives provide glaring weaknesses in theory, but I’m still not convinced of Plato’s theory. Please illustrate how the components come together to create a stronger theory.

Abram: To best explain the components, I’ll have to discuss further what their essential elements, usefulness and pleasantness, mean in the context of society and user.

Part 1: Pleasant For The User

Naomi: Ok, so what do you mean by pleasantness?

Abram: Pleasantness is a fundamental pillar in the quality of life we, in due course, intend on achieving. It encompasses what you would enjoy, what would make you happy, what would improve your life and what would make your life more meaningful. (Suikkanen, 4).

Naomi: How do I answer that?

Abram: You evaluate what are the sources of pleasures? What gives you pleasure? What is it to experience pleasure? What does pleasure consist of? And, how important is pleasure?

Naomi: I am fond of what the sources of pleasure are.

Abram: Undeniably, because we all have experienced pleasure. It is very personal and entrenched in the human experience. There are many sources. You can get pleasure from eating a cracker, and you can also get pleasure from holding your newborn child. There are many sources of pleasure. What is more interesting are the three questions I mentioned following my initial one.

You see, designers pride themselves on enriching lives, the best of them as a minimum. But you are only looking at half the equation. Eating a cracker can be useful, and we can fill a person’s life with useful experiences, but we would not consider the life of a person who repeatedly ate crackers someone who has had a happy and meaningful life. Only focusing on the usefulness of design isn’t fully taking advantage of the gamut.

As you can see from the examples I have provided, the differences between pleasures can be vast. It’s the intensity of the pleasures that can be the defining attribute of your work.

Naomi: I agree that pleasantness isn’t a concept readily presented in our design process. I’m most intrigued by your implication that more intense and long-lasting pleasures are presumably more valuable than shorter and less intense pleasures (Suikkanen, 7).

Abram: Think about what is it to experience pleasure. Experiencing pleasure is very intricate. The first thing you have to consider is, what causes you to experience pleasure is not always the same thing as what you are pleased about (Suikkanen, 8). For example, you can see someone homeless on the street, or digging through garbage for cans to deposit for five cents each. Their misfortune permits you take pleasure in your job and your socio-economic position. You take pleasure in learning and appreciating your life circumstances and situation. You don’t take pleasure in seeing the homeless individual’s hardship.

Let’s look at it through a design lens. Take the Virgin America redesigned web experience. What causes you to experience pleasure is the organization of content that is easier to navigate and more logical in its presentation. But, the user isn’t pleased about those things directly. The user is pleased about being to get quickly through the experience while being able to focus on the most important facets of their trip in an aesthetically pleasing environment.

Naomi: In your examples, there seems to be a difference between being pleased with things and taking pleasure in doing things.

Abram: Precisely. That’s the succeeding distinction I would like to present. My other illustrations seem to imply that the pleasures feel equivalent, which is furthest from the truth.

There is an experience implanted in the sensation of pleasure that starts to separate the varying degrees of pleasure. That is desire. These experiences are not pleasures as such, but they are experiences, which you desire to have for their sake when you have them. (Suikkanen, 9). You desire to own a home?

Naomi: Yes.

Abram: You also desire to own a pen.

Naomi: I am beginning to see your point.

Abram: You desire to own a home more than you desire to own a pen, as a consequence, the experience of owning the two significantly fluctuate, but they are both pleasures. The desires that Design can accomplish vary as much as the desires themselves.

Naomi: That view is a little troublesome. Some people want to experience the opposite of a pleasurable experience simply for the sake of experiencing them. Think about a person who has never experienced pain before, it is troublesome to equate their desire to experience pain as pleasure, as they are complete opposites.

Abram: Your opposition introduces an additional characteristic of pleasure. It would be insufficient to conclude that pleasures end with the desire to have them. Pleasures have prudential value, meaning they improve your welfare. That is part of what makes them pleasure. There are two types of prudential values; there is intrinsic prudential value and instrumental prudential value. Pleasures with only instrumental prudential value don’t improve your life in themselves (Suikkanen, 12). Money has this quality; just having money doesn’t provide any pleasure. Having cognizance of the affordances of currency infuses pleasure in the experience of possessing currency.

Then there are intrinsic prudential values, like having close friendships. These values improve your well-being in themselves.

The overall experience of someone desiring pain has an effect on his or her well-being. Though it can be described as pain, the value taken away from the experience could be rounding out the person’s character, teaching a person empathy, or any number of things. The main point is that there is value.

Naomi: I am starting to see how this plays a role in my dilemma. The authority that I invent by virtue of the design process does provide me with limitless power to create, but the shallowness comes from only creating the useful. For me to create for the betterment of my audience, I should take into account the pleasantness of my actions.

Does having pleasant experiences make your life go better in itself?

Abram: Surely. It’s true in two systems. Biologically, nature has made pleasure and pain our scale on what we are ought to do and not to do. Sex is an instance where we are biologically wired to get pleasure from that experience because it is fundamentally advantageous for our species. The inverse is true for painful actions.

In a more psychological sense, nothing can make your life go better unless it is something that motivates you (Suikkanen, 13). Let’s look at having close friends; the sensation of having close friends moves you toward having that experience. Money alone would not provide that same motivation.

If you can understand what makes your life go better must be able to motivate you, and that nothing else than pleasures and pains move you, then you can see how only pleasure and pain have prudential value.

Naomi: I want to make sure I comprehend the components of pleasure apparently. The first component is it’s varying degrees of intensity. The second component is its source is not always what your pleased about, thirdly you have to desire something for it to be pleasurable, and they need to have intrinsic prudential value to improve well–being. This is correct, right?

Abram: Indeed.

Naomi: Before I begin to articulate how this all ties into my dilemma, could you explain more the idea of well-being?

Abram: Certainly. Happiness, well-being, and the meaning of life are at the core of ethics. When we talk about well-being, we are talking about prudential value. The more items of intrinsic prudential value your have in your life, the greater your well-being. Happiness is similar.

Before I go to happiness, I want to make clear what I am talking about when I use the term happiness. There are a couple of ways you can use the term happiness. You can say your feeling happy, which describes the emotional state. For example, you can be happy to get a car. In this sense, all that needs to be made clear is there is a positive emotional sensation that is happening when you obtained your new car. There are some issues with that use of the word, but I will not elaborate today on that subject.

The second usage and the one I’m going to be talking about are living life at a high level of well-being. For example, you can say someone has had a happy life. This use of the term would mean that the person has lived a life with a high-level of well-being.

There is another component of the second use case of happiness, and that is the fulfillment of a life plan. Your happiness increases with the execution of life goals and you are happy to the degree you think that your life is following your life plans.

Naomi: It is difficult to discover how the level of intense pleasure that we discussed earlier can be accomplished through Design.

Abram: As Descartes advised us, we should pursue clarity in philosophy by dividing philosophical problems into smaller parts than can be considered separately (Suikkanen, 5). Let us begin with the intensity of pleasure.

What are the strongest desires people have?

Naomi: Well, there are sixteen universal desires that drive all people. People prioritize them differently, but they are universal nonetheless. They are the desire for knowledge, to influence, to be autonomous, for social standing, for peer companionship, to get even, to obey a traditional moral code, to improve society, to exercise muscles, for sex, to raise own children, to organize, to eat, for approval, to avoid anxiety, and to collect or to value of frugality (Reiss).

Abram: Let’s examine the desire for knowledge. If your audience’s greatest desire is to obtain knowledge, then how she experiences achieving her goal can increase the intensity of that pleasure ultimately increasing the pleasantness. Taken together, the intensity of our pleasures is directly influenced by our desire, and our happiness is influenced by our ability to achieve these goals. Where further exploration is warranted is into, how do you design for the pleasure of obtaining knowledge, once you’ve identified that knowledge is your users overall greatest desire?

Naomi: Going back to the examples of the cracker and the newborn. The cracker delivers pleasure, but it did little to appease truly the universal desire to eat and didn't come nearly as close to the intrinsic feeling of satiation in comparison to the newborn. The holding of a newborn child satisfies the motive of family, and the desire to raise one’s children while amplifying the intrinsic feeling of love.

It also helps that the desire to raise one’s children usually greatly exceeds one’s desire to eat. This is true, partly because the former happens a few times in a lifetime, and the latter happens a few times a day.

What I also find intriguing is the anticipation of a newborn child. A parent anticipates the birth of their newborn child for months prior to their arrival. Every moment between the news of the pregnancy to the birth of the child increases the desire, hence making the pleasure more intense.

A cracker, on the other hand, takes maybe seconds between the wanting and the receiving of the cracker. Although, if a starving man received news he would be receiving crackers moments before a human would die of starvation, then the intensity pleasure of eating those crackers might exceed that of the holding a newborn.

So, if a user’s greatest desire is to experience knowledge, it would seem to increase the intensity of the pleasure they collect receiving the knowledge, you would have to create expectation and anticipation of the knowledge they desire.

Abram: Indeed our most intense pleasures spawn from expectation and anticipation, but the intensity of pleasure is only part of the spectrum for its pleasantness. Let’s now take into account the intrinsic prudential value of a design. How do you suggest that be incorporated?

Naomi: If we look at money and having close friends again, the difference is the former is a means to the latter desire. For a design to have intrinsic prudential value, it would have to be a destination for pleasure, rather than a means to get there.

Let us assume again that our user’s strongest desire is the desire for knowledge, then a web experience like WikiWand would be and example of a design solution having intrinsic value.

Abram: How so? I assume the wisdom of Wikipedia would have the intrinsic prudential value as it is the quencher of the desire of knowledge.

Naomi: As you stated before, the source of the pleasure is not always what you are pleased about. Wikipedia as a source of information would satisfy our user’s desire, but it wouldn’t be what she was delighted about in WikiWand. The interface’s design makes the information of Wikipedia more easily digestible, and navigable, which makes it a terminus of pleasure for a user looking to digest knowledge, and not just a means to get there.

To understand and have an understanding of the affordances of creating pleasures by means of desire, I need to have a better understanding of what a desire itself is. You see, if I am looking to maximize the pleasure of an experience, it does me no good to work backward to the problem. I need to identify the core of the pleasure. Can you further explain desire?

Abram: Certainly. First, we have to identify what’s at the core of desire. Is desiring to be great the same as being motivated to be great, or does desiring to be great only cause that motivation?

Naomi: I would have to say the latter.

Abram: I would agree. The essence of a desire is the motivation to bring something about. Like pleasures, desires can be categorized, but into three groups.

There are instrumental desires. Similar to instrumental prudential pleasures, instrumental desires are only a means to another end, as the desire to visit Facebook to message a friend. In that example, the person desires to message a friend and Facebook is a means to get to the secondary desire. Then there are realizer desires. Realizers are desires that help you fulfill a desire that’s not the same as the action. It’s pretty similar, so I’ll provide another example, a person going on Facebook to realize the desire to experience a new site. The visit to Facebook does fulfill the desire to experience a new site, just not the same desire to the action. The previous example doesn’t fulfill the desire of messaging a friend simply by being there. The last group of desires is intrinsic desires. Intrinsic desires are like intrinsic prudential values; they are realized by themselves. Continuing with the Facebook example, an intrinsic desire would be to want to visit Facebook simply just to be on Facebook.

All these groups of desires create a motivation to achieve an action. This happens because desires are associated with a reward event (Schroeder). Biologically, when we achieve what our desires motivate us to do, we release a chemical called dopamine from our brains, which is gratifying. Dopamine is the same chemical released when drugs are abused, during sex, and all other actions we find satisfying.

The strength of the desire varies based on how much reward you will receive for the action. You desire food less than you desire friendship because the reward of friendship is greater. This partly because the reward event of dopamine release fluctuates based on how much the reward exceeds our expectation. The amount a friend can exceed expectation is far greater than how much a meal can exceed your expectation.

Let us imagine a person who has never used an iPhone 6s and isn’t aware of an iPhone 6s’ full functionality and this person has text before with a flip phone. When this person goes to create a text message, based on her expectation of a messaging interface, the iPhone 6s would greatly exceed her expectation and release more dopamine. When this excess dopamine is released, the dopamine is used to solidify neurons that lead to that action, and the neuron connections are strengthened. The solidifying of the neurons makes the delight linger but also creates the expectation, so the next time she use the interface, and it does what she expects, then there will be less of a dopamine release because she doesn’t need to strengthen the neurons to that action as much as before.

Naomi: So to increase the intensity of pleasure, I would have to create expectancy and anticipation of her desire. The greater the desire, the higher the threshold of pleasure can be.

To increase how much someone desires a thing, you have to increase her expectation of a thing, but ultimately it will dissipate unless the experience can repeatedly surpass her expectations.

So I’d conclude that a Design, to be most pleasant to society, should create high expectation within her and then surpass those implanted expectations repeatedly, while increasing anticipation as high as possible. Also, in this framework, intrinsic pleasures and desires are crucial to achieving optimal pleasantness.

[create an example of this]

Abram: It would seem so. In both examples, I’m curious as to how you control anticipation.

Naomi: Anticipation is all linked to our biology. We anticipate events because biologically we need to be right. Our ability to anticipate is one of the main reasons we have been able to evolve as a species.

Abram: Please elaborate.

Naomi: If you hear a loud bark of a dog, your heart rate quickens, the blood flow to your muscles increase, and hormones are released throughout your body (Huron, 4). All of the previously mentioned actions happen in order to prepare you for an impending attack (Huron, 4). We anticipate things because we need to be right, it’s biologically advantageous to be right. If we couldn’t anticipate that the impending dog was dangerous, we would be dead.

Abram: I can now more easily relate the two sensations.

Naomi: Anticipation is all about our instincts, primarily our instinct to expect the worst. We consistently expect the worst to happen because we need to stay mentally prepared, even after false alarms. For the previously mentioned reason, we respond to similar stimuli we know aren’t dangerous because our instincts don't like to take chances.

Abram: A lot of our instincts are linked to fear or our survival. How do you break that down into something that is usable for design?

Naomi: Anticipation has different stages When these different stages are understood, they can be utilized to influence someone’s experience. Examples of controlling anticipation can be found in different artistic fields, like music.

Abram: I am interested in being enlightened by your music example, but first explain to me these stages of anticipation.

Naomi: Surely. In that brief moment of time that we anticipate an event, we mentally go through 5 stages of evaluating the event. The stages are imagination, tension, prediction, reaction, and appraisal.

In the imagination stage, we envision what the outcome of a future event will be, which can lead to vicarious pleasure or displeasure–as though the outcome has already happened. We don’t naturally think about future possibilities; we feel them (Huron, 8). Being able to feel these events is a powerful affecter of our behavior. It’s what gives her the ability to skip more immediate, simple pleasures, to achieve greater pleasures later.

Then there is the tension stage. The tension stage we increase our arousal and attention to be prepared for the forthcoming event. In the previous dog example, we physically prepare for the attack on the previously mentioned steps. We also block all distracting thoughts, sights, smells, and other outside stimuli to be mentally prepared for the impending event. Lastly, we wait until the last possible moment to maximize the number of resources we are going to use for the impending event. If we didn’t wait until the last moment, we would be exhausted by the time the dog showed up. Similar to an outfielder in baseball, the longer we are tense in preparation for an event the more exhausted we are, even if the event doesn’t happen.

In the prediction stage, the same way we are rewarded for achieving our desires, we are rewarded for our correct predictions (Huron, 12). These hormones are released to offset the stresses that the body may experience. For example, when she runs for a bus that she predicted would pull off and she cuts her arm on something, she won’t feel it until she gets on the bus. Her body prepares her to continue to function as best as possible during the stress event. Inversely, in the absence of real danger, the hormonal release is very pleasurable.

The reaction stage is where one of three primal actions occur. She either fights, flights, or freezes. It begins in milliseconds and happens either consciously or unconsciously (Huron, 13). Finally, the appraisal stage is where she takes a moment to consider the event consciously and react to it.

Some of the greatest pleasures stem from our natural response to these fears. Let’s look at laughter as an example. Laughter is commonly known to express pleasure, most of the time. What is interesting about laughter is that it stems from fear and our expectations. Let’s look at the simple game of peek-a-boo. When a face suddenly appears, the infant is biologically preparing for the danger, as our instincts always assume the worst. After the infant realizes that there is no danger, the endorphins released in preparation for the event provide a delightful feeling, and she vocalizes that there is no danger through her laughter. What’s interesting in this example is that the stark contrast between in the expectation of the event and the result.

Abram: The dissection of anticipation is fascinating. Anticipation seems to happen in an instant, and it’s thought-provoking how much that instant can dissever. You have insinuated some positive effects of controlling different moments within the time space we’ve labeled anticipation, but most of the positive results seem to very primal and linked to survival. How do these layers of anticipation play a role in design?

Naomi: Whenever she can’t predicate an action it will always grab her attention. She is biologically wired to want to be right; it is dangerous not to be. She spends all day making observations, predicting the most probable outcome, and comparing the actual events to her hypothesis. The more she can predict an action the more surprising it is when it doesn’t meet her expectation. Using catching a baseball as an example, if she has a ball tossed to her at a moderate speed and she has her eyes follow and predict it’s path, she would be more surprised not to catch it than to catch it. Vice-versa, if the ball is tossed at a batter, hit at a speed that is harder to follow, and she predicts it will land in an area that she is not confident her athletic ability will allow her to get to in time, she would be more surprise to catch it than to not catch it.

An example of how this theory can be found in the design of web navigation. When a website loads, she anticipates the navigation will be on top of the screen, maybe even the left or right. She also predicts that the navigation will have links to different pages and sections of the site. Other than those two expectations, navigation to sites usually has free reign to be creative. The Dim Sum website (http://resn-experiments.tumblr.com/) is a great example of using anticipation as n tool to increase the pleasure of an interaction. She will predict, and be correct, about where the navigation to the site is upon entering the site. She will also be correct in predicting that clicking the menu will initiate a series of events that will lead to a list of text links to click on. She would be wrong the assume nothing would happen when the mouse hovered over the menu icon, getting her attention. She would have also been wrong if she predicted she would scroll through the large text options on a 2-dimensional plane. As the icons creatively and beautifully appear and disappear in the 3d space, her failed intuition would spark more interest into the current environment. This happens not merely because it was unexpected, but because there was a reason to believe she knew the possible outcome based on her culture and previous experiences.

Abram: Anticipation is going hand-in-hand with expectation.

Naomi: I do agree that they function on similar plains, but they inform each other as oppose to creating redundancy. Design could benefit from understanding the human biological reaction to events. It would be too threating to go a website and it closes the browser and starts typing on over your computer screen.

Although the experience should be something new and irregular, it has to be rooted in familiar cultural and life experiences. The unpredictable response has to feel non-threatening and controllable because it’s in our nature to respond to change in a prescribed manner. It is most beneficial when a person can predict correctly they are wrong. It increases the impact of the wrong predication and increases the dopamine flow.

Abram: Let us review and elaborate on the formula you mentioned to ensure we have the same understanding of the method.

For a Design solution to be most pleasant to the user, it should first create high expectation within her. Making it evident a design solution can fulfill intrinsic prudential desires creates expectation that can be maximized. Also, these expectations have to be consistently surpassed to remain the most pleasant experience possible. A design should also take advantage of her biological prediction responses to create a highly anticipated experience while overall creating an intrinsically pleasurable experience.

Naomi: Correct.

Part 2: Pleasant for The Designer

Abram: Let’s move on to the next quarter of the equation. So far we have elaborated on the method of providing the most pleasantness to society. It should be clear what the term pleasantness is referring to. That being said, we did pass on the first capacity of the equations, which began with providing the most pleasantness to the agent. In this framework, the agent here would be you, the designer.

Naomi: I’ve maintained the belief that a designer’s role in the design process is to remain in the shadow of the design solution. Individual agendas and biases distract, or get in the way, of creating a design solution that is purely manifested from the problem it is trying to solve. That being said, the notion of creating with conscious awareness of your agenda seems counterproductive to the solving the problem.

Abram: A process, preserved in that novel, pure, method of completion admittedly omits the most powerful asset in the design process, the person. Each person inevitably has a bias of some sort. Our worldview is a reinterpretation of our perspective.

Naomi: Indeed. A designer who only knows how to create print projects undoubtedly will find a print solution to any problem. This is similar to the metaphor of only having a hammer and seeing every problem as a nail.

Since we have already dissected the elements of pleasantness and summarized the components of how to create the most pleasant design for society, would we only transfer the concept and change society to the designer as the focus point?

Abram: If we made a direct reinterpretation, for a Design solution to be most pleasant to the designer, there should be high expectations for the solution. The design solution should fulfill intrinsic prudential desires of the designer and the high level of expectation consistently be surpassed during the duration of the design solution’s life span.

How would you describe the expectation of the designer during the design process?

Naomi: What each designer expects from their solutions varies as much as designers do. In my experience, there has not been any explicit focus on the degree expectation of a solution. Mainly, the level of expectation for a project has varied based on some factors, all seemingly connected to a pure assessment of the goal. For example, if the goal of a design is to get more people to visit a website, then the expectation would be to increase the traffic by some amount. We don’t fixate on the figure; that is more of a marketing agenda.

Abram: We described expectation as the threshold of how much pleasure can be experienced. To consciously gauge the expectation throughout the design process, there has to be an expectation that is weighed. This established expectation would have to be ambitious enough to ensure that surpassing it would provide greatest possible pleasure. Let us look University of California-Riverside professor Cecile K. Cho experiment connecting expectation setting to happiness. One hundred and thirty-four participants were asked how much return on stocks would make them happy. They were all asked to invest five thousand four hundred dollars. Afterward, they were tricked to believe that they had received the return they said they were happy with. Although the participants all chose what would make them happy, Prof. Cho observed that the participants that achieved a higher expectation were much happier. Prof. Cho broke down the components of the expectation to be expectancy and value. According to Heidi G. Halvorson Ph.D., a social psychologist, "Expectancy" refers to how likely you believe you are to succeed, and "value" refers to how good it will be for you if you do reach the goal. (Rubin). We’ll use prospect and worth, so we don’t confuse the terms we’ve been using.

This ties directly into what we’ve been discussing about expectation. For a designer to achieve the intrinsic prudential value we associate with pleasantness, there has to be value infused in the expectation of the design.

Naomi: It sounds as though the expectation of the design should be benchmarked with a figure.

Abram: Not exactly. Perhaps the goal of increasing web traffic could be strengthened by adding benchmarks, but there are other ways expectation can be structured to increase pleasantness. As long as there is a prospect to achieve the expectation, and it has worth than it’s threshold could be increased. That same site could have an expectation of innovating the way its users understand navigating a website. That expectation has prospect because there is a possibility of creating that innovation, and has worth because it’s useful. We’ll discuss usefulness more in-depth later.

Naomi: My initial thought was that the innovation of a design would be stifled by trying to use proven contemporary methods to match benchmarks, but now I understand your describing prospect as the improbable but possible. Dunne and Raby described a similar definition for a speculative design in their book “Speculative Everything”. Dunne and Raby describe the best speculative design should live in a realm that called preferable future.

In their break down of futures, there was the probable future. The probable future is one that will occur unless something catastrophic happens like a tornado or market crash. Then there is the plausible future. The plausible future required more exploration into alternative futures. After that, there are the possible futures. The possible futures simply require some scientifically potential steps defining a future scenario. Possible futures simply require a defendable train of thought, regardless of how bizarre they may seem. Anything outside that scope was considered fantasy and unusable. The preferable space is in between the probable and plausible space. (Dunne 5)

Do you see the connection I do with high levels of expectation and speculative design?

Abram: I do. If a goal is to have truly high expectations, there has to be some level of exploration into an alternate future to accomplish it. As a Designer, you are ultimately defining the future. The moment currency is exchanged; a possible future becomes real (Dunne 37). When a person buys a product, they are ultimately deciding what products they want to live in the now and future, and what they no longer want. The same applies to attention. When people decide what devices and interfaces they want to spend their time on, whether consciously or not, they are choosing how they want to interact with technology and how they don’t. A design expectation should acknowledge that reality by structuring itself to be ambitious enough to confront the future and define what should be in it. The expectation we described earlier of creating a new way of interfacing with the contents of a web server is laying the groundwork to begin eventually questioning the world we want to live in. That’s where the expectation for a design should be, in the realm of preferable futures.

Naomi: I agree. This reminds me of a fictional project I did for Pablo Escobar. My expectation for the digital interaction I was creating was to innovate the way the users of his library interacted with a learning space. This in due course would lead to users deciding how they want their technologies to function. Having preferable futures steering my expectation at the end of the day left me with a project I was much happier with. If I had chosen to create a project that stayed in line with the conventions of what a digital library experience already is, I would have left with a project that imitates a future being determined and added nothing to the landscape. This seems to tie in directly with the third facet you described, the high level of expectation for the reverberation of design’s existence that is consistently surpassed during the duration of the design solution’s life span.

Abram: They do tie in together nicely. The last part we should talk about is the solution fulfilling an intrinsic desire of the designer.

Naomi: Our high expectation discussion still leaves my belief intact about design not being about the designer. Although the designer gets the intrinsic pleasure of surpassing an expectation, the surpassed expectation still is rooted solely in the design. How do you describe the fulfilling of a designer’s intrinsic desire?

Abram: Let’s go back to the sixteen universal desires you described earlier. Design specifically speaks to the desire for knowledge, to influence, and to improve society. Regardless of your intention, you end up fulfilling these personal desires throughout the course of your career. It’s part of why you chose to be a designer. You would be hard-pressed to discover a man whose career doesn’t fulfill any intrinsic desire.

With that being said, by placing a targeted emphasis on fulfilling these desires, the by-product of your design will be entirely focused on the solution. Similar to the eating a cracker versus having a baby comparison, fulfilling intrinsic desires can add to your overall wellbeing too significantly to be ignored.

Naomi: A better question for me isn’t how should you focus on your personal desires, it’s why should you focus on them in the first place?

Abram: For the same reason we focused on intrinsic desires for our users, because it increases your well-being. Earlier in this conversation, we talked about Utilitarianism and how a focus only on the effected creates internal dilemmas that eventually come back to considering the effector. The same is true for this situation. Fulfilling your intrinsically valuable desires ensures you do not end up the passenger that gets thrown off a cliff.

Naomi: To summarize the first half of the equation, and describe what we would the most pleasant design solution possible.

For a design solution to be most pleasant, the user should first have a high expectation of it. This high level of expectation for the user is created by manipulating the anticipation of a fulfilling of intrinsic prudential desires and is continually surpassed throughout the life of the solution, ultimately creating intrinsically pleasurable experience for the user.

Also, there has to be a high-level expectation from the designer created by positioning that expectation in a preferable speculative future. Through speculative consideration, the solution should continue to surpass the designer’s established expectation while the designer fulfills his considered intrinsic desires.

Part 3: Useful to the User

Abram: We’ve made it through half of the spectrum. We can resolve what creates the most pleasant design, and at last, completely understand pleasantness. Making it evident a design solution can fulfill intrinsic prudential desires.

Let’s now talk about usefulness, in regards to digital design. I’ve stated before there is a good deal of focus on the usefulness in design already. What are some of the ways usefulness is currently defined in your design process.

Naomi: The usefulness of a design solution is measured by whether it gets the user to accomplish the goal they came to accomplish. A lot of the “how” seems to be related the pleasantness of accomplishing the goal, but accomplishing the goal remains the primary vantage point for usefulness.

Abram: There has to be more to determining the usefulness than just determining was a goal accomplished. I agree that much of how a goal is accomplished is nested in the pleasantness of its execution, but the usefulness is more than whether it accomplished a task. Accomplishing a goal has to be done without compromising the user outside of the interaction. Accomplishing the goal has to be effective. The current trend of design seems to be heading in the opposite direction.

Naomi: How do you define effective? I would have to disagree that design is heading in a trend of ineffectiveness. Let’s look at Facebook again as an example. Facebook started as a tool to connect with your classmates, then friends and family. Now their interface, specifically their mobile interface, allows for the same connections with classmates, friends, and family while allowing users, in the same stream of information, to be connected with the content of related users in one seamless experience. These adaptations still allow the user to accomplish their goals while providing a more enriching interface.

Abram: Your example is precisely what I am describing as moving toward ineffectiveness. Your goal should be to create an artifact that seamlessly enriches the lives of people.

Naomi: My intention was to describe a seamless experience with the last example.

Abram: What you described was a seamless addition to the interface, not the life of the user. You see, every day there is an increase in the number of artifacts fighting for our attention. Although a rush of new objects and products are being created, the time to for them hasn’t increased.

Every day, we reload our daily time credit to 86,400 seconds. Healthy people spend, roughly speaking, 28,800 seconds on sleep. The average person spends about 7,200 seconds on commuting, and another 28,800 seconds being at their jobs. We also use the same 86,400 seconds to visit websites, update and peruse social media, and other activities. Designers are purposefully exploiting the knowledge gathered through ethnographic studies of the user to take away the time each person is desperately trying to hold on to.

The time that’s lost permanently engaging in activities designed to manipulate you, as oppose to the other way around, will never have an opportunity to be spent on the people, things, and activities of intrinsic value.

Naomi: We came to the conclusion that the most pleasant solutions are the ones that are intrinsically valuable in themselves. It would seem that the what’s best for the well-being of the people, would be to interact with an ethical design solution.

Abram: You were almost there. We did conclude that the most pleasant solutions are the ones that are intrinsically valuable in themselves. We also emphasized that a person’s well-being is influenced by how many things of intrinsic value are in their lives. If a person is spending all their time on one intrinsically valuable asset, then their life has been designed to have a low level of well-being.

Let us return to example of Facebook, would you argue that the person who previously spend their time engaging with friends and family in environments they enjoy, develop, and matured in, has an improved well-being by using an interface that allows them to spend more time scrolling through content?

Naomi: In that paradigm is where the dilemma dwells. We live in an age where we have expanding amounts of technologies assisting us in saving time to use on the things we love. At its essence, that’s the job of all technology. From stairs and knifes to iPhones and WiFi, the invention of every new technology aims to make life easier and quicker so we can have more time.

Abram: Strangely, the more technology people have, the less time they have to spare. One reason for this lack of free time is our tools or technologies, are being designed for our attention.

When we invented a way to digest food quicker by cooking it, what was our response to that?

Naomi: We ate more calories so we could spend less time hunting. As a result, our brains also grew.

Abram: Precisely. When stairs were invented, people got to the top faster. What was the response to that?

Naomi: I understand the logic your eluding to.

Abram: We as humans initially would use our newfound time on things we wanted more of, or needed.

But in our current age, when we design a way to connect with our friends quicker, we spend less time with our friends. When we design interfaces that should increase our productivity, we become less productive. The quality of life people are striving for is being pushed further away from them with the tools they are using to obtain it.

Naomi: I can put together how this could be a detriment to society. We still have the same 86,400 seconds we have always had, and we’ve designed technology to become destinations for communication as oppose to just being tools. But, not all designs are tools. Some interfaces are designed to be tools, as well as entertainment and other purposes. I can agree in theory, we should have exponentially more free time to ourselves with the rate new technologies are being created and designed for, but the inverse is happening. The usage of a user’s time should be the defining attribute of usefulness to society?

Abram: In this era, a great deal of the most influential technologies in society are digital, or is heading in that direction. Now that our tools can communicate, as well as perform, designers have been tasked with creating how they will communicate. It’s during this exchange where usefulness evolves past just helping a user complete a task; it’s evolved into how the technology aligns with the lives the users aspire for.

Naomi: How do you suggest a designer can design artifacts or interfaces that align with the lives user aspire for?

Abram: It starts with redefining the goals that a design has. The goal of design has to incorporate the user wholeheartedly.

Here’s an example. A goal could be to “help people send messages to each other instantly”. The seeds of uselessness have been implanted once the previously mentioned goal becomes the lighthouse of the design process. This goal fails to acknowledge what people want from the technology and focuses on more of how we want to condition people to the technology. In this example, “sending messages instantly” concentrations are on the technology. A design response to this goal could be to make the messages appear quicker on the screen of the recipient and make the recipient more aware of the message with some visual design strategy. An interface may also be designed to allow the recipient to respond quicker. On the surface, the goal looks like it’s about enriching communication between people, and creating an interface that utilizes the speed and technology to improve communication (Harris).

Naomi: As of now I don’t recognize the issue.

Abram: I’ll present you with the following questions, do people want messages to be delivered quicker?

Naomi: Of course, which is why mail has evolved from being transported by horse to being carried by circuits.

Abram: Do people want interfaces that smoothen the experience of responding to a message?

Naomi: Again, yes. Which is why an interface like text messaging has evolved from a series of screens and actions to one fluid, conversational interface.

Abram: Do people want to receive messages more abruptly?

Naomi: Ahh, I see. If the goal is achieved, it would have created an interface that could snappishly interfere with the goals of the user outside of the interface.

Abram: This is where the concept of fitting into the lives of the user comes in. People want to have time their time valued, among other things. Quickly sending a message is great because it allows the sender to retain more of their time, instead of focusing on sending the message. The sending of the message happens when and where the sender wants it. The receiving of a message is a different story. While the sender may be using their time most efficiently, there is no way to know what the receiver is doing. So if a person is completely focused on a task, the speedy and abrupt message would interfere with that effort. It takes an average of twenty-three minutes to get back a high level of focus once your concentration is broken. A useful solution would consider the vulnerabilities of all the users in this scenario, throughout the entire experience.

Naomi: The stairway to hell is paved with good intentions. It’s always easier to look at the aftermath of an event or the repercussions of an invention and judge its impact. How can I create solutions that are mindful of a future that I cannot predict?

Abram: This can be achieved by creating design goals with the following questions in mind inspired by Marshall McLuhan; What part of the life of the user will the new artifact enhance? As a result of the enhancement, what aspect of a user’s life will become obsolescent or become suppressed? What does the user, due the new artifact, become vulnerable to? (McLuhan, 379)

Naomi: What part of the life of the user will the new artifact enhance?

Abram: Asking what part of the life of the user a new artifact enhances makes the goal the goals less insular and focuses on the lives of the individual. I agree that hindsight is 20-20 in these type of evaluations. Let’s look at project you are currently working on through this spectrum to illustrate how we can improve the usefulness of a solution with a new way of thinking.

Naomi: I am working on a mobile application with a wearable technology companion called Enguage.

Abram: What is its goal?

Naomi: The goal of Enguage is to keep people more connected with their friends and loved ones. It aims to do this by using phone communication records to measure how long it’s been since you’ve communicated with your friends and family and alert you when you haven’t communicated in a long time. The ultimate goal was the help users maintain their social health through staying connected with friends and family.

Abram: How does the wearable technology accompany the mobile application?

Naomi: The wearable technology is a ring that will provide a haptic signifier when your social health is low. It’ll also glow with the current status level, using color, to help the user be always aware of their current health, similar to a Fitbit.

Abram: What part of the life of the user will Engauge enhance?

Naomi: It should enhance the user’s social life by providing the ability to manage her social life and being more aware of how she is managing her relationships. As we discussed before, improving the number of moments with friends and family is intrinsically valuable and will increase the overall well-being of the user.

Abram: As a result of this enhancement, what aspect of a user’s life will become obsolescent or become suppressed?

Naomi: Since the user will be engaged in more social interactions, it may suppress the time they have for themselves, like hobbies and personal things done without friends. It could suppress the most intimate time being spent, like being with a boyfriend or spouse, since it’s it’ll be pushing you to keep your interactions diversified. It could suppress your social privacy with the wearable component.

When people see a Fitbit, they either don’t know what it is, can see the person is out of shape looking to get into shape, or in shape and looking to stay in shape. With a wearable social health indicator, people could conclude that you either have too many friends and relationships to manage or too little. Both those conclusions ultimately lead to the passerby conclude you’re a social person, or you want to be and make you a target for public interactions, which ultimately may not be what you want from the device.

Questioning the suppressions of Engauge strips the novelty of the idea and focuses me on the real users, and it’s consequences. It’s fun and exciting to thinking about enhancing the user’s life, but thinking about it’s inverse effects starts to highlight how practicality.

Abram: Experiencing the process sometimes is more valuable than thinking about it. Initially speaking about Engauge’s enhancements brings about clear and simple ideas are easy to elevate. Once you start thinking about their effects, you can become more grounded and analyze the usefulness of a design. Though it might seem similar, think about the new vulnerabilities the enhancements create and we will redefine the goal to be more aligned with the quality of life the user would be striving for.

Naomi: Ok, the last part of the triad of questions, what would it leave the user vulnerable to. How would you describe the difference between suppressing and making vulnerable to?

Abram: A good analogy would be the black, the white and the gray area. The black would be the enhancements, things that on the surface are looking to improve the lives of the users. Then the white would be the suppressions, the facets of the users life that are sure to end with the inclusion of the new artifact. Finally, there is the gray area. The gray area would be the possible effects of the suppressions or their logical order of events.

Naomi: Ok, so the user becoming susceptible to unwanted social interactions due to the suppression of the privacy of social health would be more of a vulnerability.

Abram: Exactly.

Naomi: Some vulnerabilities could include the unwanted social interactions. Another could effect could be, depending on how the application calculates your social health, the anxiety of managing too many less significant relationships and not being more present in the deeper relationships. Also, if the user doesn’t have many friends or family to begin with, Engauge could make the user frustrated or depressed if they can’t increase their social health based on the circle of people they have.

Abram: Let’s put together a more useful goal for the user, based on what we have discussed.

The original goal was to “the help users maintain their social health through staying connected with friends and family.” Based on what we’ve discovered about through our brief conversation about managing these relationships, we can conclude that we want to help the user “establish deeper, more intimate relationships and/or stay more connected to the deeper, more intimate relationships they already have”. This goal incorporates the lifestyle that the user is hoping to achieve while purging the identifiable suppressing and vulnerable factors.

Throughout the process of testing and refining, more vulnerabilities and suppressers can and will be identified. This framework makes sure your focus is on the users goals and aspirations and not the system.

Naomi: To summarize what a useful design solution for a user is, we are concluding that a useful solution for the user is one helps the user obtain their life goals by maximizing what the solution enhances, and minimizes what the user will be left vulnerable to, and what aspects of their lives will be suppressed.

Does the same framework apply to the designer?

Part 4: Useful to the Designer

Abram: The same criterion of usefulness for user doesn’t work for the designer.

Naomi: Why not?

Abram: Usefulness for the user is based on having a design align with the life the user wants to live. A direct substitution of the designer and user would conclude the design would have to align with the life the designer aspires for. While that will be a component, it can’t alone be the criteria. Design is still a service to its end user, so creating for the designer’s life goals would be troublesome and polarizing.

The digital designer has two responsibilities: to create the artifact that best serves the needs of the people who will interact with it, and to advance the digital medium as a whole. (Murray, Loc. 1044-1045). The first responsibility we incorporate in describing the usefulness for the user. The second responsibility is more directed at determining the usefulness to the Designer.

Naomi: Advancing the medium as a whole is a sharp turn from the criterion that the defined usefulness for the user. It would seem appropriate to have goal to enhance the designer while limiting his suppressions and vulnerabilities. Focusing on advancing the medium would turn the focus off of the designer and on the field as a whole. Are you suggesting that aiming to push the design field forward that it would result in a useful advancement for the designer?

Abram: When we talk about the usefulness for the user, we are talking about all users. So when we speak of usefulness to the designer, it makes sense that we talk about the field, and it’s entirety. All Designers benefit from the individual advancements made by each. Every practice is a sum of its parts and members.

What’s unique about digital design, and all things made with electronic bits and computer code, belong to a single new medium, the digital medium, with its unique affordances (Murray, Loc 72-73). With that being said, a design is only useful to a designer if it could further the development of his practice. Designing in a new medium inevitably becomes part of the broader collective effort to establish meaning to the medium (Murray, Loc 73-74). For example, the connotations associated with the usage of newsprint come from designers continually shaping culture around their designs. In the end, everything you create defines its place in culture, and it’s only a useful endeavor if its is done with intention.

Naomi: Digital design is still relatively new. It’s almost easier to build on the establish print medium because of the building blocks already in place. In digital design, those building blocks have to be reinvented almost every time a designer starts a project. Looking at cellphones as an example, the building blocks established in the early 2000’s for designing on cellphone screens are obsolete. New formal conventions almost every year since the mid-1990s have had to be created to incorporate the affordances of mobile devices successfully. Although their building blocks have become archeological relics, their cultural significance still exists. Each successful interactive mobile design influenced the next while preparing culture for how to interact with what’s next to come. I can appreciate how the usefulness of a design can be associated with how purposefully it pushes design forward. This does begin to sound very similar to the pleasantness we described of having a preferable future considered. This would be problematic because we would be determining that pleasantness and usefulness for the designer are the same. Am I wrong to be considering them synonymously?

Abram: They do appear to be similar, but they are very different. Earlier when we were talking about preferable futures, we were talking about consciously considering the futures we are allowing our users to decide on. Our discussion about advancing the field is about consciously considering the futures of the medium from a designer’s perspective.

All of your legacy formats provide building blocks that are unsuited for on another. As a result, designers are left either trying to squeeze design in the wrong hole. When we talk about pushing the practice forward, we are talking about how are we helping fellow designers understand this new landscape by helping define it. With digital design, it is a never ending task that because of how quickly the affordances of the new squishy medium are added.

Naomi: How do I design for defining the medium?

Abram: You have to design for the inherent behaviors medium. I’ll use screens as an example. Too often, designers begin planning screen-based designs by drawing a rectangle and putting elements in them. But why?

Naomi: We do this because screens are rectangles, and to plan for space, we have to define that space.

Abram: That thinking is an example of trying to squeeze design in the wrong hole. Print, where your approach is coming from, needs to have the boundaries accounted for because they don’t change. Screens, on the other hand, have the ability to change, therefore thinking about the frame limits the affordances of the medium. What would happen if we stopped treating the screen like a container, and instead as a material to build with?

Frank Chimero, a Brooklyn-based interaction designer, defines web design as “an edgeless surface of unknown proportions, comprised of small, individual, and variable elements from multiple vantages assembled into a readable whole that documents a moment”(Chimero). His approach priorities what the medium wants, as oppose to what you want it to do.

That’s how you design for defining the medium, by separating the medium from its parts and start considering the unique behaviors it exhibits.

Naomi: To complete the useful part of the equation, the most useful design for a designer pushes forward to the field of design by investigating and defining the affordances and behaviors of a medium through the application of the solution. This is good for the field whole which precipitates to the individual designer.

To reiterate what a useful design solution for a user is, we concluded that a useful solution for the user is one helps the user obtain their life goals by maximizing what the solution enhances, and minimizes what the user will be left vulnerable to, and what aspects of their lives will be suppressed.

And after navigating the four facets, we are ultimately saying that the design we ought to create is one that the user should have a high expectation for. This high level of expectation for the user is should be created by manipulating the anticipation of a fulfilling of intrinsic prudential desires and continually surpassing those expectations throughout the life of the solution, ultimately creating intrinsically pleasurable experience for the user. Also, there has to be a high-level expectation from the designer established by positioning that expectation in a preferable speculative future. Through speculative consideration, the solution should continue to surpass the designer’s established expectation while the designer fulfills his considered intrinsic desires. It should also push forward to the field of design by investigating and defining the affordances and behaviors of a medium through the application of the solution and help the user obtain their life goals by maximizing what the solution enhances, and minimizes what the user will be left vulnerable to and what aspects of their lives will be suppressed.

Did I get the whole equation?

Part 5: Case Studies

Over the next month, I will put four of my projects (my capstone, Engauge, The New Knowledge Experience, and the Pablo Escobar Foundation Project) through my attached framework to help define how to use my approach and explain how it positions design solutions.

Epilogue

After I complete revamping and creating my projects to satisfy my framework, I will write about how it can be improved, where it falls short, where it worked, and how I plan on continuing to continuing the framework.

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