
Experiences Before Things: A Primer for the (Yet) Unconvinced

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Abstract

While things (i.e., technologies) play a crucial role in creating and shaping meaningful, positive experiences, their true value lies only in the resulting experiences. It is about what we can do and experience with a thing, about the stories unfolding through using a technology, not about its styling, material, or impressive list of features. This paper explores the notion of "experiences" further: from the link between experiences and well-being and society and people's developing post-materialistic stance to the challenges of the experience market and the experience-driven design of technology.

Author Keywords

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ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

General Terms

Human Factors; Design; Theory.

To have or to be? That is the question

Not long ago, I was invited to give a talk in Paris. The date was set to a Friday afternoon. "What a perfect opportunity," I thought, "to add a romantic weekend to

a satisfying work assignment." Although my wife and I live only a four-hour train ride away from the "City of Love", we rarely spend time there, not to mention a full weekend. It didn't take much to convince us. The grandparents took care of our children and we were ready to go.

It was a wonderful weekend: a small hotel close to *Montmartre*, a bit of shopping in *Le Marais*, the *Centre Pompidou*, long walks, wine, *tarte au citron* – it doesn't get much better. On our way back to Germany, we vowed to repeat this soon.

In the Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) community but also in certain design domains (e.g., interaction, industrial), experience became pivotal as a signifier of a change in perspective on technology in itself and how to design it [4,6,9,10,11,14,16,19].

While not all available approaches center on experiences *literally*, they all embrace emotion, story, and meaning. Some authors – so am I – even argue to put experiences before things [11] and make them an explicit objective of design, not only an appreciated by-product. In this view, experiences are stories told through the



Figure 1: The rooftops of Paris (Source: Author)

All in all, the trip cost the equivalent of a new laptop, two *Gazelle* bikes, or three and half *Plastic Side Chairs* by the Eames'. The weekend in Paris was an experience – intangible, transient, but living on in memory. Laptops, bikes, or chairs are material goods – tangible, lasting, living on in studies, garages, or dining rooms.

product and designer become foremost the authors of those stories. Only after having outlined the desired emotional and cognitive content of an experience, the action involved, its context and temporal structure, a designer can start thinking about how to convey the experience through a thing or system of things.

Strangely, while I find the proposition to consider the experience before the thing quite a radical change, many practitioners and academics of HCI happily embrace experience – however, without changing much in their approach. Let's say you've recently designed a "diversion" or "exploration" experience to be enjoyed in a car, which happens to involve navigation technology, you can be certain to be reviewed by experts on technologies rather than by experts on experiences. And the former will demand an evaluation of the *system* not the resulting *experience*, but will call this a "user experience evaluation". (Make no mistake: the latter would not even accept the notion of evaluation unless it is "poetic" in nature – just kidding).

What are the reasons for this mismatch between the radical changes in perspective implied by "experience" and common practices? I suspect that some may be simply unconvinced. Others may not be fully aware of the implications of "experiences before things" yet. For both is the present paper. Its purpose is to summarize and further strengthen the arguments for and consequences of engaging in a truly experience-driven design of technology (*Experience Design*) – hopefully in an informative and entertaining way.

Experience makes us happy

Often, we have to choose between experiences and things. Think for a moment: a new laptop or a weekend trip (not with my wife, though) – what do you desire? And what will you finally take? Admittedly, it is a tough call, but *Consumer Psychology* has the answer: Take the experience, because it makes you happier [2].

Why do experiences make us happier? First of all, they allow for "positive reinterpretation." An experience re-

sides in memory. Memories, however, can be changed in retrospect. We can spin experiences and make them bigger and better than they presumably were. Things, however, sit on shelves or are stuffed into cupboard. They get old, people get used to them, and many things lose their appeal. As one of van Boven and Gilovich's [2] participants put it: "material possessions, they sort of become part of the background; experiences just get better with time" (p. 1200).

Another important reason is that experiences are closer to the Self (see [11] and [5] for an extended summary). People are literally the "sum of their experiences." Only recently, Carter and Gilovich [5] provided empirical support for differences in the centrality of experiences and things to the Self. In one study (Study 2), they asked participants to name five significant material purchases and five significant experiential purchases they made in their lives. Subsequently, they were asked to give a summary of their life story and to incorporate at least one of the purchases they've listed (but not all of them). Independent of the price of the purchase, experiential purchases were more often mentioned than material purchases. In addition, people believed that a person, who knew some of their experiential but none of their material purchases, would be more knowledgeable of their true essential Self, than a person, who knew only some of their material purchases but none of their experiential purchases.

In sum, positive experiences are crucial to individual well-being and beat material goods in terms of "hedonistic efficiency". They are self-defining stories, we treasure and collect.



Figure 2: "Is he serious?" Video stills from Dacia's promotional film
(Source: <http://youtu.be/XWxKXv0fvds>)

Societal change from the materialistic to the experiential

Already back in 1992, Gerhard Schulze described in his book *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft* (experience society) [17] societal change from the materialistic to the experiential. Instead of merely believing in material wealth, we tend to place more emphasis on meaningful experiences and personal growth. TNS Emnid, for example, asked 1000 Germans about the importance of certain aspects of life for their personal well-being (2012, [http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/cps/rde/xchg/SID-28680807-](http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/cps/rde/xchg/SID-28680807-A993E25F/bst/hs.xsl/nachrichten_113236.htm)

A993E25F/bst/hs.xsl/nachrichten_113236.htm). Eighty-four percent found their "health" to be very important, followed by "family/friends" (68%), "autonomy/freedom" (67%), "peace/community" (58%), and "protecting the environment" (51%). Only 24% were concerned about safeguarding and even less (11%) about increasing "money" and "possessions". (All this in times of economic crisis.) It is, thus, not surprising that research into happiness and the so-called *Positive Psychology* (e.g., [18]) is nowadays in strong demand.

Being a materialist, being an experientialist

Another sign for a broad change from the materialistic to the experiential is the stigmatization of materialism [1]. In one study, Van Boven and colleagues introduced "Mark" und "Craig", two fictional graduates. Mark decides for a prestigious job offer, with a good income in a city with cheap accommodation, but not so good recreational opportunities and only moderately friendly colleagues. Craig forgoes a little prestige, income, and cheap housing for more recreational opportunities and friendlier colleagues. Twenty-four of 26 participants liked Craig better.

People believe materialists to be trendy, selfish, and insecure, whereas experientialists are humorous, friendly, open-minded, intelligent, and caring. Stigmatizing is compelling. Van Boven and colleagues let stranger talk for 15 minutes either about a recent material or experiential purchase. Those who had to talk about things enjoyed the conversation less and liked each other less compared to those, who had to talk about experiences.

The stigmatization of materialism does not really seem to fit into our consumerist world. Could it really be that future generations will not long for a Porsche, a Rolex, and a penthouse in Manhattan? It could. Dacia, for example, manufacturer of reasonably priced cars, already used stigmatization in advertising. One promotional film showed an attractive women and a handsome young man in an animated conversation (see Figure 2):

She: "Oh that sounds so exciting!"

He: "Oh yeah, it makes some money. Definitely. Look."

He takes his car keys, points at his Porsche *Cayenne*: "120.000!"

She appears shocked, turns back to him, smiles embarrassedly: "Oh, I am so sorry for you. Do you want to talk about it?"

This film and others from the series question the meaningfulness and supposed "normality" of bacchanal material possessions.

In sum, societal change reflects the growing individual belief in the power of being healthy, free, and socially

connected in a peaceful and unimpaired environment. This includes the realization that current overly materialistic lifestyles – while thrilling and pleasurable – may not be as fulfilling as one hoped for. Meaningful experiences seem the key to individual well-being.

The experience market

Gerhard Schulze [17] described the principles of the experience market (see [15] for a more business-oriented perspective). Similar to the world of things, experientialists plan to acquire particular experiences and work on getting them [12]. They still consume. However, the difference is that experiences are directed towards the Self and are rather personal. Positive emotions and memories need to be co-created by consumers and providers. They can't be simply acquired. A bar is only as illustrious as their guests.

This is a challenge for makers of experiences. It is much easier to ascertain that, let's say, a kitchen will be functional, stove and sink in the right places, neat ways of storing vegetables and fruits, knives, and pots, than making sure that a kitchen creates enjoyable and meaningful experiences. Consumers themselves may not even know what a meaningful positive experience in a kitchen feels like before they had one. In addition, consumers can never be sure whether an offer will create the hoped for emotion, meaning and treasured memories. Will I like this movie? Is Disney World worth a visit? Will I enjoy myself frolicking around in the icy waves at the shores of the Bretagne? Should I learn to knit, to felt, or to program? Whether a Smartphone works or not will become apparent through the number of software crashes. Whether it will create enjoyable experience is less clear.

The experience market is an uncertain market – for makers and providers as well as consumers.

Things create and shape experiences

Despite this uncertainty, experiences have a great potential for design. Things and experiences are no contradiction. Most experiences are mediated, shaped or even created through things. Wonderful, mind-opening hiking experiences require shoes, clothing, maps, and GPS receivers. The difference is that the experientialist is not primarily proud of her hiking boots, but values them for their role in the hiking experience. It is much easier to enjoy a majestic landscape without hurting feet. Here the thing becomes a "hygiene factor", taking away a pain not necessarily integral to the hiking experience.

But things can also be more active, more transformative, more about offering a new possibility than solving a problem [7]. GPS and the practice of geo-caching, for example, turn contemplative hiking into an exciting treasure hunt. Purist hikers may find this questionable. But still, while we definitely need to debate the content of our experiences, we can certainly acknowledge the central role things play in creating and shaping experiences.

Experiences: integral or associated?

Traditionally, experiences are addressed through advertising rather than through the product itself. Since 1968, for example, Ferrero offers a chocolate brand called *Küsschen* (Kisses) in Germany. The main advertising claim is "to give good friends a Küsschen (a kiss)" – the more the better. The relationship between sweets and friendship, however, is arbitrary. It was created by the advertising company. Sweets are neither

able to create friendship nor do they create feelings of closeness and togetherness. The "experience" is created through a superficial *association* of a thing (a piece of chocolate) and a class of meaningful social experiences (having friends, sharing, gift-giving).

This is different for BMW's claim of the "Joy of driving". It stems from the experience of control and mastery of the car in (slightly) challenging situations (i.e., competence). This is actually an integral part of any BMW and a major part of the engineering and design activity. It is not only a superficial association, made up by the ad team, but an *integral* experiential outcome of driving a BMW (and many other "premium" cars).

In HCI the *User Experience* is often thought of as a synonym for general product quality or innovative interaction techniques. But it could be more. Things, technology, should *create* meaningful experiences instead of being loaded with symbolical experiences only. Thus, while things play a crucial role in creating and shaping experiences, their true value is only in the resulting experiences. In the future, it will be about what we can do and experience with a thing, not about having it, its styling, material, or impressive list of features. Experiences will become more important than the thing itself.

The often overlooked importance of content

Traditionally, HCI focuses on methods, processes, sometimes definitions and even measures – largely triggered by the demands of a corporate world. Accordingly, there is already a concern for how to design experiences (methods, processes), but not so much for what experiences to design. This must change.

Experience Design is certainly one of the design philosophies coming closest to what humans really care about. When taken seriously its main activity is to design pleasurable, meaningful, and even treasured moments. However, what possesses the power to make profoundly happy may also possess the power to make profoundly unhappy. Designing a clever way of opening a bottle of beer is one thing, messing with people's emotions and experiences is something completely different. Principles of good web navigation will always apply, no matter whether the Web site is the one of the Red Cross or an internet porn provider. Because of this, an information architect can easily ignore content and just focus on his or her trade – to make navigation easy by structuring content according to people's knowledge and expectations. From an experience perspective, designing an altruistic or a sexual experience is something completely different. When it comes to designing experiences, we can neither ignore the content and the purpose of the envisioned experience nor the question of whether we want to have this experience out in the world at all.

What kind of experiences?

What kind of experiences do people strive for? Which should we provide? Keinat and Kivetz [12] argue that people are drawn to experiences which appear collectable. This "collectability" is similar to principles of collecting things. We look for once-in-a-lifetime opportunities, non-repeatable experiences tied to particular places and/or times (the first baby). We go for the exotic (Finland in winter), unconventional (celebrating Christmas in summer), extreme (walking a desert), or risky (race car driving). We enjoy the systematic accumulation of varying experiences (visiting all 46 capitals of Europe or train spotting). We want to be there, to ex-

perience significant events live (volcano eruption, a Royal wedding). Note, however, that experiences do not have to be extreme to be meaningful. Walking a flea market, a weekend in Paris, a barbecue with friends, or a table tennis match on a Sunday afternoon – these are all enjoyable experiences providing meaning to our lives and defining our selves. Which experiences to settle for, the extreme or the mundane, is a topic in itself – one with a multitude of aspects, touching upon individual philosophies of life. I personally prefer the mundane. What do you prefer? The answer will have a profound effect on the experiences you'll design.

Surprisingly, debates about content are rare in HCI and Interaction Design. Sometimes, critical remarks surface, for example in the context of sustainability and persuasion [3]. And while those remarks are couched in terms of complex scientific arguments, we can more simply take them for what they are: Attempts to negotiate the stories we want to tell through technologies. There is no right or wrong. There is no "truth" to be unearthed. Take the recent project of designing a music player to provide a compelling social experience on small parties [13]. One crucial aspects was to provide a way for guests to participate in selecting the music without disrupting the party and turning it into a competition. While the question of whether our design was successful in reaching this goal is a matter of "quality" and "truth", the question of whether the experience we envisioned is good is a matter of "taste" and "argument". There are surely hosts out there, for whom a brawl is the hallmark of a successful party. I am rather a sucker for harmony.

But whatever we want to provide, designing experiences requires deep knowledge of individual and social practices, of the psychology of experiences and foremost: care for the consequences of influencing lives through designed experiences. An experience designer must be ready to take responsibility and must remain critical. *Experience Design* as discipline in turn must create a culture of reflecting about actual content, and not only about methods and processes.

Closing remarks

Experiences make us happier than things. Experiences provide identity – we are what we do rather than what we have. This post-materialistic stance has consequences for consumption and design. In the future, the thing in itself will become less and less important. It will be the experiences a thing creates and shapes, the stories told, which will matter the most. This alone will have interesting effects. A trend like the "sharing economy" (i.e., cars, bikes, files, flats) is an apparent example. The moment, we care more about experiencing a good story involving a fast car than the fast car itself, we may simply borrow one, have a nice weekend on serpentine roads, take gigabytes of photos, select the best and upload them to *Facebook*. Many proponents of the sharing economy believe only people with a pronounced utilitarian stance will share. I disagree. Experientialist share, because *driving* a Porsche is more fun than *owning* one.

I assume that experiences are designable and can be created and mediated through things. Things can tell stories through their mere presence, their content, functionality, interaction and presentation. They limit and facilitate, and thereby shape experiences [8]. These experiences, however, are not dissociated from the

thing. They are an integral part of it. They actually constitute *the* meaning and value for people. This is often overlooked, when discussing technology, such as a Smartphone. In public, it may all be about the "right" operating system, "swiping" and "pinching", camera quality, the color of the shell (yellow, I suppose) and the resolution of the screen. In private, it is about staying connected with a loved one, being stimulated, when bored, achieving things, one couldn't do without a mobile companion. In private, we tell stories about how we spent evenings in bars guessing the highest chart entry of the songs playing in the background, checking the guesses with *Wikipedia* and a song recognition app. Who cares about screen resolution?

Experiences *must* be designed, too. We cannot simply leave the construction of the meaning of our designs to people alone. What we then need to discuss more thoroughly is the actual content of the experiences we design. We may settle with the observation that people enjoy the visceral thrill of acceleration and driving fast and, thus, provide them with cars, which thrill even more. Or we might reconsider the dangers involved in this experience for the driver and especially bystanders and suggest something different, less dangerous, an alternative way of enjoying yourself while driving. The key to *Experience Design* is, thus, critical reflection and dialog among designers and consumers [19], as well as a clear emphasis on taking on the responsibility for the consequences of our designs.

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