



Exquisite Empathy

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*At MCN 2018, we held a workshop of empathy-building activities
and explored the following questions:*



How can we uphold our human-ness amidst immense, technological change?



How can we use technology, if at all, to create more immersive, embodied experiences that bring wonder and joy?



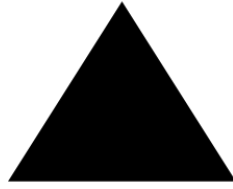
How might we use technology, if at all, for our benefit without harming ourselves and other individuals?

In using these questions as our framework, we found ourselves—again and again—expanding our conversations to look at empathy in any context, not only in the context of technology. Often the answers that we found applied to technology required a human-centered approach that applied beyond technology alone.

We put together a [zine](http://cloudchamber.cc/for/mcn2018/DIYempathiZINE.pdf)¹ to guide our workshop, and here (in reviewing how it went) we wanted to keep the same playful, punk spirit. As we address the questions above, we'll use a variation of the Surrealist game “exquisite corpse,” taking turns with the cursor, and Frankensteining our individual thoughts together into a patchwork. Each author is identified by a different font, for the freedom of semi-anonymity.

Ready? Let's begin...

¹ <http://cloudchamber.cc/for/mcn2018/DIYempathiZINE.pdf>



How can we uphold our human-ness amidst immense, technological change?

A return to convivial listening²: I recently started reading poems again, words
arrayed on a screen or more preferably
scattered

on

a

page,

listening to my voice echo the words in my mind, pausing to capture the melody
or staccato of the author's voice in mine. Technology can both flatten and expand
the particularities of soundtracks we inhabit. Reckoning with the unique musicality
produced in our spaces is one way to (re)assert our humanity. Museums have the
power to reproduce the particular while making space for each visitor to receive,
inhabit, and remix the soundtracks received via their interactions with each artifact.

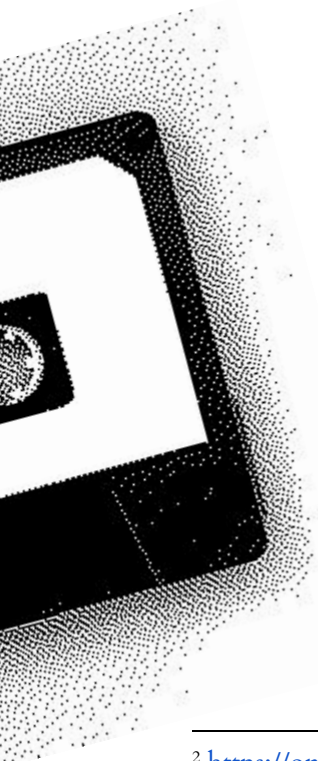
*(I **love** the media-analogy here: experience as mixtape³! Reproduce a
particular experience; in the playback, allowing people to live in it, but remix it.)*

Riffing on this direction—technology as a tool for looking at our own lived
experiences and culture and *human-ness*—perhaps we can also flip it on its
head and make the converse true: museums can provide context (and space
to talk and think about) the human history of technology, so that we can
better consider how to fit technological change into our lives. If human-ness
is a mixtape, the museum can look at the players we use to listen to
it—phonograph, walkman, discman, iPod, *clouuuuud*—, and show how past
inventions changed culture so that we can conscientiously steer our culture.

To duck away from the overly-meta metaphor: in addition to understanding
each other in a technology-mediated world, understanding the historical
context of how we faced immense technological change in the past can help
us cut through the technology today, and museums can do that, too.

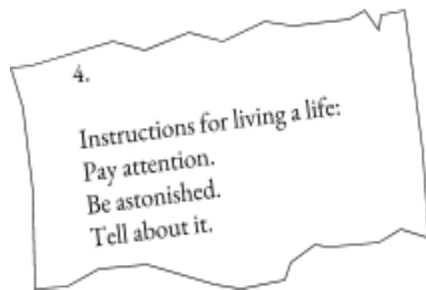
² <https://onbeing.org/programs/mary-oliver-listening-to-the-world/>

³ Image by Namroud Gorguis on Unsplash: <https://unsplash.com/photos/FZWivbri0Xk>





How can we use technology, if at all, to create more immersive, embodied experiences that bring wonder and joy?



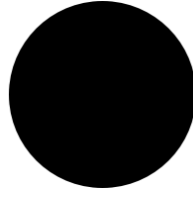
Attention with feeling (inspired by the examples raised by poet Mary Oliver⁴): we have the potential to be more aware, cognizant of the world we not only inhabit but also the worlds we long to be part of.

This idea of “attention with feeling” is one that guided the process of planning our Empathy Jam session at the MCN 2018 Conference. Although many of our early conversations were skeptical about technology’s ability to foster these kinds of immersive, embodied experiences, we did indeed rely on key technological tools to put attention and emotion into not only our session planning, but the bonds forming between our team members. Prime among these was our insistence on Zoom videoconference meetings to do most of our significant planning face-to-face with people who lived across the span of the entire USA.

Maybe we’d have been able to make faster progress if we relied more on email, but it was when we were emailing back and forth that our conversations frequently petered out. I’m as guilty as the next person of sitting there with an un-responded-to email in my inbox, and I was sometimes the person who derailed our planning with a delayed email reply.

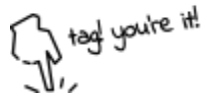
In our Zoom meetings, on the other hand, the creative juices flowed with all of us in our respective home and work environments, grinning and nodding and taking notes when we gathered in real time. The real-time, voice and video connections between us led to much more honest emotional investment than emails ever could.

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/18/well/mary-olivers-poems-taught-me-how-to-live.html>



How might we use technology, if at all, for our benefit without harming ourselves and other individuals?

Right now, technology is designed to be as functional and efficient as possible. Perhaps we can better use technology for our benefit when we design it to accommodate the messy and complicated experience of being a human using technology.



One thing that became clear in the discussions in our session and in planning our session is the need to involve people from outside disciplines and different backgrounds when designing experiences—without technology and ESPECIALLY with technology. There's been a lot of discussion of ethics in the tech world⁵ recently, and two techniques that seem very helpful for framing this approach, in addition to including a more diverse group in your team, are...

1. Designated Dissenter⁶ — a role on your design team, rotating with each project so that one person doesn't always end up the killjoy, with the explicit duty to disagree! To question all design decisions and “asking how changes in context or assumptions might subvert those [underlying] decisions.” How things might go wrong?
2. Personas Non Grata — building off the suggestion in the article above on figuring out “imperfect personas”⁷, or what your audience types might be like when they're stressed or not having the best day, identify the audience types that are explicitly bad actors⁸, who might abuse the experience or other participants, and design safeguards in the system to prevent that.

That's a “defensive driving” approach, though; what are ways that we can actively steer toward better ways? (We left this an open question, and maybe the act of leaving it an open question IS the way, ...to let in the right answers?)

⁵ <https://www.future-ethics.com/>

⁶ <https://alistapart.com/article/design-for-real-life-excerpt#section8>

⁷ <https://alistapart.com/article/design-for-real-life-excerpt#section2>

⁸ <https://www.gaijin.com/2015/04/designing-for-evil/>

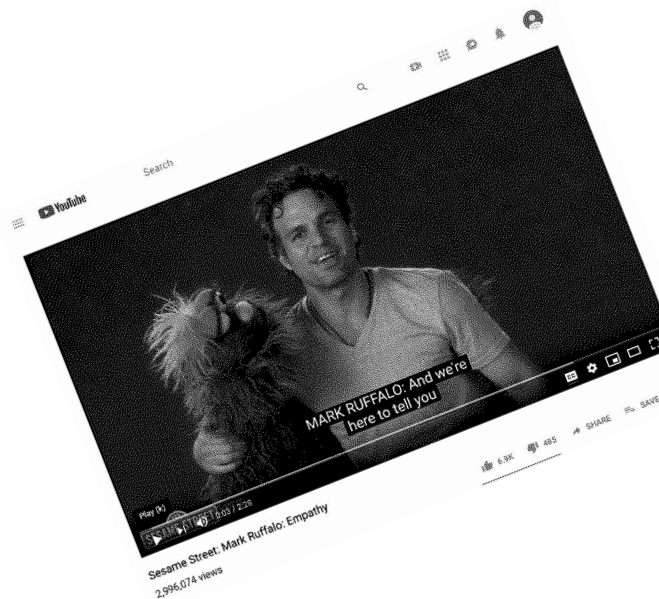


(The session!)

We chose a participatory style of session to better facilitate activity-based discussion, while also adding some variety for attendees. Creating a “zine,” or self-produced magazine, was a wonderful opportunity to combine the team’s creativity and provide something for participants to keep.

Each team member created two unique empathy activities, referencing resources listed at the end of the zine. The session began with a centering exercise, where one participant would sit across from another. Looking into each other’s eyes, prompts from the speaker⁹ provided a personal, humanizing experience. The participants were then split into five groups, led by each team member. Each group did two ten-minute empathy activities from the zine, including a discussion. There were an additional five minutes for the groups to speak on technological implications per their activity. The session ended with a grounding exercise for participants to share what their groups discussed with the rest of the room.

Empathy is a heavy topic. Discussions get personal, and some vulnerability is necessary to connect with others. We decided to add some levity to the session as an icebreaker for participants. We advertised our early morning session through twitter and word-of-mouth with promises of doughnuts. A looping video of a Sesame Street character learning the definition of empathy¹⁰ played as attendees entered the room. When splitting into groups, a game of musical chairs decided where they would end up.



⁹ <https://www.ramdass.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Just-Like-Me-Meditation.docx>

¹⁰ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9_1Rt1R4xbM



(How the session went...)

During our session I was struck by how participants reacted. Here we were, on day 3 of the conference. It seemed that those who opted to join us were there very specifically to engage. What they might not have guessed is the level of engagement we were asking for.

Our first activity, “*Just Like Me*,” illustrated the power of holding another’s gaze and thinking deeply about our connection to one another, even as strangers. I saw people with tears in their eyes as they began to break out to the smaller sessions.

And in the midst of those smaller discussions, people were thoughtful in how they responded not only to the activity prompts but also each other, sharing space for feelings that they might not have anticipated.



One of the activities was about The Believing Game, to listen *completely* and *open-heartedly* to someone you disagree with and try to find ways that what they are saying might be true. When we discussed a story from the New York Times¹¹ about a 27-year-old evangelical from Nebraska who said

before, when you’d say you are a Christian, that would signal you are a critical, judgmental person. I feel a little bit more safe now [that Trump was elected], going into places and saying, “I’m a Christian.”

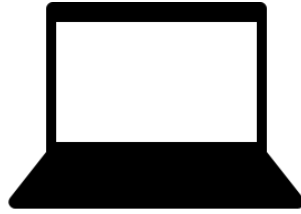
...and the idea that declaring yourself a Christian was “unsafe” in the U.S.A. (in some way) *challenged* a lot of participants. Some attendees brought up later in the conference that they were still thinking about this perspective.



¹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/01/us/young-evangelicals-politics-midterms.html>



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And then...

I'm sad to do this, and I don't exactly know the best way, but I need to bow out of our project.

Everyone else, collectively, thinks

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{{{ ...!!!! Things are too busy! We should have done that, too! }}}}
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Then in emails:



Thanks for letting us know. 😊



I'm so SO glad you ARE doing so ... hope that you are not feeling the stress too keenly!



—that's SO completely understandable, and to be perfectly honest, I probably should have done something similar in stepping back given the rest of what's on my plate right now.

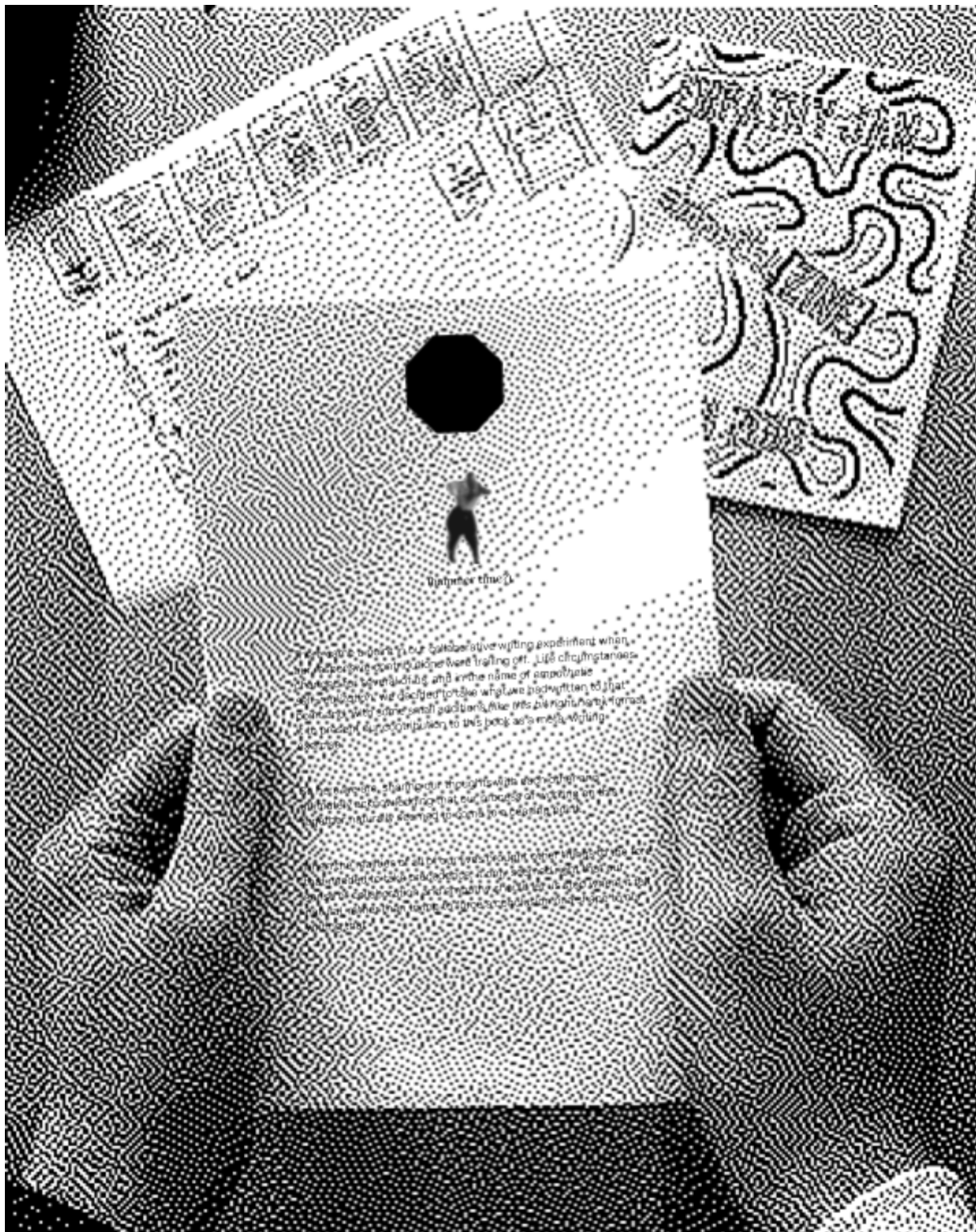


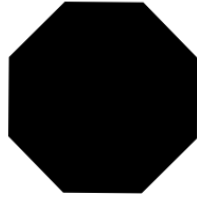
I just want to reiterate how grateful I am for you all.



[These messages] are such gifts! They spark the realization that the human using the technology is the pivotal piece. That no matter how crass or elegant it is, the technology (be it eye glasses that allow one to focus their gaze more clearly during a "Just Like Me" meditation or the various GUIs and infrastructure that supported these very emails) is secondary to the empathetic humans connecting to each other through its use.

So.





(hammer time?)

There came a point in our collaborative writing experiment when our responsive contributions were trailing off. Life circumstances changed for several of us, and in the name of *empathetic self-realization*, we decided to take what we had written to that point and, with some small additions (*like this bit right here*), format it to present our contribution to this book as a meta-writing exercise.

So here we are, sharing our thoughts with each other and ultimately acknowledging that our process of working on this together naturally seemed to come to a ceasing point.

When the realities of all of our lives brought other things to the fore that needed to take precedence, it only seemed right that our sense of collaboration and empathy should let us stop where it felt natural, rather than trying to force a conclusion or a shape to our writing that