

An Unclear Path to Reflecting on Technology

A Critical Reflection on The Tilting Bowl: Electronic Design for a Research Product

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This essay by Henry Lin, Ron Wakkary and Doenja Oogjes explains the process of development of the research product of the Tilting Bowl. The overall idea of this project is to have a bowl that would tilt at any random time during the day. While I understand the idea behind this project, I am not sure that it successfully reaches its point, or at least the article doesn't mention enough for the reader to comprehend the effectivity of the project regarding its meaning.

The Tilting Bowl project's intent is to create a ceramic bowl that would tilt at random times during the day. The essay explains the process of creating this bowl, with a description of the different iterations in each of the main parts or challenges encountered. They explain the research and prototypes done with the tilting mechanism including the motor used, the movement and unpredicted issues. Then, the design and integration of hardware is explained, with the first idea of a perforated circuit to a custom PCB, the way of producing it and integrating it to the bowl as well as, again, the main unpredicted issues. Power management is also presented, because the goal was to be able to have enough battery so that it can be used for a year without being recharged. System optimization and power management is therefore necessary. Throughout the essay, they also explain the concept of research product, as a method to experiment an idea. As opposed to the research prototype, a research product is finished and do not have the prototype's limitations with use. They encourage long-term testing, like living with the prototype or the product, as a way to find issues and solve them, in a concrete situation.

One thing that this article does not mention a lot is the meaning of this project. Why it is done, and why it is done the way it is, beyond the material factors. One paragraph at the beginning mentions it, but it is not reiterated a lot throughout the essay. What is mentioned is that the Tilting Bowl serves as a way to explore the interaction of humans and technology. In this essay, it is not explained further, nor it is related to the technical aspects explained. However, another essay, made the year before by the same authors, explains more in details the meaning of it. In a very brief summary, this article mentions the philosophical issues raised by the Tilting Bowl in an everyday life environment. It mainly brings the concept of postphenomenology, which is, in short, the philosophic etude of the interactions of the human body and mind with its

environment, trying to exclude its subjectivity (Idhe, 22). This bowl has been experimented with four philosophers who lived with the bowl in their home and they describe their reflections on it. However, I feel like the benefits of this project rejoin a very closed group of people. In fact, for people who are not practiced in philosophical thinking, this bowl will probably not have the effect intended. In an everyday life, this object will become part of the scenery and people will get bored at replacing it. While this is an interesting phenomenon for philosophers to analyse, the common person will lose interest in this artifact.

Also, if a reflection on technology is what is intended, technology should be present in the design. The essay doesn't mention the choice of material in relation to the meaning of the experience, and I think that this is very important. In fact, how is the user supposed to know that a reflection with technology is supposed to be had when it just looks like a natural bowl? It could as well be a draft of wind from the window that makes the ball tilt at random hours. How will users comprehend that this is a technological object that they are interacting with?

It is very important to design with the meaning intended in mind. I assume that one of the main reasons to make this a ceramic bowl is for it to blend to a natural environment. However, ceramic is not a material that is related to technology. For example, a bowl in turquoise glass, with sharp cuts, would be something that evokes technology in people, with also being able to disappear in the décor. In fact, glass, as it is a very natural material, used a lot for spiritual purposes in cathedrals for example, is also very trendy in building design or house supplies, as we try to make more and more natural light enter in our homes (Dwyer). It is therefore now a norm of new technologies to be accompanied with glass structures: an association has formed in our minds. As said by Elzbieta T. Kazmierczak, design "coexists with cultural codifications comprising collective and individual environments (45)." Therefore, we need to have something that is related to the existing code of the subject matter for it to be understood as such, and I don't think that the choice of ceramics does evoke the association to technology as much.

To conclude, the Tilting Bowl does not reach its intended meaning to its full potential for me, because of the group targeted by this artifact that is too narrow and because there is a lack of concordance from the design to the meaning, at least from what is presented in this article. I still think that the Tilting Bowl is a very interesting worth improving and sharing, because the meaning that it is trying to convey is still very important and pertinent in society. With all this technology available to us, it is important to position ourselves as human within these, which is what the Tilting ball is helps to accomplish, or at least encourages this reflection.

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