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# Music is My Life: Disseminating Design Research to the Community

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## **Abstract**

This short paper asks the question: How might we disseminate design research to the community? One possible response is discussed wherein drawings and stories created by 129 homeless young people became an art exhibit called, *Music is My Life*.

## **Author Keywords**

Research through Design; Homeless Young People; Music; Art

## **ACM Classification Keywords**

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

## **Introduction**

Lately, researchers and designers of interactive systems have considered the intersection of research, design, art, and community, asking questions both practical and epistemological [e.g., 1,2,5,6]. This short paper joins in by focusing on a particular question: How might we disseminate design research to the community? This question arose in regard to drawings and stories of music devices that 129 homeless young people created during a large-scale, exploratory study of the role of music in their lives [10]. This paper discusses how these drawings and stories came to be the topic of an art exhibit, called *Music is My Life* [3,8].

### **Background – Study and Design Activity**

The study took place from February 2012 to February 2013 and engaged over 200 homeless young people, aged 15-25, half from Seattle, WA and half from Vancouver, BC. Participants took part in surveys, interviews and design activities answering questions about music, risk-taking, and technology use, among others. Findings from the overall study are being reported elsewhere (e.g., [10]). Here, we focus on goals and dissemination of the design activity.

Participants in the design activity completed steps on a self-guided activity sheet where they were first prompted to imagine a music device that could help a homeless youth. Then, participants responded to a number of questions (e.g., Who would use the device?), drew a picture, and wrote a story about a situation where the device would be used. Participants remained anonymous and also chose whether to give permission for their drawings and stories to be used in a public art exhibit (see Fig. 1 for a completed example). Since the overall goal of the study was to explore the role of music in the lives of homeless young people, the design activity built on value scenario techniques from prior work [e.g., 9], yielding findings that are useful for design but which also tell the stories of the everyday lives of homeless young people. Thus, the design activity fits most cleanly within the discourse on research through design.

### **Disseminating Design Research**

Research is disseminated in a number of ways, with peer-reviewed journals and conferences being primary venues. I knew that 129 young people who participated in the study wanted their drawings and stories to be shared. I also knew that few people in the larger

community had the opportunity to meet and have extended conversations with homeless young people. However, it seemed unlikely that many community members would find out about the drawings and stories by reading academic journals or attending conferences. So, a public art exhibit might be the right approach. Yet, questions remained, particularly about how to proceed and who to involve.

### **Music is My Life Art Exhibit**

In order to find a way forward, in November 2012, I assembled a team of 20 volunteers. Volunteers represented neighborhood stakeholders including homeless young people, business owners, curators, service agency staff, and faculty and students at the University of Washington (UW). We discussed possibilities, and decided to move forward with an exhibit. We named the show *Music is My Life*, after a quote from one of the study participants. With the goal of opening *Music is My Life* in May 2013, we held regular meetings and followed a project plan we created as part of a successful grant application to the City of Seattle. Although loosely coordinated, we kept three primary themes in mind: 1) Spread the word; 2) Develop expertise; and 3) Lower barriers.

*Spread the word.* To date, we have: done outreach at public events; been featured in newspaper articles [e.g., 4]; designed and distributed 100s of postcards and posters; created a Facebook page [5]; and given public presentations [e.g., 7].

*Develop expertise.* Everyone on the project had opportunities to take on new challenges. For example, homeless young people assisted with outreach,

## Music is My Life and "A Little Note"



The Music is My Life exhibit consists of two parts:

- 1) A website with all the 129 drawings and stories (<http://musicismylife.ischool.uw.edu>); and
- 2) A set of 8 physical panels depicting 18 drawings and stories.

The photo above shows one of the physical panels being viewed by a guest at the opening of the Music is My Life exhibit in Seattle, WA. Note that this panel includes "A Little Note" (see Fig. 1).

(Photo: Robert Wade)

1

Tommy was having a bad day. His mother had just passed away, forcing him to become homeless. His girlfriend left him because he smelled bad and his friends no longer wanted to hang out with him because he had no money. He was downtown Seattle contemplating suicide when he was approached by two Orion Outreach workers. In addition to giving Tommy socks, snacks, and a flyer to connect him to services that he so desperately needed, they handed him "a little note." He had seen these on t.v. but his mother would never purchase him one because she didn't agree with the music he listened to. Instantly he popped the headphones in and logged on, pulling up "My Girlfriend's Dead" by the Vandals. After that he had the drive to get up and walk to Orion, where upon entering he asked to speak with a counselor to get all of the ideas off his chest. He spoke about his recent homelessness, his mother's passing and the loss of his girlfriend + friends, all the time flicking through all the songs that he could remember, each one slightly more uplifting than the last until finally he felt well enough to go out for dinner, sign up for shelter, and made an appointment with the counselor for tomorrow morning.

2

Tommy was having a bad day. His mother had just passed away, forcing him to become homeless. His girlfriend left him because he smelled bad and his friends no longer wanted to hang out with him because he had no money. He was downtown Seattle contemplating suicide when he was approached by two Orion Outreach workers. In addition to giving Tommy socks, snacks, and a flyer to connect him to services that he so desperately needed, they handed him "a little note." He had seen these on t.v. but his mother would never purchase him one because she didn't agree with the music he listened to. Instantly he popped the headphones in and logged on, pulling up "My Girlfriend's Dead" by the Vandals. After that he had the drive to get up and walk to Orion, where upon entering he asked to speak with a counselor to get all of the ideas off his chest. He spoke about his recent homelessness, his mother's passing and the loss of his girlfriend + friends, all the time flicking through all the songs that he could remember, each one slightly more uplifting than the last until finally he felt well enough to go out for dinner, sign up for shelter, and made an appointment with the counselor for tomorrow morning.

3

Step 1: Homeless youth and young adults face challenges in their daily lives. Imagine a music player device that could help homeless young people. Then write short answers to the questions below. There are no right answers.

What would be the name of the device?

A Little Note.

Who would use the device?

Homeless youth and the homeless population, everyone for \$.

Who might not use the device but would be affected by its use?

Bus drivers, staff + volunteers at drop in centers, friends.

What would the people who use the device think is important?

Music, convenience, battery life

What would the people who use the device be trying to accomplish?

To listen to their favorite music while away.

How many years would a person use the device?

As long as they live

What would happen to the device when it wore out or when it was replaced?

It will be replaced for free, if you are homeless / homeless \$.

How many people would have one of these devices?

As many as possible.

Where would the device work? Everywhere? Or only in certain locations?

Anywhere, connected to satellite.

☒ By checking this box, I give permission for my sketch and story to be used in a public exhibit.

Attachment 3, Design Activity Worksheet, Rev B, 01/02/12

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1

Date: 6/10/12

Step 2: Using the blank sheet of paper, sketch or draw a picture of the device. Then write short answers to the questions below. There are no right answers.

Features are things that the device can do, things that make the device different from others, and things that make the device special. List 5 key features of the device.

1. Solar Panel / extends batt. life
2. Connected to satellite (All Music)
3. If you run out of battery it will auto charge
4. You have the option to save songs into hard drive
5. Clips to belt

Cost: \$1000 or 8000

Battery Life: 100% better

Available Colors: rainbow, glow in the dark, pink everywhere in between.

Weight: 2oz

Dimensions:

Height: 6 inches

Width: 4 in

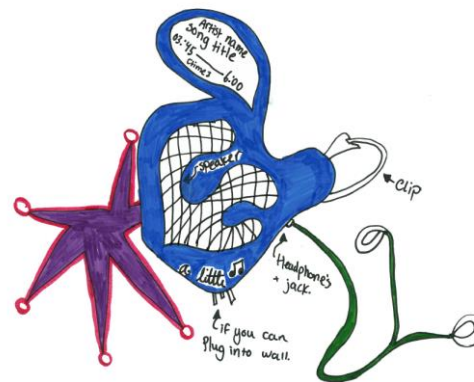
Thickness: 1/2 in

Material: Solar panel, Speaker, Screen, plastic + rubber

Step 3: Using the lined sheet of paper, write a story about a situation where the device would be used. The story can be long or short. It can be a fictional situation or can be based on a real situation. There are no right answers.

4

- Solar Panel.
- Extendable + retractable solar panel.



**Figure 1.** "A Little Note," a music device imagined by a homeless young person in Seattle. This completed design activity includes: 1) Original story; 2) Verbatim story transcription (not part of the original design activity, included here to enhance readability); 3) Completed design activity sheet; and 4) Drawing of "A Little Note."



Molly's Café, The Henry Art Gallery  
May – August 2013 (Photo: Robert Wade)



Command Print Art + Apparel Gallery  
September - November 2013



YouthCare offices  
November 2013 - present

**Figure 2.** Three venues where Music is My Life has appeared in Seattle.

transcribed stories, and took part in curating the show. In another example, some UW students gained experience with exhibit design, while others honed their skills for web and visual design.

*Lower barriers.* We wanted Music is My Life to be available to the largest number of people. So, we built a website that people could access at any time and booked the show at venues with no admission charges.

### Summing Up

We began with a question of how we might disseminate design research to the community. Although time will tell, it appears that a public art exhibit such as Music is My Life may be one meaningful response. To date, Music is My Life has appeared at three no-cost venues in Seattle, including a café at a contemporary art museum (Fig. 2). Subsequently, we estimate that the physical panels have been seen in Seattle by 5,000 people with many more accessing the Music is My Life website. Knowing this, we laid plans for the show to travel to Vancouver, BC. Happily, we have recently been awarded funding from Fulbright Canada with support from the US Embassy, and a team of volunteers in Vancouver are currently securing a venue where Music is My Life will be shown concurrent with the dates of the DIS 2014 conference.

### Acknowledgements

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