MS1 RESEARCH: ask / interview

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the question

The research question that I have chose to address is: how can I create artificial things – objects, scenarios, sensations, etc. – that are scary or uncomfortable in the same way that natural things are?

IDEO methods

Using the IDEO method cards as a prompt I chose to approach this research question through asking five whys and conducting an extreme user interview.

five whys

Why are natural things scary?

Because we cannot control them, they are unpredictable, and sometimes they can hurt us.

Why can't we control them?

Because human beings cannot immediately influence the behavior of natural phenomena or living creatures with whom we do not know how to communicate.

Why can't we communicate with non-human creatures?

Our brains have evolved past using the communication techniques that most non-humans employ. We have evolved to communicate using out brains more than our bodies.

Why is this useful from an evolutionary perspective?

This allows us to transfer or save important knowledge across time and it allows us to build larger knowledge structures.

Why is it important to transfer knowledge between humans over time?

Knowledge allows us to protect ourselves from and dominate natural phenomena that otherwise makes survival difficult.

This is a really cyclic result! I did not quite expect this line of whys to progress in the way it did.

extreme user interview

I interviewed one potential user whom I would consider to be very at ease in the natural world. They sleep outside most of the time and rarely wear shoes, generally preferring to have as few man-made constructs – whether material or social – between themselves and the world around them as possible.

The question I asked the subject was, "what natural things do you find uncomfortable or creepy" taking the example of a spider to start. The subject replied that when they encounter an creature such as spider or snake, which moves in a unique way, they don't feel a knee-jerk sense of fear or revulsion, but rather a deep curiosity and sense of awe about how the creature achieves that motion.

After addressing how motion causes more curiosity than revulsion, we talked about the scale of natural events. This was harder to discuss and pin down. Taking the example of how a rainstorm can be a drizzle or a flood we talked about the uncertainty of scale that accompanies natural phenomena. We concluded that the huge variation in scale of the natural world is difficult to conceptualize and can lead to fear in some situations. Some things can feel frighteningly small, like a tick or bacteria, or frighteningly large like the grand canyon or an avalanche. This aspect of fear or discomfort never really goes away, but we agreed that the more direct experience you have in the natural world, the more at home you can feel with scale of different magnitudes.

Overall, I found that my subjects conscious choice to live with fewer man-made constructs heightened their empathy for the natural world around them and led to more curiosity than fear in unknown situations. This result wasn't particularly surprising, however it was interesting to hear it articulated in such a plain way. The role of observation also felt important in their response; instead of feeling scared and turning away, their response in most situations is to observe and ask. As we observe and ask questions of the world around us we build a better sense of understanding and fear becomes less instinctive.

interview

I am planning to interview kinetic sculptor Ed Andrews.