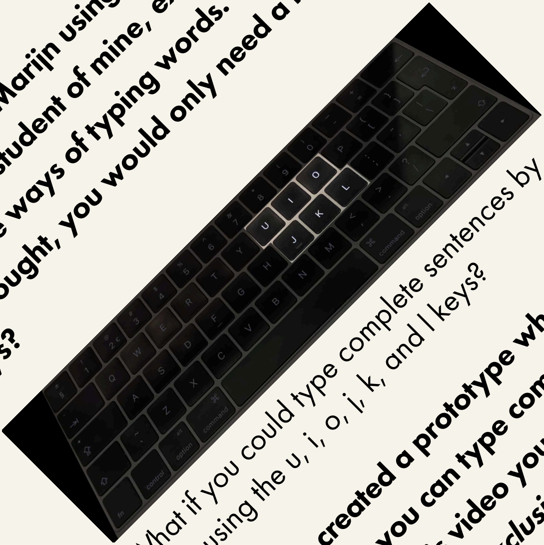
ADD NONSENSE

Marijn is a software engineer. He can only use his left hand, and with that hand he has difficulty with fine motor control. This means typing can be hard for him. It’s even one of the reasons why he didn’t finish university. He had to write papers. Marijn is incredibly intelligent, so thinking up a paper is very easy. Yet typing it would take him ages. Basically the problem he has with keyboard layouts is that not all keys are next to each other.

On a QWERTY keyboard it’s easy for him to type the word *was* because the letters are close to each other.

Typing the word *is* is much harder though. He will have to move his hand and exactly point it to that one small square.

After observing Marijn using his computer, Rick Buter, a student of mine, explored alternative ways of typing words. What if, Rick thought, you would only need a few keys?



What if you could type complete sentences by only using the u, i, o, j, k, and l keys?

And so he created a prototype where with only six keys you can type common words. [1] On this video you can see me typing the words *exclusive design.*

ALLOWING WEIRD IDEAS

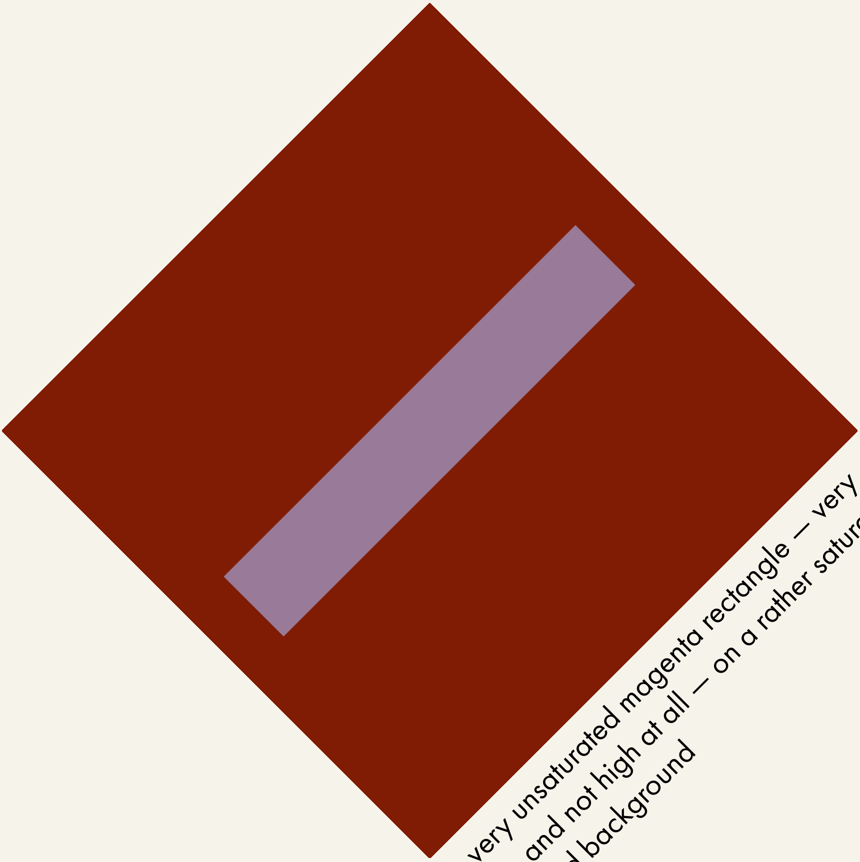
At first Rick didn’t dare to mention his idea, let alone create a working prototype. When he first thought of it, it simply seemed too ridiculous. Only when I explicitly asked my students to come up with nonsensical ideas did he dare to make a prototype and test it.

When he first showed this prototype to Marijn, he had to laugh indeed. It looked so ridiculous and complicated, it didn’t seem to make any sense. Yet after trying it a few times he had to conclude that this might actually work. If you want to you can try the prototype for yourself.

Allowing ideas that seem nonsensical into a design proces can lead to innovative products. This is a common ideation method used in many different creative fields. Questlove explains in his book about creativity that some musicians play music backwards in order to come up with completely new sounds [2] (not just to listen to hidden satanic messages).

My personal interest in nonsense has grown while I was working at a large web design agency. Everything we did there had to make sense, by which I mean that everything had to have an easily measurable effect. More visitors, more money, better performance, simple things like that. And thus we only investigated the obvious. This always gave me the feeling that we were missing out on things.

Back in 2010, as a reaction to this professional focus on *utility* I started a website called Love Nonsense, in which I blogged about nonsensical, mostly funny but often insightful topics. I have worked on several nonsensical side projects as well. Like this script that translates colour code into written language.[3]



A very unsaturated magenta rectangle — very wide and not high at all — on a rather saturated, dark red background

At first this idea of making colour accessible to blind people seemed nonsensical to me, since I assumed blind people can’t see colour. Later it turned out that some blind people can see colour, and others may have memory of it, like I explained in the section about Assumptions about blind people.

Just like the six-key-typing project by Rick Buter, this is an example of using nonsense in order to allow weird ideas, and exploring them. And in these cases they resulted in valuable new insights.

Apart from a simple ideation tool to allow weird ideas, there are other reasons to use nonsense as well. Other reasons are lifting ideas beyond the obvious, breaking out of a single rusty context, exploring the unexpected, and of course having fun.

TALKING DOGS

An example of using nonsense to lift ideas beyond the obvious is this prototype of a talking dog. During my master research I organised a few Exclusive Design Challenges. Some of the more interesting ideas grew out of the *add nonsense* principle. Like this idea of smart glasses that give a blind person some information about the surroundings. This is a quite common idea, and working implementations of this already exists.[4]

This team took this obvious idea to a next level by attaching the speaker to the guide dog. 5 All of a sudden all kinds of new possibilities and questions emerge. What’s the personality of the dog? Will the dog be able to tell persons who want to pet it that you really shouldn’t? Will it crack jokes? How will people react when they are being described by a talking dog? It would be so interesting, and so much fun, to explore this idea further.

AN ELECTRIC WHEELCHAIR-MOUSE

At another one of these workshops one of the teams had a lot of fun, together with Marijn, with working on an idea of using Marijn's complete electric wheelchair as a device to control a website. They envisioned Marijn moving the mouse cursor by driving through a large room, filled with sensors. While possibly spectacular, this of course is a rather unpractical idea.

Yet it did contribute to my simple spatial navigation experiment, [6] which can be seen as a more economical and more practical version of this wheelchair mouse. This is a nice example of just having fun, which is important as well when working with a serious subject like accessibility.

ACCESSIBLE VIDEO DOCUMENTARIES

A nice example of breaking out of a single, rusty context by allowing nonsense is the project I did with Simon Dogger. He asked me to create an accessible version of the 2doc website[7] for him, a website with video documentaries. This may be dismissed as nonsensical: why would a blind person want to watch documentaries.

Yet in many ways of course it does make sense: A video documentary is not only visual, there’s a lot of auditory information in documentaries as well. And of course, apart from the documentary itself there’s a lot of extra information about the documentary as well, like the description and meta information that’s of interest to Simon’s research as a designer.

It reminds me of a discussion I had with Katrien Vermeulen, my wife, a long time ago when I still worked at this web design agency. Back then we were working on checkout flows for webshops, and our sole focus was on making it as easy and as frictionless as possible for people to buy stuff. Making it harder to buy things sounded like utter nonsense to me. Until I discussed this with Katrien who works with homeless people and people with severe, chronic debt issues. She convincingly argued that there are very good reasons to make it harder instead of easier to buy things.

Both these examples, the one of making videos accessible to blind people, and the one about making webshop checkout flows harder to use are good examples of not dismissing arguments that sound nonsensical without giving them serious thought. Allowing this kind of nonsense into our research can broaden our vision and can result in completely different products.

INVISIBLE ANIMATIONS

And then there are the completely unexpected ideas that may pop-up when you ask for nonsense. Like the project with the invisible animations I did with Hannes Wallrafen. [8] When I asked Hannes if he had some ideas that were too ridiculous to suggest, he told me he wanted funny little animations on his website, even though he is blind.

Animated illustrations aren’t very weird, and even coming up with a textual alternative is something we’ve done before. But by designing the animations first for Hannes, and testing them first with him I came to new insights. In hindsight it’s almost too obvious, but it’s a very clever prototyping workflow to first test the textual alternative of an animation before you create the animation itself. Creating an animation is a lot of work, writing a small punchline is much easier to create, and much easier to iterate.

SNIGGERING SCREEN READERS

Another idea that came out of this project was the idea to make screen readers laugh. It was the first time Hannes heard some emotion from his screen reader. It made me realise that even within the tight constraints of a screen reader, which sounds neutral and maybe even boring by design, we are able to add some emotion to our design.

This idea of making screen readers laugh resulted in the open database of strings that make different voices of different screen readers laugh. This database is funny, sure, but it is also a first step in trying to lift screen reader interaction beyond what Graham Pulling calls engineering, into the field of design. You are very welcome to contribute.

FUN

Of course there are serious reasons for allowing nonsense into your design process. But for me the most important reason for using nonsense, and not some other ideation method, is to allow *fun* into the design process. Designing accessibility, helping disabled people lead an independent life is serious work. But it can be fun as well. And only if we allow fun will we be able to start making pleasurable user interfaces. If we do, maybe some day in the future Léonie Watson will come over to my university again, and this time she will be able to explain what makes an interface fun to use for someone who is blind.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Six Key Typing. Rick Buter and Vasilis van Gemert. Git repository. Accessed December 16 2018. github.com/vasilisvg/six-key-typing

[2] Creative Quest. Questlove. Ecco. Hardcover. 2018

[3] Human Colours. Vasilis van Gemert at al. Git Repository. 2013. github.com/vasilisvg/human-colours

[4] See for example Seeing AI , an iPhone app by Microsoft.

[5] Maaike van Cruchten et al. The First Exclusive Design Challenge. Team Larissa. 2017. vasilis.nl/gbi/exclusive-design-challen

[6] See the chapter about false assumptions called **Fuckup's mama**

[7] See the chapter about **Designing Like It's 1999**

[8] See the chapter about **Insivible Animations**