Play as a Trigger for Designing Significant Experiences

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Abstract. This paper is a continuation of the theme discussed in the paper "The meaning and the value as triggers for designing significant experiences" presented at the 3rd edition of this Conference in 2019. Having dealt with the fact that meaning and value are fundamental requirements to activate a symbolic relationship with objects, we have also concluded that these qualities come from both the level of commitment assumed by the person during the interactive communication process and the durability of the solutions proposed by the designer. Competing with the trivialization brought by the familiarity of the object – a useful strategy in a consumer society – lacks, however, an ability of the designer to propose durable solutions which can continuously feed the interest of the user.

In this article we critically address the importance of playfulness as a trigger for designing significant experiences in graphic and product design initiatives, as well as the insignificance of this aspect when seeking an immediate or visceral impact. We present examples and perspectives put forward by such different personalities such as Kenya Hara, Naoto Fukasawa, Donald Norman, Pine and Gilmour, Huizinga and Roger Collois.

We aim at contributing to a comprehensive and enveloped reflection of the ludicity, collaborative and affective dimension of Design as catalyst of the emotive value of the communication process.

Keywords: Design · Ludicity · Play · Collaboration · Experience

1   Introduction

We can assume with some certainty that design is now seen as an area that should directly interfere with the experience of the intended audience in order to have a better reach in what concerns its purpose. As explored previously in the paper "The meaning and the value as triggers for designing significant experiences" published in the book of this Conference last year, thinking about the project for a truly significant experience implies taking into account a set of complementary qualities to the functionality and external aspects (formal and aesthetic) of objects which can activate the user's symbolic relationship.

In the above-mentioned article, we focused essentially on the intermediate character of design for the user to access a certain consciousness related to his/her behaviour. We emphasised, as a fundamental requirement of the whole signification process, the availability that the user dedicates to the situation, thus becoming co-creator of his/her own experience. Niedderer's 'social cups' project was given as an example of this perspective: design focused on the moment of human-object interaction. Its intentionally disruptive character came from the fact that the cup was designed without a stem and, in order to be put down, it implied that more than two people, eventually unknown to each other, would come to an agreement to fit the cups together.

Projects like the above are an example of how design can challenge the user by relying on their behaviour so that they complete the meaning by participating in the 'game' proposed by the designer. Its focus is on interaction, and on provoking a reflection about social individualism and the current difficulty of socializing in certain contexts. This demonstrates the potential of design to go beyond the creation of an object with an end in itself.

Specifically, in this paper we will point out other qualities or 'silent' features of design to access the heart of the user experience, namely the sense of play or playfulness. We will critically address the immediate or visceral impact of a seductive solution as a capitalist phenomenon which does not, however, necessarily contribute to a successful or mnemonically resistant solution.

2   The Importance of a Dynamic and Lasting Experience

"Today the greatest danger is that we live in a large cage that is an open space where everything is the same: the houses are the same, the times of life are the same, the fun activities are the same (…) the difference is only apparent. And we need not only to live differently but to experience differently. Experiencing symbolic discontinuities"[1] (Tolentino de Mendonça 2013, Cit. Marques, 2013)

Considering the current context as a society of an increasingly global and diversified 'spectacle' (reminding Guy Debord's best known work) invaded by a wave of playful, participatory and stimulating manifestations, it also reveals itself, paradoxically, lonelier and emptier. The way our society has been structured, based on an offer of products for a public eager to participate in its consumption has led to a rise in expectations to find new emotional levels of often immediate experiences. Faced with fireworks, the difference is then merely apparent, as D. Tolentino de Mendonça claims, yet not experiencing from symbolic discontinuity. On the contrary, the feeling of familiarity is a very useful factor for the current economic model, when used in the fashion system. It is of interest that a certain trend quickly becomes tedious in order to awaken a new desire in the consumer. It is essential that things become easily consumed, therefore obvious and superficial.

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[1] In the original: "Hoje o grande perigo é vivermos em termos humanos numa grande jaula que é um *open space* onde tudo é igual: as casas são iguais, os tempos de vida são iguais, os divertimentos são iguais (…) a diferença é apenas aparente. E nós precisamos não apenas de viver diferente mas de experimentar a diferenciação. Experimentar descontinuidades simbólicas".

As a reaction to this sense of symbolic emptiness, several authors have shown that several areas manifest new approaches for the need of a symbolic recovery. As discussed in the authors' previous article "A imaterialização da marca: da economia da mercadoria à economia da transformação" (Dias and Baptista 2019a, b), the theorists of Experience Economy (2011), Joseph Pine and James Gilbour, sustain the importance of developing an economic model supported by 'transformation' based on something more lasting than the memory of an experience.

Integrating meaning into the human experience through design seems to have become one of the greatest ambitions of designers' practices in recent decades, as Cooper and Press state in the following reflection: The creation of products, communications or environments is only one means to this end. Designing the experience means putting people in the foreground, seeing the world through their eyes and feeling with their feelings (Cooper and Press 2009, p. 18).[2]

Several studies have been trying to find evidences that a well-made design solution does not only require designing a positive experience, of immediate or visceral impact. They show that the greatest emotional reactions are triggered by less expected events, as opposed to familiarity, which tends to reduce the user's reaction and attention. When approaching design, Donald Norman finds it essential to integrate memorable results, which resist time and the impact of familiarity. However, according to him, the studies which are focused to understanding this phenomenon have been insufficient and the playful element has been commonly used to create pleasant but superficial and fleeting experiences.

Norman claims that overcoming trivialization and familiarity is a great challenge for designers, not only because it is impregnated in consumer society because it is an essential tool for the fashion system, but also because of the nature of our brain's constitution. He explains that, given the capacity of human adaptation to repeated situations, to which we tend to pay less attention, this psychological phenomenon has its anthropological explanation in the need for defence that saves human attention in repeated situations, reserving concentration for unexpected moments (Norman 2004, p. 108). Norman points out that part of the answer to better understand the mechanism of resistance to adaptation of the brain can be provided through studies made to things that withstand the test of time, such as certain types of music, literature or art (Norman 2004, p. 110).

In 2004, Norman said that the academy had not yet devoted itself to studying qualities such as fun and pleasure. He understands that these two qualities imply great delicacy in their application to design, because they produce very particular effects depending on the context of their reception. Therefore, Norman stresses that artistic areas in general should be taken as a research path for design, because they have long explored human interaction in the way that science cannot understand (Norman 2004, pp. 108–105). However, some authors seem to manifest a conscious reflection of these mechanisms, studying them or highlighting them through new concepts such as

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[2] In the original: "La creación de produtos, comunicaciones o entornos es solamente un medio para llegar a este fin. Diseñar la experiencia supone colocar a las personas en primier plano, contemplar el mundo a través de sus ojos y sentir con sus sentimientos".

ludology (Frasca 1999) or funology (2003). Thus, the contribution of scientifically based research to the understanding of the experiences which can produce a deep and lasting effect on people's memory and, consequently, the effectiveness of the affective bond of the objects produced by designers seems fundamental.

3   The Importance of the Playful Element in Design

Humour, for its ability to trigger public awareness, has always been used as an intelligent strategy to bring embarrassing or difficult topics to debate and reflection.

In this regard, the designer Jeremy Girard considers that the playful element will only become memorable if the amount of humour is added in the right proportion, thus becoming a very sensitive task: "too much can have the opposite effect, driving users away due to an over-the-top approach". In his opinion, the power of humour is fundamental to the experience of communication, but it cannot be an obstructive element to the rest of the experience (Girard et al. 2012).

Norman concludes that the secret to a good design solution, which resists time, is to design something taking into account the dynamism of the experience. As he explains, when we listen to a song frequently, given that conscious attention is limited, our concentration will try to focus on different parts in each audition. If the structure of such song is basic, the positive experience of listening with pleasure is easily exhausted. In other words, familiarization will cause saturation.

The dynamism of the experience that Norman proposes to designers comes from the richness and complexity of the structure of the work which provides something different in each perceptual experience, continuously feeding the interest of the user. Norman considers the concept of seduction as a process, as proposed by Julie Khaslavsky and Nathan Sheldroff, a reference for this relational phenomenon. For these designers, after the initial impact of enthusiasm, the real trick for a long-lasting relationship comes from a process of seduction which, according to them, is where most products fail.

We can then establish an analogy between the long-lasting process of seduction and Norman's proposed affective model: the initial impact is established at the visceral level where there is an emotional promise. When 'something' triggers in the user an emotional impact that triggers an unexpected reaction. At the behavioural level this 'something' proves to be a solution which is not only attractive but also useful. In other words, the initial promise is continually fulfilled. Finally, on a reflective level, the initial experience, felt by the user, can constitute a story in itself that is remembered and told as something positive, having continuity after the use of the product or service. Thus, the experience that began with an emotional impact, visceral or on the surface, ends in a memorable way (Norman 2004, pp. 111–112).

4 Play as a Trigger for Designing Significant Experiences

Huizinga wrote one of the most important studies between culture and game: the controversial 'Homo Ludens', published in 1938. This author leveraged the interest of many others, such as Roger Caillois or Umberto Eco, who analysed the game instinct as a fundamental element of the human culture. Huizinga acknowledges that playful behaviour absorbs the player in an 'intense and total' way (1938/1993, p. 16), and that this phenomenon is even more intensified when the essence of the playful spirit – daring, taking risks, enduring uncertainty and tension – allows the player to forget that he/she is playing (ibid., p. 59). Although Huizinga or Caillois do not consciously analyse the character of game in design, they approach cultural manifestations in a broad way and make an approach to tangential areas – such as the production of plastic arts, crafts and architecture – giving us material to discuss the possible relationships, potentialities and divergences that we can find between game and design nowadays.

The benefits of the game are present in many key areas, including pedagogy and design. According to the president of the National Game Institute, Stuart Brown, "If you look at what produces learning and memory and well-being, play is as fundamental as any other aspect of life, including sleep and dreams" (Henig et al. 2008).

The designer Paul Rand, for example, in his text Design and Play Instinct (1965), already referred to the pertinence of using game principles – the existence of limits defined by a discipline – as one of the most important aspects for the motivation and creation of new and meaningful solutions by the designer (or student). More recently, as an extension of this idea, author Michael Golec in the article Memory, Instinct, and Play Design: Beyond Paul Rand's "Play Principle" (2005) also adds the intuitive aspect of the game as necessary for learning.

In Joana Quental's doctoral research, the author also notes the importance of the game's function in the field of design because it is recognised by most of the designers she interviewed. For them, "the project [is] considered a challenge and seen as a game in which they propose to participate"[3] (Quental 2009, p. 294).

We can thus conclude that the creation and execution processes of a design project are within a ludic dimension, either from the methodological side of the designer or from the user's side that, as a participant in a context and time proposed by the designer, can be understood as a 'player'. If we consider the history of design, we can see that it is rich in seduction games between the designer and the receiver by means of the product, mainly as a commercial strategy. But there are countless designers who, with social, experimental or pedagogical objectives, have explored this component for mnemonic purposes. Through humour and surprise, they trigger and challenge the receiver to enter a communicative game, contributing to increase the emotional value of the communication process. In other words, they attract the attention of the receiver via the force of the message, or the solution.

Cassandre's posters (Fig. 1), clearly artistic and commercial, have become a communicative reference because of the play between word and image, inspiring many

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[3] In the original: "o projeto [é] considerado um desafio e encarado como um jogo em que se propõem participar".

other authors and seducing the public of a fluorescent market to participate in modern life through the consumption of new products. An iconic example is the poster for the Dubonnet wine brand, 1932, which consisted of involving the receiver in the dynamics of a visual and sound game: DUBO (du beau, beautiful); DUBON (du bon, good); DUBONET (wine brand).
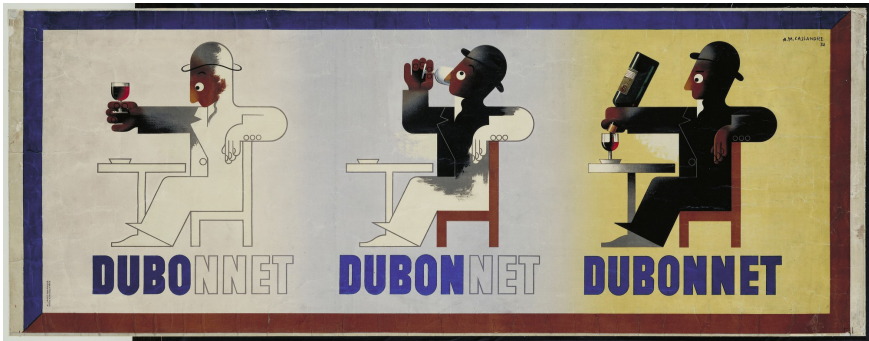

Fig. 1. A. M. Cassandre. Poster, Dubonnet, 1932. In: https://www.moma.org/collection/works/5370

The Japanese designer Shigeo Fukuda, through his minimalist language influenced by the International Style, used humour, satire and optical illusion as communicative tools. Many of his best-known projects evoke multiple readings where meaning emerges during the decoding of the visual game.

Another multifaceted designer is Bruno Munari who challenges the receiver to reconfigure new relationships with objects. In his project Nella Nebbia di Milano (Fig. 2), the meaning of the story is activated through the user experience during the moment of interaction with the book. The experience of the fog is visual and tactile given the nature and overlapping of the material.

Fig. 2. Bruno Munari. Book, Nella Nebbia di Milano, 1968. In: https://www.amazon.it/Nella-nebbia-Milano-Prima-edizione/dp/B06Y47SF7K

On the Portuguese scene, Fernando Brízio is a designer who recurrently uses humour and subjectivity allied to an awareness of the functionality of objects and their communicative power with the user (Fig. 3).

The IDENTIDADES DESIGN logo (Fig. 4), by the Portuguese designer Álvaro Sousa, is an example of how something as apparently limited as creating a graphic identity can become a memorable experience through surprise and visual play. The degree of difficulty of decoding this graphic game makes it almost a personal discovery. Its communicative potential is activated from the moment the observer recognises that the final semicolon may not actually be what it seems. The visual rhythm with the colours and the partition of the words ends with a semicolon that suggests the continuation of the first two letters (ID).

Another design perspective that seems to offer resistance to the effects of time is the without thougth concept by Japanese designer Naoto Fukasawa. This term appears in reference to almost ethnographic observations of how people unconsciously relate to objects and the context. Feeling the creative importance of this contemplation and study for the design, Fukasawa starts in 1998 a series of collaborative workshops with other designers. The author guided the designer's talent to think about the importance of the "Silent Connection" that is established with objects, promoting the flow of behaviour but without alerting the user's attention. This design perspective focuses mainly on the essence of objects, hiding subtle meanings that are progressively discovered by the senses during the performance of use. Fukasawa points out that when this subtlety of design is understood, it sometimes has a "profoundly moving" impact (2007, p. 10). As a manifestation of this awareness, Kenya Hara commissions the exhibition Re-design – daily products of the 21st century (2000), a show that consisted of the redesign of everyday products.

Fig. 3. Fernando Brízio. Pottery. Painting with Giotto, 2005. In: https://i.pinimg.com/originals/1f/ac/02/1fac028ae2d7d56763cd885bd0c0559e.jpg

Masahiko Sato reinterpreted the seal of arrival and departure from the country for passports at international airports (Fig. 5), which was originally made using a square or circular seal. The author proposed a new relationship between the text and the image,

Fig. 4. Álvaro Sousa, Graphic identity of the event IDENTIDADESIGN, 2009. In: event's programme.

Fig. 5. Country seals of departure and arrival. Masahiko Satos response to the exercise posed by Kenia Hara for the exhibition Re-design – daily products of the 21ˢᵗ century. In: https://www.designboom.com/design/kenya-hara-designing-design/

combining the direction of the plane icon, according to the passenger's departure or arrival. The departure is marked with the plane pointing to the left (given the oriental reading).

For Kenya Hara, this concept is an example of how graphic design can produce an affectionate feeling of hospitality during a routine secretarial procedure. He sees in the small communicative gesture a way of leaving a seed in the minds of travellers that will germinate in the future (Hara 2008, p. 31). This seems to us an excellent example of an initiative that overcome the neutrality of daily products, triggered by their familiarity, activating a new symbolic and dialogic level to the user. The results of this initiative have emerged with a critical, pedagogical and aesthetic charge, and seem to reinforce the importance of creative exploration when 'doing' and reflecting on design.

5 Conclusion

The examples analysed in this paper demonstrate that design can go beyond 'shaking the attention' of the user for free or as an ornamental way of highlighting the presence of something. For designers, however, the deafness of communication derived from the excessive noise of today's everyday products, such as the use of playful aspects devoid of depth, becomes a major challenge.

With this reflection we intend to demonstrate that practice and thought for the moment of interaction in what concerns design can leverage a dialogue or tension with the user by involving him/her in a situation in which he/she can also be responsible and

co-create meaning. The answer to this challenge demonstrates the need for the area of design to develop competence for communication that is long-lasting.

We looked at design in its playful dimension, in a game dynamic (from Huizinga's perspective), where meanings are acti`vated within a concrete 'player' context and during the construction of their own experience, lending itself in a wider sphere as stimuli for reflection. We end with the conviction that Caillois tells us that "the way you win is more important than the victory itself and, in any case, more important than the bet"[4] (1967/1990, p. 17).

Finally, we underline that in order to be able to integrate any 'new product' into people's hands and minds, it is essential to attract them to a process, that is, to the playing arena.

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[4] In the original: "A forma como se vence é mais importante do que a vitória em si e, em todo o caso, mais importante do que a aposta".

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