
WHO AM I?

REFLECTING UPON MYSELF AS A DESIGNER

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INTRODUCTION

When I started this paper I was only thinking about a reflection of where I currently am. As I started to write three distinct sections evolved, where I have been, where I am now and where I am going. Each of these sections discusses how my thoughts have evolved over time and where I think I am going as a designer. The first section discusses my past design work prior to coming to the HCI/d program. In second section I discuss how the readings from this semester have helped me identify things that I currently do as a designer and understand that further. The last section discusses where I am going as a designer and what is influencing these thoughts.

WHERE I HAVE BEEN

I have always felt I was some sort of designer. I have always been drawn to the more creative side of things. In my apartment I have a painting I did when I was in middle school and an oil pencil sketch that I did in high school hanging on the wall. I am not an amazing artist but I do pretty well.

I have always been very spatially oriented. I can look at things and usually figure out a way to get most things arranged in a way that makes sense. As an undergraduate in my newspaper editing classes my professor told me he didn't understand how someone who was so good at page layouts was so crummy at headline writing.

I am also very detail oriented. I try to have everything perfect sometimes this isn't possible but it is something I strive for. I try to cover all of the small details. I am often the person asking what if this, or what if we did that.

I ended up in web design because I was pretty good at making things fit on the page and make sense. I also had enough graphic design skills to be able to put together something that looked good. I was also able to learn HTML, CSS and other basic programming languages that would allow me to work online.

I thought I had found my place as a designer/programmer but the more I got into the area the more I realized that there was much more here. I became very interested in usability testing

and making things easier for people to use. Initially I thought I wanted to do just user research and didn't realize how much more there was beyond user research.

This all changed as I started the HCI program. Since then my idea of what I want to do has been challenged. I have been trying to figure out where I am going and what I want to do.

WHERE I AM NOW

I have spent most of this semester reflecting on the past year. Seeing the first years come in, watching them tackle projects in Marty's class, working on the CHI project with them and just spending time talking to them has really helped me in my process of figuring out my personal design philosophy. Taking this class is what really started me thinking about who I am as a designer.

I started by looking at the way I design. I am working on the CHI Student Design Competition with a group of HCI and computer science students. We started out by doing literature reviews to try and understand more about the problem. We tried to come up with a concept based solely literature reviews. I struggled to think of a good idea based off of other people's research. We talked to some local organizations that work with the homeless to get a better idea of what people who work with this population see. One shelter in particular was really inspirational to me. We talked to a shelter for women who are recovering from substance abuse. They gave us a lot of really good information about homelessness in Bloomington especially in the area of substance abuse. I made notes of the things they told us and started to think about how to connect everything.

As I thought about the interview in the back of my mind I had an "ah ha" moment that Nelson and Stolterman refer to as a parti. I find that my best designs come to me in this way. This parti lead to the concept that the team I am working with will be entering into the CHI competition. We went back to the shelter that we had talked to and she loved the solution. She even thought of someone who could benefit from the solution.

The only issue with designing via parti is if you don't have that moment when it all makes sense. I have found myself frustrated when I can't quite get to this point but I feel like I now have some tools I can use to stimulate this process.

I also see the lack of a human element slowing me down a little in my capstone project. I have done a lot of literature review but without the human element I doubt I will be able to find an approach. I am currently running a study that I hope will give me some of the human element that I am looking for.

Thinking about these two projects and previous projects I have found that I am a very human-centered designer. People are my inspiration for many things and removing that element makes designing difficult for me.

In a way this relates back to the story Jones tells about the wagon maker working with the people who come to him to have a wagon built. The wagon maker custom builds each wagon based on the needs of the person.

The wagon maker is an example of a craftsman since each wagon he builds is different from the previous and builds upon the knowledge he has learned from previous wagons and wagon makers. Through experience the wagon maker has learned that dished wheels to allow for different weights of cargo. In this way I also see myself as a craftsman working with my tools and constantly refining my process.

I enjoy practicing my craft using different mediums. One of my favorite mediums is food. I am a pretty good cook in general but my specialty is breads and desserts. Some of the recipes I have used many times and have gotten them to a point where they produce consistently good results. Others are new and I may have only made them a few times or haven't tried them at all. The old standby recipes are ones that I have made over and over again to the point where I know exactly how to do everything. I typically have my own technique for recipes like this I may even throw in something extra that I have found makes it just a little better. This is where the craft of cooking comes into play. Small alterations based on how something turned out the last time may make this one better or worse than the last one.

In cooking and design attention to detail down to the smallest level is very important. Everything you add changes the recipe ever so slightly. Add too much of one thing, cook it too long and it can ruin whatever you are making. Gajendar talks about crafting icons at the pixel detail level. I can draw a parallel to making something from scratch and working with a raw ingredient the cooking equivalent of a pixel. I take all of the various ingredients and combine them together to create a finished product.

Within craft and with all areas of design reflection in action is very important. The concept of reflection in action was made popular by Donald Schön. Reflecting within design is something that is very important to me. After I have finished a project or even while I am working on a project I will often take some time to really think about what I am doing and where it is going.

Reflecting in design is not only reflecting on mistakes but upon positive experiences and things that worked well. In design it seems that reflecting on the positive parts of a project seem to be often missed. If something fails there is typically a meeting to go over what went wrong and what we can do in the future to prevent it. When something goes right people are

congratulatory and they move on. Typically no thought is put into why things went smoothly and no problems occurred. This is something that I have been looking at over the past year.

WHERE I AM GOING

Some new things I have started to think about and incorporate into my designs are the ideas of sustainability and ensoulment of designs. Janlert and Stolterman talk about the character of things which is very similar to the concept of ensoulment. Nelson and Stolterman take an even more direct approach and discuss the ensoulment of designs.

When I think about the objects in my life many of them have meaning beyond their utility and some of them don't. For example I am much more attached to my laptop than my broom. The laptop allows me to keep in touch with friends, study for my classes do research among a many other things. On the other hand the broom is very useful when I need to clean but it only performs one task and is not something I use every day. I would say that most people are more attached to the things they use on a more regular basis than things they only use occasionally.

Verbeek talks about the sustainability of objects and a group called "eternally yours". The group was formed to encourage designers to start thinking about the impacts of their objects. If you design something and then don't take the time to look at the impact it can have you are doing both yourself and the eventual user a major disservice.

I think the combination of the idea of ensoulment and sustainability of design is an important idea for designers. If you can create something that people want to take care of then they are less likely to dispose of it or to dispose of it in a different way.

General HCI theory is another area that I am trying to expand my knowledge. Coming into the master's program I didn't have a theoretical background so the whole concept of theory was something fairly new. Most of what Journalism is rooted in is practical thoughts and ideas along with a collection of rules and a code of ethics. This is probably why I really enjoyed Roger's critique of various theories in HCI and how practitioners have trouble using them.

I have read a large number of papers in the last year and a half. Many of the theories and ideas that were presented in these I couldn't see myself using as a practitioner since they were either too complicated for a production cycle or difficult to apply. I believe the ideas that I have identified in this paper are some of the more accessible thoughts in current HCI.

I am hoping to expand my knowledge of theory a little more before I graduate. I believe it is important to know the major HCI theories in order to be seen as someone who is well rounded in HCI.

CONCLUSION

I have learned a great deal in the past year and a half and I know I still have more to learn. I am also trying to figure out if I can possibly relate my past experiences to my new experiences to tie my past to my present. I see ways to link Journalism to HCI but I am not sure the industry I came from is ready to accept the ideas that I have now. I realize that there may not be a way to make my past and present completely compatible but I have been able to draw from pieces of my undergraduate education and practice into HCI.

I am open to wherever the next semester takes me. I am sure I will learn a great deal from my capstone project as well as just continuing to experience the things going on around me.

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