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## Interaction Design and the Paradox of the Conscious Unconscious.

In this paper I examine a variety of interaction design definitions in order to build a methodology I may use to discuss the discipline critically. Additionally my goals are to produce artifacts, services, concepts and technological applications as an interaction designer. I intersperse ideas, which are becoming the building blocks for my approach.

In my education thus far I have found as with any discipline—creative or business—a spectrum of definitions from the practical to the socially conscious, from the theatrical to the rigid, and—most recently—from the responsible to self proclaimed “radical” interaction design. (IxDa Interaction Design and Sustainability panel, January 24, 2008)

Jonas Lowgren and Eric Stolterman, the authors of *Thoughtful Interaction Design*, feel interaction designers must take responsibility for ethical and aesthetical qualities of digital artifacts and that relating design solely to usability and usefulness is too simplistic. Rather than focusing just on methods I believe they are suggesting a focus on the broader scope of design thinking. Particular points of design thinking suggested in the following excerpts from other interaction designers are inspiring my approach.

In the forward of *Designing for Interactions*, Gillian Crampton Smith suggests we think of the implicit meaning as well as the explicit meaning for our designs. In her view, the qualities of interactive systems speak to people in different ways - that humans read meaning into artifacts differently. It is the interaction designers job to understand and utilize implicit meaning as well. Along with the design principles of usability, utility, satisfaction and communicative qualities, Smith argues for a fifth element—sociability. If the system does not support connectivity, if it is dehumanizing, in Smith's opinion it is doomed to fail. I am intrigued by implicit social cognition or the feelings, cognitions and evaluations not necessarily available to conscious awareness, conscious control, conscious intention or self-control. Ubiquitous computing and the future of Ad Hock networking are examples that explore implicit thinking and social connectivity. As an interaction designer these areas in technology are of particular interest as tools to connect people with information and human-to-human support.

In the essay *Wicked Problems in Design Thinking*, Dick Buchanan broadly explores different applications of design: Symbolic and visual communication, material objects, and activities and organized services. He believes the central theme of organized services is connections and consequences in the everyday experience. The fourth area is the design of complex systems or environments for living, working, playing and learning. This area is more and more concerned with exploring the role of designer as facilitator. Guiding humans into a broader ecological and cultural environment or complex system made up of technology, products and activities. In this state of facilitating - these areas are interconnected, with no priority given to any single one.

I see interaction design as an overarching umbrella, which has these parts, nestled within. I am learning there are many schools of thought about what interaction design is, how to teach it and what defines a successful outcome. I gravitate to the holistic view which includes in my view, an ideal state:

beauty, communication leading to new awareness, achievement of task-related goals, fluidity within a system that is building upon itself, and the connection to other humans in a meaningful way.

I feel human-computer interaction and information designers will be the gatekeepers for a healthier society. Currently within this emerging discipline of interaction design there are many discussions brewing with regard to social change, sustainability and life cycle analysis.

Traditionally in American culture the politicians, activists and artists have been the motivators for Cultural Revolution and while these communities are forming similar discussions about the direction of our consumption I see designers with the access to the tools of change and the awareness to make the difference. In the Design Mind Green Issue a forum for idea exchange between design and business, a publication by Frog Design the opening quote harkens to awareness.

“ Booming economics have created a set of consumer desires where the impetus to protect the environment has never been more powerful than the desire to have a strawberry Pop-Tart- with sprinkles”.

Our communities, economies, leisure, work and education are all becoming part of the design discussion. Designers of products and services will be the first thinkers to have access to shifting paradigms in a society that is driven by products. The designers of the products humans rely on will have the power to make the changes needed to promote a symbiotic environment filled with healthy, meaningful activities and sustainable products. In a disconnected or non-symbiotic environment Pop Tarts are glorified, eaten, enjoyed – then potentially contribute to breakdowns such as diabetes, obesity or less dramatic outcomes such as irritability or a lack of nutrition. A conscious healthy choice for food would not include a Pop Tart. Designers are moving in the direction of no longer unconsciously agreeing to a marketing agenda or client driven bottom line driving the product design. One clear example of this movement is the Design Accord. This agreement signed by consultancies and independent designers states they are obliged to inform the client of the relationship client desires and sustainable options.

In an interview with David Kelley titled The Designers Stance, Kelley talks about having levels of consciousness. First someone realizes they don't know something which promotes an willingness to learn- in this state, one is mindful of their acts (conscious), after not keeping an eye on one's state of mind, things become automated and the mindfulness subsides. If designers and the companies they are working for can remain conscious of their actions and responsible for outcomes under the umbrella of interaction design, we will see progress. The breakdown occurs when the unconscious state is present and the ethical responsibility is placed on an outside force.

My favorite anecdote about interaction design is referenced by Alan Kay in From the Desk to the Palm. He says the moment interaction design was birthed was, “When people designing interfaces realized end users had functioning minds.”

He goes on to reference Marshall McLuhan, a media theorist and author who noted in his book *Understanding Media* that the use of the personal computer would change the thought patterns of an entire civilization. Whether one agrees with McLuhan's draconian take on these changes or not, we could all agree that a truly powerful change did (is) happen (ing).

This is an exciting time to be in the field of interaction design, because thoughtful and responsible designers and useful desirable products and activities will potentially effect new thought patterns in the years to come. The desire to work with and include the principles of empathy, sustainability, corporate social responsibility and ethics in the industry may indeed allow the designer to be a gatekeeper for generations of global end users. These end users will be connected through emotional networks shared with companies that are accountable and vital. These companies will develop new ways to use technology, offering easier and more meaningful access to information resources that will help humans lead healthy prosperous lives.



