Fun Systematically

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ABSTRACT

This position paper looks at two examples where the study of fun is at very least systematic, and quite possibly scientific. In the first, Virtual Crackers, a systematic process of 'deconstructing experience' identifies the individual aspects of an experience (pulling crackers), which are then used to reconstruct a new experience in a new medium (the web). In the second, a generic question about the relationship of fun and engagement is studied through the mutation of examples, slowly changing particular abstract attributes. Neither process is perfectly automatic nor even reproducible, but both exhibit structured methodologies to find results. Scientific? You decide.

Keywords

Fun, enjoyment, engagement, design, deconstructing experience, virtual crackers

INTRODUCTION

The title of this panel is "Funology: A Science of Enjoyable Technology?". This is problematic in itself. Funology suggests a science of fun, but are fun and enjoyment the same? An evening quietly sipping wine with friends, slowly watching the breeze fleck the still surface of cool waters, far off the gentle sound of a beck tumbling towards the lake, ducks and swans slowly gather on the water's edge as the sun casts vivid light shows across the distant hills. Enjoyable – yes. Fun …?

Fun, enjoyment, humour, pleasure, funny – we know the difference, yet if we can't even distinguish them clearly for a panel title what hope for a science of enjoyment … or fun … or whatever. Of course the fact that we can all tell enjoyment from fun means that although we may not be able to articulate fully the differences between then, nor give precise definitions, still there is something there that is distinctive.

I don't know whether it is 'scientific', but certainly I have found that you can be systematic about understanding and designing enjoyable or fun experiences. I will briefly look at two examples of this systematicity. First will be the design of virtual crackers – a process that involved the translation of a physical experience to a web product. Then we will look at an exploration of the relation between fun and engagement, using examples to uncover the critical points where one type of experience ends, and thus start

to understand the attributes of experience. The former is about a particular experience – and we are better at understanding these experience words in particulars rather than abstraction – the latter about using particular examples to gain general understanding.

CRACKERS – DECONSTRUCTING EXPERIENCE

For readers who do not come from a country with British influence you may never have come across Christmas Crackers. At Christmas on the dinner table, by each place is a small brightly coloured tube of paper and cardboard. The ends are slightly pinched in to prevent the contents falling out. When the meal begins those around take one end of their cracker and offer the other to someone else. They pull … and with a bang (from a small gunpowder strip) the cracker pulls apart and its contents spill out onto the table: a small plastic toy, a paper hat and a strip of paper with a (usually very bad) joke printed on it.

In 1999, I was part of an Internet company called aQtive. We wanted to send something to our contacts and users but an electronic greeting card seemed, well passé. So we thought about electronic Christmas crackers. However, a simple conversion of Christmas crackers would be just as boring – imagine a video of someone pulling a cracker – yawn. Instead we 'deconstructed the experience', created a web experience that did not match the phenomenological aspects of 'pulling a cracker', but instead reconstituted elements of the experience. Table 1 shows the elements identified and how they were mapped onto the virtual cracker.

This deconstruction/reconstruction process sounds very reductionist and you might think that this could not give rise to an exciting or fun experience. In fact the opposite is the case, the systematic reflection prompted a creative process that was successful at least measured by the usage of Virtual Crackers and the enthusiastic email feedback we get.

|	real cracker	virtual cracker
surface elements		
design	cheap and cheerful	simple page/graphics
play	plastic toy and joke	web toy and joke
dressing up	paper hat	mask to cut out
experienced effects		
shared	offered to another	sent by email message
co-experience	pulled together	sender can't see content until opened by recipient
excitement	cultural connotations	recruited expectation
hiddenness	contents inside	first page – no contents
suspense	pulling cracker	slow ... page change
surprise	bang (when it works)	WAV file (when it works)

Table 1. the crackers experience

FUN & ENGAGEMENT – EXPLORING BOUNDARIES

For the second example we'll look at some work with Masitah Ghazali at Lancaster University. We were examining various attributes, terms and ideas around 'experience' and fun. We discussed mind maps and produced numerous random jottings, until at one point an apparently simple question arose: is engagement necessary for fun? It appeared to be, but with a lack of clarity about both fun and engagement, which rivalled that of the panel title, we were not sure. How does one even begin to properly pose a question like that, let alone answer it?

We classified experiences into those that are fun and not and those that are engaging or not. This gave us the Venn diagram as shown in figure 1. The central region, experiences that were fun and engaging was easy playing in the park, running with a kite, … The engaging and not fun category was fine too – doing an exam … total engagement, but not exactly fun. And outside both, not fun and not engaging … well boring, again not too difficult: waiting for a kettle to boil. However, we were struggling to find examples that were fun without being engaging. But not finding examples doesn't prove anything beyond our lack of imagination.

Now it was around that time that I had realised why finding examples of abstract concepts is often hard (and it is a long story). So we needed techniques to discover examples … and one example discovery technique is simple – mutation. Think of an example that is not what you want, then change it until it has the right attributes. Take something that is boring (waiting for a kettle to boil) and try to make it fun … but trying not make it engaging at the same time … easy: add a little birdy that pops up and sings when the kettle boils. (silly yes, but we are after fun not cool).

Even better if we look at the path between the boring and fun example, doing small changes we can examine the critical points where it ceases to be fun and hence begin to understand critical aspects of fun.
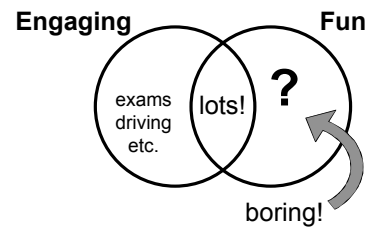
Fig. 1. Exploring fun

This process of mutation and then looking for critical changes can be applied to many experiential (and other) issues. It is suitable for the 'expert' analyst in 19th Century armchair philosopher style. It can also be used with users/subjects to uncover their tacit structurings of their personal affective space.

LESSONS

The experience of Virtual Crackers shows us that it is possible to systematically analyse a particular experience (pulling crackers) and use this analysis to design a fresh experience, in a new medium (the web) and yet in some way preserve the essentials of the felt experience. Note how in order to do this specific design we needed to derive abstractions from the old and then reapply them to the new.

The study of fun and engagement was an investigation of the abstract – is it true in general that fun is always engaging. In order to address this question, and in so doing understand more about the nature of fun, we looked at examples and used a methodology of mutating them to find critical differences. That is in order to understand the abstract we derived specific designs and then used them to uncover new abstractions.

In short to create new specific designs we needed to create abstractions … and in order to understand abstractions we needed to consider specifics. Isn't academia fun!

And it is at very least systematic … and possibly even scientific :-)

MORE …
See Dix (2003) for a description of the deconstruction/ reconstruction method; see www.vfridge.com to send a Virtual Cracker; and for more about experience visit …

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REFERENCE
Dix, A. (2003). Deconstructing Experience - pulling crackers apart. in Funology: From Usability to Enjoyment. M. Blythe, K. Overbeeke, A. Monk and P. Wright (eds.) Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Kluwer, 2003. pp. 165-178