



Practicing Humility: Design as Response, Not as Solution

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Embracing Mess

The very basic task put upon designers is no more and no less than to imagine alternative worlds and work towards realising those. That may be a bigger change oriented towards an explicitly transformative intent (e.g. a world without cars and alternative mobility), or a small change where an object might arrive at being or exist in a different way (e.g. a world in which there is a slightly differently shaped juice box). With this expectation and the surrounding pervasive practices, particularly around empathising with others, comes the tendency to override others' experiences through the lens of designers' own sense-making. In this commentary, I think through what it might mean to deliberately take on a different position guided by *humility*, *loving epistemology*, and *radical enthusiasm*.

Walking through the associated tensions engrained in designing from such a positionality, I illustrate some of the considerations guiding my own practice and potential pathways guided by curiosity and awareness of the unknown. This commentary, written from the perspective of design theory, offers a provocation of how we might think of design not as something we do to find solutions, but rather as a practice oriented towards being response-able and embracing messiness and tensions.

Design's High Horse

Design practices necessarily require us to imagine worlds that are different, if not implicitly better, than the *status quo*. Hence, designers need to build up the confidence to claim that they are the ones who can contribute constructively to such a change. In altering a *status quo*, we encounter (sometimes subtle) shifts in power distributions, giving designers the responsibility to attune to those even though this might not always be explicitly attended to (Kender and Frauenberger 2022).

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Even within participatory design contexts, explicitly aiming at levelling out the playing field between different types of expertise contributing to design, negotiations of power are continuously required of everyone involved (Bratteteig and Wagner 2014). And even if we share these lived experiences with participants, we still need to attend to differences. We need to pay attention to how power is not only involved in the design process, but also in the design outcome, and in the situated contexts they operate in (Brulé and Spiel 2019).

The most common way to re-conceptualise this power, besides a head-on attack, has been the notion of addressing ‘problems’ and identifying ‘solutions’ (Blythe et al. 2015). Particularly in the context of technological design and increased efforts of digitising our lived environments and socio-technical constraints, however, we have learned that these ‘solutions’ often lead to more widespread and manifest issues around discrimination (Bender et al. 2021) and exclusion (Spiel 2021). This shows that design always already privileges some perspectives over others. Designers make assumptions about the potential circumstances and contexts of the use of their artefacts. However, when we consider technological systems, they do so on a much grander scale than we might be comfortable with.

Marginalised populations and minority groups often have more experience with this than others. They understand that the world is not made for them, and technologies often serve as a reminder thereof. For example, the design of technological artefacts for neurodivergent people is mainly driven by the external expectations on behaviour and demeanour (Spiel et al. 2022)—at the risk of entirely counteracting the self-determined positions neurodivergent people themselves might have and desire (Spiel and Gerling 2021). Hence, without checking in with the dominant assumptions that might be guiding our design processes, we risk solidifying and amplifying existing modes of injustice.

Given that designers take on the position of identifying alternative realities, they need to recognise specific expertise and experience others might bring to the table. To do this, we need to encounter each other as valid partners who can contribute to a shared understanding of ‘problems’ and desires. To provide an experimental and methodological counterpoint within the OutsideTheBox¹ project, for instance, we were interested in collaboratively designing technologies that support holistic well-being with autistic children (see Frauenberger et al. 2019). Together with eight children aged six to ten, we designed technologies they found meaningful in their everyday lives.

The project centred on the agency and experiences of the children in creating the prototypes. Subsequently, we needed to understand whether we adequately supported them during the design process. To do so, we needed to understand which kinds of meaning the children gave the technological artefacts and their experience with them. One way to do so, traditionally, is drawing on notions of empathy (cf. Wright and McCarthy 2008).

However, this way is fundamentally limited. By focusing on empathy, we focus on our own understanding of an artefact or experience and how it becomes legible

¹ See https://frauenberger.name/research/projects/01_otb. Accessed 11 September 2023.

to us. Given that autistic children have entirely different life worlds compared to researchers (be they autistic or not), prioritising our own understanding of their position puts us on a high horse which, again, privileges our design perspective over that of our participants.

From Solution to Response

Wright and McCarthy state that

[i]n an empathic relationship the ‘designer’ does not relinquish [their] position to ‘become the user’, a position from which nothing new can be created, rather the designer responds to what they see as the user’s world from their own perspective as designer. (Wright and McCarthy 2008: 639)

Their pragmatist concept of empathy is decidedly dialectic, requiring designers and ‘users’—or, in our context, ‘participants’—to engage in a *dialogue*. In participatory engagements with marginalised groups, that can be somewhat problematic.

For example, there is a widespread and pervasive assumption that autistic people and especially children are not able to enter a dialogue (Milton 2014). Hence, even in the rare cases where autistic children are involved in participatory design processes, the involvement tends to be somewhat limited and reduced to defining the aesthetic of a pre-defined product (Spiel et al. 2019).

In that regard, empathy is often seen within a so called *solutionist* framework (Blythe et al. 2015). Solutionism requires us to identify a problem and have designers address it—largely through their perspective (Cunningham et al. 2023). However, relying on empathy to adequately engage with others’ experience which might be more or less akin to our own, bears a high risk to end up producing *bullshit* in a way that ‘[t]he bullshitter is faking things. But this does not mean that [they] necessarily [get] them wrong’ (Frankfurt 2009: 12).

Relying on empathy means drawing mainly on the researcher relating participants’ experiences to their own. This entails contrasting, interpreting, judging, and valuing these experiences. The experiences are first put through a filter in how legible they are to designers. That is fundamentally prone to create a fake understanding of another’s lives, especially when engaging with marginalised experiences that designers might not share.

Cynthia Bennett illustrates the issue that comes with formalised ‘empathy’ exercises: ‘The empathy-building exercises ... do a type of preparatory work that contrasts with disability activism and related forms of partnership-development’ (Bennett and Rosner 2019: 9). If it is our aim to understand the other from our perspective, we fundamentally override the situatedness of their lived experiences and expertise.

As an approach, this is still oriented on the researchers’ agenda and interest. Designers claim the space of participants. Then, they risk misrepresentation through their own interpretation. However, to actively centre experience outside of our own, designers need to start recognising different types of expertise that are relevant to situate design within specific contexts. We need to take a step back, not aiming at

‘fixing issues’ through design or ‘providing solutions’, but rather to engage in a different type of dialogue—one oriented on response and response-ability, ‘to become answerable for what we learn how to see’ (Haraway 1988).

The concept of empathy as something that allows us to understand others’ experience through our own sense-making does not always prevent privileging our own interpretation. Thus, designers first need to acknowledge uncertainty of our own assessment. This requires us to develop a willingness to work in contexts that are not readily available and legible to our modes of sense-making.

A Notion of Loving Humility

To do so, we might look at design as an activity that renounces the supposed expert status and takes on a mediating function more deliberately. Such an understanding humbly provides responses that allow for further negotiation in conversation. This implies changing the way we approach the purpose of designing. Subsequently, we might move towards creating incomplete and deliberately unfinished artefacts that are open and malleable to changing circumstances, needs, and desires.

To find a humbling stance in my own design (and) research practice, I draw on De Jaegher’s development of a loving epistemology. In her words:

I bring loving to bear on epistemology because I think there is something in the basic structure of knowing that is easy to forget about, but that we may find again by studying the basic structure of loving. I think loving and knowing share a core, and that they entail each other. (De Jaegher 2019: 14)

De Jaegher draws on ‘letting be’ as a stance that allows loving and subsequently knowing. I am intrigued by this approach to epistemology as it uses love as a decisive stance that is consciously evoked.

I think this can be tremendously helpful for any kind of design, be it structured around participatory engagement with others, or more set within the professional discipline. When we love the other, we want them to be happy. We don’t want to change them, we bask in their presence. When we love another, we let each other be. We marvel at what they do, how they think. And we recognise a distance. We recognise that we are not the other in an appreciative manner. We make space for them in our life. We take ourselves and our desires back for them to have space in our life—and, subsequently, in our research.

With that, I do not mean that I emotionally commit entirely to the people I design with and/or for. Instead, I suggest taking this approach to knowing as loving and apply it to my design practices in the form of *radical enthusiasm*. Radical enthusiasm entails a reorientation from ‘gathering knowledge’ towards being of service. I want to encourage us collectively to take participants’ perspectives, recognise how they are different, and assign them with enthusiastic validity.

Taking on such a stance can be humbling in that it requires us to consciously choose to be curious about the lives and experiences of the people affected by our designs. It further asks us to actively wrestle with the limitations of what we might be able to understand about these people. However, within this unassailable space

between us lies the potential for productively challenging and actively negotiating our differences. It opens up a space for imagining how we may live *with* them instead of aiming at solving them away into neat and tidily structured worlds that often only serve to exclude those not fitting. Space that allows us to settle into the position of a modest witness (Haraway 1996), one that embraces our subjectivity and specificity along with that of our participants without one claiming authority over the other.

Such a proposal is necessarily lofty. What does it mean to explicitly practice humility? It never feels adequate to fully claim humility as my stance. To make this claim would be the opposite of fulfilling it—we can only try to work towards an ideal without ever reaching it. To me, this comprises a productive analogy for how we might understand design work differently.

Suggestions for Practice

To an extent, practicing humility will require us to think of design not as a solution, but as a steppingstone towards a desired goalpost that by itself might shift and change, embracing the fluidity and messiness of our human lives instead of trying to neatly optimise and rationalise them away. Given the global and local existential crises, design oriented towards engaging with tensions might then comprise the very foundation of a meaningful practice (Light et al. 2017).

Concretely, I suggest *making space* in many kinds of ways. Being careful when entering spaces not our own and potentially unfamiliar to us; making sure that the spaces in which we conduct research and design are comfortable and safe for participants and welcoming to alternative bodies, perspectives, and ideas than are currently present; taking oneself back and not overriding other's positions with our interpretation; or going down pathways that may feel risky and treacherous to us as we might not fully grasp them (yet).

Furthermore, I try *engaging all my senses* when attending to others: paying close attention to body language, tone, and facial expressions; looking out for tacit interactions and engagements that might not have been initiated on purpose but allow us to understand each other in different ways; actively reflecting on the oppressive frames acting on designers, participants, and others, allowing us to share only some and never all of our experiences with others. One of my strategies requires attending to what remains unsaid and unarticulated in engaging with the people I design with and/or for (cf. Ashby 2011). There are likely aspects of ourselves as designers leading to us holding a somewhat privileged position over others, making it unclear to the people we might collaborate with what can be considered safe to share with us and what cannot.

In my practice, I aim at creating a context in which *agency is actively shared* and utilised by everyone involved. This entails letting others lead the design process with me deliberately following. This does not release me from the responsibility of offering structures and coming up with ideas, though it requires me to additionally be prepared to abandon those in cases where they turn out to be less useful and productive than initially assumed.

To some extent, this might be difficult, given that we exert our own expertise and judgement, potentially investing a lot of time and effort into providing these aforementioned options—and we should. However, if we understand ourselves as facilitators of negotiations and explorers of opportunities and potentials, we might take humbled satisfaction in tickling our curiosity beyond the limitations of what we were able to imagine and think before. And isn't finding out how else we might be able to think and live ultimately what makes design such an exciting activity?

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