Designing Situated Improvisation

Jinsong Liu, Sylvester

20015476

Macro UX

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https://blog.sylvesterlau.com

Introduction

The MA User Experience Design course challenges my conventional mindset aspiring to a straightforward design approach of 'define, ideate, prototype and test'. Instead, both theory and practice imply the 'fuzzy' nature of design, which appears to be ambiguous, chaotic and uncertain (Sanders and Stappers, 2008). The transforming role of design professions in business, politics, health, culture, education requires designers to focus on complex socio-technical systems (Forlano, 2017). It facilitates design into a complex, non-linear activity that involves various actors and continuously adapts to different situations.

This essay will establish my learnings on building a dynamic, situated design mindset. It will then review my Macro UX project and discuss how to implement situated and improvised factors in both the design process and the outcome.

Situated Design Process

It is popular to describe design methods as universal and unchanged across different contexts (Simonsen et al., 2014, pp.1-17). But examining through the lens of 'situated knowledges', knowledge production is intimately associated with its historical, political, and situational circumstances (Haraway, 1988). As theoretical and practical implications of knowledge, design methods and processes should be considered within explicit networks and practices (Suchman, 2009), rather than carelessly isolated from their location.

In the Marco UX unit with the V&A Museum, our group aimed to devise an embodied experience of the online collections. After the fuzzy beginning, we gradually agreed to communicate the Silk Road theme on an exploratory virtual space. Implications of design methods like direct storytelling, user testing, and mood board had to adapt to specific technical and resource constraints.

For instance, by choosing the virtual space platform Mozilla Hubs, we adjusted the regular user testing into play-test using distinct features like virtual touring and built-in voice communication. Although merely planning to frame usability problems and the potential target audience, I noticed a much more imaginative and discursive interplay in this situation. Designers and visitors began collectively exploring and reimagining the virtual Chinese and Indian villages, addressing related memories, and even hanging out with strangers. It is worth reminding that visitors are in physical rooms and digital space with different affordances, and the combining digital worldling and AR experience provoked unplanned reactions beyond our initial intention.

Conducting play-test, shadowing and observation in Mozilla Hubs vitural scene.

Interviewing in physical room.

Embodied Bayan drum interaction.

The 'accidental' play-test methods reveal that our design process is highly embedded in a specific context, in which designers should carefully select and interpret the 'universal procedures'. Through recognising the procedures as resources for situated practices, the appropriation would crucially alter the process.

Supporting Improvised Outcome

The situated mindset not only produces a dynamic manner but also supports improvisation in our design outcome. Rooted in drama, dance, and music, improvisation could refer to a 'creative act composed without prior thought' (Gerber, 2007). Under the improvisation principle, the audience is no longer just a spectator, and the designer is not the only creator. Instead, participants' and designers' are competent actors (or improvisers) whose operations influence and are influenced by rules, discourses, and artefacts within the constraints of an existing structure (Simonsen et al., 2014, pp.1-17).

One improvised factor in our Macro UX project is the pursuing of a visitor generated experience. Since the Silk Road is a massive trading network across east and west, we tried to reproduce its ongoing and collaborative nature by allowing viewers to collect and exchange selected objects from different cultures. In this case, our focus shifted from static interactions to behavioural stimulus, space and context that enhance the improvised opportunities for visitors, which actively edit the story and scene to create a more captivating experience (Gerber, 2007). Unfortunately, these features aren't entirely achievable in Mozilla Hubs, so our presentation remains insufficient.

Visitors inspect objects.
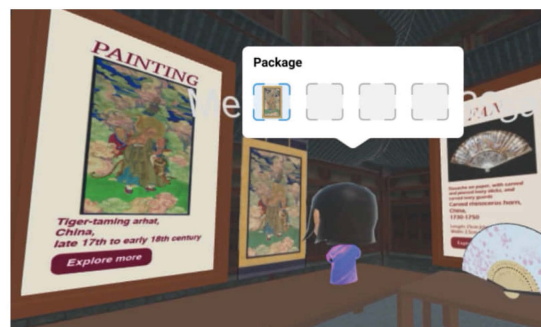
Visitors select and carry items (conceptual).

Visitors carry objects and travel to another country.

Exchanging items with local residents (conceptual).

However, I learned how improvisation acts against the segregation of planned and situated actions (Suchman, 2009), and meanwhile, it is challenging to achieve a satisfying harmony between control and improvising. Analysing from this situated design perspective, I keep questioning that if we could improvise more along the way. For example, while we struggled to conceive embodied interaction within the Silk Road story, the interviewees drew unexpected inspirations during play-tests, such as collective instruments-playing or multiplayer community. What could players bring to the world settings with their exceptional situated knowledge and pure imagination? Maybe an earlier workshop engagement could have boosted designers' and participants' improvisation to co-create a more fruitful narrative.

Conclusion

This essay has examined my practices in the Macro UX unit through interpreting situatedness and improvisation in design. It has suggested we acknowledge the situated, contextual nature of design processes and methods. Consequently, applying improvisation techniques could further extend situatedness and explore more possibilities in design outcomes.

It is a great honour to work with the V&A museum on this experimental project. Considering one of the museums' aims is to educate through objects, this project inspired me in rethinking how knowledge, action and situations combine into dynamic learning. The situatedness is insofar a slight touch in this project but could potentially extend and implement in my future design.

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