

A LESSON FROM THE SEWING KIT

Position Paper for CHI 2003 Workshop on Designing Culturally Situated Technologies

Marc Böhlen
Department of Media Study
SUNY Buffalo
Buffalo NY 14260
mrbohlen@acsu.buffalo.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper inspects the idea of the kit, grounded in necessity and limitations, as a basis for thinking about culturally significant artifacts. The mobile phone is discussed in the context of the kit.

Keywords

machine culture, everyday things, sewing kits, psychosis, temporality, survival kits, mobile phones

INTRODUCTION

Within computer science, there is no canon on how to successfully design culturally situated information-processing devices. Some interesting methods from outside of computer science, such as psychology and media arts, have been proposed [2, 5]. This position paper proposes a revisiting of the suggestiveness of the kit as a possible additional thought model for the design of culturally situated technologies.

EVERYDAY THINGS

The significance of the mundane and the habitual for the culture of artifacts has been pointed out repeatedly [1]. After a usage analysis of the psychology of everyday things, Norman [4] proposed a plan for the successful design of everyday things in the home that includes simplicity of structure, common sense, power of constraints, visualization, error tolerance, correct mappings, and standardization. But how can this apply to culturally situated information objects?

HABITS AND HOME

Everyday things hold hidden knowledge about how we think and perceive our surroundings and ourselves [3]. Likewise, everyday objects in the home are manifest boundary conditioners of what constitutes the home. Indeed, it is not so much these everyday objects themselves that hold such information, but rather the assumptions, needs and fears they imply. Similarly, the home in this context can be seen not primarily as a physical object, a box or container, but as an agreement on ways of use, a contract of habits and personal patterns.

EXCEPTIONS TO THE HABIT

If the home is a habit and a preference of experience, and if it is robustly designed to maintain habit, then one would expect to find affordances to deal with exceptions to habit

built into it. This is the significance of the kit. The kit is an arrangement by which one can make manageable exceptions to habit and routine.

ELEMENTS OF THE KIT

What happens when habits are confronted with exceptions? The kit is a proven conception for managing the unusual. In travel, for example, the toiletries kit holds the essential elements one would not wish to miss in a convenient, portable, small but complete package. There is a particular aesthetic to the neat contained nature of such hygiene kits. The implications of carefree affluent elegance is so strong that many hotels offer their own version of a toiletries kit (fig.1) - minus the portability - proving the guest a discerning traveler. A neatly arranged collection of him and her shampoo, conditioner, fragrance soap, shower cap and shoe shine wipes is *de rigueur* in such kits.



Fig. 1: hotel toiletries kit

As opposed to the travel kit that continues and augments a habit, the repair kit aims to remove the state of exception preventing the occurrence of habit. Repair kits usually



Fig. 2: sewing kit

anticipate certain kinds of exceptions. The minimalist sewing kit (fig. 2), for example, generally contains thread

in the colors red, black, white and sometimes beige and at least one needle. Often a button and a small pair of scissors are included. No long term and robust results can be tailored with such kits; the minimalist collection of tools ensures incomplete craftsmanship. What the collection contains is as important as what it omits; Choice matters. Where the travel kit creates pleasure in its use, the sewing kit creates pleasure in its non use. The belief of being prepared for the unknown can be relaxing.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE KIT

As the home is less an object than a mental condition, the kit is less a collection of things, than a statement about what we fear, desire and believe to need at all times. It can be a formulation of longing and nostalgia for something not available, fear, a method by which to alleviate it, or even the carrier of pleasure in its own right. In all cases, however, it claims the territory of dealing with the temporary. In all cases it grows out of necessity, real or perceived.

SURVIVAL KITS



Fig. 3: urban survival kit Fig. 4: paper mobile phone

Fear of loss can generate needs unimaginable under other circumstances. Survival kits are a good example of such a phenomenon. While survival kits for the outdoor enthusiasts have been common for a long time, a new class of survival kits for the home, office and automobile are now available (fig. 3). Typically such kits are tailored as a collection of food, water and medicinal supplies for a defined number of average humans for a defined number of days. Worst case scenarios are evoked, but not explicitly listed in the technical descriptions of these kits. In the example shown above the container conveniently but shamefully doubles as an emergency toilet. While sewing kits create comfort by preparing the user for a known situation, urban survival kits build comfort by restraining horrors of war and devastation and insinuate a deterministic psychology of control they can never deliver. Here the kit builds a powerful belief system capable of disciplining existential fears.

A LESSON FROM THE SEWING KIT

Artifacts and procedures rooted in the idea of necessity need not be limited to signify in the domain for which they were created. The limitation to the necessary, the minimal, can become a formula for achieving symbolic representation beyond necessity.

The mobile phone and text messaging are an example of a portable information sewing kit. Not unlike a traditional sewing kit, the mobile phone has only a subset of all possible attributes of its class. While ubiquitous connectivity clearly makes the cell phone a universal communication device, its physical dimensions tie it to succinctly limited forms of exchange. Miniaturization breeds ultra portability, but diminutive displays lead to new linguistic inventions of terseness. Cell phone poetry should be no surprise as there is no space for prose. It is the specific limitations within the ubiquitous communication capacity that give it a special flavor, and make it worthy material for often kitschy dramatic turns in B-movie plots. Restricted battery capacity and the occasional lack of signal coverage make the completed call, performed impromptu, more precious than the guaranteed hardwired terrestrial connection. Desperate calls made from hijacked airplanes [6] and burning buildings are precious exceptions to the silent disappearing of non networked victims. The Taoist ceremony of sacrificial burning of valuables intended to placate ghosts in the afterworld, today includes the burning of paper mobile phones, complete with paper charger and extra paper battery pack (fig. 4).

So while the universal machine may be the final goal for computer science as science, for computer science as a cultural machine, generality may not be a requirement. From the sewing kit and the cell phone one might deduce that computing systems in cultural contexts will thrive more off specific properties than universality. Whether such attributes are set by design or by technical limitations may not matter. Achieving significance in machine culture may require the counter intuitive act of limiting the universal machines to very specific attributes and orchestrating them properly.

REFERENCES

- [Agre 1997] Agre, P., "Computation and Human Experience". *Cambridge University Press*, Cambridge, UK, 1997.
- [Böhlen 2002] Böhlen, M., "A Different Kind of Information Device: Fridge Companion", *Proceedings of ACM CHI 2002 Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 2002.
- [Goffman 1959] Goffman, E., "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life", *DoubleDay*, ISBN 0-385-0942-7, 1959.
- [Norman 1988] Norman, D., "The Psychology of Everyday Things", *Doubleday*, ISBN 0-385-267746, 1988.
- [Sengers 1999] Sengers, P., "Practices for Machine Culture: A Case Study of Integrating Artificial Intelligence and Cultural Theory", *Surfaces*. Volume VIII, 1999.
- [Rheingold 2002] Rheingold, H., "Smart Mobs", *Perseus Publishing*, ISBN 0-7382-0608-3, 2002.