

Fields of Interpretation: Design in Flux

Namrata Primlani

Abertay University, n.primlani@abertay.ac.uk

Our current epoch has often been dubbed ‘post-truth’. Values and technologies seem to be changing more rapidly than ever. We are left feeling constantly in flux. At the same time, there has been a rapid homogenization of culture globally, while the same underlying technologies and ideologies seem to appear in superficially new forms. How can designers respond to the state of systemic ambiguity and creative stagnation? I discuss possibilities for interpreting and capturing research objects that are designed to be intentionally ambiguous in form, function and values. I reflect upon one such object changing over a period of five years and try to capture how it continues to change.

CCS CONCEPTS • Insert your first CCS term here • Insert your second CCS term here • Insert your third CCS term here

Additional Keywords and Phrases: Insert comma delimited author-supplied keyword list, Keyword number 2, Keyword number 3, Keyword number 4

1 INTRODUCTION

While designers often aspire that the objects we design might be used in the ways that we intend, this is often not the case in practice. This desire to control the uses of the objects of design is known as the Designer Fallacy. Don Ihde described this fallacy as a parallel to the intentional fallacy found in literature, where the interpretations of a text deviates from the authors original meaning[2]. The acknowledgement of multiple interpretation is not often considered in modern technologies which, as it is now widely known position particular interpretations of objects as ‘solutions’ to problems [6] Re-interpretation and change are a key part of discussion and participation technology development. Globally, there has been a stagnation in the technologies, cultures and values surrounding innovation. This can be seen most clearly in the change in policies of Big Tech companies. Recently, Meta announced that it was ending factchecking on its platform and shutting down its diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) programs [9]. In 2023, Microsoft laid off its ethics and society team and in 2022, Twitter laid off its AI ethics team before changing its name to X [3,8].

While in design research, leaving objects open to interpretation is now common, these tend to be positioned as incomplete ‘probes’ or ‘prompts’ to provoke reflection. But iterative design must also address changes in the broader cultural and ethical interpretations of research objects and in capturing this change over longer periods of time. As the philosopher Lao Tzu said “*If you do not change direction, you may end up where you are heading*”.

I discuss a research object that was allowed to change over five years. The object started off as a physical prototype but over time morphed into different forms. In each subsequent iteration, participants from diverse cultures interpreted the original idea in widely different ways. While something of the essence of the original physical prototype remained in its interpretations, I found that over time physicality became less necessary while the values surrounding its use became the focus of discussion. Design became a process of re-orientation towards these collective interpretations.

1.1 Ambiguity

There are certain optical illusions that are created to be ambiguous. One example is the Necker cube created by the Swiss crystallographer Louis Albert Necker. The cube can take different forms depending on how one looks at it and one can switch between the different interpretations.

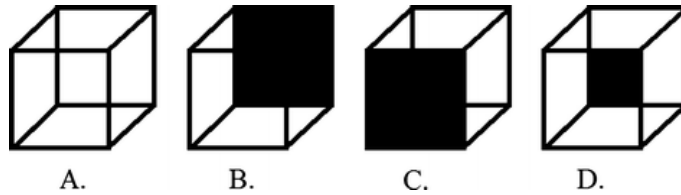
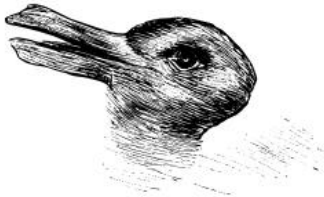


Figure 1. The Necker Cube.

A similar illusion is the Rabbit-Duck image.

Welche Tiere gleichen ein-
ander am meisten?



Kaninchen und Ente.

Figure 2. Duck-Rabbit.

“The dress” that took the internet by storm was an optical illusion where switching between the two interpretations was difficult (is “the dress” blue and black or white and gold?) with viewers often getting stuck on one of the possibilities [5]. “The dress” caused confusion, fear and disagreement (such as between Kanye West and Kim Kardashian).



Figure 3. “The dress”.

Most technologies today, such as smartphones or social media platforms like X constrain flexible interpretations. These things are carefully designed to orient users to one form that similar to “the dress” make people stuck. I am interested in how designers can create research objects that are more like the duck-rabbit and less like “the dress”.

1.2 Time and change

I have been considering how researchers can describe and envision design as a process of responding to fields of possible interpretations out of which, at certain points in time, and when appropriate, one form can be discussed. Of course, Einstein did something similar in physics, when he said that it was better for scientists to think of light as a wave sometimes and at other times as a particle. Some scientists have said similar things in quantum physics.

As technology changes more rapidly, values, institutions and culture are more in flux than ever before. Researchers have thought about this in terms of the Collingridge Dilemma [1,4]. By the time we understand the cultural and ethical shifts brought about by a new technology, the technology and our values themselves have already changed. Perhaps one way to deal with this, is for researchers to think of objects as fields in flux. Such things would shift meaning to adapt to re-interpretations of values, forms and uses.

In part, this thought was inspired by one of my research participants. He described ubiquitous technology as simply the same technology in different forms, all of them with the sole aim to collect user data. We can see this now in the homogeneity of technological objects that pose a superficial heterogeneity. Sure, we can buy an Android or an Apple phone or a SMEG toaster or a Braun toaster or choose Facebook over X but really, these are only differences in aesthetic and branding. How can researchers resist such superficial diversity and instead attempt at understanding how to inspire real novelty or respond to changing social currents?

2 DATA GATES

In 2019, I started designing a research object called a ‘Data Gate’ (Figure 4) [7]. This was a fictional device created to study issues around privacy and ubiquitous computing. The basic idea was a device that would allow users to metaphorically ‘hide’ from ubiquitous data collection. Over five years, and several iterations, the Data Gate took on many different forms, at times re-interpreted by my twenty participants and at times re-interpreted by me in response to my emerging understanding of the problem I was studying. I am presenting a paper on one of these interpretations at CHI this year.



Figure 4. The Data Gate. A design in flux.

I am now beginning work on a project studying cybersecurity. I have been thinking of reviving the Data Gate and exploring more interpretations of this object. I would like to give this object to other researchers and see how the meanings evolve. Through this process, I am interested in how I can capture and present the interpretations of such an ambiguous object over time and what this might mean for design research in an age that has often been called post-truth.

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