The role of artefacts in client-user centred design

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ABSTRACT
As a design agency we have transitioned from a methodical or engineering influenced approach to one that enables us to better respond to the situation and needs of each project environment. The methods we use, and propose to use are shaped by the particular situation of the client. In this paper we present some of the creative and generative artefacts that are incorporated into our design process, and introduce work in progress exploring mobile devices as design tools.

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Design research, methods, personas, scenarios, mobile methods, mobile devices, self-reporting

ACM Classification Keywords
H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

INTRODUCTION
Digital Eskimo is a design agency with a commitment to work with progressive organizations on socially positive projects. As such the interactive technologies we design have an arts, education or socio-political purpose to them. For example music sites for young composers, online/viral campaigns for refugee rights, community building websites and so on. To be successful this type of design output requires user participation and contribution [3].

As part of this praxis we explore and utilise methods within our design process that support discussion between the stakeholders of the system (including clients and end-users) and the design team.

In this paper we present examples of our current processes including cartoon personas and scenarios using playdoh, as well as blogs that we create as reference of the physical workshops that we run. We also briefly discuss work in progress exploring mobile devices as design tools and methods for working with remote clients and users.

DESIGNERS, CLIENTS AND USERS
The Call for Papers emphasises the relationship between the designer and the user. As practitioners this relationship cannot be seen independently from the client, and as an agency our praxis is framed by the commercial environment in which we work.

The types of interactive systems that we are asked to design vary greatly in style, purpose, scale and lifespan. They are also defined by the budget for the project, the nature of the work (fast, viral, one off, evolving community site etc…) timeline, access to users, the type of audience, and the clients relationship to them (e.g how well they feel they know their users).

It is our experience that (with the exception of some of the larger branding companies), gaining access to users or engaging in any form of collaborative design process including user involvement is rare. For many smaller interactive agencies like us, it is seen as a nice to have, but far beyond the scope of the budget.

This means our methods are most often performed with clients (who may or may not be users). Our techniques are intended to inspire design and to engage clients in thinking differently about their requirements, but also to get them thinking differently about their users/stakeholders and their potential role in the design process. We have found that the use of creative methods with clients, such as those described in the next section, can increase the likelihood of them seeing the value of including users in the design process.

METHODS
In this section we give a brief background to our approach and introduce some of the methods and artefacts we use.

Approach
As a design agency we have transitioned from using a more methodical or engineering approach with projects, to more creative, designerly and fluid methods. We found the former step-by-step process to be too rigid and time consuming for smaller projects. Our existing process still has key phases (e.g scoping, design and blueprint) but the methods we use, and propose to use are shaped by the particular situation of the client.

This need for diversity means we draw upon traditional branding and market research methods as well as old and new interaction design methods such as, Cooper’s personas, diary studies [2, 8], cultural probes [1], picture scenarios [9], mobile probes [5] and other work on mobile methods [4].

To focus our contribution we will discuss our use of food, ‘nakeds’, ‘magic’ devices [6], and blogs to creatively
explore technology use with clients. These artefacts open up avenues for exploring and immersing in the design space and creating a common reference point in that space. We also briefly introduce work in progress with mobile self-reporting tools.

**Food**

Workshops are one of the first chances we get to work directly with our clients and establish the context in which the system will operate. We like to start our workshops by sitting down to breakfast together. We discovered this technique accidentally when a group of people had driven from afar one morning for the workshop and had not eaten. We have since continued the Breakfast warm up exercise as it turned out to be one of the quickest and easiest ways to break the ice.

**Nakeds**

Early in our design process we work with clients/users to identify key stakeholders. One of our methods is to start with a wall of ‘nakeds’, each representing a different type of stakeholder. They are gradually ‘dressed’ with various demographic, social, technical, and environmental attributes and their relationship to the system described.

*Figure 1. A Naked, props and a finished persona.*

These exercises and artefacts enable clients to quickly understand the concept of describing different user groups, and to identify which of those we might want/need or to involve in the design process. They generate design possibilities and features, and trigger future research.

**‘Magic’ Devices**

We often evolve the personas into scenarios and storytelling as part of our design learning and research. These can be ‘straight’ user profiles and scenarios describing existing or potential technology use practices, or extraordinary stories incorporating ‘magic devices’

We have used the later approach with clients when exploring potential interactive education tools for children and young people. Our objective was to explore ways in which young people might be inspired to learn and engage with a particular topic through interactive technologies. Using existing personas, participants were given a range of props including a ‘magic thing’ (playdoh), facsimilies of technological tools and young peoples toys and media with which to create a story (Figure 2).

*Figure 2. A magic device*

These approaches to creating user scenarios/stories can be molded to the context of different users and clients. For example the props and images provided reflect different aspects we might want to explore. They also demonstrate to clients a range of creative ways in which they might be able to communicate with their target audience about the use of interactive technologies. In addition they form the basis for creative and ongoing discussion between the design team and clients.

**The Blog**

In the past at the end of a workshop we would write up all the notes, create a textual document, and file the photos and audio. Now we use blogs (one for each project) to capture and archive all the visual and audio info. In addition to being less time consuming a blog enables a more flexible representation of the days activities than a list of bullet points. Furthermore we are able to introduce the clients to useful technologies such as flickr and del.icio.us as part of their blog.

Initially we thought the Blogs would be a site of ongoing discussion (e.g project based blogging), instead we found the blog creates a common archive where all forms of information from written, visual, audio, and url links can be assembled, updated, and made available to those who participate in the development of the project. In addition they have proved useful when new team members (from either side) come on board.

**Mobile Tools**

Several of our current clients and their users are not locally available to us, and the use of remote and mobile methods is of particular interest. Mobile technologies present both a challenge and an opportunity for researchers and design practitioners alike. The merging of techniques such as Cultural Probes and digital mobile devices reveals an interesting connection between the personal and ubiquitous nature of mobile devices, and the need for researchers to develop participatory techniques that can be easily applied in the field [4, 5, 7]

As part of exploring this we are currently undertaking an internal pilot study of mobile design research methods within the agency. Each member of the design team is using a different mobile recording device (mini video camera, digital camera, mobile phone, pda etc) to complete a mobile diary.
It is important for us to work as reflective practitioners and this internal evaluation serves to make us more aware of issues and opportunities related to methods we intend to use with clients and users. Our own experiences also assist us to develop a framework for how we evaluate different methods and tools. For instance are they networked (e.g a mobile phones) or not (e.g a video camera), what is the image quality, size/mobility, ease of use, cost etc. These factors in turn help us to understand the design contexts that they may be more appropriate for.

![Figure 3. A diagram showing the different attributes of the mobile devices we are using.](image)

We are also currently experimenting with mobile tools to collect material for design research and inspiration from remote clients. This work and our internal pilot is in progress and I look forward to reporting more at the workshop.

**CONCLUSION**

In this paper we have outlined some of the current methods that we employ with our clients, and include a brief report on work in progress developing mobile methods. Our iterative and somewhat experimental approach is driven by the need to have a range of flexible methods at our disposal, and the belief that each situation requires its own hybrid response. For example cultural probes allow involvement at a distance and mobile technologies can be employed fairly easily with overseas clients.

The nature of the design process within our agency is evolving, and we have begun experimenting with approaches that we consider to be more compatible with our design sensibility. The timing of the workshop dovetails with a reflection on this shift within the company as we evolve our tools further. The workshop would be an opportunity to share and discuss the ways we use various artefacts when collaborating with clients and users to open up communication, provoke inspiration and inform our design work. We also look forward to benefiting from the sharing in the experiences of others.

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**REFERENCES**