

Artificial Intelligence is a Character? Exploring design scenarios to build interface behaviours

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(Article begins on next page)

DESIGN CULTURE(S)

Cumulus Conference Proceedings Roma 2021

Volume #2

ARTIFICIAL
LANGUAGES
LIFE
MAKING
NEW
MULTIPLICITY
PROXIMITY
RESILIENCE
REVOLUTION
THINKING

**Design Culture(s)
Cumulus Conference
Proceedings Roma 2021**

Volume #2

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- | | |
|-------|--|
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Cumulus Conference Proceedings Roma 2021

Volume #2

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CULT
URE (S)

ROMA **2021**

JUNE 08.09.10.11
CUMULUS CONFERENCE

OVERVIEW

36 **ABOUT THE
CONFERENCE**

49 **EXHIBITIONS**
all tracks

81 DESIGN
CULTURE (OF)
ARTIFICIAL
track

629 DESIGN
CULTURE (OF)
LANGUAGES
track

1175 DESIGN
CULTURE (OF)
LIFE
track

1425 DESIGN
CULTURE (OF)
MAKING
track

1891 DESIGN
CULTURE (OF)
MULTIPLICITY
track

2095 DESIGN
CULTURE (OF)
NEW NORMAL
track

2604 DESIGN
CULTURE (OF)
PROXIMITY
track

3153 DESIGN
CULTURE (OF)
RESILIENCE
track

3929 DESIGN
CULTURE (OF)
REVOLUTION
track

4383 DESIGN
CULTURE (OF)
THINKING
track

4768 **POSTERS**
all tracks

CONTENTS

36 About the conference
Loredana Di Lucchio, Lorenzo
Imbesi

49 EXHIBITIONS

51 ARTIFICIAL | City of Experiences
George Brown College, Canada

54 LANGUAGES | Post collaboration
as a form of counter-culture: The
birth of new languages
University of Johannesburg,
South Africa

57 LIFE | Design for social problems
in Mexico: living with disabilities
Autonomous Metropolitan
University, Azcapotzalco, Mexico

60 MAKING | New Textile
Topologies: Experiments at the
intersection of surface, textile
and form
The Swedish School of Textiles,
Sweden

63 MULTIPLICITY | Self-Acceptance
to Self-Indulgence
Pearl Academy, India

66 NEW NORMAL | Expedition 2
Degrees
Zurich University of the Arts

69 PROXIMITY | Newcomers: Design
for Immigrants
Pratt Institute's School of Design,
USA

72 RESILIENCE | Designing for
Resilience: Creating new
possibilities for industrial cities
University of Monterrey, Mexico

75 REVOLUTION | UFØ Drift: In
Search of Practice
ArtEZ University of the Arts
Arnhem, Netherlands

78 THINKING | Design and
awareness: user meeting
ESDAP Catalunya, Spain

81 DESIGN CULTURE (OF) ARTIFICIAL

83 A participated parametric design
experience on humanoid robotics
Francesco Burlando, Xavier
Ferrari Tumay, Annapaola Vacanti

99 A systemic vision for the common
good : |C|A|S|E| Goods Mobility
in the fourth industrial revolution
Veneranda Carrino, Federica
Spera

CONTENTS

117	Activist Activated: Efficacies of AR Political Poster Design Sarah Edmands Martin	199	Consensual (Design) Fictions: co-creating iterative use cases to define technology conceptualization David Hernández Falagán, Andreu Belsunces Gonçalves, Kevin Koidl
130	Art, Design, and Mathematics: Software programming as artifice in the creative process Carlos de Oliveira Junior, Eduardo Ariel de Souza Teixeira	215	Design of robotic for superhuman tasks Fabrizio Formatì
142	Artificial Creativity – Hybridizing the Artificial and the Human. Yael Eylat Van Essen	227	Design, space management and work tools: enhancing human work in transition to Industry 4.0 Luca Casarotto, Pietro Costa, Enrica Cunico
156	Artificial Intelligence is a Character? Exploring design scenarios to build interface behaviours Andrea Di Salvo, Andrea Arcoraci	237	Designers' skills for Social Robotics Maximiliano Romero, Giovanni Borgia, Rohan Sashindran Vangal, Francesco Baldassarra
168	Becoming Janus: The Subversive Potential of Face Recognition Technologies Romi Mikulinsky	251	Designing for the future by understanding evolving culture based on advancing technology and the changing behaviours that accompany it. Nayna Yadav
181	Between digital and physical. Envisioning and prototyping smart material systems and artifacts from data-informed scenarios. Stefano Parisi, Patrizia Bolzan, Mila Stepanovic, Laura Varisco, Ilaria Mariani	264	Designing Somatic Play for Digital Natives through a Body-centric Design Process Seçil Uğur Yavuz, Kristi Kuusk, Michaela Honauer

CONTENTS

279	Designing unpredictable futures. An anthropological perspective on the algorithmical prediction of human behaviour Giovanna Santanera, Roberta Raffaetà	360	From the evaluation of acceptability to design of an assistive robot for elderly Francesca Tosi, Mattia Pistolesi, Claudia Becchimanzi
290	Digital Creativity Tools Framework Marita Canina, Carmen Bruno	376	Future heritage and heritage futures. A design perspective on the activation of Digital cultural heritage stored in archives Margherita Tufarelli
304	Digital tools that support students to reflect on their design competency growth paths John Fass, Job Rutgers	386	Going beyond the problem of privacy: individual and social impacts of the use of personal information in connected services Laura Varisco
316	Domestic AI and Emotional Involvement. Design Perspectives Mauro Ceconello, Martina Sciannamé, Davide Spallazzo	400	Human and Artificial Intelligence for the Cultural Reform of Design Elena Laudante, Mario Buono
328	Empowered by Code, to act in real word Alfredo Calosci	412	Human Sensibility, Robotic Craft: Toward Autonomous Stonework Tom Shaked, Karen Lee Bar-Sinai, Aaron Sprecher
339	Exploring Digital Inequalities: How Welfare States are disappearing behind an AI Paola Pierri	423	Interface takes command. Educational environments, tools and practices to face the new normal. Alessio Caccamo
349	From Decoration to Functionality — Research on smart accessories design in the Internet era Qingman Wu	437	Intelligent Voice Assistants: A Review of User Experience Issues and Design Challenges Lucia Rampino, Sara Colombo

CONTENTS

449	Research on Gender Differences of Adult Head Shape in China Renke He, Wenxiu Yang, Wanshan Li, Haining Wang	537	The Perceptual and Dialogical Form of Design between Time, Space and Technologies Camelia Chivăran, Sonia Capece
461	Speculative Physical Models Created Through a Robotic Process Sara Codarin, Karl Daubmann	552	The role of Design in telepresence robotics experience Claudio Germak, Lorenza Abbate
476	Teaching Design in the Age of Platforms: A Framework for Platform Education Xinyi Li	565	The Venice Backup: Case studies on the use of Virtual Preservation Techniques on Architectural Heritage sites in Venice, Italy Kai Reaver
488	The body as an artefact: a case of hand prosthesis Venere Ferraro, Silvia Ferraris, Lucia Rampino	587	Towards a visual-based survey on explainable machine learning Beatrice Gobbo
502	The design of human machine interfaces: from data to risk prevention. Annalisa Di Roma, Alessandra Scarcelli	604	Toys and Play, Weapons and Warfare: Militarizing the Xbox Controller Rachel Berger
516	The Designer in the AI/Machine Learning Creation Process Frederique Krupa	619	Wearing the smart city: Supporting older adults to exercise by combining age-friendly environments and tailored digital public data Nicole Aimers, Alen Keirnan, Ann Borda, Sonja Pedell
526	The encounter between Design and Artificial Intelligence: how do we frame new approaches? Marzia Mortati		

CONTENTS

629	DESIGN CULTURE (OF) LANGUAGES	754	Data visualization as a qualitative driver in knowledge communication: an interpretative framework Giulia Ciliberto
631	A Sidewalk museum. Exhibiting the collective dimension of the moving image Nicolo Giacomo Ceccarelli, Marco Sironi, Sabrina Melis	771	Design and Cultural Sites: New signage methods and languages for fruition, accessibility and storytelling Monica Oddone, Irene Caputo, Marco Bozzola
645	Abstract to figurative, and everything in between: visual design approaches and linguistic codes of a traditional form of animated product. Vincenzo Maselli, Eleni Mouri	786	Design and the 'Magical magic'. Disney and history, perceived heritage and shared memory Luisa Chimenz
659	Al-Kafiye: A Symbol of Change Hala Abdel Malak	800	DEsign DEcide The sign Tsvetomira Girginova
688	Beyondstories. People Narrative makes a Territory Aureliano Capri, Valeria Michetti, Veneranda Carrino, Mauro Palatucci	811	Designing the Gross. In search for social inclusion Adrien Rigobello, Nadja Gaudillière-Jami
707	Brand in Product. The language of the brand to govern complexity Mario Rullo, Massimiliano Datti	828	Finding New Representations of Old Knowledge: a design study of visualizing I-Ching Yvette Shen
726	Creating Visual Identity as Constellation: Methodological Project for a Design Workshop Ximena Izquierdo, Magdalena Ballacey	843	Form is function. Ethics and aesthetics of digital technologies in inclusive interface design. Letizia Bollini

CONTENTS

852	<hr/> 'Graphicmance'. New Visual Languages between Design and Performance Giulia Scalera	938	<hr/> Performativity as a language of sense-making for cultural service in local museum Shu Hongming, Eleonora Lupo
865	<hr/> Inner Geographies as poetic-aesthetic knowing: the inspiration and manifestation of creative doings through an emotively-orientated sensory methodology Mizan Rambhoros	950	<hr/> Solid perspectives and optical corrections of spaces in graphic & architectural design Tommaso Empler
883	<hr/> Italian Pavillion at XXII Triennale di Milano Ilaria Bollati, Luisa Collina, Laura Daglio, Laura Galluzzo	962	<hr/> Spatial construction for ideational meaning: An analysis of interior design students' multimodal projects. Andrew Gill, Giovanna Di Monte-Milner
895	<hr/> Language and identity in new Italian design Stefano Follesa, Peian Yao	976	<hr/> Tales of Surprise: Exploring Sense Making Processes Through User Narratives Miray Hamarat, Ozge Merzali Celikoglu
906	<hr/> Metaphors as Knowledge Activators in Data Visualizations: the case of the Archipelago of Calvino's literary works Tommaso Elli, Maria de los Angeles Briones Rojas, Beatrice Gobbo, Margherita Parigini, Virginia Giustetto, Valeria Cavalloro, Michele Mauri	992	<hr/> The Design of Politics: Understanding the Arrest of Cesare Battisti Through the New Media Factor Noemi Biasetton
925	<hr/> Patient Autonomy Indicators: a knowledge visualization tool for patient autonomy support Wen Zhang, Yuan Liu, Li Hou	1007	<hr/> The Enlightenment of the Contemporary Transformation of Chinese Traditional Visual Space Perception on Cultural Sustainability design for all Jixiang Jiang, Dong Tao

CONTENTS

1021 The Interplay between Ethics and Aesthetics in Intelligent Systems-Users Interaction
Gabriele Barzilai

1034 The pluralistic aesthetics of nowadays design
Francesca La Rocca

1049 The role of vernacular typography in the linguistic landscape of multicultural Singapore: A multimodal analysis case study of a gentrified street
Min-Yee Angeline Yam

1063 The Threshold of Language: Design and Soma
Daniela Monasterios-Tan, Susan Sentler, Ginette Chittick

1082 Towards a new design culture of scientific production – Innovating the formats of scientific publication of design
Eleonora Lupo, Beatrice Gobbo, Emilio Lonardo

1098 Translation Design for medicine leaflets. Research and innovation.
Elena Caratti, Antonella Penati, Valeria Bucchetti

1115 Visual dialects. Exploring early design sketching in various design disciplines
John Daniel Öhrling, Åsa Wikberg-Nilsson

1127 Visualizing Offshore Foreign Direct Investments: The Atlas of Offshore
Michele Mauri, María De Los Angeles Briones Rojas, Jonathan Gray, Daniel Haberly, Chris Anderson

1144 What does this symbol mean? Icons as a Language for Emergency
Rodrigo Ramirez

1159 Where methods meet form
Meret Ernst, Maya Ober

1175 DESIGN CULTURE (OF) LIFE

1177 Adopt a costumer - to design new processes and packagings
Maria Benedetta Spadolini, Chiara Olivastri

1190 Autonomy as a Design Principle: Service Design for the Technology Literacy of Older Adults
Houjiang Liu, Miso Kim, Canqun He, Tia Thomson

1208 Bio-revolutions: radical change, design cultures and non-humans
Carolina Ramirez-Figueroa, Luis Hernan

CONTENTS

1222 Cognitive Ergonomics
Components for Analysis of User
Interface in Healthcare Industry
Mariia Zolotova, Angela
Giambattista

1238 Connect art and science for a
functional biomimicry in design
Andrea Forges Davanzati

1244 Development of a test setup for
validating a cognitive assessment
platform within ICU's
Muriel De Boeck, Philippe Jorens,
Guido De Bruyne, Kristof Vaes

1256 Food design as a tool for social
development: experimental study
in the evaluation of child smell
Ligia Afreixo, Francisco
Providência, Sílvia Rocha

1272 FUTUR.DRESS. The Superskin for
the Human Body in nearspace
Maria Antonietta Sbordonè, Ilaria
Giampetraglia, Alessandra De
Luca

1286 Hybrid systems of human |
technological | biological
products: a road to a greater
sustainability?
Marco Marseglia, Francesco
Cantini, Alessio Tanzini

1301 No more whining – natural smart
textile
Nuutinen Ana, Pietarine Heidi,
Kunnas Susan , Korpinen Risto,
Sipola Reeta

1308 Paving the way to post-digital
smart materials. Experiments on
human perceptions of a bio-
inspired cellulosebased
responsive interface
Stefano Parisi, Markus Holzbach,
Valentina Rognoli

1325 The flow of emotions in co-
creation
Mariluz Soto, Caoimhe Isha
Beaulé, Satu Anneli Miettinen

1337 The Food Futures Teaching
Cluster. Food Culture, Visual
Communication Design, and
Collaboration
Peter K. Chan, Ben McCorkle, Rick
Livingston

1351 The river and the revered: Tracing
the impermanence of the land,
the people and the embroidered
Indrajit De, Saumya Pande

1364 The Shape of Drugs: a matter of
Human-Centred Design
Antonella Valeria Penati, Silvia
Luisa Pizzocaro, Carlo Emilio
Standoli, Valeria Maria Iannilli

CONTENTS

-
- | | | | |
|------|---|------|--|
| 1377 | The Wicked Home: Living Space as Ecological Holobiont
Rachel Armstrong, Rolf Hughes, Nel Janssens | 1453 | Amorphous Stacks: A Low-Tech Construction Method for Jointless Cast Structures
Liqiong Huo, Jongwan Kwon |
| 1392 | Three Dimensional technologies: Digitising Nature
Gregor MacGregor | 1468 | An Exploratory Study about Communicating 4D Printing between Product Designers and Manufacturing Engineers
Faten Ezrin Azhar, Eujin Pei |
| 1405 | Towards Neurodesign. The Mental Effort in packaging design
Alessio Paoletti, Lorenzo Imbesi, Angela Giambattista | 1482 | Biotextiles applied to everyday objects
Viviana Quiña, José Francisco Alvarez Barreto, Cristina Muñoz Hidalgo |
| 1413 | “WIT” as a Sustainable Engine Overcoming Mind Fixation in Ideation
Alon Weiss | 1504 | Claudio Alcorso and Post-war Textile Culture
Tracey Sernack-Chee Quee |
| 1425 | DESIGN CULTURE (OF) MAKING | 1521 | Collaborative Capabilities: aural encounters in digital/analogue co-creative making
George S. Jaramillo, Lynne J. Hocking-Mennie |
| 1427 | A designed generation: Maker's maturity and social responsibility
Luca D'Elia | 1535 | Collaborative ontology design for Open Hardware and Open Design
Massimo Menichinelli, Emilio Velis, Andre Rocha, Alessandra Schmidt |
| 1438 | Accumulation of empirical investigation into joint structures in wooden furniture design
Yi Shiang Lin, Ming Huang Lin, Jen Kuan Yau | 1551 | Contemporary Spaces of Apparel Design: Embracing both Digital and Physical Environments
Krissi Riewe |
-

CONTENTS

-
- | | |
|-------|---|
| 1562 | Design Cultures of Making:
Fashion thinking as creative
process and pedagogy
Susan Postlethwaite |
| <hr/> | |
| 1573 | Design culture of playing. The
musical instrument industry: an
important culture of made in
Italy.
Marco Mancini |
| <hr/> | |
| 1588 | Digital encounters in the culture
of textile making: developing a
hybrid craftsmanship for textile
design by fusing additive methods
of surface fabrication with
knitting technology
Delia Dumitrescu |
| <hr/> | |
| 1600 | Distributed design and
production for distributed care.
Investigation on materializing
bottom-up open and indie
innovation in the field of
healthcare
Patrizia Bolzan, Massimo
Bianchini, Laura Cipriani, Stefano
Maffei |
| <hr/> | |
| 1614 | Heterotopia of Space: How
capitalism is alienating and
controlling societies
Sarah Khayat |
| <hr/> | |
| 1625 | I - D (I – Design _ Idiosyncratic
Meta Design) Idiosyncratic
Proceedings on Reading and
Production Meta-Objects in
Contemporary Industrial Design
Mantikou Angeliki-Sofia, Farangas
Athanasios, Zafeiropoulos
Theodoros, Psychoulis Alexandros |
| <hr/> | |
| 1640 | If we can't make it together, we
won't make it alone. The
challenge and potential of
collective making
Lena Håkansson, Stephanie
Carleklev, Stephan Hruza, Anna-
Karin Arvidsson |
| <hr/> | |
| 1652 | Inter-Weaving Culture and Crafts
in Design Education
Puja Anand, Alok Bhasin, Priyanka
Khattar |
| <hr/> | |
| 1668 | Learning through codesign
toolkits. A case study on
codesigning the cinema of the
future
Simone Taffe, Sonja Pedell |
| <hr/> | |
| 1681 | Letterpress: A Survey of Print
Culture or an Immersive Learning
Experience
Alexander Cooper, Rose Gridneff,
Andrew Haslam |
| <hr/> | |
| 1695 | Made by (Material) Frustration
Arielle Blonder, Shira Shoval, Eran
Sharon |
| <hr/> | |

CONTENTS

-
- | | | | |
|------|--|------|---|
| 1711 | Material culture(s). Research paths in an evolving material design culture, and the connected future designer's attitudes
Doriana Dal Palù, Beatrice Lerma, Claudia De Giorgi | 1799 | Research on the Application of Lacquer Craft in Modern Accessories
Tianxiao Xie |
| 1724 | Mind-mapping in design culture: A tool for ideation in graphic design education?
Philip Jones, Marion Morrison | 1811 | The Emerging Fashion-Tech Paradigm in the Contemporary European Landscape
Chiara Di Lodovico, Chiara Colombi |
| 1738 | New scenarios for developing cooperative platforms for local manufacturing
Alberto Calleo, Giorgio Dall'Osso, Laura Succini, Michele Zannoni | 1825 | The evolving role of prototypes in design research: a discussion on terms and meanings
Silvia D. Ferraris, Gabriele Barzilai |
| 1752 | Playing for change: designing a board game for the circular economy
Thomas David Cockeram, Jessica Clare Robins, Emmanuel Tseklevs, Leon Cruickshank | 1840 | The Making of a Dress: Explicating the Implicit Processes
Adrian Huang |
| 1769 | Progetto Glume: from milling waste to resource for new materials
Danilo Perozzi, Laura Dominici, Elena Comino | 1857 | The shape of wellbeing: investigating an approach for the development of a design requirements framework for design for wellbeing projects
Sandra Dittenberger |
| 1785 | Re-distributed manufacturing in makerspaces. Towards a model of sustainable production
Louis Rose | 1873 | Weaving sequential changes – designing textiles with multiple embedded stages
Riikka Talman |
-

CONTENTS

1891 **DESIGN CULTURE (OF) MULTIPLICITY**

- 1893 Architectural Design Education as an Agent of Change: The Case of the Ultra-Orthodox Branch, Jerusalem
Elissa Rosenberg

-
- 1904 “But I’m a lecturer not a therapist”: Educational Coaching – a proposed alternative approach to supporting students through their creative education
Gary Pritchard
-

- 1918 Decoding the birth of transcultural fashion
Shipra Kukreja
-

- 1934 Design as a medium for an informal learning. INDICOLearning from the interface to the activity
Marina Puyuelo, Mónica Val, Hugo Barros da Rochas
-

- 1946 De-stereotype UX Design – Discussing and managing issues related to the clustering of users in the design of innovative solutions
Margherita Pillan, Alessandra Mazzola
-

-
- 1958 Framing diversity: designing hearing aids from a deaf culture perspective
Patrizia Marti
-

- 1979 Gazes and Gatekeeping: Reconceptualising the entrance portfolio in the post-colony
Diane Steyn
-

- 1994 Hybridity as a culture of making
Maya Ober, Nicole Schneider
-

- 2011 Hyper-Contextual Futures in Mexico City
Paolo Cardini, Karla Paniagua
-

- 2025 Learning and Differences reciprocally shared and validated: A decade long Participatory Design collaboration between KG Elementary School and AD University
Raymond Patrick Zachary Camozzi, Helene Day Fraser, Caylee Raber
-

- 2040 On (un)becoming in Design Academia: A Coloured female’s autoethnography
Cheri Hugo
-

- 2058 The Ethics of Knowing a Shared Language and Intention in Design
Lisa Elzey Mercer, Terresa Moses
-

CONTENTS

2066 The Neighbourhood Home.
System of environments for plural
inclusion
Ilaria Longo, Sonia Massari,
Alessandro Spalletta

2081 Universal Visual Languages in a
Male-oriented Society
Valeria Bucchetti, Francesca
Casnati

2095 **DESIGN
CULTURE (OF)
NEW NORMAL**

2097 A Comparative Study of Online
Teaching Modes of Sino-Italian
School of Design: A Politecnico di
Milano, Tsinghua University, and
Tongji University perspective
Fan Chen, Lin Li

2107 A COVID-19 Horizon Scan Looking
for Post-Pandemic Implications
for Design
Marcus Foth, Glenda Amayo
Caldwell, Joel Fredericks

2126 A new way of perceiving the
locality: economic growth, social
inclusion, environmental
protection
Fabio Mongelli

2141 A Sustainable Jewellery Design
Practice for Psychological Health
after Covid-19
Huiyi Qu

2153 Autopoietic design; seven
components for a sustainable
future design model
Gonzalo Raineri Bernain

2165 Community-led design
capabilities during the COVID-19
pandemic and beyond
Mariana Fonseca Braga, Eduardo
Romeiro Filho, Haddon G.
Guimarães Pereira, Emmanuel
Tseklevs, Rosângela Míriam L. O.
Mendonça

2182 Cross-Team Brainstorming and a
Comparison of Online to Physical
Version
Heng-Yi Mie, Hsi-Jen Chen

2198 Design Education in a Pandemic
Context
Harald Skulberg

2210 Design for Sustainable
Healthcare. Cutting the impact of
medical products through
disposable packaging
Gabriele Maria Cito, Angela
Giambattista

CONTENTS

-
- | | | | |
|-------|---|------|--|
| 2227 | Designing new learning experiences in pandemic time: how digital can support a new didactic in Service Design
Andrea Taverna | 2302 | Identifying Factors for Designing a Successful Telemedical Training System for Remote Pediatric Physical Exams
Elham Morshedzadeh, Ph.D.,
Andre Muelenaer, MD, Jr, MD, MS.,
Michelle Morris, Dana Werlich, Margaret Nelson, MD. |
| <hr/> | | | |
| 2239 | Ecosystem Framework for Community Life Circles based on Life Projects in the Post-COVID-19 Era
Tao Chen, Yong-Ki Lee, Juyoung Chang | 2316 | Inter-University Design Workshop: plurality in design education
Inés Alvarez-Icaza Longoria, Diego Alatorre Guzmán, René Harari Masri, Lucero Donaji De la Huerta Santaella, Ana Elena Hernández Palomino |
| <hr/> | | | |
| 2253 | Expansive Video Capture – Up close, personal & specific tutoring “performances”
Brendon Clark | 2332 | Kids-centered Pocket Park design. Well-being for children in the urban post-covid context.
Benedetta Terenzi, Anna Laura Pisello |
| <hr/> | | | |
| 2265 | Gamified e-Learning approached through Emotional Design in the Post-Covid-19 era
Na Wei, Yong-Ki Lee, Juyoung Chang | 2347 | Nanomedicine and Tourism in the post-pandemic era: smart “mobility & health” through wearable design for lab-on-chips
Claudio Gambardella, Pietro Ferraro, Assia D'Alesio |
| <hr/> | | | |
| 2275 | Healthcare innovation during the pandemic time: digital technologies to enhance clinic 4.0
Stefania Palmieri, Mario Bisson, Alessandro Ianniello | 2358 | Post-pandemic medicines: towards a new normality
Antonella Valeria Penati, Carlo Emilio Standoli, Patrizia Bolzan |
| <hr/> | | | |
| 2289 | Hospitals’ decision-making regarding infrastructural adaptations in response to Covid-19
Pleuntje Jellema, Margo Annemans, Ann Heylighen | 2372 | Reaching Audiences in 2020
Sharon Hooper |
-

CONTENTS

-
- | | | | |
|------|---|------|---|
| 2387 | (Re)envisioning the contribution of design to the sustainable transition of healthcare systems
Amina Pereno | 2487 | Telemedicine, today more than ever. The ABBRACCI design concept for COVID-19 patient monitoring
Alessia Buffagni, Martina Frausin |
| 2404 | Reinforcing Networks of Place-Based Care and Resilience
Julie Van Oyen, Jacquie Shaw, Laura Kozak, Jean Chisholm | 2500 | The Challenges and Benefits of online Education and the possible impacts of the entry of IT firms in the education ecosystem
Nayna Yadav |
| 2419 | Research on rapid mass production of emergency products based on FDM 3d printing
Xueyan Wang, Dongmei Peng | 2512 | The design culture and the challenges of the new normal
Nicola Morelli |
| 2433 | Semi-immersive Virtual Habitat to Enhance Relaxation in People with Dementia during COVID-19 Emergency
Silvia Maria Gramegna | 2524 | The effects of eye expression on emotion perception
Yi-Hsun Liu, Hsi-Jen Chen |
| 2446 | Shifting paradigms in Sustainable Fashion Design education: Studying implications & effectiveness of pedagogical methods adopted in a pandemic setting
Pragya Sharma | 2537 | The value of design in the emergency-driven scenarios. Crafting Ecosystems with data
Francesco Dell'Aglio, Enza Migliore, Chiara Scarpitti |
| 2471 | Strengthening city resilience through the re-orientation of a social innovation incubation programme in Covid-19 time. The case of 'The School of the Neighbourhoods'
Marta Corubolo, Anna Meroni, Daniela Selloni | 2551 | Thinking With Card: Curriculum-Led Making Activities Integrated with Distance Learning
Benjamin Hughes |
-

CONTENTS

2569 Understanding public health communication design globally during the Covid-19 pandemic: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly
Emmanuel Tsekleves, Mariana Fonseca Braga, Alejandro Moreno-Rangel, Linli Zhang, Mafe Salazar, Hannah Field, Hayley Alter

2594 “United in isolation. An online letterpress festival”. A community response to the Covid-19 pandemic
Andrea Vendetti, Elettra Scotucci

2604 DESIGN CULTURE (OF) PROXIMITY

2606 A Design Experience for Interactive Narrative Based on The User Behavior
Yuan Yao, Haipeng Mi

2619 An answer to the complex representation of territory. The fertile ground of mnemotopes and design of communication.
Clorinda Sissi Galasso, Giovanni Baule

2630 Attractive Factors in the Experience of an Online User-supported Learning Platform
Min-Yuan Ma, Hsin-Yi Huang, Eric Chen-F Hsieh

2650 City Branding and Fictional Layers: Reading Istanbul through Filming Locations
Zeynep Arda, Onur Mengi, Deniz Deniz

2667 Co-Design processes for the inclusiveness of Rome's temporary communities
Gianni Denaro, Luca D'Elia, Safouan Azouzi

2679 Co-designing the future of a public space and its related services. The case of the Reggio Emilia Ducal Palace and its park
Marta Corubolo, Anna Meroni, Daniela Selloni

2694 Collaborative Futures: a pedagogical model for delivering future-focused and citizen-centred design education
Marianne McAra, Kirsty Ross

2710 Communicating social values to children using design solutions
Laura Giraldi, Marta Maini, Francesca Morelli

CONTENTS

-
- | | | | |
|------|--|------|---|
| 2720 | Creating an inclusive learning environment to support transformative learning and encourage upward educational mobility opportunities for economically or academically under-resourced design students
Michal Rotberg | 2800 | Design projects as drivers for organisational change in the public sector
Felicitas Smittinger Schmittinger, Alessandro Deserti, Francesca Rizzo |
| 2736 | Cultural Differences as Challenges and Design Drivers in the Development of Smart Assistive Technology for an Ageing Society
Danying Yang, Louise Moody | 2813 | Design when you are the other 90%, a student's perspective
Kyle Graham Brand |
| 2752 | Data visualization and knowledge sharing in participatory design to improve people liveability in urban places
Giovanni Borgia, Massimiliano Condotta, Chiara Scanagatta | 2826 | Design with Social Justice in Mind. The Case Study of Furniture Design in Elementary Schools
Caroline Gagnon, Claudie Rousseau, Thomas Coulombe-Morency, Sonia Cadoret, Colin Côté |
| 2768 | Democratizing design: lessons from a case study in the Alpine area
Daniele Busciantella Ricci, Ilaria Argenziano, Marta Gandolfi, Michela Ventin | 2846 | Evolving future city-based retailing via design thinking: A Chinese hybrid model approach
Yujia Huang, David Hands, Rachel Cooper, Nick Dunn |
| 2786 | Design for Promoting Pro-environmental Behaviours of the Georgian Domestic Workers in Ankara
Ayşe Kaplan, Lilyana Yazirlioğlu | 2862 | Feeling Endem. How travel enhances applied-autonomy in spatial design
Hans Venhuizen |
| | | 2878 | Global Proximity: case studies of international and interdisciplinary collaboration between the USA, Italy, Guyana and Japan
Valeria Albani, Paolo Cardini |
-

CONTENTS

2887 Heritage and cultural accessibility: the role of design in the creation of an intercultural dialogue
Marco Bozzola, Irene Caputo, Claudia De Giorgi

2903 Immigrant Cultural Acculturation - A study of Tibetan Clothing in India
Anahita Suri

2920 Making in Proximity: Design Policies for collaborative making cultures
Lina Monaco, Luca D'Elia, Viktor Malakuczi

2931 Making practice as narrator of changing social worlds-Textiles and the Scottish Borders, in the 21st century, but based firmly on the past?
Britta Kalkreuter

2942 Multiple narratives for multiple visions: engaging citizens in building future scenarios for their city through participatory design and storytelling.
Davide Fassi, Annalinda De Rosa, Francesco Vergani

2955 New Technological Space for Tourists. Design as a Trigger of Experience, Osmotic-Membrane Interface, Know-How Provider and Social Engager
Luisa Collina, Ilaria Bollati, Claudia Mastrantonio, Umberto Tolino

2968 Placemeaking through Creative Practice: Enabling Change and Empowering Future Change-makers
Cheryl Giraudy, Saskia van Kampen

2984 Proximity as space of opportunity: connecting people, productions and territories
Valentina Gianfrate, Elena Formia, Flaviano Celaschi, Elena Vai

2998 Radius 100 model – Working multidisciplinary theories, methodologies and design practice: An approach to social design beyond academia
Dr. Yona Weitz, Arch. Sharon Koniak

3014 Rethinking User Experience of Parking Garage. Exploring Innovative Suicide Prevention Strategies Through Motivational Design
Sébastien Proulx, Adam Fromme, Leila Akberdin, Maria Basile, Olivia Forsyth, Maya Jenkins, Abby Nelson, Claire Spicer

CONTENTS

3031 Signs of the Artisan City
Eleonora Trivellin, Susanna Cerri

3046 Social networks as enablers of
design cultures: An analysis of
multiplex relationships among
members of a creative hub
Sine Celik, Tua A. Björklund

3059 Subversive Design. Designer
Agency Through Acts of
Insurgence
Seth Parker

3072 The City of Care
Anna Anzani, Elena Elgani, Maria
Renata Guarneri, Francesco
Scullica

3084 The power of designing choices
Raffaella Fagnoni

3101 The systemic approach and the
use of new technologies to
communicate cultural heritage
and develop a culture of
proximity
Marco Faccini, Alessandro
Spalletta

3121 Towards a Design Observatory:
crafting a distributed approach
Nina Costa, Vasco Branco, Rui
Costa, Afonso Borges, Raul Cunha,
Ana Catarina Silva, António
Modesto

3137 When a designer encounters an
artisan: a parameter analysis
investigation
Carla Paoliello

3153 **DESIGN CULTURE (OF) RESILIENCE**

3155 0 Textile. A Design Research
applying Circular Economy in
textile field
Maria Antonietta Sbordone,
Viviana Vollono, Carmela Illenia
Amato, Barbara Pizzicato

3173 A Research on the Sustainability
in Traditional Cave-Dwelling
Construction Skills in Northern
Shanxi Province (Jinbei Area)
Runze Liu, Haoming Zhou

3182 A Study of Zero Waste Fashion
Design and its Possibilities within
a Design for Circularity Process.
Debbie Moorhouse, Tracy
Cassidy, Parikshit Goswami,
Andrew Hewitt

3198 Awareness, compatibility and
equality as drivers to resilience in
sustainable design research
Giuseppe Mincoelli, Gian Andrea
Giacobone, Silvia Imbesi, Michele
Marchi, Filippo Petrocchi

CONTENTS

-
- | | | | |
|------|---|------|--|
| 3212 | Circle Sector: exploring the role of designers in a circular economy
Ben Hagenaars, Niels Hendriks | 3297 | Design educators in the 21st century: Applying The Compass methodology to prepare future designers as changemakers in a culture of resilience
Catalina Cortés, Alejandra Amenábar |
| 3222 | Cooperatives enterprise, incubators for the co-design of a new organizational and management model for sustainable development.
Caterina Rosini, Silvia Barbero | 3311 | Design for Social Impact and Crafts Communities in Turkey
Hazal Gumus Ciftci, Stuart Walker |
| 3235 | Craft Your Future: Building a circular space through the European digital craft
Chele Esteve Sendra, Manuel Martínez Torán, Eileen Blackmore, Hendrik Jan Hoekstra | 3324 | Design Plugin: Using Design Thinking Approach in Smart Sustainable Cities Education
Tarmo Jaakko Karhu, Martijn Gerhard Rietbergen |
| 3249 | Creativity as a Driver in Social Innovation Processes
Debora Giorgi, Irene Fiesoli | 3337 | Design projects as drivers for organisational change in the public sector
Felicita Schmittinger, Alessandro Deserti, Francesca Rizzo |
| 3264 | Design culture (of) resilience. Space & Service design taxonomy, overcoming undefined space & service design contexts
Nansi Van Geetsom, Andrea Wilkinson | 3350 | Designing community: creating resilience through collaboration
Jessica Clare Robins, Emmanuel Tseklevs, Leon Cruickshank |
| 3282 | Design education and forest environments – learning from and with living systems
Caroline McCaw | 3365 | Designing resilience. Design dealing with communities
Carlo Branzaglia |
| | | 3371 | Designing Resilience. Mapping Singapore's Sustainable Fashion Movements
Harah Chon, Lim Jiayi Natasha, Elisa Lim |
-

CONTENTS

3382	Designing Sustainable Product-Service Systems applied to Distributed Economies in Water-Energy-Food Nexus approach Renke He, Meng Gao, Carlo Vezzoli, Ke Ma	3476	Food Cycles. Redesigning processes and products Silvia Pericu
3401	Discovering Design Values in the Chinese Pre-Qin Classics Miaosen Gong	3487	From Objects and Products to Things and Stuff Clare Green
3412	Eco-lab-orating. Insights from an ongoing intervention with design school faculty Rakefet Kenaan	3501	Green infrastructures and satellite images: the case study of Munich Giovanni Borgia, Filippo Iodice, Federica D'Acunto
3424	Educating Designers for the Circular Economy: Innovative Digital Resources, Collaborative Learning and Synergic Actions Lucinda Morrissey, Roberta Barban Franceschi, Ana Margarida Ferreira	3516	I Don't Want to Feel Outdated. The dissonance between product attachment and contemporary relevance Malene Pilgaard Harsaae
3436	Evolving the conventional curriculum: innovative learning interventions in a classroom to enhance design students' learning competencies Joselyn Sim, Harah Chon	3527	Innovation through circular economy: Tool development for multidisciplinary approach to product-service-system Design João Sampaio, Ana Afonso
3448	Fashion Futuring. Rethinking sustainable fashion design Alessandra Vaccari, Ilaria Vanni	3544	Lost in transition; Methodologies and tools of Product-Service Systems Design for major life transition Maria Paola Trapani, Nadejda Cervinscaia, Nadejda Cervinscaia
3458	FASHIONABLE FAÇADE: textile waste innovations for the built environment Hilde Heim	3560	Materials Designers. Boosting Talent towards Circular Economies Laura Clèries, Valentina Rognoli, Pere Llorach-Massana

CONTENTS

-
- | | | | |
|------|--|------|---|
| 3572 | Preparedness and infrastructure design for disaster and emergency situations; the key to a resilient community
Noemi Bitterman, Medardo Chiapponi, Alessia Buffagni, Andrea Cotti | 3655 | Strengthen Ties of Social Bonding Through Design from and Emotional Perspective
Deyanira Bedolla Pereda |
| 3585 | Replicating the Unpredictable: Board Games as Prototypes for Wildfire Evacuations
Thomas Maiorana | 3672 | Study on the Sustainable Design of the Young Elderly Oriented Smart Wearable Products
Chen Han, Shen Lei |
| 3597 | Revised Function Analysis of Sustainability - understanding the complexity of sustainability
Paul Topf Aguiar de Medeiros, Charlotte Sjödel | 3686 | Surviving in the wild: Sustaining design and social innovation initiatives in Asia-Pacific
Cyril Tjahja |
| 3616 | Role of Social Ecologies within Social Design and Social Innovation
Neeta Verma | 3699 | Sustainable Deliberation; an Empathetic 'Mantra'
Amita Deshpande, Ranjana Dani |
| 3626 | Slow Engagement & Widening the Frame – Emerging Models of Social Innovation and Design Culture
Diana Nicholas | 3715 | Teaching and Practicing Service Design and Social Innovation: Experiences with Communities at the Margins in São Paulo, Brazil
Rosana Vasques, Mari Suoheimo, Maria Cecilia Loschiavo dos Santos |
| 3641 | Smart, Safe and Green System. A Resilient-Based Strategy for Sustainable Buildings and DIY Design
Cecilia Cecchini, Miriam Mariani, Paolo Mondini | 3727 | The cot, the pot and other stories
Lena Gupta |
| | | 3755 | The Materiality of Resilience
Emile De Visscher, Lorenzo Guiducci, Iva Rešetar |
-

CONTENTS

-
- 3774 The poetics of waste in contexts of satisfactory use and social action
Desamparados Pardo Cuenca, Patrik Baldan
-
- 3795 The potential of Theory of Change to visually model the underlying logic behind service design projects
Luca Simeone, David Drabble, Kerstin Junge, Nicola Morelli
-
- 3810 The SDGs framework as strategic lever for design education.
Simona Maccagnani, Marco Ricchetti
-
- 3823 The Tree and The Room: Co-Designing DIY WiFi Networks with Emergent Local Metaphors
Michael Smyth, Ingi Helgason, Lauren Lapidge, Katalin Hausel
-
- 3838 Towards 'regenerative interior design': exploring a student project
Giovanna Di Monte-Milner
-
- 3853 Trace: design and responsibility in the Prato textile distict
Elisabetta Cianfanelli, Renato Stasi, Matilde De Gennaro, Maria Grazia Soreca, Margherita Tufarelli
-

-
- 3863 Walk the talk: Towards an ecological futures framework for our designed cultures
Håkan Edeholt, Jomy Joseph, Nan Xia
-
- 3878 Water infrastructure as leverage for resilient cities: a multi-scalar design perspective on urban flooding
Sophie Leemans, Erik Van Daele
-
- 3894 Weaving the New Way of Making from the Andes
Rodrigo Muñoz-Valencia
-
- 3912 Working with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals in Design Education
Silje Alberthe Kamille Friis
-
- 3929 **DESIGN
CULTURE (OF)
REVOLUTION**
-
- 3931 Alternative narratives data visualization archive
María de los Ángeles Briones Rojas, Michele Mauri
-
- 3945 Becoming Lost and Found in Translation
Mark Ingham
-

CONTENTS

-
- | | | | |
|------|---|------|--|
| 3963 | Critical Thinking in fashion design education - New learning approaches for a systemic change in the fashion industry
Carolyn Ermer, Julia Schwarzkopf | 4071 | Experiments on complex systems mapping around materials.
Flavia Papile, Romina Santi, Beatrice Gobbo, Tommaso Elli, Barbara Del Curto |
| 3980 | Design as a methodological stance in interdisciplinary research
Valérie Côté, Caroline Gagnon, Lynda Bélanger, Daphney St-Germain | 4088 | Exploring visualizations of design processes from a design activist perspective – a scoping study
Karina Goransson, Anna-Sara Fagerholm |
| 3996 | Design for Fast Track Democracy
Jennifer Schubert, Bastian Koch | 4105 | Fashion-Tech Revolution: Future Frontiers from Products to Processes
Alba Cappellieri, Chiara Colombi, Livia Tenuta, Susanna Testa |
| 4009 | Disrupting governance by Systemic Design and co-creating the public value
Carolina Giraldo Nohra, Eliana Ferrulli, Silvia Barbero | 4123 | From the product to the object. The speculative design practice as instance.
Chiara Scarpitti |
| 4025 | Disruptive technologies and behavioural change: Design fiction as trigger for critical thinking
Mila Stepanovic, Venere Ferraro | 4135 | From trustful empowerment to overwhelming guilt: pedagogy in current activism practices
Alexia Autissier |
| 4043 | Does design thinking matter? Empirical study and survey on the effectiveness of design thinking
Hannah Park | 4147 | Guilty Materiality: why we play down material relations
Stéphane Treilhou, Clare Green |
| 4057 | Education formats to integrate Design with Humanities, Politics, Social Sciences & Education
Anna Lottersberger | 4160 | MANIFESTO! Now: Game Design for Revolutionary Thinking
Julian Hanna, Simone Ashby, Sónia Matos, Alexis Faria, Callum Nash |
-

CONTENTS

-
- | | | | |
|------|--|------|--|
| 4174 | Ph.D. Admission System Based Comparative Study in Design Discipline under Chinese Context
Fan Chen, Jing-Yi Yang | 4275 | Targeting Design Intervention across Levels of Complexity
Tanner Slade, Nicola Morelli |
| 4187 | Politics by design
Elisabetta Cianfanelli, Maria Claudia Coppola, Margherita Tufarelli | 4288 | The Agency of Discursive Design Exists in the Industrial
Karma Dabaghi |
| 4200 | Projecting Change: Redefining Preservation in the Era of Sea Level Rise
Liliane Wong | 4303 | The Patient Revolution. New design perspectives in healthcare innovative processes.
Carla Sedini, Laura Cipriani, Massimo Bianchini, Barbara Parini, Stefano Maffei |
| 4218 | Realising Discourse: A Strategic Design Solution to the Problem of Addiction
Jason Hobbs | 4319 | The transformation will not be televised
Peter Friedrich Stephan, Raz Godelnik |
| 4239 | Reframing development: A proposal on the role of design research in Latin America based on situated views of the world
Juan Alfonso de la Rosa | 4333 | Time and Design. Time as a key parameter for a survey on contemporary design
Enza Migliore |
| 4250 | Speculative Design for the Public Sector. Design Fiction as a Tool for Better Understanding Public Services
Gianni Sinni | 4351 | Walking the Line: Creative Research as Critical Activity for Design
Brooke Chornyak, Tania Allen |
| 4263 | Speculative Design in Education: Mapping the Landscape
Ingi Helgason, Ivica Mitrović, Julian Hanna, James Auger, Enrique Encinas, Michael Smyth | 4370 | Why we need more somatic culture in design
Silvia Sfligiotti |
-

CONTENTS

4383 **DESIGN CULTURE (OF) THINKING**

4385 Always ordinary, never
straightforward: Considering the
work of Lorraine Wild
David Cabianca

4403 Anticipatory Design and Futures
Literacies: A Need and a Hope
Andrew Morrison, Manuela Celi,
Laura Clèries, Palak Dudani

4420 Authorship and automation in the
digital design culture
Giuliano Galluccio

4434 Banham's 'Unhouse' as Anti-
Interiority: Towards Twenty-First-
Century Theories of Design and
Domesticity
Helen McCormack

4444 Bodies of Evidence: making
in/visible histories in South
African Design Education
Nike Romano

4459 Culture and Relationality. Moving
towards 'post-rational' modes of
design
Tom Ainsworth, Sally Sutherland

4472 Design History and the Decline of
Historical Thinking
César Peña

4482 Designers-Thinkers and the
Critical Conscience of Design
Sanna Simola

4500 De-signing Ambiguity
James Dyer, Christian S. Petersen

4514 Disruptive Thinking in Design
Education
Riccardo Balbo, Elda Scaramella,
Serena Selva

4524 Diversified Orientation and
Design Value in Safeguarding of
Intangible Cultural Heritage
Tie Ji, Yinman Guo, Xiaolei Min

4542 Domesticity and digital eugenics:
design cultures of Silicon Valley
Luis Hernan, Carolina Ramirez-
Figueroa

4551 Exploring Asian Philosophies and
Service Culture: the Notion of
Dignity
Miso Kim

4562 Fantasia and analogical thinking:
a specific reflection on teaching
the essence of the Creative Leap
Valentina Auricchio

CONTENTS

-
- 4573 How to teach design thinking to non-design students: enablers and barriers to transfer design research practices.
Gianluca Carella, Michele Melazzini, Xue Pei, Cabirio Cautela, Marzia Mortati
-
- 4595 Not just Thinkers, Makers
Hein Dubery, Kyle Brand
-
- 4605 Radical Interdependence: learning/doing with things
Jaron Rowan
-
- 4615 Rethinking & Appropriating Design Education for a VUCA World
Jan Eckert, Sabine Junginger, Guillermina Noël
-
- 4636 Rethinking Design through Literature
Susan Yelavich
-
- 4649 The chain reaction. How to design a process for transforming museums by rethinking the role of personnel
Alessandra Bosco, Silvia Gasparotto
-
- 4664 The concept of Interaction Design under review: literature review and interviews with qualified informants
Eduardo Ariel de Souza Teixeira
-
- 4674 The Emergence of Modern Design Discourse in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR)
Qassim Saad
-
- 4689 The engagement of visitors in faber's houses and studios. Empirical design research and experimental actions in Lombardy
Raffaella Trocchianesi, Anna Mazzanti, Alessandra Spagnoli, Davide Spallazzo
-
- 4703 Theory under suspicion: criticality and material meaning in practice based research
Marta Camps, Jaron Rowan
-
- 4720 Tokyo 2020: globalization and self-orientalism in the communication of the next Asian Olympic Games.
Claudia Tranti
-
- 4736 Towards borderless futures: How transcultural approaches changed the practice of graphic design
Juliana F. Duque
-
- 4753 Which way to go? Some complicated crossroads facing design culture in Aspen.
Elena Dellapiana, Ramon Rispoli
-

CONTENTS

4768 POSTERS

- 4769 A visual-analytical approach to phases of transition in people's life paths

Laura Heym, Jennifer Schubert, Irene Visentini, Sofia Sanchez, Alvise Mattozzi

- 4770 Aeon, in his original meaning of "life", "vital force" or "being", "generation".

Ana Maria Fessmann, Elene Bakhdatze, Vaishnavi Bala, Varshini Janakiram, Janina Hietl, Gianfranco Olivotto

- 4771 Co-creating prosthetics as fashion accessories for assisting people with disability. The case of hearing impairment

Andree-Anne Blacutt, Stéphane Roche

- 4772 Collaborative methods: design bridging academia and industry

Teresa Franqueira, Pereira Catia

- 4773 Craft in Makerspaces: The Potential for Social Change for Sustainability

Alessandra Fasoli

-
- 4774 Creative design process for envisioning the future of emergency medical services in smart cities

Vipul Vinzuda, Niall Deloughry, Leonard O'Sullivan

- 4775 Design and Neuroscience for the UX. Possible tool for Designers

Alessio Paoletti

- 4776 Design as a tool for participatory transformation of urban space

Jacobo Muñoz Duato, Damià Jordà Bou

- 4777 Digital visual tool for design project development in a multidisciplinary team

Michela Carlomagno

- 4778 Education in social design by means of artistic photography

Cecilia Casas-Romero

- 4779 Enabling Collaborative Turns: A Conversation-Based Approach for Design Workgroups

Sze-Yunn Seah

- 4780 Experimenting new joints for more sustainable and easier to assemble furniture

Patrizio Cipollone, Viktor Malakuczi, Felice Ragazzo, Michele Russo

CONTENTS

-
- | | | | |
|-------|---|------|---|
| 4781 | Exploring the potential uses of ocean plastic and public engagement activities for raising awareness
Xingyu Tao | 4788 | Identities and sustainable futures
David Serra Navarro, Carme Ortiz Valeri |
| <hr/> | | | |
| 4782 | Feed: design for Eating Disorders prevention in pre-adolescent age.
Carlotta Belluzzi Mus | 4789 | Interaction studies applied to Robotic Surgery
Giovanna Giugliano, Sonia Capece, Víctor Fernando Muñoz Martínez |
| <hr/> | | | |
| 4783 | Festival Living Labs: Involving the Festival Community in Sustainable Experimentation.
Marije Boonstra, Aranka Dijkstra, Peter Joore | 4790 | Intervention of Indian Textile Craft in Design Pedagogy for Social innovation and Economic Growth
Sakshi Babbar Paul, Saroj Bala |
| <hr/> | | | |
| 4784 | Grey matter - Matière grise. When the 'thé dansant' is no longer an option. Imagining an inclusive and intergenerational urban future, placing seniors as productive actors of the civic life.
Jerome Picard, Elida Mosquera, Benoist Desfonds, Matthieu Boustany, Peeraya Suphasidh | 4791 | Italia 3.0. An educational strategy to enhance food as Food Cultural Heritage
Monica Bortolussi, Martina Mitrione, Sonia Massari, Alessandro Spalletta |
| <hr/> | | | |
| 4785 | Guided by Voices from the Fields: A case study on earth, plants and fashion design
Piret Pupart, Julia Valle-Noronha | 4792 | Kairos: How Digital Culture Heritage can improve society and its development through Systemic Design
Giovanni Capoccia, Veneranda Carrino |
| <hr/> | | | |
| 4786 | Heirloom a device for the survival of the fittest memories
Valeria Volanti | 4793 | Kinetic calendar for tracking physical and emotional stress in women
Mariel Domínguez |
| <hr/> | | | |
| 4787 | Hybrid Town, Stories in Maps: from China to Milan
Guido Tattoni, Hagit Pincovici, Germana De Michelis | 4794 | Knitted expressions. Movement as material in Textile Design
Faseeh Saleem |
-

CONTENTS

-
- | | | | |
|------|---|------|--|
| 4795 | Love Leftovers - Useful fictions and what if we could put our memories on sale?
Teodora Ivkov, Luca D'Elia | 4802 | TellMi Ecosystem: an example of Design Process applied to didactic methodology.
Elisa Chiodo, Michele Aquila |
| 4796 | Mass media imaginary as a symbol. How image is revealing the crises of our time through cinematic design.
Celia Cuenca García | 4803 | Time Well Spent. Facilitating mindful and meaningful screen use through a 'Design for Humansic Living' methodology
Ace Chia |
| 4797 | Neighborhood Cowork (Cowork del Barrio): Co-creating agents for social change
Sandra Molina, Cynthia Jaramillo, Alejandro Ramirez | 4804 | Trans/Feminist Critical Making – Design as Open-Source Opposition
Michelle Christensen, Florian Conradi, Marie Dietze |
| 4798 | Pen Your Thoughts: A Visual Design Language Study on Student's Learning Progression
Jennifer Samonte Aguilar | 4805 | Visual Exploration Method to Engage Art History with Practice-based Mindset in Design Education
Hanny Wijaya |
| 4799 | Real-time snow information for tourists - Utilizing AI for tourism - Case Snowman
Marija Griniuk, Maija-Liisa Rautiainen, Jesse Talsi, Päivi Timonen, Michelle van Wyk | | |
| 4800 | Recycling, refusing plastic use and choosing biodegradable materials for new products
Alexandra Anghelache | | |
| 4801 | Shifting Mindsets, Bridging Generations
Shiu Heng Sin | | |
-



DESIGN CULTURE(S) | CUMULUS ROMA 2021
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Artificial Intelligence is a Character? Exploring design scenarios to build interface behaviours.

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Abstract | The paper aims to illustrate the qualitative results of the first phase of the scenario research about voice interfaces, examining whether it is possible to design them as if they were a theatrical or cinematographic character. The research field intersects interaction design with character design, intended as the narrative construction of a character, and theatrical performances. The experimentation takes advantage of theatre workshops that aims to show, and understand, which are the main characteristics of a vocal interface and how to design them according to a performance approach. The paper ends illustrating how design can address actual opportunities and criticalities about emerging technologies, following a relations-based approach.

KEYWORDS | INTERACTION DESIGN, VOICE USER INTERFACES, CHARACTER DESIGN,
SCENARIO, THEATRE WORKSHOP

1. Introduction, from voice to personality

In recent years, there has been a widespread diffusion of devices that integrate vocal interfaces closely connected to artificial intelligence. Although these issues were already debated in the scientific community during the early 1990s, only in the last decade this topic experienced greater insight from many disciplines, including interaction design. The renewed attention is linked to the massive diffusion in the daily life of two products-functions: voice assistants (SIRI, Google Assistant, Alexa, Cortana); smart speakers (Amazon Echo, Google Home) that had a surge in sales. The scenario also includes extremely complex products, such as robots, voice assistants on board of cars with different degrees of automation and web pages applications. Therefore, the research field appears to be very broad and even in the scientific literature names of the vocal interfaces are connoted with different nuances. They are defined as Vocal Agent (VA), more often as Vocal Assistant, Conversational Agent (CA), Intelligent Assistant (IA), Virtual Assistant (VA). Robotic scientists, for example, imagined them to help fill the gaps in human social relations to generate friends and companions (Richardson, 2015). If the set that contains all the definitions is called Natural User Interfaces (Dasgupta, 2018), much is being discussed not only on the functions of the interfaces but, above all, on aspects such as: the emotions they should communicate, the characteristic traits of the personality, the ability to stimulate virtuous behaviours. The concept of naturalness is still debated in the scientific community, but the dialogue makes interaction easier because voice interfaces currently allow a great tolerance in the understanding of the input messages, without forcing the user to be strict encode and learn standard messages to be given in a dialogic fashion (Dale, 2016). Moreover, the voice is not only perceived as human-like, but human traits are also associated with the behaviours of the system (Nass, Steuer & Tauber 1994). People tend to infer more a human creator behind the computer, hearing a voice than reading the same text (Schroeder & Epley, 2016). Even if users are perfectly aware of the presence of an artificial intelligence, they believe that voice-human has real needs and desires (Short, 2017), human emotions or traits (Brave & Nass, 2007), feeling even more comfortable when VA asked invasive questions (Yu, Nguyen, Prakkamakul & Salehi, 2019). People create a mental image of the voice, including personal traits, attitudes, background information and even physical characteristics (Cohen, Giangola & Balogh, 2004). Starting from this statement, VAs are usually designed to include emotion appraisal (Castellano et al., 2013), generation and expression capabilities (Tsiuorti et al., 2016), to produce empathy (Lunardo & Bressolles, 2016). Other attributes usually associated with VA are: empathetic (Fung et al., 2016), affective (Oker et al., 2015), emotive (Maldonado & Nass, 2007). All these efforts are made to foster communicative and emotional aspects, but the core concept follows the design of a human-like interface, defining it as emotional intelligence, that is grounded in parameters like: believability (Ranjbartabar & Richards, 2016), the illusion of life (Bates, 1994), collaboration (Cassell, Sullivan, Churchill & Prevost, 2000), trust (Cheepen, 1988), sensitivity (Dibitonto, Leszczynska, Tazzi & Medaglia, 2018), capable of conversing (Clark et al., 2019). However, one of the most debated topics is how to give to VA a recognisable personality to simulate a

real human-like dialogue; many scholars apply the same personality model both to the human and the machine side, because the base construct is to create a match between human personality and the machine one. But, at present, the VA wide spreading generated an unusual loop in which scholars are still analysing commercial VUI to find if there is a clearly designed personality, which categories of user can easily accept, adopt and engage a stable relation with that kind of VUI. While personality is well described by Corr and Matthews (2009) as "the set of habitual behaviours, cognitive and emotional patterns that evolve from biological and environmental factors", then the first split concerns the subdivision between the personality traits theory and the personality types one. Personality trait theory considers characteristics of people as part of a larger continuum and its approach is described into the Big Five theory; personality types theory, instead, describes characteristics of people as discrete categories. Big Five theory (McCrae & John, 1992) specifies the general affective behaviour by the five following traits: Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Neuroticism. Type theory has its roots in personality scales, such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (1962), which posits 16 personality types deriving from a set of four fundamental dichotomies, for example, extroversion vs introversion. It is worth noting that in the analysed studies, scholars do not use the two approaches as separate, but often mix them by adding other parameters, see for example Heudin (2017), such as mood (Morris, 2012) and emotion (Campos et al., 1994).

2. Analysing and designing personalities of VA

The literature review presented in these first two sections aims to show how interaction design considered the aspects of voice interfaces design, especially the humanization aspects, including users' inferences. The analysis includes design and psychology references as the research field is multidisciplinary, but broadens the field also considering character design. Garcia, Lopez, and Donis (2018) analysed 3661 online surveys to assess the VA personality; their goal was to evaluate VA and identify people desired VA personality. They found that: attributes most frequently associated with VAs were practical, informed, up-to-date, well-mannered, logical and helpful; the least associated were cheerful, sweet, sentimental and masculine. On the other hand, Ehrenbrink, Osman, and Möller (2017) found the personality profile of testers and their preference for Siri, Google's Now and Cortana, based on attractiveness and psychological state reactance. The results show how the group of testers who preferred Siri was the largest and matched the average personality profile. The Google Now group was preferred by extravert, the group that preferred Cortana was more neurotic, less agreeable and less extroverted. Doyle, Edwards, Dumbleton, Clark, and Cowan (2019) present a study in which two VAs are compared with human interaction. They found eight key dimensions to categorise participants' perceptions, for this study is essential to quote at least three of them: conversational interactivity, partner identity & role, vocal qualities. MA, Yang and Fung (2019) used the Big Five model to understand whether VAs personality affects how people perceive intelligence of VAs; their testers observed VAs

endowed with personalities more intelligent than the robotic one. There are still a few examples of how to design the personality of a VA. Spencer, Poggi and Gheerawo (2018) designed, through participatory design workshops, four personalities based on Jung (1954), Person and Mark (2001) archetypes. They define four main features: purpose and story, person, tone of voice, language. Lee, Lee and Lee (2017) show the results of workshops with groups of two users that play the human role and the VA role, using the Wizard of Oz approach. They found that if the VA role was acted in a cheerful and friend like users were funnier and more satisfied, even if the time to complete the tasks were longer. On the other hand, groups with introvert played VA had the best performance with a minimum level of communication. Ghosh and Pherwani (2015) observed the behaviour of assistants in real life. They collected data about communication styles, attitudes, language and nonverbal cues, strategies to face the boss mood. Then they selected nine personality attributes to generate three hypothetical personalities. This work is significant, but, according to the authors, is focused on the assumption that a VA could be only an assistant and must act mimicking those behaviours. Heudin (2015) designed an emotional metabolism that can manage personalities, moods and emotions into a multi-personality conversational agent. He experimented 12 personalities, some of them referring to characters of cinema. He claims and demonstrates that multi-personality agents work better than mono-dimensional ones preserving coherence. Finally, Braun, Mainz, Chadowitz, Pfleging and Alt (2019) propose to match the personalities of users and VA using Big Five models and experiment them into a real-world driving study. They designed four assistant personalities (friend, admirer, aunt, and butler) and their results show "higher likability and trust for assistants that correctly match the user's personality while we observed lower likability, trust, satisfaction, and usefulness for incorrectly matched personalities". The interesting part of this work is the use of a voice pre-recorded by an actress. In the literature review, the authors found some work about the characterization of the interfaces, starting, for example, from the work of gender analysis by Schnobelen (2016); Luria (2018) suggests three guidelines to design personal robots: reciprocity, affirmation and independence. These come from a review of 15 sidekick characters from popular books and movies. Literature analysis shows that there is still a little corpus of studies about the designing of the personality of interfaces in general. The authors also found that is not clear how to design the behaviours of a voice according to the users and the context, finally even if it is true that people consider VA as human-like there is still a design space to project an AI character giving to machines their characterization. According to these brand-new studies and previous experimentations, the authors want to explore the characterization of the interface and the concept of performing interfaces which is recently be claimed by Aylett, Cowan and Clark (2019), underling the differences between personality and characters. Therefore, considering personality aspects is now part of the design process but as Vas are considered human-like can they be considered as characters? Which elements besides personality are needed to design VA in this way?

3. Methodology and Workshop structure

The experimentation makes use of designed theatre workshops that aimed of showing and understanding the main features of a vocal interface and creating a grounded common language background between performers and designers. The workshops involved three professional actors, they currently work for theatre shows and film productions, they also recorded voice over for films. The elements of discrimination to choose them were: their experience in shows where the contact with the audience was much closer, for example in contexts without a stage and barriers between actor and audience; their work as teachers. We assumed that the closeness and direct interaction with the audience, greatly influences the character and generates sudden changes during the performance, then teachers of acting methods have experience in explaining all the facets of the theme. The three workshops with the individual actors lasted about three hours each, they took place at the authors' department, both the authors took written notes during the workshop. We chose not to record audio and video, except for brief moments related to performance examples, in order to avoid that the actors could perceive the workshop as a set. The first phase focused on the voice assistants currently available on the market; the goal was to: verify the actors' knowledge of the interfaces; acquire familiarization with them; investigate their use; test the other devices they were not aware of; collect their perceptions on the voice assistants asking them which were the main perceived parameters and if they found the features of a character designed as such. The second phase concerned a critical analysis, in which the actors were asked to comment on three vocal interfaces chosen among the many present in the cinema (Samantha in *Her*, HAI9000 in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the episode *White Christmas* taken from the *Black Mirror* Series). The aim was a deeper understanding of how a cinematographic interpretation of an AI was designed and realized and to trigger a dialogue on character building. The third phase mixed elements typical of the semi-structured interview and the performance. The actors were asked to explain not only the main factors that allow to characterize a character during the performance, but also the developing method itself across different steps. This framework could also be useful not only in the preliminary phase, as in this paper, but it could be also used for concept generation and validation. In fact, the general goal is to better understand how performing a character is different from considering personality as seen in literature, in order to obtain other parameters to integrate into the design process.

4. Results

During the first phase all the actors confirmed that they know at least one of the vocal assistants, but they do not own them as speakers. One uses Siri on iPhone weekly, one Google Assistant daily, one Google Assistant only in particular situations (i.e. driving). The actor using Siri started to do it after a random event. During the rehearsals, Siri started talking without anyone wanting to do it. From that moment, Siri was used as a character on

stage as a disturbing and surreal element. All actors previously seen Alexa at work, none of them ever interacted or listened to Cortana's voice. In order to demonstrate how the four VAs work, the actors could freely talk to the assistants for few minutes. Then actors asked to the VAs to tell a fairy tale and sing a song. This choice allowed the actors to listen to two possible uses of the voice closer to their context. For all four cases the actors were asked to evaluate the vocal assistants according to the criteria of verisimilitude, and the parameters associated with the voice that were more evident to them. The comparison with the parameters is based on the literature and includes tone, timbre, pitch, rhythm, intonation, accent, prosodic elements. The three actors recognized as plausible Siri and Alexa, praising the quality of Alexa's voice, while judging the sound quality of Google Assistant and Cortana as still "too raw" and "robotic old school". Judgements about the characteristics of the voice were: "always UP", "always ready and enthusiastic", "ringing". It should also be pointed out that one actor emphasized that all these characteristics reinforced negative stereotypes related to female gender. The three female voices were also defined as the mirror of current technology. According to the actors, it seems that the voice that represents the intelligence of the machines has that particular timbre. The reaction in front of the fairy tales and songs of all three actors was of "amazement", "makes you smile", "could be used as a pastime". Vocal assistants told: a text about punctuation (Google Assistant); the little mermaid (Alexa, NB with sounds and accompanying effects); the fox and the grape (Cortana); Siri avoided answering. By repeating the experiment, some of the VA can change behaviours, Cortana sometimes answers similarly to Siri and Google Assistant, telling their own story. The actors highlighted that this might contribute to the construction of VA back-story. The songs, instead, have been an element of debate, especially about Cortana (Italian anthem) and Alexa (Il canto dell'addio). The actors expected that VA would use a tone modulation effect, called vocoder, and that they could not keep up with the rhythm of the song. But voices and rhythm were not distorted, so actors assumed that a speaker recorded the songs ad hoc. Google Assistant's voice, instead, collides with the actors' expectations because it sings nonsense lyrics; while Siri refuse to sing and after some insistence provides a spoken version of the song "Nel blu dipinto di Blu". The songs provided more elements on the analysis of the parameters of the voices, i.e. the rhythm, the cadence and the tails of the vowels. The rhythm is perceived by the actors as "broken", "not fluid", especially when the period becomes very long. In their opinion this depends on a cadence that is not yet fully characterized, but above all on the vowels cut in the length at the end of the words. If, in fact, the addition of some pauses and hesitations, such as "ehm", recalled probable human behaviour, one actor pointed out that the word can be pronounced more or less quickly, but very rarely is cut off sharply. The question at the end of the first part concerned the perception of a designed character in VAs. In this case all the three disagreed, pointing out the total lack of acting and of typical aspects of the character, defining the interfaces as "generalist", "average", "not at all prone to make the interlocutor emotional", "distant, though always cheerful and available". When asked to compare their comments to the personality classifications found in literature, actors agreed on their utility, but they pointed out that personality is not "rock-hard", it has to be declined in every single line and actions;

so, it is not possible to apply personality just to a question-answer, but it needs more connotation as a whole character. They underlined that a character needs more psychological elements – personality is just one of them –, physiological and sociological features in a complex way. The second phase was dedicated to the analysis of three videos that clearly show the interactions with artificial intelligence. The beginning of this phase was dedicated to watching some part of films in English and Italian language. The first sentence that all the actors uttered was almost identical "this is acting", "we are talking about something else", "it is not comparable". The actors underlined the strong interpretation highlighting the unbridgeable difference between actor and speaker. Although some subjects of actor and speaker courses of study are similar, actors are called to work with their whole body "in a holistic way", while speakers can work only on aspects of voice. Explaining better those concepts, actors focused both on the vocal emission through the body and its movements, and on the psychological aspects. They performed some lines showing how that interpretation could be generated by focusing on the invisible body of the actor, for example "even if you can't see the body of Scarlett Johansson (Samantha's voice in the film *Her*), you can perceive her posture, her gestures, you can hear her breathing". Two of the actors narrate, in fact, that in order to emit sounds in the theatre it is necessary to involve the whole body, that is used according to postures, movements and gestures to limit, amplify or modify the sounds, even stage costumes are taken as a cue to characterize the vocal emission. In the theatre, the psychology of the character is explored in an extremely detailed way and the indications are often metaphorical, "that sound must be yellow". Sentences that seem to recall Kandinsky's theories and that, however, could generate a common background language starting from design elements. All the actors agreed on another determinant factor of the acting: it can return the change in the psychology of the character. "You can understand what *Hal9000* is becoming paying attention to how the interpretation is changing, the rhythm, the sound, how it plays between the mellifluous and reassuring register and the attitude of the one who hold your life in its hands". The voice reacts to the narrative, to the evolution of the characters during the whole time. One actor, commenting on the scene of *Black Mirror*, dwells on the fact that it is the man who tries to imitate, to impersonate the role of the machine, as if the machine now had a predetermined archetype. The third phase focused on two questions: how an actor builds the character to be performed on stage and how, once on stage, he modulates and manages everything he has studied. The answers were very different, many methods and schools of acting were mentioned and often the answers remained on a high level, the same about the voice parameters. Three phases emerge: study and construction of the character by themselves, adaptation of the character during the rehearsals with the director and the other actors, live performance. During the first one the answers have common traits when quoting the questions towards the character. This is a technique widely used in writing (Seeger, 1990), whether it is dedicated to novels, films or theatre performances. It is an approach that can also be found in character design and concerns the exploration and research of the character, starting first with the written text analysis and then adding levels of depth on all possible aspects of the character's life and story. When a detail is not present in the text, the

actors reconstruct it. This serves to build the internal motivation, "the engine", the goal that will become increasingly evident on stage. The reconstructed elements will help the actor in shaping the character. On the basis of the text and the questions to the character, the actors declare to build "a scheme", "a grid" that includes all the elements, from the dominant emotions to the recursive gesture (e.g. of the hands) constructing a recognizable grammar of the body, from the parameters related to the voice to the relationship they will have with the other actors. The second example has been defined "the jazz grid" and is linked to the other two phases of rehearsal and live performance. The actor builds the character on a "reactive grid", with possible responses to other events. As in jazz improvisation, the interpretation becomes relational. The grid then responds to the input provided at that moment by the other actors, by the audience, by the context and by the environment whether real (in the street or in houses), or on stage. A clear distinction emerges between these two environments. Although the actors on stage claim to perceive very well how the audience is reacting, in situations without barriers the actor enters a direct relationship with the nearby audience and modulates the parameters of the grid by virtue of the audience's attitude. In these cases, they say that the range of variation of the parameters is much wider to better adapt, provoke, seek empathy with the audience.

5. Conclusions

The actors' vision was very much concerned with qualitative aspects of performance. Aspects not found in the literature and divergent ones appear in all three phases of the workshop, from the use of the whole body acting to generate the voice, to the need to build the psychological aspects of the character, starting from his relations and his story that evolves during the use. The lack of characterization of VA is highlighted, as a homologation on many aspects. Furthermore, some purely vocal aspects must be implemented, such as the final resonance of the vowels and a design of some distinctive features such as rhythm and cadence. It is difficult from the analysis of these workshops to draw precise variations in order to obtain immediate results applicable to the existing vocal interfaces. According to actors the project is missing, although the vocal instrument is at an advanced state of realization and their producers are exploring innovations such as emotional intelligence, which may not fill the aspects of emotional reaction. The three workshops, on the contrary, allowed the authors to glimpse what could be a road still little explored regarding the question: what is the character of technology, of artificial intelligence? Cinema and visual arts provided many answers designed to stimulate reflection, trigger discussion and provoke, but by now the technological tool is already present in our homes and in our habits. Personality aspects can be considered a starting point but, as actors pointed out, using only personality the risk is to obtain a homogenisation of the interfaces' behaviours. To create real emotional conversational VA, the next step should be the construction of a complex character able to react during the dialogue, according to the situation and the context. The contribution of design in this field can therefore be very methodological, if it integrates not

only actors for performance but also copywriters, psychologists and social science experts in a wider way.

6. Future Works

The presented work is part of a research project that will end with the design of an interface for a self-driven vehicle. The next step will therefore concern the definition of some possible characters that AI will be able to interpret in a well-defined context, the script writing and interpretation of the actors and the subsequent post-production actions that are still open questions.

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