Design Research

METHODS AND PERSPECTIVES

Brenda Laurel, editor

The Paradox
of Design Research
The Role of Informance
BONNIE MCDANIEL JOHNSON

Design research is inherently paradoxical: it is both imaginative and empirical. It cannot be simply empirical because the "typical" consumers that researchers need to understand are rarely able to articulate their needs ○47 DISHMAN.

Design researchers must go beyond what they can find: to see more than is visible, and to learn more than can be heard. Accordingly, design research is an act of imagination, just as much as design itself ○23 IRELAND. Yet it must also be grounded in empirical evidence, for no business manager wants to think that the research on which her profits depend is made up in the research department.

The metaphor of consumers as tribes of culturally unknown people has influenced much of design research today. Hence, ethnographic field methods and other techniques used by anthropologists provide disciplined approaches for research. The goal of ethnography is to understand what is foreign to one's own world view ○30 PLOWMAN. Some have used the expression "empathetic design" to express a more ambitious goal of seeing a situation internally; that is, as potential consumers will see it [Leonard and Rayport 1997].

The goal of "informance" (and its cousins, performance ethnography and design improvisation) goes beyond understanding consumers' culture or even having an "inside" understanding of consumers. Its goal is to create, through performance, characters that can speak about their world, express informed opinions about product features, answer questions about design possibilities, and even design products. Informance is a set of techniques in which actors and/or researchers study what is known about consumers and role-play potential consumers ○41 DISHMAN, ○49 LAUREL. Informance subsumes both ethnography and empathy. It begins with ethnographic study—questioning and observing people in particular consumer segments. Researchers move on to interpreting their data through empathy: seeing situations, uses, and elements as the studied consumers would see them. The next step is informance itself: acts of pretending which transform empathy into action.

Pretending has value in many ways for design researchers. It is a way of learning. Just as children pretend to be moms, dads and firemen as a way of learning how to be adults, researchers can learn how the world works for the people they pretend to be. It is a way of changing oneself. As people can change their negative moods by pretending that they are happy, researchers can change their attitudes and see values where they would not have otherwise imagined them. Perhaps most important, pretending allows researchers to give a voice to their

understanding of consumers. These consumers become "we" rather than "they," and as such, join the design team.

Two situations especially call for informance. Design for entirely new categories of products calls for Informance because new kinds of products are particularly difficult for most people to imagine. Informance is also particularly useful with products for populations who have little in common with the designers. A product may be for a segment that is demographically remote from the designer; for example, 30-year-old designers creating products for people who are 70; or a product may be intended as "worldwide" and thus culturally remote from any individual designer.

Informance can take many forms; different forms are practical in different business situations. In his essay, Dishman describes the most elaborate form: "performance for an audience." To use these techniques, you may need to have assistance from someone who, like Dishman and Laurel, has professional training in performance. But as their examples illustrate, you can create informances using teams of researchers and designers, most of whom have no formal training. The great advantage of "performance for an audience" is that many people can be brought into the research and design process; for example, engineers who may be remote from the research process can be included in the audience and bring new insights and engineering components that improve the design.

A second kind of Informance, described by Laurel, is "design improvisation." Here there is no audience apart from the team members who are performing for each other. The advantage is that it requires less polish and probably fewer props. Sessions can also flow back and forth between improvisations and discussions of design implications and possibilities.

Informance can be part of the everyday life of design teams, and at its most casual level, it already is. Team discussions with improvised examples are an elementary form of informance. As researchers and designers discuss their potential consumers, some people will no doubt exemplify their ideas with comments about what Consumer Jane might think, and even mimic what Jane might say about a design feature. This pretense should be encouraged in team discussions. As team members bring rigor to their characterizations of consumers they have studied, they can bring consumers' voices into the meetings is a quite useful way.

In concentrating on the imaginative aspects of informance, I have not meant to neglect the importance of grounding the imaginative techniques of Informance in high-quality quantitative research. The people who are improvised must be drawn from scientifically selected samples to represent targeted consumer segments ○63 PURPURA. The idea is to allow typical consumers to say what they cannot themselves say by transforming them into characters in a performance. The power of informance lies in embracing the paradox: using a sound empirical basis as springboard for the skill of the researchers and designers to create characters.