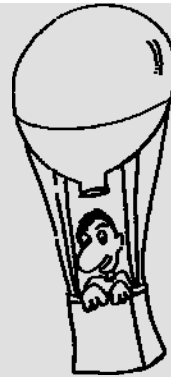


Ludic Design

an Interview with William Gaver



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Gerry Gaffney:

William Gaver is Professor of Design at Goldsmiths College at the University of London. He invented the cultural probes user research technique with colleague Tony Dunn several years ago. Originally with a background in experimental psychology, he moved from hard science to a position of placing interpretation at the heart of design, in some ways perhaps indicative of the relationship between usability and the user centred design field over the past few years. Bill, welcome to the User Experience podcast.

Bill Gaver:

Thanks, it's nice to talk to you.

Gerry:

Now, I don't want to talk at any length about cultural probes because we covered it in a previous interview. However, I do want to ask you about why you avoid interpreting the data that you gather from such activities. For example, you don't develop scenarios or personas, which are the sorts of things that we might do in an industrial setting.

Bill:

Well... I think it depends on what you mean by interpreting. We don't analyse the

data, so we don't do some of the things that I might have done when I was a psychologist, like count up the number of people who give certain types of replies or even the number of responses, nor do we try to use the replies to generate personas, because after all we've got real people that we're dealing with. And we don't really do scenarios in that context because, again, we've got real returns from real people. We don't need to kind of re-present them. They are what they are, and what I find too is that it's nice to work with the... raw materials because they force you to re-interpret them pretty much every time you look at them. ... If you do the kind of traditional job of analysis, what you're doing is interpreting your results and coming up with a new representation of what you found, and the tendency is then to design to that representation rather than to the actual data, and in a sense that puts you at a remove from the people that you were using as inspiration for your design. So we tend to just live with the results of the probes that we've got and leave them around and kind of use them in new combinations and new ways; find new meanings for them; sometimes just pick out one or two that are particularly striking and allow things to be a bit more flexible, a bit more loose.

Gerry:

I guess that's a very interesting approach because a lot of the time we're trying to get, you know, snapshots of things that we can present to business owners and the like, but certainly when people interact with the raw data it's so much more exciting.

Bill:

... You know, the probes are really flexible if they're designed well because there's lots and lots of different items that get returned, and you can sort of pile them up and look at a stack of probe returns as being a kind of portrait of a person or of a respondent or you can just pull out individual photos or individual snippets of tests or quotes or what have you. So you can use them in that way that you might use for business people of presenting one thing and allowing that to serve for or stand for or represent a lot of results or you can do something a bit more holistic with the results.

Gerry:

Can you tell us a little bit about ludic design, presumably it's based on the Latin word ludus which is generally translated as 'play' although it has I guess wider connotations than that also.

Bill:

I've been using the word ludic design. It describes some of what I'm trying to do for a while now and it is based on the Latin for play. It's also a term that's been used in design communities and elsewhere, I got it in part from the book '[Homo Ludens](#)' in which the argument is that people are characterized by play as much as by anything like thinking or tool use or what have you, and I've been inspired by the notion of designing for play because I think it offers a nice alternative to assumptions that design should be about problem solving or about functionality or about trying to ... pursue tasks in particular ways. From the point of view of play; if you want

to think about people as being characterized by play you realize that there is a huge number of activities that we pursue in everyday life that are not about achieving some external goal but are done merely for the sake of enjoyment and pleasure. I should say sort of parenthetically that by play here I don't mean game play. I don't mean joining in a set of kind of arbitrary rules to see who can win in some situation. On the contrary I mean by play something much more fluid and self-motivated so examples of play are things like, I don't know, anything from fooling round with friends and taking on imaginary roles when you're just having a chat with them to maybe starting to take over things where you stack up things to see how many things you can balance on one another before they all tumble down or taking a new walk on the way home from work just to see where you get, but also I tend to allow that category to extend to beyond the obviously playful to taking things like enjoyment of the scenery or just sort of staring out the window and wondering about how the wind is moving around the leaves and the trees and so forth. So it's a pretty broad category and I think what really ties it together in my mind is the notion of there's a bunch of ways of appreciating the world or engaging with the world that aren't goal oriented and that it's quite an interesting task to try to design for those things but it's also potentially quite culturally important to kind of recognise and appreciate those forms of activities because more and more technology and design in general is conceived of in terms of promoting task performance and that means that it conveys a view that all our lives is about doing work basically.

Gerry:

That brings us rather neatly I think to the drift table that you and your team developed which is a fascinating device if device be the right word for it. Can you tell us a little

bit about the drift table and about the inspiration behind it?

Bill:

Yes sure. The drift table is pretty simple. It's just a little coffee table, it's about a metre square, it's not very tall and on the top of it is a small porthole and if you look through that you see aerial imagery of Britain kind of slowly scrolling by and the way that the imagery moves is all controlled by the way the weight is placed on the table so if all the weight is one side of the table then it'll appear to move in that direction. There's a huge amount of imagery. We had a donation from getmapping.com of their entire database of aerial photography of England and Wales so it's about a terabyte of really high resolution imagery and that means that you can use the table to explore the landscape for hours or days; you sort of just don't repeat the experience. But we purposely designed the table to, as I was indicating before, not be to pursue any task. It's not really for anything it's just to kind of fool around with and explore with and in fact we even went so far as to make it impossible to, you know, type in the destination that you want to go to or even to go very quickly, to try to undermine the expectation that it would be for going to particular destinations. We really wanted to see what would happen if people just drifted around. The whole notion behind it was to try to build something that worked at several levels really. On the one hand it's meant to be just, on a very surface way, a kind of engaging and fun object one that would be nice to play with and I think it works pretty well on that level. But it's also at a kind of deeper level, trying to be an existence proof of the appeal of taking a different approach to developing technologies for the home. A lot of technology is built with the idea that you have to solve problems or pursue tasks and that's the kind of attitude that's developed

out of researching computation in the workplace, but if you move into the home it seems all the more important to try to look at different kinds of values you might want to support. In this case we wanted to support the value of just goofing around. So we built the table a few years ago and we've had it in people's homes for them to try and found that they engage with it in different ways and often quite intensely and we've also had it in a number of exhibitions here and it's done a good job in helping us try to make our point to a fairly general audience.

Gerry:

You showed some fascinating footage in I can't remember was it Sydney or Melbourne late last year where you had video footage of a chap who had one in his house for a while and he had rocks that he was weighing it down with and he had atlases of Britain that he was following sort of peregrinations of the table itself. It was quite fascinating.

Bill:

Yeah it's good. I mean the table... it's funny you know there's kind of an assumption that you can build a table and then add some kind of new electronic functionality to it and it still will be pretty much a table and there's truth to that but on the other hand it also became clear that he did want to navigate the table from place to place and so all of a sudden you wouldn't use it just as you would every table because every time you put something on it you were also affecting the way it travelled. So he got really sophisticated about what kind of objects he used and how he placed them on the table to kind of do what he wanted to do with it, and as you say he also tended to use a map a lot for navigation because you only have a fairly small view on the world below. You can see maybe sort of a few houses and a bit of a field or whatever, and so if you really do want to try to go

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someplace, and he took the table; he and his friends in his household would take the table on kind of extraordinarily long trips. If you want to be able to navigate it in that way then you really need a map. I should say there's a little place display on the side that shows the name of the place that sort of corresponds with the view so that gives you a clue for looking up on a map and then you have to try to identify landmarks and go from there. He was by far our most sophisticated user; I'm not nearly as good as he was at navigating the table around.

Gerry:

Now you've said that you don't consider yourself to be an artist and yet your work has been exhibited. You mentioned that the drift table for example has been in the Tate in London.

Bill:

The boundary between art and design is a really difficult and contested one and I don't really like to get into those discussions too much but I'm pretty adamant that I'm not an artist. And I should point out that the table was in the Tate Britain but it was pretty explicitly not displayed as a piece of art; it was displayed as a piece of design that kind of resonated with and expanded and extended the show that they had on at the time which was dealing with British landscapes so it definitely was... you know... it filled a certain role with that show, it gave another view of the British landscape but it was clear to the curator and we were really happy that the relationship was not seen as one of, you know, dealing with an artwork and an artist but rather a designer and design.

Gerry:

In the last few years Bill we've begun to move sort of away from the idea of interacting with electronic devices just using traditional mechanisms like the

keyboard and the mouse and the screen and so on, and I guess for me one of the exciting developments is the development of the Nintendo Wii and the movement into that whole area... Does your work tell us anything about where the trend away from the traditional input/output devices might be leading us?

Bill:

Well that's an interesting question because you know the kind of tangible interaction is not the focus of our work at all. We don't really tend to characterize our work in terms of the style of technology we use, but instead the kind of personal and cultural effects we're trying to achieve. But it does tend to be that to do the things that we want to do and to have technology live in people's lives in the ways that we'd like it to live in people's lives, you have to move off the computer on the desktop you have to move away from keyboards and mice and even often buttons and try to find different ways for there to be a kind of relationship between people and the technology so... it's like we've discovered tangible interaction from the other end just by trying to achieve the effects we want to achieve we've moved towards building technology into furniture and fittings for the home that aren't normally seen as computational.

Gerry:

Another project of yours that's relevant to this discussion I think is the history tablecloth if I'm using the right name. That reacted over a period of time to objects that were placed on it. Can you tell me a little bit about the inspiration for that and how the device fared when it was actually in use?

Bill:

Sure. As you said the history tablecloth was a kind of mat. It had electroluminescent material screen printed on it in a kind of a lacy grid pattern and it lit up under things that were left on it for a long time. The

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inspiration for that was kind of varied. It ranged from some of the probe results that we got right to... actually one of the inspirations was my parents'-in-law home in Germany which I visited you know for years and years now. I became aware at some point that there were things on various of the shelves around the home which as far as I was concerned hadn't move in all the time that I'd been visiting. It made me really aware that I think all of us or many of us have a tendency to load up surfaces in our home with things; you know, decorative items and so forth, that slowly become ignored and they just end up sitting there as part of the background without us paying much attention to them for sometimes years and so you know we wanted to try to draw attention to that - that kind of different movements and flows of movement within the home over surfaces in the home with a tablecloth. We were also in doing that kind of inspired and informed by ethnographic work done by colleagues of ours up in Nottingham, Andy Crabtree in particular, where they were looking at how information flows in the home and not just electronic information but physical paper-based information as well. They started to really highlight the role of different kinds of surfaces in the home as being places where people store and work with and display information so that was one of the things that drew our attention to the notion of tables and surfaces and shelves and so forth as being interesting places to design for.

Gerry:

And then when you actually put the tablecloth out in the field if you like, or out in somebody's home how did that turn out, what happened then?

Bill:

It was mixed results. So the way the tablecloth works is that there were industrial load sensors put under the legs of

the table and those measured the weight on each of the four legs and they used fairly simple math to figure out where objects were on it, and the whole system worked extremely well in our studio, with adjustment and so forth, but it's actually pretty tricky to get it right... The longest field trial we did was in a flat that was kind of a loft style flat in an old warehouse and the floors were a bit uneven and they were a bit springy so when people walked by they sort of bounced up and down and so forth and all of that meant that there was a bit of noise in the system so the tablecloth didn't always register when objects were put on it and actually more importantly didn't always notice when things were taken off. And what that meant was that the pattern of light on the tablecloth didn't do exactly what we said on the carton. It didn't always turn on and off depending on to when things were left on the table but it had a slightly more complicated relationship. So it kind of did what we thought it would do but it also had an element of randomness in it. We had the tablecloth in these people's homes for I think it was two, almost three months, and for a good part of it we were rushing around constantly trying to debug and fix the table but they had no notion that there was any problem at all. We didn't tell them more than we needed to about what was going on because we wanted them to approach the tablecloth as they found it so to speak and so what looked to us like a problem seemed to them to be incredibly intriguing behaviour and they really valued the tablecloth very highly not just because it was quite beautiful which they thought it was but also because it was mysterious and sort of reactive in strange ways. They described it to some guests of theirs who were kind of complaining they couldn't control it the way they would a computer or a machine; they described it as being more like a cat that you had to play with and coax, which we thought was quite lovely.

Gerry:

Tell me Bill, your work on cultural probes has been very influential and it's got... I hesitate to use the word but it's got practical applications for user research in design of web and mobile devices for example. Do you think that your work on ludic design and things like your drift table and your tablecloth can also lead to more... well, let's say business focused applications?

Bill:

Well, yeah and I think actually this cuts back to the question before about art versus design in a way. However I need to think about this. I'm watching a squirrel trying to get food out of my bird feeder and deciding whether I should rap on the window...

I think it cuts back to the argument about art versus design. One of the reasons that I prefer not to think of the work I do as art, apart from the fact that I haven't really entered into the community of art is that the kinds of work we're doing really has important things to say about how we design for people and how they want to lead their lives and when we're talking about these sort of ludic playful interactions I think that's a form of engagement that people value and should value in their lives and it could be taken on into business context and that could happen...

I mean there's a few ways to think about that, one is some of the things we do, some of the things we've made, could potentially be commercialized pretty much as is. It's not impossible to think about people going down to their local furniture shop and buying a drift table you know and it's not impossible to think that they might want to. And similarly with some of our other designs you know there could be commercial possibilities for them. It's not something we tend to explore because we tend to focus on our work as research but it's not something we ignore either.

But even more than that that kind of spirit of offering people interesting situations and resources for their own use and kind of ways that they can play and explore and put things together themselves. That's something that could inform the design of many, many kinds of projects or products and it's in fact that's a way that we want to take some of our work in the future. We've been focusing a lot on just what it means to design things that offer that kind of engagement, without worrying in a way so much about what that engagement is about what we're starting to do now is taking some of these ideas and apply them to issues that are more commonly perceived as important.

Just for example one of the things we'd like to do over the next year or two is take some of this style of interaction to designing for things that are going to raise awareness about the environment and the notion is there that we might be able to design some sort of devices or systems that would enable people to get new views on their environmental impact but the key would be to avoid being too prescriptive about how they should approach that information, so rather than create systems that constantly tell you that you need to use less energy and recycle more and so forth, we would try to point out some of these issues in a way that's fairly non-judgemental and in fact open for a kind of aesthetic appreciation.

The idea there is that we don't need systems telling us how to live and what to do. We're adults, we know the issues, we get told what to do all the time by various things but instead it's more that if we could find new ways, new perspectives on ideas and on the world around us, if we could sort of play around with the issues that surround us, we can find our own ways of leading meaningful lives, so that's the kind of thing we'd like to support with our designs.



Gerry:

Bill Gaver, thank you very much for joining me today on the User Experience podcast.

Bill:

Thank you very much.

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