

Quest for Fire, Water, Earth and Air

An interaction design bus and art installation reflecting climate change concerns through human and elemental connectedness

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ABSTRACT

The notion of travelling to open doors onto different perspectives is an antidote to living, working and socializing in spaces mediated by technologically designed artifacts. Interfaces have become ubiquitous and relationships and styles of communication have changed in keeping with this ever-present trend. The Bachelors in Technology design students, from the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, have shared their concerns through their design research problems in exactly these areas. Questions regarding water safety, food security, air quality, sewerage management, marginalisation of people with disability, cultural specificity being erased by generic digital content arose; it became clear that the fragile threads connecting the ecosystem to the human system need nurturing. From an internal landscape to an external one, these students apply themselves creatively and intellectually in order to tackle real problems proactively; to talk less and do more. To this end, a sizable art installation piece has been conceptualized and constructed which will be unveiled with an accompanying performance piece at the 13th Participatory Design Conference (PDC) in Namibia, in October 2014.

Author Keywords

Interaction design, participatory design, inter-disciplinarity, art installation, climate change, ecosystems, human connectedness.

ACM Classification Keywords

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

INTRODUCTION

The interaction design bus is a concept that offers the possibility for new perspectives by removing oneself from a zone of comfort to an unknown zone. Dietrich (2011) refers to liminal spaces as transitional spaces

where one is able to suspend preconceived ideas and be open to what the moment has to offer. The interaction design bus represents this transitional space, as it and its approximately 40 occupants make their way from Cape Town to Windhoek; co-creating workshops with communities along the way and participating in events and life moments. The journey will facilitate a documentation of ordinary people's responses and stories to climate change, during two workshop sessions. Biographical stories collected and/or filmed by students as part of responding to their research in a situated way (Lave & Wenger, 2002) will form a visual connection linking the start of the physical journey to their research journey and the final outcomes. These short vignettes will either be projected onto the art installation and/or embedded as stories on paper on the installation, with an accompanying performance piece during the exhibition. The elements and human sensoria will be connected in the performance piece to offer a crystallization of the interaction design lines engaged with on the journey to Namibia.

TIGER FISH INSTALLATION

Due to the nature of the project, namely making use of an emergent methodology (Breen, 2005) to be able to work with what is gathered during the workshops and the journey itself, not all the requirements and even outcomes are finalized at this stage of the planning process. What we have finalized are the following:

- the brief that we co-developed with the BTech design students speaks of an inter-disciplinary, participatory art installation piece, reflecting connectedness.
- the art installation piece will mostly be completed before arrival in Windhoek - only assembly needs to be done and may take some hours to complete.

The selected sketches that have been developed in the first phase are included as Figure 1 and Figure 2. The concept of a tiger fish skeleton was decided on, since the students in this group presented a rationale that resonates with issues of climate change, participatory design practices, interconnectedness, and the role of the elements in climate change.

The tiger fish (as symbol of power and survival) is found in fresh water, and water safety is under threat. One side of the skeleton represents death/decay and the other side, built up of driftwood and other found materials,

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represents life and the regenerative capacity of nature and living creatures. The skeleton features a lateral line as a 'map' of our journey, as well as providing interactive experiences with the audience. For example, they may try to follow our whole journey by playing a hotwire game, without touching the wire as this would set off an alarm. Setting off the alarm represents the frequency of species becoming extinct and our disregard for ecosystems.

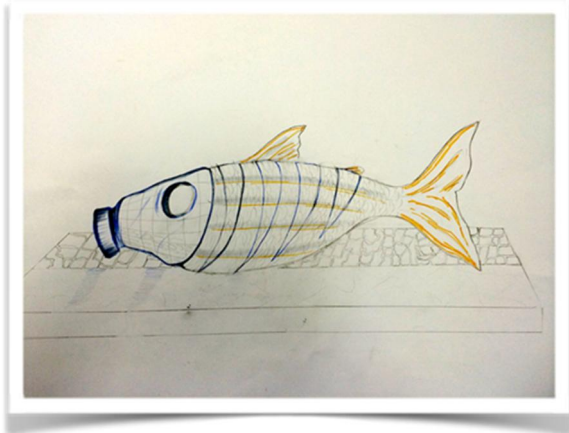


Figure 1. Life.

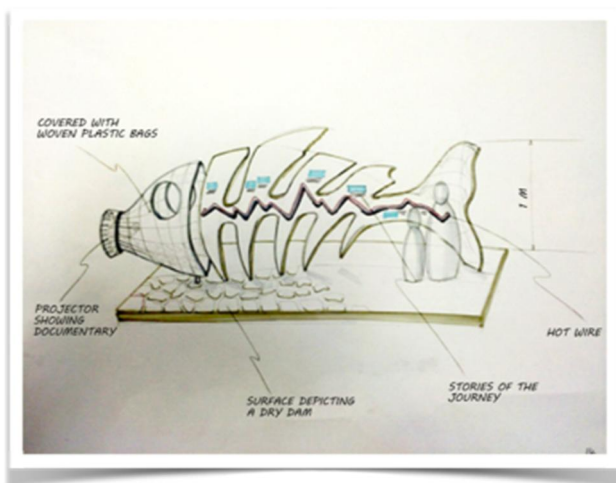


Figure 2. Decay.

As a keystone species, these fish are a critical link in the ecosystem. Overfishing and sport fishing are threatening their survival. Similarly, pollution affects their survival, and this is represented at the mouth area, which will be filled with rubbish gathered on beaches along the way. The base of the installation is a representation of cracked mud and dried up river bed environments, but in essence the piece will display elegance of line and convey a bold, easily understood message.

A performance will introduce the art installation piece, but thereafter it is hoped that audience interaction (in a variety of ways) will obviate the need for the original performance to be re-enacted. The performance will add to the interactive aspect of the art installation piece that reflects the conference theme of "Participatory Design" and interconnection. Lighting and sound form part of the unveiling of the Tiger Fish installation.

The exact, final nature of the Tiger Fish installation will only be revealed as the journey nears its completion – but

materials will be taken along – as well as gathered along the way. In keeping with the intuitive workings of the phenomenologist, scope for change and happy accidents will be allowed for in the development of the installation en route to Namibia.

DRIVING THE LINE: PROCESS

Interconnections Using the Metaphor of Line

Line is a fine tool for an artist and designer to use. Line is descriptive, expressive, elegant, bold and fulfills many functions. Lineage indicates ancestry - a linking line to the past – and linear speaks of the unbending and straight-to-the-point practices of the present. Curvilinear speaks of the rounded way in which the future unfolds, and 'driving the line' will bring together past, present and future in many ways; in the workshops, the stories harvested there and in the installation aligned to the requirements of the PDC brief will have evolved and changed through interaction with various role players and participants along the way.

The Workshops

The workshops will interrogate issues around climate change, but the approach will remain inclusive and participants' stories will be recorded only with their consent and if they so choose, anonymously documented or credited to the orator. The oral tradition remains a strong cultural practice in most parts of Africa and South Africa, with orators inclined to circle the same point (Gough & Bock, 2001), it is a slow unfolding style that requires time.

The first workshop was held in Cape Town and students and lecturers brainstormed a week long preparatory session to ensure that the best concepts were developed. This was also done with a view to promote World Design Capital (WDC) worthy projects which can then be exhibited at the Design, Development, and Research Conference (DDR) in Cape Town in September 2014. For the DDR purpose a maquette will be made and a poster will be designed about the PDC conference presentation.

The second workshop is planned with farming and local community members in Lambert's Bay, South Africa, and the third workshop is intentionally not pre-planned to leave the option open for "chance" encounters. The workshop sub-themes will focus on the elements in order to provide "hooks" for the participants to hang their

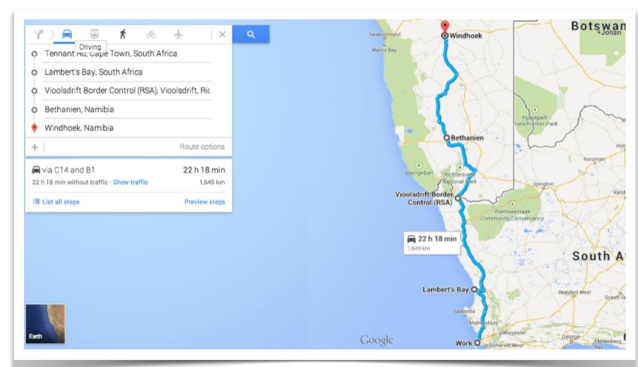


Figure 3 Driving the line.

climate change stories on. Printmaking, painting, photography, poetry, soft sculpture and traditional sculpture are envisaged as methods of story collection to turn the textual layer into a visual layer by the participants. The methods are selected using a participatory design approach.

CONCLUSIONS

The intention with *An interaction design bus and art installation reflecting climate change concerns through human and elemental connectedness* was from the start to take design out of an institutionalized setting and work with real-world relationships and encounters. The WDC motto of “Live Design - Transform Life” takes on a very practical meaning when the discourse is broadened to people who have not had encounters with design or design thinking. Harvesting stories about climate change, interacting with communities and participants, turning our own eyes inward to search the inner landscape; all of these are objectives that cannot be apprehended yet.

The Tiger Fish installation is the only concrete object that has found its form. The multi-disciplinary and multi-media approach with the flattening of hierarchic structures in the project is its unique contribution. Removing students, lecturers, and technical assistants from the comfort of the university to interact, innovate, build, and live as a creative community of practice for 10 days will undoubtedly result in a lived experience that cannot be replicated within institutional boundaries. In the interest of authentic engagement and in developing an

African design response, this project is part of a three year strategy that will investigate and upscale designerly approaches toward climate change in Southern Africa and Norway.

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