

“Empathy with Things, Assemblages and Possible Futures”

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Introduction

The emergent field of design anthropology (Gunn, Otto, & Smith, 2013; Halse, 2008) occupies an important territory with respect to theoretical and practical interventions and possibilities with respect to notions and becomings of the future. One avenue for exploring new frontiers of design anthropology is to develop more explicit methods for observing, participating and empathizing with objects (Bogost, 2012), things (A. Telier, 2011; Ingold, 2010) and assemblages as a means of engaging with alternative possible futures (DiSalvo, 2012; Dunne & Raby, 2013). For the past several decades, human-centered design has focused on using ethnographic methods to understand human needs and develop appropriate solutions. However, given the global context of complex socio-technical systems situated within the materialities (Dourish & Mazmanian, 2011; Parikka, 2012) of acute economic and environmental crisis, the notion of what it means to be human has exploded and become complicated, almost beyond our imaginations. Here, the field of science and technology studies, can provide design anthropology with rich theoretical frameworks that can help us unpack the “black box” of the human as we co-evolve—both, mentally, physically and ecologically—with emergent media and technology as well as with the larger environmental ecosystem.

Beyond the Meat Sack

At a recent conference on “Algorithms and Accountability,” at New York University in February 2015, legal scholar James Grimmelman gave a presentation on copyright and human readers vs. digital readers of text such as bots. He exclaimed, and I promptly tweeted, “Humanism and ‘the meat sack’ as a dominant perspective of thinking about technology is problematic.” This statement helps to shed light on the ways in which human-centered modes of thinking (including human-centered design) are insufficient in coping with current legal and socio-economic challenges. As such, design anthropology

must explore new philosophical perspectives in order to successfully frame problems and pose relevant questions.

When I think of emergent media and technology platforms, I consider the ways in which our bodies (as well as our pets, plants, toys, products and clothing), domestic and work spaces, architectures and infrastructures, cities and natural environments are increasingly hybrid, digital and networked. In particular, I pay close attention to developments around the ways in which values and politics are embedded in the socio-technical systems such as what are known as smart cities, the ‘internet of things’ and digital fabrication among other things. In order to grapple with these human/non-human (Haraway, 1991, 2003) juxtapositions, design anthropology must do the difficult work of translating these frameworks into meaningful methods that can reframe research questions in relevant and exciting ways.

So, what avenues might design anthropology have for empathizing with objects, things and assemblages? How might these emergent ways of listening, understanding and empathizing allow for the opening up new kinds of research questions? Can these questions allow for designers to create critically (Agre, 1997; Ratto, 2011) engaged prototypes, demonstrations and experiments (Galey & Ruecker, 2010; Stark & Paravel, 2008; Turner, 2014) that will serve to build design knowledge (Archer, 1995; Bardzell, Bardzell, & Hansen, 2015; Bardzell, 2015; Buchanan, 1985, 1992; Cross, 2001; Frayling, 1993) for the field of design anthropology?

In my research and writing, I’ve conducted ethnographic observations of urban spaces and retail environments where the explicit purpose was not to understand human patterns or behaviors but rather to observe things and imagine their “secret lives.” While this type of observation may tell us more about the social construction of these mundane infrastructures and objects, our imaginings can help to build storylines and scenarios that might be generative for designers. For example, with the ‘internet of things,’ designers have been exploring the ways in which connected products might have personalities, ethics and behaviors.

In my pedagogy, one technique that I have used to promote alternative understandings of socio-technical things is bodystorming (Schleicher, Jones, & Kachur, 2010).

Bodystorming is an embodied practice of designing through roleplaying. By taking on the roles of insects and animals and well as servers and cell towers it is possible to explore alternative perspectives on being in the world. I argue that inhabiting these roles allows for the emergence of new forms of intersectionality and can serve as the stimulus for a host of interesting questions that might open up different opportunities for designers to engage around important matters of concern (Latour & Weibel, 2005). This is one way of extending human-centered design for the anthropocene era. It is a means of decentering the human to call attention to the many other entities that deserve our empathy.

Finally, in my everyday life as a diabetic embedded with networked medical technologies, I have been exploring the notion of empathizing with a range of devices that have become part of me. Together, we collaborate and negotiate the complexities and routines of daily activities such as getting dressed, showering, sleeping and eating. While my experience in this regard is somewhat unique, it is not necessarily a difficult stretch given the many technologies that we are increasingly outfitted with including mobile phones and “quantified self” tracking devices.

Conclusion

This essay has raised the consideration that it is increasingly important for fields such as design anthropology to find ways in which to move beyond human needs and the human experience of the world, particularly in light of environmental crisis. In order to address the evolution of design methodologies around the non-human, I have offered three examples of what it means to decenter the human from my research, teaching and everyday life. Decentering the human is a means of engaging with alternative possible futures by raising provocative and imaginative questions that will allow design anthropology to generate relevant approaches to complex socio-technical dilemmas and concerns.

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