Designing for Ambivalence: Mothers, Transitional Objects and Smartphones

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Abstract

For many women, the first few years of motherhood demand complex negotiations of maternal and work related roles. The versatility of smartphones, functioning for both work and play, can add complexity to the blurring of boundaries in this period: the phone is often used for work while doing childcare, and at other times to keep children quiet or entertained. Transforming from tool into toy, it becomes an object of competition for parental attention, but equally turns the mother into a rival since its use is often shared. My research investigates how design can explore the relationship between mother, child and the smartphone, using proposals to expose the tensions brought by this device in family life.

Author Keywords

Speculative design; ambivalence; toy; tool; smartphones; transitional objects; motherhood.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous

Research Situation

I am a doctoral student in the Design Department at Goldsmiths College, University of London. My background is in product design and I have worked in

Figure 1: quick proposal *Guilt Teacup* by workshop participant Luca Alessandrini. *Photo credit Jennifer Heller.*

Figure 2: The proposals helped participants articulate ideas around the management of home and work identities. *Photo credit Jennifer Heller.*

the design industry for many years. My research has been informed by my work as Research Associate in the Family Rituals research project [23], where I could observe how design proposals can help expose latent aspects of family life.

Through speculative design proposals, my practice based PhD investigates the ambivalent attitudes towards the smartphone, experienced by mother and child, as it blurs boundaries between work and play, creating tensions. I have done pilot interviews with parents, where I presented early proposals that addressed aspects of my research, and recorded participants' reactions. Together with cultural probes [6], these have allowed me to identify the salient themes of my research. In February 2016 I carried out a design led workshop [24], using props and quick design proposals to help articulate themes related to the management of work and home identities (figures 1 and 2). In December 2016 I ran the Conversation Pieces [25] workshop sessions, where I presented experimental designs to participants, and documented the responses and discussions that emerged. I am currently working on these proposals, some of which are slightly provocative and critical of the situation I am exploring. I aim to develop some of these designs to a semi or simulated working state, and give it to a family in the Summer 2017 to live with for a short period, and document this experience through interviews.

Context and Motivation

My study focuses on mothers of pre-school children, who are the primary carers, and indirectly, their children. In this 'in between' period, when a child is still small and maternal identities begin to exist in tension with work or non-maternal identities, many mothers

create solutions to accommodate simultaneous demands, often using digital devices as childcare, though with reluctance. Bardzell proposes opportunities for HCI and design practitioners to draw on feminist standpoint theory, as it can bring clarity in the ways encounters with technologies can be considered through the subjectivities of the 'marginal' user [3]. By looking at the experiences of mothers and their young children, I hope to be able to unravel unexamined experiences and present alternative perspectives.

Much of my work is inspired by my own experience, observing that the associations mothers, fathers and children have with the digital technologies prevalent in their lives can vary according to parents' assumed roles in the family and the age of their children. Neustaedler & Sengers consider that an autobiographical design approach using personal experiences can be a great source for providing nuanced considerations of the research space [14]. The accumulated, implicit knowledge that I have collected in my experience as a designer, researcher and working mother, shape the repertoire that informs the processes and decisions in this research. However, in presenting my proposals to participants, the result is that I gradually expand onto new understandings beyond my own.

Speculative design is an established approach that explores possible scenarios and critiques established practices while allowing the emergence of new design spaces [1,5,7,20]. While drawing from such perspectives, I hope to offer the HCI community some practical approaches that explore how design propositions can give material form to complex themes and offer opportunities for debate, while exposing aspects of the impact of technology in family life.

Taking part in the CHI2017 doctoral consortium would be an invaluable opportunity to receive feedback on my design research and proposals, and to engage with a diversity of scholars.

Background

The domestic space is an arena of performance and interaction with objects, each with a significance and association with its owners' history. Many new mothers spend more time at home than before giving birth, and so are surrounded by objects that represent previous and new experiences. During this period, new maternal identities have to be accommodated to coexist alongside work roles, often put temporarily on hold. As sociologist Nippert-Eng noted, the blurring of boundaries between work and home life tends to be particularly acute for parents, predominantly when children are small, and this can be more visible in mothers [15]. In this context, the relationship with objects, particularly those previously associated with work, such as the phone, becomes more complex. Just as a grandfather clock in a home may come to stand for the family's ancestors, as Daniel Miller suggests, [13], a mobile phone, as well as digital devices such as laptops and tablets, may come to represent a connection with work, career, aspirations, or simply other non maternal roles.

The emergence of maternal identities during this period coincide with the gradual development of the child's own identity as a separate being from its mother. Ambivalence during these early years has been widely investigated by child psychologists and psychoanalysts, as it points to the complexity of the emotional landscape for both mother and child [2,16,18,21]. Toys and child objects can play a significant role during this time. Transitional objects [22] – such as security blankets or preferred soft toys, are a child's first possession, providing comfort and enabling separation when the mother is unavailable. As psychoanalyst Lisa Baraitser observes, the mother also has her own unique relation with the child's transitional object, beyond the unique and special relationship the child has developed with the object itself [2]. From a design perspective, this points to a set of affordances brought by childhood, maternal and shared objects that are distinct for mother and child: a favourite teddy bear can offer relative separation through the comfort it provides a child and through the (short) temporary freedom to be occupied elsewhere it offers the mother.

In the case of the smart phone, this affordance duality has added complexity as it blurs the boundaries between work and play. Defending boundaries may produce seemingly self-contradictory behaviours (the phone can be off limits to children, but it is often used to keep them quiet or entertained). It can also bring up ambivalence: fascination at how able they may be with the technology; mixed feelings for allowing too much screen time; guilt for using it while doing childcare [11]. Children can also feel ambivalent towards the device: as it flexibly transforms from work tool into plaything, it becomes an object of competition for parental attention, but equally turns the mother into a rival since the device is often shared. In this oscillation, it becomes a sort of transitional object for both mother and child, creating tensions and ambivalences that this research investigates through design proposals.

Research Questions

As a designer, I see fertile ground for exploring this space. The main output of my research will be my proposals (in the shape of images, designs and artefacts), the thought processes behind them, and the debates and responses they elicit about the issues that they raise. The main questions that my research will address are:

• How can designs critically explore the ambivalent attitudes towards the smartphone that mother and child experience, as it flexibly transforms from work tool into play thing?

• How can these proposals be used to provoke responses from publics about our relationship with smartphones in family life and the possibilities for design and technology to reshape the existing situations for mothers and young children?

My Approach

My research aims to use design proposals to elicit responses through the narratives that they raise. Carl Di Salvo argues that the idea that images and objects can stimulate meaningful reflection is the potential of speculative design, and that creating events that make use of artefacts and the processes behind them to engage the public give them performative qualities, helping them incorporate in the public debate [4]. Using design proposals to draw out responses from participants is an established practice in design and HCI research. Examples of this research through design [9] approach can be seen at [8,10,12,17]. In my experience, I tend to have more immediate and useful reactions to my research when I show my proposals

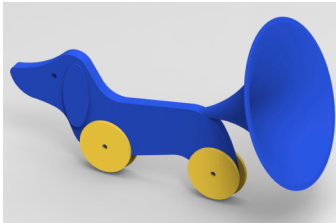Figures 3 and 4: exploring narratives through proposals

than when I speak about it without the help of visual material or models. Collaboratively analyzing the narratives that the designs bring about in the interactions that they propose is intended to increase engagement with participants, help articulate themes in my research, and spur dialogues about our relationships with smartphones in family life. Recently, I have been exploring with proposals that aim to playfully address the tensions between tool and toy, as well as exploring with the smartphone as a sort of family member or pet (figures 3 and 4), a mediator of tensions [19]. This has been a useful approach in presenting the complex, tangled themes of my research to diverse audiences.

Acknowledgements

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