

# Concepts of Stillness

Michaela Reiser, University of the West of England

## Abstract

In Western culture we place great value on the creation of commodities. As a result we emphasise the production of artefacts, but much less the quality of social interactions and user experiences we initiate. This demonstrates that we still tend to see practitioners as creators and audiences as consumers. However, users and audiences have changed, and in order to develop the more engaging modes of interaction and participation they demand, we need to critically appraise the theories and practices we teach our students and promote a more comprehensive and integral view of what constitutes design activity.

This means shifting our focus from problem solving to evaluating the quality of user experience and how to pass this on to our students. 'Stillness' allows us to focus on human interaction and creativity. It is not inactivity, but the decision to leave standard procedures and established notions of the design process behind, in order to allow for new responses to emerge.

In practice, this means revisiting our approach to process-based pedagogy and extending the range of teaching methodologies by studying recent design research, Human Computer Interface design research, as well as examples from practices not directly related to design. Adopting user-led design, collaborative evaluation and other strategies that value the responsiveness of an audience or partner will allow us to work with more open processes which will in turn promote a higher quality of social interaction. The paper concludes by outlining the benefits of adopting some of these strategies.

## Keywords

Interaction, User experience, process-based pedagogy

## Introduction

In Western culture we place great emphasis on the creation of objects. We evaluate the production and consumption of artefacts, but much less so the quality of the social interaction and individual experiences we initiate through it<sup>1</sup>. Practitioners are often portrayed as creators and audiences as consumers. Not surprisingly, undergraduate art and design students<sup>2</sup> often place much emphasis on the design and production of work, but less on understanding the qualities of the experiences they initiate or the complex social systems these are situated in.

Evaluating the user experience is often taught as an added extra, but not as a founding rationale for production. Shortcomings in students work therefore include lack of user testing, audience responses not feeding back into the production phase, neglect of long-term effects of production, or the lack of continuity and maintenance of multimedia projects. These omissions are often considered to be less grave compared to technical glitches, reduced functionality or lack of originality in the work. This malaise affects areas such as interaction design, multimedia design, media practice, product design, software design, installation art, and 3D modelling.

Especially amongst media practice students it seems there is a tendency to create work for those sectors of society they are familiar with or know through the media, but not for others they find difficult to deal with. Work is produced that echoes existing media products and aimed at a receptive consumer society. This is problematic when learning is no longer discovery and transformation, but an exercise in imitation and representation, a circular approach that only affirms the conditions for its own existence. This conserves already established identities and overlooks those currently emerging.

All of this has a detrimental effect on future professionals, because by rating these shortcomings as less important during their studies, we implicitly further the notion amongst students that this is an acceptable practice. We indicate that it is tolerable that new products have a limited lifespan, that fast or temporary fixes are viable alternatives to thoroughly evaluated solutions, and that -for aesthetic reasons perhaps- our designs do not always meet the emotional needs of our users. This feeds into the expectation that creativity and technological expertise is still the domain of designers who provide solutions rather than empower users to find solutions themselves. In promoting this thinking we affirm a status quo that is more and more detached from social reality.

Users and audiences have changed over the past decade(s): whilst multimedia technology has come to permeate more and more aspects of life and work in Western society, we now deal with more diverse user groups that have technical expertise and are willing to use it in the creation of cultural output. The increasing popularity of web sites such as Wikipedia, eBay, Youtube or Myspace that thrive on user participation illustrates this point very clearly. Conversely, systems where users perceive that their participation has little or no effect suffer from user apathy; for example, the number of young voters in the UK has steadily declined over the last decades<sup>3</sup>.

Closely linked to audience participation is their sense of presence. Undoubtedly there is a qualitative difference between those audience members who feel compelled to act or can lose themselves in play, and those who feel awkward and forced to perform a 'correct' action. According to Mantovani and Riva (1999), a sense of presence is increased when participants feel in control, when they execute a task they want to do and which they can divide into sub-tasks. It is important to leave decisions about action to the participant, to allow participants to take from the environment what they need, to proceed in the order they choose, and to provide situations where actions have a cultural meaning and value. The result of this is that one should respect the social interchanges that occur between participants or participant and reactive environment.

If we want to see more engaging ways of interaction and 'real' participation, we need to start questioning how we currently prepare future designers.

### **Designer-led processes**

The 'engineering approach' – a top down designer-led process still popular in design education - is awkward at best, as it understands design as problem solving. Here the design process is broken down into pre-production, production, post-production (or analysis – synthesis - evaluation). It is a cognitive tool that often relies on modelling an environment rather than providing the conditions for its emergence, on knowledge about users rather than knowledgeable users; and on averaged user feedback indicators such as box office numbers or hit counters rather than verbalised individual evaluation. This is problematic if we want to develop more engaging ways of interacting, because although we can determine how efficient applications work and what users do with them, it does not help us to gauge their engagement and enjoyment.

Modelled environments often hinge on methods such as cause and effect or simulation. This human-centered and mechanistic view is limited as it excludes the complex and interdependent relationships that exist between parts in a responsive system, at least some of which are unpredictable at the outset. For this reason the well-known 'Game of Life' by John Conway<sup>4</sup> for example needs to be played through to see what will happen.

Also in simulated environments every object and stimuli needs to be either pre-constructed for the user, or the parameters for their construction pre-decided. And often only those interactions that were considered as useful or meaningful cause an effect. All of this restricts users, as there is little

space for individual expression, improvisation, dialogue, chaotic behaviour and play; as effects only occur when users follow the pre-programmed rules. In order to allow for more open play and self-expression, actions without direct purpose would also need to cause an effect, which means the amount of programming required increases dramatically. It becomes an attempt to remodel the world in its complexity.

A prime example of this is the development of virtual reality experiences that represent space through Cartesian coordinate systems. Richard Coyne, Professor and Chair of Architectural Computing at the University of Edinburgh, mocks the drive of researchers and artists to ever greater representation and mathematical precision: "VR research [...] appears to be driven by the quest for greater quantity and higher quality of data input to the senses. Ignoring the constructed nature of perception suggests that a virtual reality system for a frog would be little different than one for human" (Coyne 1994, 66).

The constructed nature of perception Coyne refers to has been discussed extensively by Norretranders (1999) from a neuro-scientific view, according to whom we process most sensory stimuli non-consciously (the ratio is said to be 1.000 000 to 1), we have experiences only after the brain has created simulations from sensory data; and that only in unusual or threatening situations we employ conscious decisions. From a philosophical and psychological viewpoint it is also important to at least mention the role memory plays in interpreting experience. Previous experiences often construct a habitual scheme of references ('a worldview'), which is only questioned when a situation arises that is so new or traumatic that the framework no longer fits.

In short, the designer-led model shows great shortfalls when it comes to working with real life situations.

### **Different approaches**

Much can be learned from researchers and practitioners who look into how social systems change over time, how to value individual user experiences and how to design for open-ended play. From this we might be able to derive new teaching methods that are more capable of acknowledging users' complexities within an interactive context.

Research at the ID-StudioLab, Delft University of Technology (Overbeeke et al in Blythe, 2003) has revealed that in order to move the focus within interaction and product design from usability to 'funology' (user enjoyment), a user-led design methodology needs to be applied that involves cognition, physical experience and affect in equal parts. It concludes that a traditional art-school approach that elevates a designer's vision and ignores the experience of audience members can not provide for deeply engaging user experiences, but an approach where both designers and users work alongside as equal team members can. The research places also great emphasis on *in situ* design, where design is developed within the local context involving the people concerned.

Another strategy is a stronger integration of interviews, focus groups, direct observation, or situated participation into design education. By applying one of these methods in a 'real' context, where a particular aspect of interactivity can be explored in depth and in collaboration with a target audience group, students learn to concentrate on the social processes of interaction that are actually occurring rather than those they might have predicted. Stuart Nolan, a researcher, lecturer in multimedia design and consultant in training and change management, for example recently conducted a series of participatory design workshops involving 216 young people, aged nine to 16. In 'Building magical realms: responses to pervasive and locative media technology' he discusses their responses to existing and proposed locative and pervasive media technologies in gaming, mapping, gifting, game design, bodystorming, and collaborative storytelling activities (Nolan 2006).

In 'The taxonomy of thrill', Brendan Walker, a researcher at the Royal College of Art<sup>5</sup>, explores whether a designer can actually control the flow of emotional engagement and related feelings of its users (2005). Walker refers to Zuckerman (1994) who maintained that rather than by genetics alone, thrill seekers are influenced by their sociological environment. Novel stimuli cause both arousal and anxiety, and it depends on the character of the individual where the threshold lies (Eysenck's optimum level of stimulation theory, Hebb's optimum level of arousal theory). Thrill seekers take more risks because they need higher levels of stimuli to experience arousal, which is linked up with increased experience of pleasure (Elster 2000). Walker conducts fifty interviews based on Zuckerman's questionnaires, and analyses how respondents verbalise their emotions after experiences of thrill, giving a great insight into individual user experiences. Unfortunately, he then devises a formula ('The Walker Thrill Factor') to be used as a design tool for thrilling experiences, and with that returns to a top down design strategy.

Conducting even a small-scale qualitative research project with students requires space, time, and good preparation. However this yields more than an academic rewards, especially since the application of qualitative methods has become popular with the industry: Brendan Boyle, creative designer at IDEO for example holds weekly focus groups with children that feed directly into the development process of new toys and games (Boyle in Moggridge, 2006).

Another strategy we can adopt is to enquire more deeply into how sensory perception is said to operate, especially if we consider this as the basis for interaction. It exceeds the scope of this paper to go into cognitive science in any detail, however it is worthwhile pointing out that there are theories like the Gestalt psychology<sup>6</sup> developed by Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler, and Kurt Koffka or direct perception<sup>7</sup> by James J. Gibson that tackle perception from 'bottom up'. Without making claims for their accuracy, introducing theories like these in design teaching will help to shift the emphasis from a purely cognitive towards a sensory and physical approach to perception. In this way we can open students' thinking about perception as basis for interaction.

Another helpful approach is Gardner's (1999) list of eight personal intelligences: linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal and naturalist intelligence. In recognising that knowledge and experience are gained in a multitude of ways, we can reap many benefits: by looking beyond the restraints of skills testing in our curricula, we can help our students to apply all their intelligences and hence achieve their best potential. Instead of wanting our audiences to think like designer-engineers, we can value the various ways in which clients and audience members experience and respond to our work. By applying this attitude to the way we design and converse about design, we can learn more from our users and can develop more mindful interactions.

Although at this point it is not possible to discuss the relationships between these alternative methods in greater detail, it is worth pointing out that being introduced to a greater variety of methods will be helpful for many design students, especially towards the end of their studies. It will help to challenge the dominance of the traditional approach, increase awareness for the diversity and complexity of user groups and value different ways of thinking.

Further strategies reveal themselves when we look into creative practices that already use different intelligences, or methods that operate with the responsiveness of a partner or environment.

### **Other practices**

Non-rational design strategies as discussed by Wakkary (2005: 74) are often found in disciplines where play and physical improvisation are practiced. Butoh is a prime example for such a practice,

as it arrives at its creative output entirely via a non-cognitive approach. Butoh (from Ankoku Butoh, ‘dance of utter darkness’) is an avant-garde improvisation method that originated in Japan in the 1950’s and is now practiced worldwide. Its main focus is on working with a ‘dead body’: moving without intention, without thinking, without decision-making; the body is *being* danced (Roquet 2004).

In Butoh there are no ideal forms, no sequences or structures to learn, no analysis and synthesis to conduct, no physical ideal to aspire to, not even a cohesive training methodology. In spite of this, Butoh is capable of working with change and transformation to an extent many other practices cannot. What could we learn from this practice that might feed back into design education?

Butoh’s bottom up approach exposes future practitioners to intense experiences of physical conditions, memories, and proximity to other life forms. In this way it interlinks physical experience and affect, since processes are not broken down into thinking first and experiencing afterwards or vice versa, but are taught and experienced as a unity to such an extent that practitioners begin to ‘think with their bodies’, i.e. generate responses that bypass cognition. Butoh has remarkable similarities with the way complex generative systems operate, but is capable to exemplify how responses arise from sensation in a very practical way. Butoh also promotes a direct understanding of how interlinked one’s existence is with one’s natural and social environment, and how hierarchies between life forms are only socially constructed.

An understanding of a practice such as Butoh can be beneficial when working in collaborative situations, where many different voices need to be heard. It helps to let go of one’s original design intentions and aesthetic preferences and allow for form and content to emerge out of an equal and open dialogue. It also helps to find a way of working more comfortably with artefacts where unpredictable interactions might occur, and provides a language to describe change and transformation.

### **Stillness in Butoh**

Stillness in Western artefacts often defines absence, disappearance, or death. For example the text accompanying Camille Utterbeck’s installation ‘Luminous Flux’ declares: “Alternatively, if a participant stands still, her image will disappear, dissolving in a ghostly fashion. Motion becomes presence, and stillness absence.” (Utterbeck 2001 online)

In other cases, stillness is used to offset (inter)action: “... *Untitled (Dying Bull)* ... by Kevin Yates contain[s] no movement or obvious interactivity apart from looking. ... Despite their sharp contrast with the electronic installations, the small figurines also act as a complement with a sense of stillness and scale. The stillness reminds us of the **inactivity between interactivity**, and although diminutive, the work commands no less a reaction than the other installations. The equity of response reflects the difficulty in measuring interactivity.” (Yates online, emphasis by the author). Stillness here describes a passive body but an active and contemplative mind. This is problematic as it begins to draw a distinction between the two.

In Butoh, stillness is perceived as ‘no mind’, the cessation of wilful activity, a point of mental or physical exhaustion. This does not literally mean ‘no activity’, but an often uncomfortable breach into experiences that are out of one’s control or break social limits. Beautifully grotesque movements and absurd performances can emerge from this.

At the same time this kind of stillness increases one’s awareness of time, and problematises how existence is linked to it. This stillness is a source from which Butoh practitioners draw. Frances Barbe, choreographer and researcher at the University of Kent describes how it changed her

approach to practice: “a lot of movement is thrown away in dance, undigested by its audience, and in some cases ‘un-experienced’ by the dancers. It’s as if the dancer only exists when moving. Butoh has taught me the power of existing on the stage in stillness, and the way that can challenge a dancer’s presence and draw their audience in. Through Butoh I have come to appreciate stillness as an essential starting point for dance.” (Barbe 2002: 31) Using stillness in this way, Butoh practitioners can be responsive and active, and less limited by intentions or expectations that often surround performance making in an art historical context.

Stillness in Butoh can be beneficial for design activities and creative processes when we understand it as cessation of wilful, but nevertheless intense activity. The Butoh method of exposure to extreme situations, which requires students to immerse themselves into challenging environments for periods of time, is just one example: living through these situations, students experience how changes in location, climate, or social environments resonate through their senses. The experiences let students explore their physical limits or challenge social conventions. Logical judgment is exhausted and ‘thinking with the bodies’ begins; from this new creative responses arise intuitively.

To incorporate this into the existing art and design curriculum we would need to work with a wider definition of design that is not linked to a production of an object, but includes dynamics within social systems. Students’ observations of how creative solutions arise could be assessed through open briefs. By immersing themselves into challenging and unfamiliar environments, they could explore the qualities and constraints of these, and observe how responses emerge. “Prisoners’ Inventions”, a touring exhibition that showed how prisoners design everyday things (Temporary Services, 2005), illustrates this point quite well.

## **Conclusions**

Emerging technologies pervade more and more aspects of our lives, and users demand more engaging ways to interact with each other. In order to accommodate that, we need to rethink current standard procedures and notions, and allow for new responses to emerge.

In our teaching we need to promote a more comprehensive and integral view of what constitutes design activity. We need to shift our focus from problem solving to valuing the quality of shared experience and to convey that more successfully to our students. Whilst retaining what is positive about models such as action research, experiential learning (Kolb), or reflective creative practice (Donald Schoen), and tried and tested tools such as real client briefs, student design competitions or group work, we need to strengthen process-based pedagogy.

This can be achieved by promoting collaborative design methods and user-led design. Methods adopted from recent interaction design research and HCI research can enable us to place greater emphasis on diversity, indeterminacy, and dialogue. Other, non-design practices might provide strategies that help us to open our way of thinking and to embrace change and non-predictability. Adapting the essence of these strategies for design practice is beneficial, as it can allow us to work more comfortably with open processes and facilitate a higher quality of social interaction. As a result we might be able to value each other’s complexities, contradictions and irrational responses, especially within an interactive context.

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<sup>1</sup> A good example for this is a research report by the Arts Council of England (Fenn et al. 2005). The aim was to find out "who is attending what kinds of events and how often, what types of people take part in a range of artistic and cultural activities, and how the public feels about the arts and how they should be funded" (Fenn et al. 2005: 3). What is problematic with reports like these is the quantitative approach to attendance, participation and attitudes. Attendance was measured via ticket sales, and in the wording of the report it became clear that it was predominantly understood as passive consumption. Participation was measured as consuming art, buying art, or taking part in its production. Finally attitudes were measured through to agreeing to statements such as 'the arts play a valuable role in my life'. There was no scope for assessing the qualities of social interaction or individual experiences that were initiated through artworks.

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<sup>2</sup> This and the following statements about undergraduate students refer to observations made during my teaching involvement (1998 - 2007) on a wide range of UK Art, Media & Design courses, some of which are: BA Digital Art, BA Multimedia Design, Thames Valley University; BA Digital Media, London Metropolitan University, BA Media Practice, University of the West of England.

<sup>3</sup> "...voting behaviour may be linked to young people's attitudes. A third of those aged 18 to 24 interviewed for the 1998 British Social Attitudes Survey felt that 'everyone has an obligation to vote'; this compared with four-fifths of those aged 65 and over. Further analyses suggest that this attitude to voting held by young people may not change as they get older. According to the Young People's Social Attitudes Survey, political interest among young people was already low in 1994 and had fallen further by 1998. Over a third of young people aged 12 to 19 claimed to have no interest in politics at all in 1998, a rise of 7 percentage points since 1994. A further third had not very much interest in 1998, leaving only one in three teenagers who claimed to have an interest. Although there has also been a fall in interest among adults, they remain substantially more interested in politics than their younger counterparts." *Voting turnout at general elections: by age and gender 1970-1997: Social Trends 31*. National Statistics online  
<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/StatBase/ssdataset.asp?vlnk=3723&More=Y>

<sup>4</sup> The Game of Life is a cellular automaton. It consists of a collection of cells, which, based on a set of mathematical rules, live, die or multiply. Depending on the initial conditions laid down by the user, the cells form various patterns throughout the course of the game. An online example can be found here: <http://www.bitstorm.org/gameoflife/>

<sup>5</sup> Incidentally, this is where the UK's first MA in Interaction Design started in 1989.

<sup>6</sup> Gestalt psychology investigates into human perception of groups of objects and how we perceive *parts* of objects and form *whole* objects on the basis of these.

<sup>7</sup> According to Gibson, direct perception follows three rules: the environment contains all of the sensory information needed to form an accurate perception; perception is immediate and spontaneous; and perception and action are inextricably linked.

### **Biographical notes**

Michaela Reiser is a Senior Lecturer in Interactive Multimedia at the University of the West of England, UK. Her research interests include sound, performance and digital media, with a strong focus on new media performance. She is currently developing work called 'Excitations', which focuses on sonifying subtle physiological processes of a performer's body. Using biofeedback sensors and electro-acoustic signal processing, she measures blood flow and stress levels and makes this audible. A playful dialogue emerges between performer and responsive system. New media performance is also the focus of Michaela's theoretical research, and she presented related papers at a range of major conferences. She recently acted as a key organiser of 'Mindplay', a conference on digital media theory, culture, practice and play, held in January 2006 at London Metropolitan University ([www.mindplay.org.uk](http://www.mindplay.org.uk)), and as guest editor of a related issue of Digital Creativity Journal (Routledge, Vol 17 No 3).