PLAY PROBES - AS A PRODUCTIVE SPACE AND SOURCE FOR INFORMATION

Vibeke SJØVOLL and Tore GULDEN
Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences

ABSTRACT

Playful behaviour involves exploring, questioning, risk-taking, altering and mastering an activity. Thus, playful behaviour may elicit new thoughts and actions. This paper explores how such thoughts and actions can be elicited when gathering research data by gamified design probes. A close up investigation of product design student's use of play and game elements as part of their data-gathering makes the origin for the study. This practice, which is close to what is known as gamification differs from it by that the focus is on playfulness as a productive attitude for the respondents that makes the emphasis of the activity rather than the establishing of game structures and rewarding systems. The study suggests that gamified design probes opens up for a playful and autonomous environment for data-gathering which involve learning about individual and shared social practices.

Keywords: Design probes, play, game, constraints. data-gathering.

1 INTRODUCTION

Designers today create experiences by products. In order to do so they practice in increasingly complex situations. To deal with such complexity designers and researchers often make use of user oriented design methods in which involve holistic or systems oriented thinking. User oriented design take in methods meant to increase understanding of "human phenomenon and exploring design opportunities" [1]. Researchers within the area of user oriented design have challenged the classic methods to activate people to talk by way of asking questions or having a dialogue, since these are restricted to the creative and emphatic skills of the observer or interviewee in relation to the formulated questions before or during communication. Typically, a respondent would answer questions and not suggest alternative ones, and possible dimensions are lost for the researcher. To answer to this method gap the concept of design probes has been developed [1]. Design probes may involve the activation of others to perform self-documentation, challenge or provoke imagination, increase empathy for people in different situations in order to design better experiences. Accordingly, the function of these probes compare to functions of gamification which can be understood as stimulated behaviour by game dynamics [2]. Game dynamics may consist of rules, contest, challenge, and mastery among others.

This study will emphasize on design probers that motivate respondents to imagine, explore and cooperate, a design probe known as cultural probe [1]. The methods typically used by cultural probing thus stimulate thinking and considerations about reasons for happenings and activity and often they contain assignments that involve exercises. Thus, a design probe establish a situation of objectivity as in remoteness to the interviewee and partly independent thinking for the respondent. However, the degree of these two dimensions of autonomous and independent thinking can be increased. This article explores how a playful attitude elicited by design probers can increase the autonomy by the respondent and following increase the richness of the data and objectivity of the documentation that a design probe can produce.

2 METHOD

This research is based on a case study, which comprise the investigation of design probes as means for getting information. Two design projects by master students in product design education with emphasis on game dynamics in design, made the empirical data. These projects were analyzed through theory on design probers, play and gamification. The theory brought forth the key factors:

transgressive behaviour, mystery/curiosity, mastery, mental challenge, narrative, novelty and flow, typologies which the student projects were discussed up against [3, 4].

3 PROBES

Tuula Mattelmaki who has done considerable research on design probes suggests four reasons for probing, these are. Firstly, to *inspire* and further give designers a space for creativity by a holistic approach through an understanding of the context. Secondly, probes can be used in order to find *information* before a subject, intended product or aim is established [1]. Thirdly, design probes may support *user participation* in "information-gathering, expressions of needs and dreams and design" problems " [1] and Fourthly, probes may serve as *agents of dialogues* between designers, researchers, stakeholders among others. Design probes may for example consist of a kit with activating components such as assignments and exercises in addition to documentation equipment like specially tailored notebooks and cameras. Thus, design probes activates users to "record their experiences as well as express their thoughts and ideas" by se*lf-documentation* [1] and further to "record their daily lives including social, aesthetic and cultural environment, needs, feeling, values and attitudes" by looking at *"personal context and perceptions"* and to experiment and explore [1].

User involvement by probing thus involve documentation, participation, and dialogue- activations not easy to elicit in a free and relaxed manner. In order to motivate for increased autonomous and stimulating processes of information gathering by probing the activation should be meaningful and playful [1]. Therefore, we suggest an additional typology of probing namely play probing.

4 PLAYFULNESS VS. GAMIFICATION

Much has already been written on the potential and use of game structures to support co-design processes and interaction between different disciplines and user involvement. Gamification which can be understood as "the use of game design elements in non-game contexts" [5] builds on behaviour psychology. Thus, gamification does not necessarily lead to concepts or systems that motivate playful behaviour. On the contrary, the concept of gamification is criticized for applying psychology insight to cynically exploit people by coding behaviour [2, 5-7].

On the other hand the spirit of play enable people to take risks and to bear uncertainty as part of the process, a situation that is often desired in design processes. Such spirit facilitate a productivity of play which makes the challenging balancing act that gamification wants to benefit from. However a playful attitude is fragile and is characterized by be being autotelic, being its own reward and that it often tends to break when the activity becomes goal driven (4). Huizinga used the term "the magic circle" to explain the protected and confined space of autonomy in which play exists [8]. Thus, people may experiment, challenge, explore and provoke as part of play when the context of play is defined outside the real world. Play thus represent individual intuitive behaviour and elaborate thinking beyond experience or a priori. Furthermore, play involves the inclusion of *another* (like your mother or another player). Thus, not only acting out one's own choices but also relinquishing oneself to the play of the game can open up to a new sort of freedom [9]. The two following cases are examples of such invitation to play through design probes.

5 CASES

5.1 The experience of being an asylum seeker

This is an ongoing service design project that concerns designing new solutions and systems for asylum seekers. In the insight phase of the project the two students have decided on using design probes for data-gathering due to cultural, language, and hierarchic situations, in addition to get information untainted by their own fore understandings and the possible expectations for giving correct answers by the respondents. The students ended up with a game-probe which is similar to an empty version of the game Snakes and Ladders (Picture 1). The idea behind this probe is for the asylum seekers to fill in the empty explanations for why you gain or lose your position in the game. Thus, the asylum seekers will fill in negative, emotional, relational, positive, happy etc. reasons for why the game proceeds as it does. This way the asylum seekers will possibly fill in the information while play, in discussion with others with a playful attitude and thus remote and partly liberated from an interview situation.
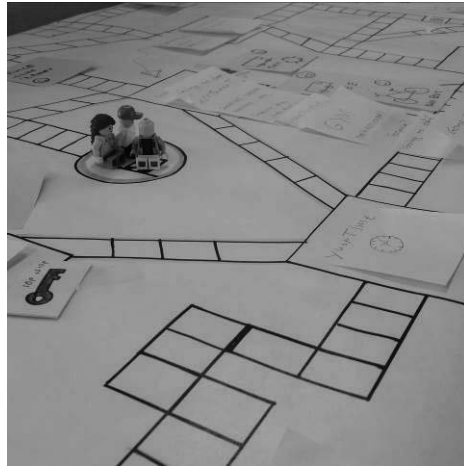
Figure 1. Game-probe on a template similar to Snakes and Ladders, by Kristin Gudmundsen Hvalbye and Sandra Mailen Elvebakken Myrland

5.2 Bicycle ramps

The other project is a guerrilla design intervention by the establishing of small Rampete Ramps (rampete: which mean disobedient) for bicyclers in Oslo (Picture 2-5). The projects goals include bringing awareness about unsuitable bicycling conditions in Oslo, marketing of the particular students' own bicycle shop- and repairs café but also bringing about some fun in the city by possible increased bicycling, in different and new places as well as comply with safety issues. The ramps are placed by the pavement edge so that they ease the climb from the street- to the pavement level. The concept comprises game elements by rules such as if you've seen them all (the ramps) you get a free coffee. In addition, the ramps can elicit playful attitude, mastery and acrobatic activity. The concept also invites users to make their own ramp as a DIY project. The user is solely involved thus out of own needs, desire, curiosity or playful behaviour. Accordingly, the data gathering in this project will be done by observing use of design probes.
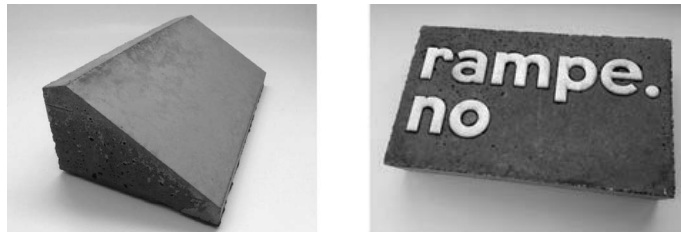

Figure 2. Rampete Ramps, concrete moulded with a relief link to the web site that explains the function

Figure 3. Rampete Ramps in use

Figure 4. APP which explains Rampete Ramps and give additional stimuli for use and further development

Figure 5. Priming and information posters for Rampete Ramps by James Duncan Lowley

6 DISCUSSION

Both probes are still in a developing phase. Yet it is interesting to analyze the two probe concepts on a theoretical level in order to discuss or exemplify how one can develop probes that engender information through playful and thus own initiated behaviour. The two cases show different examples of play probes, a term which implies that they invite playful attitude, represent rules of behaviour, represent conflicting interests, challenge cognitively and physically and may stimulate practice and mastery, individually or collectively. The bicycle ramp take in some elements from gamification theory by the establishing of a possible reward by the opportunity of receiving a possible free coffee. However, the system provides the possibility to actually win a real coffee, thus the reward is not symbolic and subsequently the main activating feature does not seem to be based on mere gamification principles but a personal will to interact.

In light of theory, it seems that playprobes can elicit playful behaviour, when experienced as free, fun, and possibly be constructive for all partakers as it enables a playful attitude. That is, the play probe may lead to challenging the game itself, creative attitude, and mastery among others. Subsequently these actions serve as useful to collect information with little influence by the designer or researcher.

6.1 Play probes as a tool for data-gathering
The probe made to investigate the experience of being asylum seekers invites to partly create and play a game. The probe thus engenders textual information as the partakers fills out of the explanations for the rules in the game, and by a subsequently observation of playing the personalized game.
The guerilla probe Rampete Ramps stimulate action by an interference or provocation in societal civic settings, typical for a cultural probe. However due to the playful element that the play probes elicit, the users themselves may choose to take part in *the game* by themselves without knowing that the ramps make part of an information gathering situation and serve to give basis for empirical data by others observing them playing and by possible additional post interviews. Accordingly, in both situations the partakers produce information without this being the main objective for their activity.

6.2 Productive play
The probes in this article make good examples of how one can implement game and play elements and further that such elements may lead to constructive and productive play [2]. Play probes thus may serve to represent a feature of the magic circle where the partakers involved experience a free space to play within which they may question and challenge, create and alter and following give new problems, needs and insights for the designers and researchers to study. We suggest that although play probes build on game design elements by for example the establishing of experiences such as winning, conflict, cognitive challenges etc. they are dependent on intrinsic motivation like playful attitude, flow, and mastery to be motivating. Thus, when the gamification features are used in a way that opens up for a playful attitude, play probes may provoke behaviour which balance on the edge of a playfulness - productivity paradox by eliciting motivation and experienced autonomy and following productive play.

7   PLAYFULNESS AS A PRODUCTIVE SPACE BY PLAY PROBES
Gamified design probes stimulate playful activity by the introduction of engaging elements that serve to release the respondent from a formal setting and partly defined behaviour. Furthermore, the respondent is motivated to engage others in the data gathering process engendered by playing or gaming and subsequently stimulated to create an atmosphere of ease and exploration. We suggest that such stimulated contexts of information gathering represent collective and individual agency that is experienced as subjective from the respondent's side and more important that such collective thinking and acting leads to shared social practices and considerations in addition to the attention toward individual preferences. Thus the agency elicited by gamified probes reveals the respondent from conformity by that they can produce own questions, contexts, and outcomes of play. Such behaviour may lead to the sharing of thoughts, imaginative and wishful thinking, maybe even expressive thoughts without considering what may be seen as truth or factual information. Accordingly, this research suggests that game based design probes or *play probes* opens up for a playful and autonomous environment for data-gathering which involve learning about individual and shared social practices.

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