
user experience, an experience

this article originally appeared on Abitare Salone magazine in April 2001.

As a practitioner in the field of interactive product development I always look for updated content on User Experience, Information and Interaction design, Graphic and Product design.

Most of these disciplines, a few extremely recent, involve a complex mix of skills and competences, with deliverables that are often hard if not impossible to compare.

As **Marc Rettig** says in his notes from the 1999 Santa Fe AIGA Advance Conference:

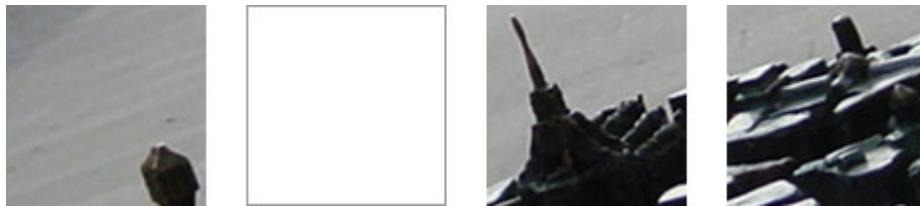
*"We don't have a name for this field yet.
The terms interface and interaction design are too narrow to contain the scope of what needs to be addressed by new designers.
Think of the hierarchy of contexts, from broad to narrow: experience, interaction, interface. While the useful-usable-desirable measure applies at all levels it is less adequate as you go up the hierarchy."*

I have lately stumbled onto what I consider a good example of a compelling User Experience that also happens to be, among other things, a fascinating blend of Information, Graphic and Product design. This is an account of that moment.

It is also an attempt at defining what User Experience is about.

The story

It's 11 PM, late September, and I am walking in the heart of Milano, Corso Vittorio Emanuele, close to where it joins Piazza San Babila. My attention, focused on the entrance to the Metro and on getting home at the end of a long day, shifts to an object I have never noticed before on the left-hand side of the street. A closer look reveals a large 3D map of downtown Milano, cast in bronze with clear artistic intent. The Duomo (the cathedral of Milano) and nearby buildings are represented as roughly shaped but still recognizable blocks. The golden gleam of frequently touched parts shows that quite a few people stop here daily, attracted by the object.



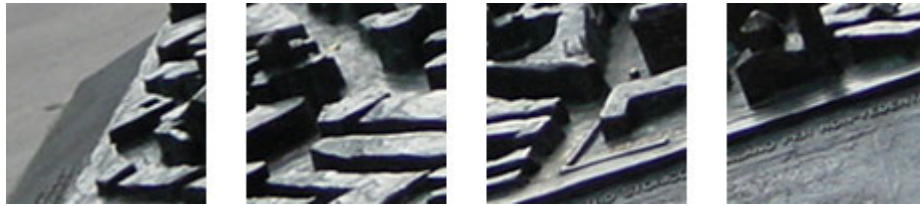
As I look up at the not too distant Duomo I cannot help but notice the

cunning similarity between the brightly illuminated Madonnina (Holy Mary) statue at its top and the rubbed-clean shining tip of the highest spire on the statue.

This triggers a "where am I" chain of thoughts as my eyes start scanning the surroundings to map them to locations on the statue.

My mind wanders as the birds-eye view I am now enjoying suddenly sheds light on spatial relationships between the various streets. I did not know the office was so close to...what piazza (square) is that now?

A body shift suddenly allows light from my back to illuminate the sculpture better and I can now detect small dots lining the streets of the sculpture. It's Braille.



The barely visible mounds slowly become evident, layering with data the art piece.

This discovery triggers new emotions, it's as if I have seen the sculpture anew. It also makes more, no, different sense now. What has been so far an emotional (aesthetic) and sensorial (kinesthetic) experience now has a functional and rational component as well. Overcoming the feeling of uneasiness that comes from "pretending to be blind" when I am not I close my eyes and try to make tactile sense of the sculpture.

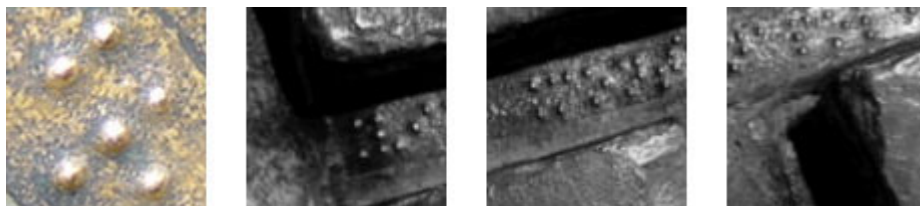
The street sounds engulf me as they come and go without any visual forewarning.

It is funny how turning one sense off has made me immediately more aware of the other ones. It feels as if the background has suddenly become the foreground.

It is yet another world, another layer of experience that unfolds under my clumsy hands.

I search for the Duomo first, its pointed spires clearly distinguishable from anything else I might encounter in my exploration. My fingers run the length of the now Lilliputian bronze streets, looking for the tiny mounds, failing to find them.

I mentally swing from trying to detect where I am in my tactile walk to trying to guess where the Braille info is to trying to make sense of it.



I am amazed at my inability to even feel the bumps that dot the sculpture. I am even more amazed at my inability to map my position as soon as I move a few centimeters away from the comforting small spires of the now invisible bronze Duomo.

It is disconcerting, my body IS my hands now. I am where my fingers touch.

Voices. Very near. English, American English.

I open my eyes.

I am back, but back where? Yes, late night, Milano. Two smiling tourists close to me, it takes a second or two.

I unconsciously take a step back, it has been a deeply emotional experience. It seems I need physical distance to achieve mental distance as well.

I am back where I was, what now, ten minutes ago, the Metro, so close. Home next.

I turn to see the light from the Duomo, the real one, disappearing around the curve the street makes where it joins the nearby piazza.

I re-focus on my original task but things have slightly changed.

I am seeing, feeling the place differently, it's as if the experience has changed the space around me, it feels now thicker so to speak.

My perception of it has changed.

I am more aware of what blind people will make out of their walks and how different our experiences are of exactly the same space and time.

I resume my walk, mind spinning with the first ideas that now populate this very paper.

So this is it, the full story, hopefully not too boring.

A few considerations

Why did I feel that it was worthwhile to take the time to put my thoughts and feelings into words and let them flow through my keyboard to your screens?

Well, because the story above it's what I think we should all strive for when we think about Information, Interaction, Graphic and Product design and how they must come together to create a holistic, compelling User Experience.

Let's start with a few definitions.

I will here use the terms design, designer and interaction in their broadest sense, as in design of artifacts, any visual or physical man-made object meant to be used by a human being. This definition encompasses graphical as well as product as well as interactive product design deliverables, artifacts.

At this point in time it is still quite difficult to define what a compelling User Experience is.

Overall we can agree with **Razorfish** that:

*A user experience is everything the user feels and observes when interacting with a product or service, in any medium, over time.
User Experience is The Brand in Action.*

I think this is a very valid definition but it does not speak about the qualities that the User Experience has to have to make it compelling, useful, usable and desirable.

That said then what is my view on the matter?

First of all I would like to make a distinction between designing experience and designing for experience.

In agreement with the guys at [SonicRim](#) I admit I believe there's only so much a designer can and should do.

Borrowing some ideas from [Brenda Laurel](#) I think we should see ourselves as skilled theatre play-writers/directors who write the plot and "design" everything that is needed for the piece to take place but know they cannot control what the actors will really say or do on stage.

My story here is fairly exemplary.

The designer of the statue, Giuliana Ranghieri, created an artifact for people to interact with.

Users, just like I did, will carry with them their own potential, knowledge and cognitive "baggage", dare I say their mental models. These differences and similarities will shape and dictate what they'll make of the object and the experience.

It is definitely true that by adhering to the mantra "know your users" and given a very specific context of use skilled designers can create artifacts that make it easier for users to have a certain experience.

It is also true though that the more we create "forced paths" to achieve our own specific end the more people will feel constrained and uncomfortable.

Again we should write the play, set the props and turn the lights on, not whisper into the actor's ear what he/she needs to say and do at all times.

User Experience, a definition

I believe naming something is a way to know it, so when I think about User Experience I cannot but consider the two terms: one is user and the other happens to be, you guessed it, experience.

The first term tells us we are looking at a human being interacting with an artifact in a context of use.

To explain the second term I am going to resort to our good friend, the dictionary. According to the online version of the [Merriam-Webster](#) experience is:

1 a : direct observation of or participation in events as a basis of knowledge

b : the fact or state of having been affected by or gained knowledge through direct observation or participation

2 : practical knowledge, skill, or practice derived from direct observation of or participation in events or in a particular activity

3 a : the conscious events that make up an individual life b : the events that make up the conscious past of a community or nation or mankind generally

4 : something personally encountered, undergone, or lived through

5 : the act or process of directly perceiving events or reality

All of the above brings me to say that a compelling User Experience can be defined as:

"The rational and emotional interaction with an artifact in a given context of use that allows human beings to acquire knowledge and changes the way they think in/about that context."

If this is true, designing for experience is not only about creating usable, useful and desirable products but it is about changing the way people perceive reality and relate to it. To change their mental models. This is in itself a quite humbling if not downright frightening task/goal. At the same time I believe it is also what each designer dreams of: changing people's lives, hopefully for the better. I personally embrace this goal wholeheartedly.

Needles to say to achieve the goal above a thorough understanding of users, their needs, behaviors, desires and dreams is not only required, it's crucial, period.

Back to the story

So does the sculpture in my story meet the hypothesis above?

Let's look first at the 3 stages identified by the **Doblin Group** that characterize compelling User Experiences:

1. Attraction (it calls to you)
2. Engagement (you forget time)
3. Extension (you want to tell others about it, you want to relive it).

You can find these stages in my story.

The sculpture made me divert from my previous goal (going home) by being compelling in nature. The heavy handling of most surfaces on the sculpture shows the fact that it is not only about me and my being fascinated with art".

During my tactile exploration I was drawn into the experience to the point that it took people approaching the sculpture and talking loudly close to me to have me mentally "come back" to where I was. I did forget time and it was a pleasant feeling.

I am indeed "telling my friends about it" (you) and every time I walk through that street I end up stopping to check the sculpture.

Now on onto my very personal view on User Experience. Did it change the way I think? Did it allow me to acquire knowledge?

The answer to both these questions is definitely yes, I have been enriched by the experience and it has changed in subtle ways my relationship with the space around our Milano office. I have been exposed to the way other people share our common space but with a totally different perspective and this has changed my perception not only of the space itself but also that of those other users.

Were the sculpture and the User Experience it enables usable, useful, desirable? Yes.

I could imagine it being even more useful and usable for a blind person but I think the power of it is that it acts as a bridge between the two worlds. What is specific to this case is that the information enclosed in the sculpture has the potential to open the mind of the user on another user's world.

The artifact, in this case the sculpture, acts as a catalyst, an enabler for the experience to take place, it acquires a power that can be exploited by the user to reshape his/her perception of the world.

How Information design plays a role and why it's important

The sculpture acts as a perfect blend of design and information. Multi-modal information.

The mile-high view the user enjoys while acting on the sculpture changes and augments the user perception of the very physical space that surrounds him/her.

Different users can also appreciate it from very different perspectives, purely functional (a map) or esthetical (a sculpture). The more factual information is in this case geared at a very specific user group but acquires new dimensions when experienced by another one. It probably has more functional qualities for the first and emotional qualities for the second.

I believe though that the magic lies in the fuzzy area where art and function meet, where the various elements act in synergy to create a whole that is bigger than the sum of the parts. It is exactly there that User Experience actually takes place.

A 3D experience and why it is so powerful

The sculpture is made to appeal to the senses and to be touched. This multi-sensorial experience provides a level of involvement that I believe no 2D artifact can match.



I have lately asked myself why the Product design world has faced User Experience-related issues much sooner and has already created a body of knowledge on the topic.

I have come to believe that the very simple reason is that physical artifacts cannot NOT consider the role of the context in their use as they must relate to it in a 1:1 scale.

I also think the current focus on User Experience in the web world has been driven by mobile devices and by the fact that the context of use in their case dictates new rules to exploit their interactive potential. Rules that are closer to the 3D world of Product design.

Checking e-mail while traveling in a bus introduces not only new functional problems (how to do so efficiently), it turns this activity into a potentially social event.

New positioning-enabled devices are starting to relate the information we access to where we are, in this way not unlike the sculpture in my story. The next step will come when our tools will be aware of who we are with and maybe even know how we feel and act accordingly.

The idea of context in this case is not only that of physical space, but also social and emotional context.

This has been so far only relatively important for screen-based artifacts. Up to now they have been mostly used in a controlled environment: sitting at a desk in a closed space, usually alone.

In the useful-usable-desirable triad the focus has been mostly on the first two components, but I strongly believe it is the third one that holds the greatest potential to provide compelling User Experiences.

Just ask yourself: why can a deeply emotional experience change our life from one moment to the next? Why do human beings develop a bond with objects such as pictures or jewels? Has it ever happened with software, even videogames?

How we will layer with data the physical world is the problem designers will face in the immediate future.

Conclusions

I hope this brief dissertation has kept you intrigued and has provided food for thought. We are at the very beginning of a period of convergence among the various design disciplines. Artifacts of different nature are merging and we need to create a new vocabulary that will bridge the physical and data world.

It is an exciting time and place to be.

I am dreaming of a world where the sculpture in my story will have a digital layer as well, that will allow blind people to find it easily through their Personal Location Tool. It will still fulfill its visual and tactile esthetic purpose but touching it will also upload information from the sculpture to the user's Personal Assistant Tools and will allow him/her to leave a message for others to access. It will record not only their words but images and sounds as well, acting as an experience beacon for visually able and impaired users alike.

I am dreaming of a world where we will be surrounded by beautiful, functional, digital objects that will fit seamlessly in our life and enrich and simplify it.

For further information about this article and/or the author please contact:

fabio sergio

via alla chiesa 5 | 21025 comerio | italy

e-mail: fabiosergio@freegorifero.com

web: <http://www.freegorifero.com>
