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Designing Experiences

May 17, 2012 | Todd Barsanti |



In *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*, Douglas Coupland talks about **takeaways**; moments which define “what it’s like to be alive on this planet.” (Coupland, 1991) As they are described, takeaways are not things that you can purchase or plan, rather, they are those moments that seem to happen serendipitously or naturally, and they stay with you, and define you, and *prove that you’re alive*. While Coupland never envisioned takeaways as something to be constructed or planned out, his recognition of such moments is profound.

Generation X was written at a time when we as a culture were just beginning to understand the implications of our digital and technological advancements. It was directed at, and written about a generation of young adults who were struggling with their own place in the world and gave them a name that is still widely accepted 20 years later. The young adults described in *Generation X* became known as **slackers**, people without **purpose** or **drive** in a career-oriented society that put an emphasis on success and monetary gain. A society that defined happiness as something that could only be achieved through the possession and ownership of bigger, brighter, faster, newer *things*. A society not unlike the one we still find ourselves a part of today.

But the message of *Generation X* was lost in Coupland’s wonderfully constructed characters. It is a seminal piece of fiction for western society, but the image we have been left with, is the personalities of the characters described, not the exposition of the culture and society which helped shape them.

The concept of takeaways is a response to the emphasis placed upon material and monetary gain. It is a crying out for an emphasis on experience, not possessions. It is a yearning for simpler times, when happiness could be found in a moment of happenstance, not sought or required through the accumulation of personal property.

But things are not likely to change any time soon.

We as a society are fully engrained in systems that are defined by the technological advances of the past. And rightly so! The number of medical, scientific, mechanical and hi-tech advancements that have improved life and increased the safety of our world in the past 100 years are too numerous to list. It is not reasonable to ask people to revert to simpler times or outdated modes of interacting with their environment. What may be reasonable is to ask the people who invent, design, and manufacture the products that we use, to do so in a more responsible manner.

In *The Natural Alien: Humankind and Environment*, Neil Evernden writes a chapter dedicated to returning to experiences. He writes of *fields of care* and that “being such a field means more than being a body; it means being-in-the-world, and it also implies a different sense of environment.” (Evernden, 1993) Evernden writes about Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a French philosopher (1908-1961) interested in phenomenology and “the relations of consciousness and nature.” Describing Merleau-Ponty’s philosophies, Evernden writes that “we must try to move beyond the experience closest to us, that of the body, and consider too the experience of world and earth.” Evernden describes phenomenology as “a kind of deliberate naïvety through which it is impossible to encounter a world unencumbered with presuppositions... Phenomenology requires a return to the things themselves, to a world that precedes knowledge and yet is basic to it.” (Evernden, 1993)

David Abram continues in his chapter, *Earth in Eclipse*, from *Merleau-Ponty and Environmental Philosophy*:

The taken-for-granted world of which I speak is, of course, none other than the world we directly experience with our unaided senses—the realm of scents, tastes, and textures in which we are sensorially immersed. Long derided by our religious traditions as a fallen and sinful dimension, continually marginalized by scientific discourse as a secondary, derivative, and hence ultimately inconsequential zone—how shall we characterize the sensuous world? It is the inexhaustible field of our unmediated experience, the very realm in which you now sit or recline. (Cataldi, Hamrick, & Bigwood, 2007)

Later, Abram concludes, “Sadly, it is also the world we have most thoroughly forsaken.”

In *In The Bubble*, John Thackara also quotes Merleau-Ponty in *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1962): “The body is our general medium for having a world; sight and movement are specific ways of entering into relationships with objects.” (Thackara, 2005) Thackara adds that for Merleau-Ponty, being witness to something, a product or a system, is not necessarily interacting with it. Phenomenology requires that all of the receiver’s senses be taken into account. That it is the entire physical environment that must be considered and attended to.

From the perspective of a designer, and more specifically a design educator, this poses an interesting challenge. What if designers could tap into Abram’s taken-for-granted world? What if the relationships we have with objects also allowed us to focus on the environment within which we happen to find ourselves—or at the very least, allow us more time to *not* focus on the object? If the elements of a superior experience are knowable and perhaps even reproducible, then are these moments designable?

I’m not suggesting that meaningful experiences can only be had when someone else designs a system for us. We are surrounded by examples of corporations trying to manipulate our desires and create bubbles within which external stimuli are controlled to the point where there is no room for interpretation. From basic examples of a print advertising, all the way up to Disney World, we’ve become quite adept at tapping into desired emotive responses.

But what if we could begin to instill in our young designers the importance of the experience? That the communications, products and services that we create and put out into the world can have more than one purpose. That the functionality should address more than its primary task, but also be aware of the environment within which it exists. To do this, designers will need to understand the relationships that we have with our objects. That our experiences and focus can, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, move away from us and into the surrounding environment.

If we can create a shift, where there is less focus on the physical object that we are interacting with, and more of an understanding of the environment within which our experiences are occurring, then perhaps we can also begin to shift away from a culture that attempts to find happiness in the purchases we make and the products we surround ourselves with. Through this interaction with our environments—through our experiences—perhaps we can begin to build more sympathy and care for the world that we interact with.

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