



BULLETIN: AN INTERACTIVE PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the process of designing an interactive digital space. Aiming to facilitate growth and connection within the Vancouver local music scene, the resulting project is a user-centred web space named Bulletin that enables interaction between event planners, artists and audience members. The importance of co-creation in the developmental and end stages of this project is explored.

Over the course of one semester at Emily Carr University of Art + Design, our communication design class was asked to conceive, research, prepare, ideate, refine and implement an interactive project that could take the form of any screen-based interaction. Supervised by Tak Yukawa and Don Williams, this project pushed us to think about changing users' experiences in a way that would create positive repercussions in their community. My project, Bulletin, aimed to create interactions within Vancouver's local music scene and enable that scene to grow in digital and physical environments (Figure 1).

The need for co-creation at all stages of the design process is a welcome and necessary change in design. By working with users and embracing their creativity and input, designers can facilitate fulfilling and positive interactions. C.K. Prahalad and V. Ramaswmy proposed in 2004 that "the meaning of value and the process of value creation are rapidly shifting from a product- and firm-centric view to personalized consumer experiences. Informed, networked, empowered and active consumers are increasingly co-creating value with the firm." [6] By opening up design to all participants, designers encourage users to infuse the project with personal and community values, creating a richer, more defining experience.

As I developed my own interaction project, my design practice became more flexible and open to input, which was then reflected in my design's purposes and function. By embracing the creativity of my peers and the populous, my design transformed from a passive experience to an active experience.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Focusing on local music culture, I wanted to explore the ways I could create an interactive experience that would help make the Vancouver music scene more accessible and vibrant. Despite Vancouver's reputation as one of the world's most livable cities, many feel that the city can be lonely, isolating and uninviting. [5] These feelings can extend to Vancouver's local music culture, which is full of outstanding bands and venues, but which can also feel insular and difficult to access. By having a space where local artists, venues and audience members can interact with one another, the music scene can become more accessible and Vancouver's unique culture can emerge and grow.

METHODOLOGY

EMBRACING THE FUZZY END. While my goals for this project remained consistent throughout the process, its form and function underwent many changes and evolutions. The first iteration was a standard event website that would highlight prices, so visitors would be able to find activities within their budget. This version of the project focused on the fact that Vancouver is one of



FIGURE 1. Bulletin merges the visual language of physical event boards and the digital properties of microblogging sites to create an interactive website that shares local music culture and fosters social interactions within and outside of the digital space.

Canada’s most expensive cities, which can limit people’s social activities and stifle new creative growth. Although this problem still plays a role in my project, I failed with this solution to truly explore the breadth of possible outcomes. By merely highlighting one function (searching by price) in an already established format, I limited myself and my project, which made further developing the concept into a community-changing, interactive experience initially very frustrating.

I had not yet embraced the “fuzzy end” of design — the beginning phases of Elizabeth Sanders and Pieter Stappers design process, illustrated in Figure 3. [6] This stage includes the “many activities that take place in order to inform and inspire the exploration of open-ended questions.” [6] This front end is meant to be ambiguous and chaotic, with the final form of the deliverable often unknown. Because I had already tightly defined my problem (the high cost of living in Vancouver limits the cultural interactions people can have) and the form of its solution (a

website listing events by price), it was frustrating to go back into the design and ask: “How can I improve people’s interactions with music in Vancouver?” “How can I make these interactions new, exciting and different?” “How can the artists and the audience grow from one another?” Only once I let go of the standard format of an events site was I able to go back and explore answers to these questions.

Opening up my design process to my peers was an important element in opening up my design’s application. The classroom environment helped facilitate conversation-based research and brainstorming sessions, which became a very fulfilling way for me to ideate (Figure 2). By becoming less possessive of my ideas, I was able to let them grow in interesting new directions. Mirroring modern trends in design research, I tried to include more public participation in the informing, ideating and conceptualizing of my design. [6]

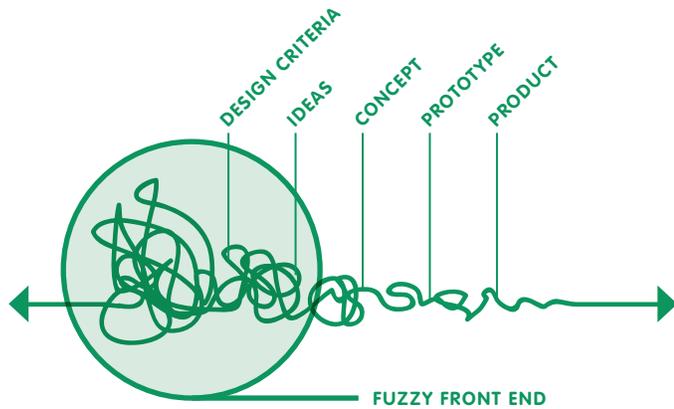


FIGURE 2. The above graph is based on Sanders and Stappers’ “fuzzy front end” of co-designing, which illustrates the necessary ambiguous and chaotic beginning explorations of design.

CHANGING THE EXPERIENCE. Moving through this fuzzy end, my reformed concept ended up embodying many of the same features of my design process: I opened up the platform to contributions, aimed to foster a creative environment, and let the users inform the final content of the space. The result is a website that highlights and encourages interactions between artists, events planners, and audiences. This format takes advantage of the commutative and expressive tools of the internet, while also placing the activity into a user’s own community. The site invites everyone to actively browse, discover and participate, both digitally and physically. Not just an online site, nor a digital mirror that only reflects real world events, this project is an interactive space that can help people understand and contribute to their culture.

By inviting users to shape the site with their own content, I’m drawing on Sanders and Stappers’ emphasis on co-creation and participatory design. They have noted that “over the last 10 years... people increasingly want a balance between passive consumption and the ability to actively choose what kinds of more creative experiences to engage in and how.” [6] For example, the Danish interactive iFloor project was designed to bring interaction back to the library, back being the key word. While “information technology may have dramatically improved our access to information... it has also taken something crucial away from the library experience — social interaction.” [2] The iFloor focused on how physical space could be used to bring this interaction back — an emphasis which I took as inspiration for my own project. I was interested in discovering a way to use the convenience and usability of the internet to bring interaction back into local culture. Both projects emphasize the role of the user in creating this meaningful experience. Urbanist Jane Jacobs stated that “cities have the capability of providing something for everyone, only because, and only when, they are created by everyone.” [3] Equally true for design, co-creative design products can transform our relationship to consumption and our environments. [6]

FUNCTION. Choosing a website format opened up many interactive possibilities, but I also sought to counter the isolating nature of the internet. In a culture overwhelmed with communication opportunities, our “web of connections has grown broader but shallower.” [1] When used properly, however, these technologies can “lead to more integration, rather than more isolation.” [1] Many online communities have formed around microblogging formats like Tumblr, which enable open, informal, fast and spontaneous contributions and interactions.

[4] I choose to utilize a highly visual layout to encourage easy browsing, as well as a tagging system that would let the user sort through and customize the communities’ uploaded content. This lets the user move through the different “moodboards” of Vancouver’s music scene and gives them an immediate invitation to dig deeper. I also wanted to make distinctions between three types of content — events, artist content and audience content — so there would be an understanding of the relationship between these cultural elements. My hope is that by providing a microblogging space that users can upload to and that focuses on the users’ physical community, a greater connection to their culture will grow.

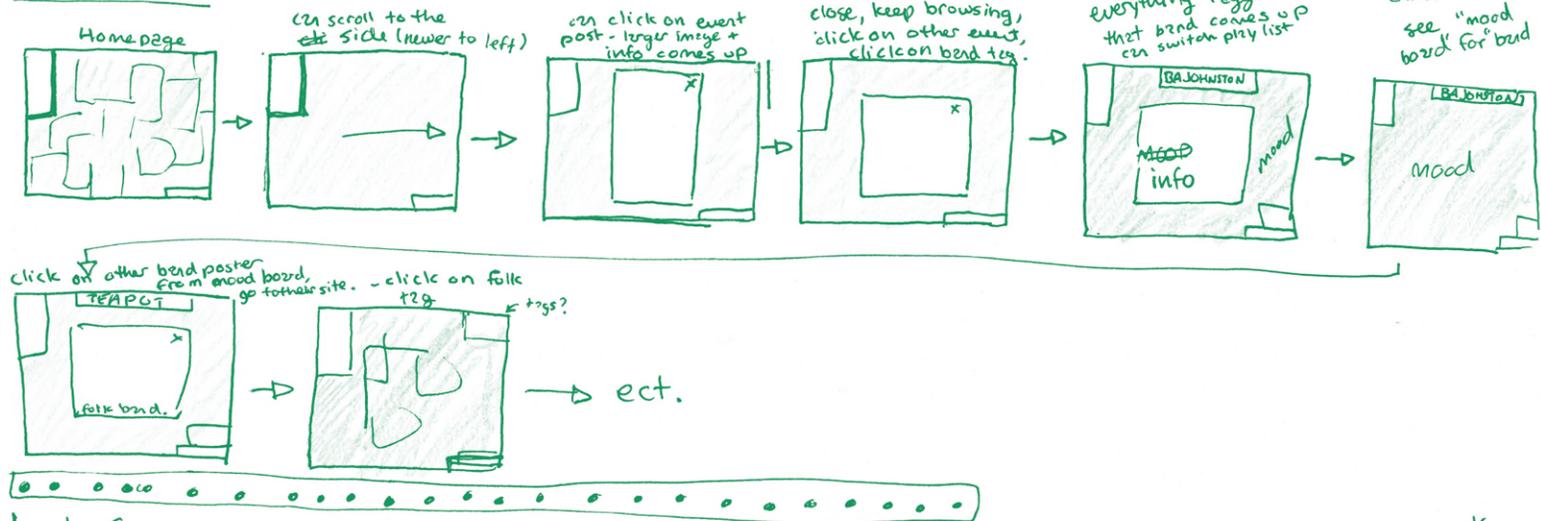
PROTOTYPING. Storyboarding was an important tool in creating the page architecture of the site (Figure 4). Envisioning my own scenarios of what I would hope to encounter on the site and asking peers for their personalized situations helped me define the end goals of my site. By always ending or starting a scenario in a physical cultural space, like a local concert, I forced myself to think of the reasons and motivations a user would have to use my site. I then took those needs and designed my prototype to fulfill them. The resulting site lets the user browse deep into the Vancouver music scene and personalize their experience, while still being part of a larger community. Leveraging popular and established online tools like tags and profiles, the interactive prototype testing went smoothly because the format was designed to be intuitive.

GETTING THAT LOOK. Throughout this process, I took inspiration from ways cultural was displayed in the environment around me. Inspired by posters, posts and boards, I wanted to recreate the spontaneous, democratic and visual quality of these public forums. I named my project Bulletin, and decided that the most of the visual content would come from user-uploaded images, photo albums, gifs, videos and playlists. The overall effect would be a like a street bulletin board: messy, organic and intriguing. The consistent elements of the site, logo, menu, background and information type treatments needed to be engaging enough to



FIGURE 3. Using the classroom environment to ideate and collaborate with peers helped elevate the design work and move it in a more fulfilling direction.

casual browser:



look for event in kits tonight:

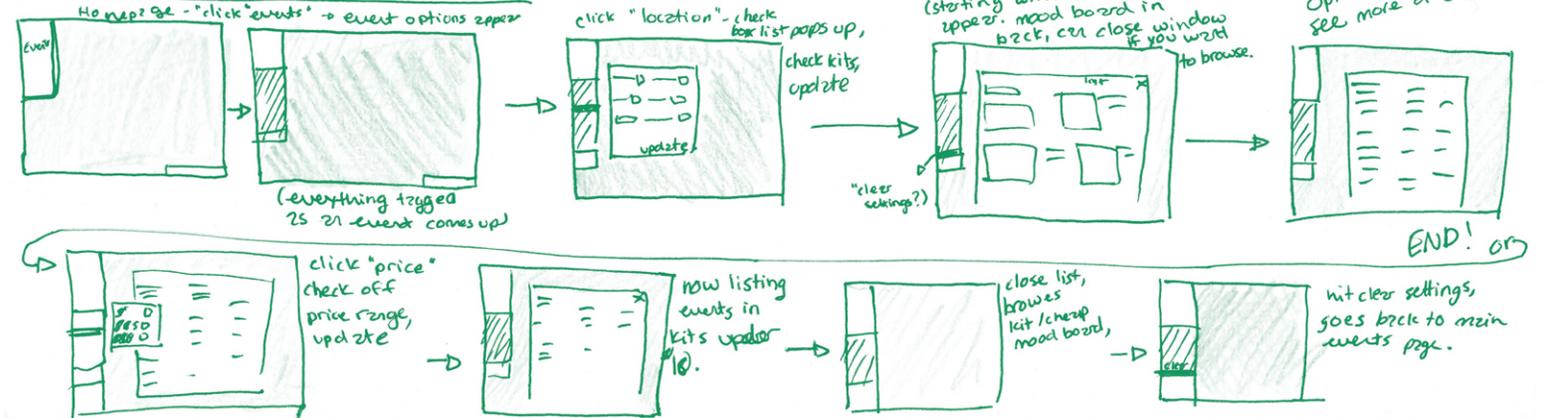


FIGURE 4. Storyboarding a user's experiences help determine necessary pages and way-finding tools, and also determined the key pages and uses of the website.

invite users to explore, but also neutral enough so that the user's content could remain the main focus. The bold logo typeface establishes the brand, and can stand out or fade into the background when needed. The tri-colour bar system differentiates between the types of content, and adds a punchiness to the brand that works to highlight posts without overpowering them.

FINDINGS

By thinking about the user experience and incorporating co-creators when possible, my design process became more active and open, which transformed my design project from a passive experience to an interactive experience. I found this change and growth very fulfilling, and I will try to utilize this method even more in future projects. While I was able to build on my design through discussions, storyboarding and prototyping with peers and potential users, I would use co-creation kits to help formulate the look and layout of the product in the future.

CONCLUSION

Communication design is at a very exciting crossroads, and understanding that interactive projects like this can potentially "arrest the escalating problems of the man-made world" and transform our unsustainable way of life into one that can "reconfigure our most basic understanding of human consciousness and how to live harmoniously in a healthy and sustainable ecosphere" is very stimulating. [6] Asking us to design not just a website or an app, but a website or app that can help transform

the world into a better place added an exciting element of responsibility to the project. It forced us to think about the environment we have and the environment we want, and challenged us in inspiring ways as designers and citizens. Re-appropriating Jane Jacob's earlier mentioned sentiments on cities, design has the capability of providing something for everyone only when it is created by everyone. Embracing co-creation in design can help this practice make lasting positive changes for our global community.

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