

P / REFERENCES OF DESIGN

THE PROMISE AND PROBLEM OF PROVOCATION.

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ABSTRACT

Topic

The goal of this Format X session is to unpack, problematize, and assert the ethical, emotional, and instrumental implications and principles involved when provocation is leveraged within discursive design practice. The session involves individual, group, and guided engagements with a few foundational and practical frameworks, as well as some provocative object examples to prompt participants' re-designs that are intentionally below, above, and right on "the" ethical "line." These re-designs operate as talk-tools to generate fundamental questions and considerations for design practitioners—a forum where what-if, how-to, WTF, and LMAO duke it out.

Provocation/the strangely familiar/dissonance has been identified as a common element across forms of discursive design (e.g., critical design, speculative design, design fiction). These practices leverage ambiguity and edginess in order to get audiences to reflect on substantive, consequential topics that may run counter to entrenched perceptions and beliefs. In challenging the status quo, designers employ more radical approaches and even justify tricking their audiences—for their own "intellectual good." As discursive designs are often presented as merely speculative, as not fully functioning, and as visualized thought experiments, they can be seen as "safe" and unburdened from the common mechanisms and attitudes toward ethical oversight. "How harmful could a well-intentioned design idea actually be?" "The potential rewards certainly outweigh any risks regarding such an important issue, no?"

Despite the prevalence of such provocation over the last quarter of a century, little has been written or established about its qualities when used in professional practice. More so than advocating for explicit codes of conduct and standards of practice, vigorous, longitudinal, reflective, inclusive, and consensual debate is posited as a responsible path forward for (our) community of practice. This session is an attempt at what part of that debate might involve or help to evolve

Timing, Tools, Infrastructure, Rules

The 90-minute session involves participants receiving a packet upon entering, which includes a brief description of an ethical framework, such as the Moral Foundations Theory (Haidt and Graham), and provocative real-world artifact examples, as well as purely speculative examples. Also included are simple evaluation forms that allow for judgments along moral dimensions. Participants' responses are shared, surfacing main points of friction, and participants are placed in groups based upon their responses. Groups are guided to determine criteria to support the re-design of one of the artifact examples. Teams are assisted through cards inspired by the "dissonance dimensions" described in the discursive design literature. These artifacts are shared with the entire group with emphasis upon where an ethical "line" might be placed within one or more contexts. Rules for this discussion encourage voicing positions both openly and through anonymized written responses. Beyond the goal of robust, facilitated debate based upon specific cases and contexts, a list of the most relevant questions and principled alternatives is an expected outcome.

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