Good People Behave, Bad People Design. Misbehaving as a Methodological Framework for Design and Design Education

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Good people behave. Bad people design. Misbehaving as a framework for design and education.

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Abstract: What happens when unwanted or unexpected attitudes infuse design processes, artifacts and uses? This paper focuses on misbehaving as part of the paradigm of design research that explores new ways to think our objects, spaces and interactions. We built upon a mosaic of case-studies and conceptual inputs to identify how "misbehaving attitudes" may operate within contexts informed by habitus, norms, regulations, standards, protocols, procedures, and/or laws. The hypothesis of this in-progress research is that these attitudes should be considered as potential methodological approaches that can enrich and extend the most "classical" practices of design. To put it forthright: can "misbehaving" approaches in design enhance the practices of design? To conclude this paper we will discuss how "misbehaving in design education could foster the "critical thinking" advocated in numerous curriculums (Combs, Cennero & Newbill, 2009; Finn, Baum & Newbill, 2011; Ministère de l’Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche, 2012; etc.).

Design Activism, Design Values, Design Knowledge, Teaching & Learning Approaches

The mischievous ways of design
What happens when attitudes usually identified as marginal, extreme, unwarranted or unexpected infiltrate design processes, artifacts and uses? What about the designer’s ways of reaching? And the mischievous ways of design? We propose “misbehaving” as a specific development of design exploration (Falkman, 2010). Design exploration “often seeks to test ideas and to ask ‘what if?’” (Falkman, 2010). Misbehaving design “often seeks to test ideas and to search for alternatives to the expected and traditional, to transcend accepted paradigms, to bring matters to a new level of understanding” (Howell, 2001: 158).

This kind of practice of exploration allows to better understand the issues of designed objects but also enrich a more “classical” practice of design. Through a mosaic of case studies, we are identifying common properties operating at each level of a design proposition and may operate within a seemingly rigid context, informed by habitus, norms, regulations, standards, protocols, procedures, and/or laws. We are proposing that these properties might be understood as underlying heterogeneous design situations, as they are forming what we identify as an arrangement “misbehaving” kind of exploration design that we have chosen to name “misbehaving design”.

While reviewing design literature on the purposes and aims of design, one can highlight how design can be involved in different arguments/approximations of organization and administration (Woodhouse & Patton, 2004; Komsi, 2009; Keshavarz & Moaz; 2013; Brulé & Kazi-Tani, 2015). Thus, it is clear to us that the first step is to unassuming, then regulating, what we may call orthodox discursive practices of design. We distinguish between the ecclesiastical orthodoxy (who has the true faith) towards the spirit of modernity (the right, fair opinion, while “deviance”, from the late late deviance, should be understood as “leaving the right path”, not following its normal course”).

Hegemonic artifacts in design research and practice - self-identified as orthodox if not refuting any sort of “designer’s deviance” - are not only widely documented with the history of the discipline but have also nurtured mainstream industrial design (Lora, 1998 [1970]; Lowey 1979; Rama, 1994; Findsel, 1994; Brulé & Kazi-Tani, 2015).

On the contrary, if “misbehaviors” might seem to be the “cold numbers” of design, they also seem to address certain of its boundaries, to open a breach in such normative regulatory frameworks: a space for debate, empowerment, and rearrangement. If clearly identified, qualified, and conceptualized, they might impact and nurture design methods. In order to examine our intuitions, we have been firstly seeing after attitudes, in different design contexts and at different stages of a design project, which empirically appears in a lesson with the regulating and normalizing frames within design and design practice.

Secondly the hypothesis of this in-progress research is that these attitudes should not be considered as marginal ways in design practices, but rather as potential methodological approaches that can enrich and extend the most classical / industrial practices of design. We are exploring ways that these attitudes or approaches are currently rearranging design:

- Processes: questioning conditions and methods
- Artifacts: disability and dysfunction: neoliberal artifacts.

From a misbehavioural attitude to a misbehaving approach? We propose “misbehaving” as a certain way of interpreting, re-reading and reconfiguring a given established artifact. Let’s consider intensity (“the way in which two or more things have an effect on each other”) as the qualities of relationships between agents (spaces, artifacts, “sculpted objects”, materials, tools, users, etc.). These relationships may be spatial, temporal, social, discursive, political, procedural, etc. These interoperating agents are firming what we identify as an arrangement (translated from the french “arangement”). Desalvo & Guattari, 1985). Designers, artifacts, users, have the ability to re-play, foil, overlap, de-script (Arrichi, 1992) this arrangement to break, expand, create rules, scripts, situations, norms, meanings, etc.

We build upon various case studies and theoretical approaches as a framework for design research that explores ways that these attitudes or approaches are operating within contexts informed by habitus, norms, regulations, standards, protocols, procedures, and/or laws. Throughout seemingly unrelated field of conception and application, we observe how these attitudes should not be considered as marginal ways in design practices, but rather as potential empowerment, and rearrangement. If clearly identified, these arrangements could make“kind of exploration design that we’ve chosen to name “misbehaving design”.

Case study one: Reconfiguring as an approach In this case study, we take interest to the use of digital tools during the design processes and artifacts. Digital tools are conditioning the design processes, and observations of digital tools in current design practices ask us to reconsider the question of the designer-practitioner and the means of conception. We argue that digital tools: an approach to come out of the digital tools, concrete techniques, which leads to the singular ways to conduct that allows the designer to modulate our own action scheme (Ik, 2004) in order to expand the range of his possibilities and the reach of her intentions in the creative process. However, this demands a particular approach from the designer towards the technical means, an approach that necessitates a necessary disruption regarding to usual ways of putting these tools into practice and therefore a misbehavior.

Case study two: Perspectives on (Dis)Obedience in Domestic Life
In this case study, we will look into two examples of “smart” homes systems. We will first identify the rhetorics of care underlying them, and then highlight the way they may engage in controversial actions, thus re-arranging their socio-spatial environment.

Our first example is Bradbury’s house from “The Void” short story (1955), describing the life of the Hadley family within an automated house, the so-called Happy Home. Progressive replacing the parents’ affection, the house nearly turns into a mechanical death trap for them. Our second example is Mother and the Motion Cookies. It is a set of sensors that can be attached to various objects and controlled through the mother hub by a selection of apps interpreting their data. It is marketed as a system allowing to “empyre live your life”, and to understand how your “fitness, health, safety, or domestic comfort” [are] weav[ing] the fabric of your days and planing to address following a mischievous process. However, we will investigate further how to develop dedicated educational material.

Conclusion and Discussion: Misbehaving in education
Through these case-studies, we have highlighted how “misbehaving” could become a methodological framework to unvisit, criticize and question regulatory and normative arrangements that are too often left unquestioned within a design project.

To test it, and how, this framework could be used during an actual design project, we proposed a workshop to a design school. It appears that our students struggled to use “misbehaving” during this workshop, but this experiment nonetheless provided us precious insights. Many of the students reported that they understood how “misbehaving” could be effective when it comes to define the scope of a personal project. But they underlined that it did not seem to be easily usable in a professional / industrial project for two reasons. First, because they already had developed a process for that case (as they indicated in the survey). Second, because they assumed that a client, commissioner or trade partner wouldn’t agree to see a design brief professionally processed and addressed following a mischievous process. However, they seem to understand it could help them to face “awkward problem”, such as social design projects, but reported lacking of concrete tools to put “misbehaving” into application.

Therefore, we believe that “misbehaving” could also be of great interest in design education in order to foster the “critical thinking” advocated in numerous curriculums. Hence, we will investigate further how to develop dedicated educational material.

Numerous questions remain, but nurture our ongoing research:

- What are the actual possibilities to set a framework for conceptual activities exclusively leaning on challenging and opposing frames?
- How could educators possibly teach design methods based on misbehaving?
- By extension, within contexts strongly challenging and opposing established and administrative frame, what are the roles of deploying “misbehaving” as a method?
- Can we, and should we, designers and educators, derogate any normative context?