DRS2016

Design + Research + Society

Future-Focused Thinking

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Rethinking SMART

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1. Workshop Organiser/s

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2. Context of Workshop

The current EU Horizon 2020 call 'Smart Anything Everywhere' speaks to an idea of imagining what 'smart' could be in the broadest, most open sense. Anything. Anywhere. But despite this openness, the smart imaginary remains stagnated. Why is this the case?

'Smart' normally combines an existing object or system, for example a fridge, car, or city - updated with the latest sensory or computational technology to achieve a level of autonomy or agency. While 'smartness' as an attribute seems desirable, under closer scrutiny the bar is often set disappointingly low. 'Smart' commonly gets confused with other adjectives, like 'automated' or 'efficient' resulting in products that pre-emptively satisfy basic desires. Smart products however, can reduce human participation or narrow down possibility to what is detectable or quantifiable.

Automation does, admittedly, operate on different levels of smart: smart bombs or smart cars. Guiding a bomb is complex and the system developed to achieve this is perhaps capable of performing the act better than a human. But is it ethically smart? Likewise the automated car - very smart mechanically and computationally. But socially? Experientially? Ecologically? Then there is the issue of the generic user of these smart objects, who is overwhelmingly young, wealthy, male - never a complex, troubled mixed-family.

So how can we begin to develop a new smart? What role can designers play in order to address the complex societal problems that face us, beyond basic smart products? How can research through design be helpful to rethink the notion of smartness?

3. Planned Activities and Expected Outcomes

Based on a series of short activities, participants will address this brief by considering the following topics :

• Real users. What does the smart home for a three-generation family - unharmonious, unwealthy, complicated - look like?

• A rethink of 'smart' with provocative counter versions:

> Smart = slow - as in slow food; not automated microwave crap but immersive, complex, engaging, experiential.

> Smart = surprising - no banal predictions (automatically turning the lights on), or annoying personalities (C-3PO meets smart home).

> Smart = reacting to more complex things, or sensing in unusual ways.

> Smart = sustainable, local, community

> Smart ≠ optimisation, think about contexts such as religion or humorous pranks

Participants will be asked to design a smart 'thing' that comprises four factors:

1. It can sense its environment

2. It can compute something based on that sensory information

3. It can act in a mechanical way

4. It can connect with other smart objects

Workshop attendees will design a thing based on a new notion of smart. They will have to think about complex interactions and systems, news ways of sensing, what computing could mean and the real-function of a product or space.

4. Intended Audience

Ideal number: 8-15

Profile: design practitioners in the field of interaction and product design (private companies ranging from startups to technology firms, public sector), design researchers, and anyone interested in futures research.

5. Length of Workshop

Half-day

6. Space and Equipment Required

Informal studio space with projector and white board.

A2 paper and pens

7. Potential Outputs

This workshop will help attendees refining a new definition of smartness and it will give practical knowledge of the issues involved in designing for smart and connected products.

About the Organisers:

Dr. Nicolas Nova is an ethnographer and design researcher, working both as a Professor at the Geneva School of Arts and Design and co-founder of The Near Future Laboratory, a research agency working on design fiction projects.

Dr. James Auger is a designer, researcher and educator working as an associate professor at M-ITI, Portugal. His research uses design practice to question the role of technology in everyday life.