Brenda Laurel Interview
Design Research

Why is design research important?

Perhaps the single most pernicious sort of folly I have seen over nearly thirty years in the computer field is the belief on the part of engineers, designers, and marketing people is that they "just know" what will work for their audience. For extremely observant, experienced designer, this may indeed be true, but such people are exceedingly rare, and those who are most successful have "trained" their intuition by carefully observing and reaching deep understanding of certain kinds of people, cultures, and contexts. For the rest of us, that first "great idea" is usually a shot in the dark. Examining the idea to discover the hypotheses that are implicit in it gives the designer a platform for inquiry that will inform the project. It may also surprise and delight the designer.

Full-blown ideas for great, innovative products do not come from research subjects. The designer need not fear that engaging in research means that one is the slave of their findings. Design research includes the careful analysis of findings, turning them this way and that, looking for patterns. At the end of the day, well-designed research findings can spark the imagination of the designer with outcomes that could not have been dreamt of by either the research subjects or even the designer herself. Good design research functions as a springboard for the designer's creativity and values.

You've said that good design needs to understand "deep, roiling currents of our dynamic culture." Is research the best method of divining those currents?

Well, "research" is a pretty broad term. Exploration, investigation, looking around, finding out are all synonyms for research. In the business of cultural production, exposure to popular media is essential research. Television, movies, news, games, nonfiction, science fiction

--all facets of the Spectacle--can provide a great deal of information about the trajectories of change, what people long for and what they fear; what sorts of stories are told and why; how people are likely to greet particular changes in their world.

As Henry Jenkins' work demonstrates so well, it is also extremely useful to delve into the currents and eddies of particular "fandoms" or subcultures. One cannot possibly explore them all, but designers can identify those that are most relevant to their work. For example, my colleagues and I are deeply inspired by hard science fiction as well as popular science fiction and fantasy. At a deeper level, thoughtful designers engage in critical discourse regarding culture and change.

What should designers look for when doing research?

The dictionary definition frames research as "scholarly or scientific investigation or inquiry." The first step is to deliberately identify one's own biases and beliefs about the subject of study and to "hang them at the door" so as to avoid self-fulfilling prophecies. One must then frame the research question and carefully identify the audiences, contexts, and research methods that are most likely to yield actionable results. Those last two words are the most important: actionable results. Often, the success of a research program hangs upon how the question is framed.

For example, in my own experience in an effort to design computer games for girls, we first framed our research question in the obvious manner: "why don't girls play computer games?" But the answers to that question (at least at the time we were asking it, in the mid-1990s) were at the same time highly predictable (e.g., the early, rapid vertical integration of the computer game industry around a monolithic male demographic) and not particularly actionable (e.g., girls don't play games because games aren't design for them or offered in retail spaces where girls go). A much more fruitful line of inquiry was, "how does play vary by gender?" The answers to this question gave us very broad coverage--from biology to local culture and social practice. The results were generative and generalizable to areas beyond game design. For example, insights into social play informed our web design efforts, and findings regarding gender signaling in toys informed our content, branding, and marketing.

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