

Ritual Portfolio:
A Tale of Encouraged Social Experimentation

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A Tale of Encouraged Social Experimentation

In the process of designing the class-enhancing ritual package, as part of the second research project, I chose to work in the Production group. Our main team task was to make sure that the work of the other five groups was well-connected both in terms of the practical consistency of their proposed ritual components as well as the bigger-picture meaning-creation of the entire ritual package. As the Production liaison collaborating with the Content team, I had the chance to contribute on both ends, with the primary individual goal of ensuring that the voice of the Content group got heard in the final refinements of the ritual instructions. This goal was accomplished by following along the Ritual Design Toolkit recommendations and facilitating the continued communication of priorities between groups.

The Design Brief that we were provided prior to the brainstorming established the enhancement of the class as the ultimate umbrella goal of the ritual, which in itself is a rather broad notion encapsulating the approach to the reading material, the student-teacher and student-student dynamics, and the classroom setup, among others. I found working with the Content group particularly insightful in this sense, as it mandated the questions “Why?” and “How?” for almost any decision made by the other groups: why did a particular ritualistic action proposal better represent the emotional stimulus expected from a part of the ritual package than a competing idea, or even than its absence? How would one justify the choice of a ritual prop in the context of the class discussions were they to be asked by an interested passerby? While the promotion of togetherness via a shared ritual is often a powerful incentive for complexity as a proxy for uniqueness, a satisfactory user experience, which correlates with how easy it is for the

ritual participants to relate to and find personal meaning in each step, was also a crucial deliverable of our ritual heavily dependent on a reasonably simple sequence.

Defining the scope of the ritual performance was a very clear target of the Content group, but it was also the most logistically demanding of their dependence on the Production group to ensure everyone was on the same page of expectations and intents. The pace was set by determining a short working list of broad concepts to be kept in mind during the design process, including “*Open mindedness about other cultures or in general*”, and this high-level approach had its advantages and potential pitfalls.¹ On one side it generously allocated creative freedom to the groups tasked with proposing the ritual actions, which streamlined my job as the liaison from Production: the takeaway of the Content recommendations was a *statement*, not a discussion, and the absence of the back-and-forth permission-asking-and-granting made brainstorming a much more independent process than expected. On the other hand, the lack of specificity in the Content demands made them more likely to fade away from the common urgency of the ritual design and end up as a formally-skipped first page to the master brainstorming document.²

Still within the key questions of scope and context determination, we as Production found particular importance in constantly reminding our respective collaborator teams about the deliverables that they were each expected to contribute before we got to prototyping, and how those deliverables would amount to the collective class takeaways after the ritual was completed.³ While the aims and goals of our own team were almost purely logistical, mostly

¹ This example was picked in this report simply because of its particularly broad language, but it remains a crucial aspect of what we as a class took away from 21A.00 this semester.

² This was a document compiled by the Production team as a way of keeping track with the developments from all groups in parallel, but due to its comprehensiveness ended up evolving into the shared script where each group described their proposed steps in detail. It was ultimately printed and distributed for reference right before the ritual proceedings.

³ Among the emotional outcomes we primarily aimed for “unusual” feelings of joy, belonging and the positive emotions associated with shaping connections with semi-strangers, which in this case were students who had only

ensuring that all the other groups had what they need to focus on creative work and that this work was appreciated, collaborating with the Content team made me realize how challenging it is to pick the right questions for which to brainstorm rituals. Thanks to the DoE-scaffolding offered by the teaching staff, the conversation with Mr. Shen and the design brief, the scope quickly gravitated towards envisioning an extended user journey grounded on playing with power dynamics, showing appreciation for the subjectiveness of personal rituals, and channeling the resources of the built environment to better reflect the atmosphere of the ritual.⁴ On the context side, we as the Production team attempted to gauge the support for various potential contextual details that could govern the ritual proceedings, and concluded that the ending of the first fully in-person school year after the COVID-19 shutdown deserved the position: among the main pedagogical takeaways of this course was learning by discussion of unique and shared experiences, and in light of the DoE readings it was only fitting to have the ritual centered around flexible interpersonal interaction, that could transition from spontaneous to incredibly personal much faster than possible in a normal daily scenario. The sudden spike in COVID-19 cases on the other hand, combined with the fortunately sunny weather, enabled the completion of the contextual picture by shifting the ritual proceedings outside the classroom for the most part, with a make-shift hybrid component.⁵

seen each other in class, but never truly communicated, let alone to the intimate extent of personal artifact interpretation. All these emotions were meant to be rigidly associated with the context from the DoE reading, though the focus on the takeaways instead of the means of obtaining them was truly impactful (and a topic better described by the Content team), The tangential outcomes were more bluntly defined as a 21A.00 T-shirt, a full stomach and certainly the ability to start conversations with these classmates in another on-campus context.

⁴ While the primary participants would be the 21A.00 students and the teaching staff, after the prototyping process (detailed explanation in the next paragraph) changes were made to welcome any interested passersby.

⁵ The Design brief was mostly centered on the aims and high-level goals of the ritual, which permitted experimentation and multiple trial-and-error iterations to find the scope and contextual elements that best reflected our vision for the class-improving ritual.

The ritual design prototyping experience proved very useful for us as the Production team to notice where the sequence discontinuities lay: were they mere artifacts of unclear transition instructions between the beginning, middle and ending of the ritual, or did they signify a discomfort of the participants with particular aspects of the design product? One such example was a significant portion of the middle actions of the ritual, which prompted a constructive discussion on the best ways to reflect the recommendations of the Content team while keeping the ritual design human-centered and grounded in the principles of the last chapter of DoE.⁶ Given the time constraints on the full ritual package, we as Production considered *pausing* as a truly powerful tool that would make the participants more comfortable as they progressed through the scripted behaviors, and it partially manifested itself in the shirt-swapping iterations. Due to the considerable number of ritual participants, we actively attempted to replace *sequencing* with *personalizing* whenever relevant, because a crucial measure of our success as Production was the timeliness of progressing through each scripted behavior as a group.⁷

Once there was a beginning-to-end chronological list of actions planned to occur during the ritual, I met with my Production team to evaluate how much the Key Events of the packet coincided with the main Outcomes, both emotional and tangible.⁸ On one side we wanted to avoid creating very emotionally unbalanced segments (very dense collusions of actions followed by extended periods of relaxed conversations), but on the other we intended to keep the ritual

⁶ The design of this ritual package in itself resembled a social laboratory, as we got to experiment with different ideas and ended up evaluating them not on the basis of convenience, but of meaningfulness. Furthermore, we sought to infuse as much of the lessons learned during this semester of 21A.00 into this single repertoire of shared knowledge, much like the DoE description of historical zones of ritual play (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021: 500).

⁷ Pausing, sequencing and personalizing are ritual behaviors defined on page 16 of the Ritual Design Toolkit.

⁸ The actual classification of ritual actions into Key Events or not was mostly subjective, as each group felt their proposals were the most substantive in symbolic meaning. Hence, while we were not truly capable of naming all the Key Events, close discussions with the Content team allowed us to bracket a set of events that required special consideration both with respect to time (accurate start/end points) and emotional buildup.

progressively dynamic and not equally balanced throughout. The most useful tools in this regard proved to be the sensory experience tweaks, as shifting the atmosphere from the brightness outside to the large-window classroom dramatically shifted the attitudes of the participants towards an absorbing approach, much more susceptible to appreciating awe-inducing events like the solemn knowledge-burial with its instrumental soundtrack.

Ritual design from the eyes of the Production team was a truly challenging but rewarding experience, as it encouraged deep engagement in trying to fit in with the assigned collaborator groups, as well as constantly trying to not dwell on the details of each proposal but continue employing a bird's eye view of the entire ritual packet. Along these lines, focusing on the main emotional takeaways from the ritual was a very effective way of knowing which ritual steps to amplify in time and attention, which ultimately improved the user experience.⁹ I strongly believe that we as the Production team, as well as the participants themselves, have learned a lot from this "larger prototype", as going through the full ritual exposed many other logistical points unconsidered until then. In conclusion, this class-level collaborative effort showed us what trying to get *unstuck* looks like, even if only temporarily shaking the hierarchy of the classroom setting or its physical arrangement, and opened the doors for a whole universe of new perspectives in terms of what we assume to be the "default" in real life.

⁹ "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you make them feel" is a quote by Maya Angelou that really embodies one of my main lessons learned through this project.

Thank you for an amazing semester, Raha and Professor Jones.

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