

Nick Knouf

Augmented Objects

While reading the papers on how objects in our lives convey meaning I thought of a couple of different scenarios of how to augment objects in our daily lives.

mixtapes :: The first object is not a single object in and of itself, but more of a cultural concept: that of mixtapes. With the rise of cassette players and recorders in the late 1970s and early 1980s came the art of creating mixtapes: selections of songs from various CDs that a person would compile and then give to someone else, commonly a love interest but also commonly a friend. These mixtapes are an ideal example of how to use an object to convey meaning: the selection, order, and efficiency in compiling the tape reflected deep personal convictions on the part of the sender.

With CDs came the demise of the mixtape and the rise of the mix CD, still reflecting some care on the part of the sender (especially if the packaging was carefully and personally created as well), but to a lesser extent than mixtapes. Today exist iMixes and other electronic mixes of digital music files that were created by simply dragging files into a list. I don't want to indicate that there are not people who take great care in the creation of their mixes of MP3s; however, I would suggest that because it is easier, the care and skill that went into making mixtapes has somewhat disappeared: and most importantly for this exercise is the disappearance of the tangible object.

How can we recapture the nature of mixtapes? One way might be through attractively designed RFID tags. For example, it's possible to put small bits of music on RFID tags. These could be used to sequence a song of some sort for the recipient. The tags could also be altered and modified in a way that reflects certain emotions of the gift giver. There are problems of fidelity and clip length, but this ties into the whole craze of 8-bit, low-fidelity music. As well, you could imagine harkening back to the idea of wax cylinders, the first bits of recorded music. Perhaps you have a small printer or scratcher that either prints an "image" of your music, or engraves your mixtapes into another object that you then give the recipient. This object could be multi-purpose then; the object could be, for example, a teddy bear that carries with it clothing that has music "printed" or "engraved" within the fabric.

In any event, I think it's important to consider how to give tangibility back to our music. While MP3s give us great ability to accumulate and reorder tracks at will, they lose the face-to-face or person-to-mail-to-person interfaces that embodied previous music transactions will so much cultural and personal concepts.

electronic talismans :: Csikszentmihályi described how for men in his survey, cars acted as the power objects of old, the talismans or rocks/beads that showed your prowess, your ability to enter a region of danger and return with items of value. Is there a way to create some sort of digital talisman, some way to show your prowess through the wearing of an electronically augmented object? There have been non-augmented attempts at this already, most notably with the memory dress which contains old and rare pieces of memory. One way to approach this would be to display prominently microcontrollers you

Nick Knouf

had programmed. This would be similar to what Yvonne Rogers spoke about recently: making technology more visible. The biggest challenge is ensuring that you speak a common cultural language; for example, most people would not know that it might be more difficult to program a PIC in assembly versus an Atmel in C. Perhaps the need, then, is for simple kits, lego-style, that give everybody the ability to create wearable trinkets.

I have to admit that I don't have any real suggestions of augmented electronic talismans, but I think it's an interesting area to think further about and is why I wanted to suggest it with this assignment.