The experience of fun with graphic design

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Abstract: This paper argues that fun could be a useful concept in facilitating the interaction between people and graphic design towards effective communication, and attempts to gain a preliminary understanding of the experience of fun with graphic design that could provide designers with insights for experience-oriented graphic design that will inspire in people’s experience of fun. It begins by discussing the concept of fun and the relationship the concept has to graphic design, then presents an empirical study that utilises the combination of the probes and interviews to investigate people’s lived experience of fun in the context of graphic design. The results of the study show that people could experience fun with graphic design by engaging themselves in sensual, emotional and intellectual involvements that are intertwined into a unity of fun. The factors contributing to and influencing the experience of fun with graphic design include: “feeling attracted”, “challenge-achievement”, “out of expectation”, “positive emotions”, “social interaction” and “contextual factors”.

Key words: Experience-centred design, Fun, Graphic design, Probes, Interviews

1. Introduction

With the stimulation of the “Experience Economy” [20] where the aims are to deliver desirable experiences to customers, the experience-centred issue has been prominent across the design practice and research community in the last decade [2]. The focus of design has shifted from the creation of objects towards people’s experience of objects. Graphic design is no exception. To achieve the primary objective of the profession, that is to affect the knowledge, attitudes or behaviour of people [12], graphic designers aim to generate the work that resonates with people to create effective communication. The proper consideration
of people’s experience hence becomes vital to process of graphic design.

In the context of HCI and product design, many researchers have found that the dimensions related to fun phenomenon are the influential factors in preferable design, and they further investigated the facets of people’s experience of fun in design [4,5,17,19]. It is suggested that the balance between skill and challenge is needed to experience fun [5,19]. Having fun could be the same opportunity to have feelings of curiosity, surprise, enjoyment, and other attitudinal emotions such as feelings of freedom or a sense of control [4,5]. The social quality also provides people opportunities to have fun with artefacts [17]. Moreover, a design evokes fun is not merely because of a fun-driven property of an artefact, but the experience also depends on the state of the person having it and on the context [5].

Overall, several features or factors of the fun phenomenon in design have been identified. However, the connection among those elements seems loose, and there appears to be a lack of holistic view on the experience of fun in design. Beside, most researches into the concept of fun are mainly situated in the context of HCI or product design, and there is little done in the domain of graphic design. We are still far from having a systematic understanding of what fun is and how it can be addressed in the context of graphic design. In this paper, we attempts to gain an understanding of fun with graphic design that could provide designers with insights for experience-oriented graphic design that will inspire in people’s experience of fun.

2. The concept of fun

As the Oxford English Dictionary demonstrates, fun carries several meanings including “the light-hearted pleasure”, “amusement”, “playfulness”, “good humour”, and “enjoyable”. It is thus indicated that fun is a state of mind - a kind of positive feeling or favourable emotion. When it comes to fun, the common phrases such as “make fun of”, “have fun with”, or “that is fun” present fun not as a free-floating feeling but an experience close to an object or oriented to an event. Also, people often mention “doing something fun”. Fun is thus defined as a manner of “doing” an activity, which may have physical, emotional, intellectual, and social aspects. Therefore fun is not only an emotional response, but also a holistic experience people could have with the outside world.

From the psychological view, Csikszentmihalyi’s work “Flow” [7] could be a classic study of fun-related experience. The term “Flow” refers to an optimal or peak experience people have in almost any activity like dancing, sports, video games, or any kind of mind-absorbing work. It is characterised as a mental state, in which people feel completely involved, time distortion, and intense joy produced in an activity for its own sake. The concept of flow implies that fun begins from an intrinsic motivation, involves in an engaging process as well as results in positive emotion.
Podilchak [21] addresses the social side of the fun phenomenon through the further exploration of engaging activities. In his empirical study of young adults, he argues that fun is fundamentally interactive. It is emotional involvement of social interaction and “restruction”, in which a reframing of an activity is established. Accordingly, there appears to be a “frame” of involvement in an activity that invites individuals to “finish” by themselves. There thus to be a continual “adding on” or reconstructing of the action [21, p.139]. In addition, “sharing” is implied in the experience of fun, that is, people enjoy fun together or want to be “spreading the fun” [21, p.140]. From Podilchak’s point of view, not only fun occurs in individual’s mind but also it is established in social interaction that involves reframing and socially structuring.

By drawing on both Csikszentmihalyi and Podilchak’s theories, we define fun as a holistic experience that begins from an intrinsic motivation, and involves an active engagement and emotional rewards, which occurs in the interaction between people and their surroundings (including other people or objects and environment), and leads to positive frame of mind.

3. Fun and graphic design

There seems to be a human interest in pursuing fun. People enjoy being stimulated, and they aspire after surprise, spontaneity, freshness, and a certain degree of unpredictability [3]. Fun appears to be an innate need of people toward objects. As artefacts integrated to the modern world, graphic design is a source for constructing a fun phenomenon and has a potential role in supporting people’s experience of fun. Fun could hence be an important tool for graphic designers to use in order to resonate with people who they design for.

Fun is also seen as one of the motivations of consumption. Holbrook and Hirschman argue [16] that the consumption experience could be a phenomenon directed toward the pursuit of fantasies, feelings, and fun. Fun therefore is one of the most effective ways for designers to differentiate their products and brands from other competitors. In the research of humorous advertisements, it is found that positive feelings of interest or cheerfulness exert positive influences, such as to attract attention, enhance an improved impression (liking), and increase purchase intention [14]. Thus, there is a significant role for fun to play in marketing consideration that graphic designers should not ignore.

In fact, to achieve the primary objective of graphic design, fun could be a powerful approach to effective communication. Norman [19] points out that the positive emotions like joy and playfulness are essential to people’s curiosity and ability to learn new information. All graphic design involves visual communication and perception, which is closely tied to a certain order of human learning [12]. Fun is a beneficial factor to learning as it could engage people and move people from being passive receivers to becoming active participants as they process information. Moreover, fun could also lead to persuasion as it could help reduce counter-arguing in those people with divergent opinions [6]. Fun hence could contribute to effective
communication that graphic designers strive to achieve.

4. Understanding experience in design
A number of frameworks and models have been developed for conceptualising experience with artefacts, which could provide us with a glimpse of people’s experience with graphic design. One of the well-known frameworks is presented by Wright, McCarthy and Meekison [23], that is the framework of experience as consisting of four threads: compositional, sensory, emotional, and spatio-temporal, which contribute to the process of experience (sense-making) like anticipating, interpreting, reflecting, appropriating, and recounting. They regard experience as holistic rather than the sum of reductive elements. Forlizzi and Battarbee [11] present a structured and dynamic framework of experience for interactive systems. They address not only the individual’s experience with the product or system, but also the different dimensions of experience including social interaction. Demir, Desmet, and Hekkert [8] also develop a framework to construct related experiential concepts in the more general context of design. They indicate the dynamic nature of experience with the overlapping of three facets: aesthetic pleasure, attribution of meaning, and emotional response. Some researchers emphasise the affective quality of experience. Norman [19] divides emotional experience into three levels: visceral, behaviour and reflective. Jordan [18] also proposes the framework of product pleasure, which contains four conceptually distinct types of pleasure: physio-pleasure, socio-pleasure, psycho-pleasure and ideo-pleasure.

Of this work, some approaches that draw on mainly cognitive science see experience reductively [18,19], while others are developed in a more holistic and phenomenological perspective [8,11,23]. The pragmatist approach tends to be preferable to help us see through experience as it sees experience in a broader view and it concentrates on the nature of experience as a whole rather than its reductive elements. By adopting this understanding of general experience we gain a primary framework for developing enquiries into the experience of fun with graphic design. In the next section, we will present an empirical study that aims to gain a preliminary understanding of people’s lived experience of fun with graphic design.

5. Methods
Based on the pragmatist perspective to understand experience, both probes [13,15] and interviews [8,22] were used complimentarily to support us to investigate how people make sense of fun with graphic design in real-life contexts. In this study, we developed the probe approach to collect the information about the real context of participants’ experience of fun with graphic design like their physical and social context, and to collect a set of thoughts relating to their experience of fun and the artefacts of their encounter. The probe pack of this study consists two items: a disposable camera and a diary sheet with the photography assignments and the open-ended questions. The tasks of the probes included: taking several photos of a piece of graphic design they have fun with during the time, including the photos of the artefact and the photos of the context of their encounter, and then documenting their feelings and experiences on the lists of
questions. The probe packs were distributed to the six participants of different nationalities chosen by convenience sampling. Each person had the pack for around two weeks to one month. After the participant returned the probe, a follow-up semi-structured interview was then conducted to interpret the probes results, and also to gain more detailed and other information relating to the issues of interest in the study. The interviews lasted for around 30 to 50 minutes, and they were audio-taped and transcribed.

![Figure 1](image1.png)

**Figure 1** A sample of the probes in this study

### 6. Results and discussions

In this study, it was found that people were very willing to talk about their experience of fun with graphic design. The materials from the probes served as easy starting points for conversations, and as stimuli to help the participants to express themselves more about their experience of fun with the chosen designed artefacts, especially the moment by moment of their seeing and thinking towards the artefacts. The common patterns of people’s experience of fun with graphic design are captured in our tentative framework (Fig.2):

![Figure 2](image2.png)

**Figure 2** The tentative framework of the experience of fun with graphic design
6.1 Sensual, intellectual and emotional engagements  
The results of the study confirm the general ground of experience in design, that people can experience fun by engaging themselves in three aspects of experience—sensual, intellectual and emotional [11,13,30]. The sensual part of the experience of fun with artefacts involves people’s sensory, bodily or other perceptual engagements. In the context of graphic design, it seems mostly to focus on visual domain. The intellectual part of the experience of fun refers to people’s information processing about the artefacts, the situations or overall experience. It involves personal cognitive process like interpretation, associations, or memory retrieval to attach meaning to the artefacts [13]. The emotional aspect refers to affective expressions of people towards the artefacts or whole experience. It could be aroused by sensory stimulation or intellectual appraisal. In the experience of fun with graphic design, people may feel weird or confused about the artefacts at the first sight. After their evaluation in relation to personal values or concerns [12], they may feel fascinated or interested in the artefacts. These three aspects of experience may exist only at a conceptual level, it is difficult to distinguish or separate them in real life because they are overlapping or intertwined into a unity [13,30].

6.2 The process of “sense-making” in fun  
In the context of the study, those above three aspects of involvements are woven into a process of “sense-making” [30] of fun with graphic design, which are constituted by “feeling attracted”, “challenge-achievement”, “out of expectation” and “positive emotions”.

Feeling attracted  
Most participants mentioned that when they looked at and felt attracted by the artefacts this was the departure point of their experience of fun. Their attention were caught as they found the artefacts unusual, weird, standing out of others, or related to themselves in different aspects. As one of participants said: “When I passed by this advert that is a big shopping bag, I found it quite strange. Because I think most of adverts are 2D, rarely are 3D stuff. But this advert was shaped in a form of 3D, and it was a big shopping bag. At that moment, I found it quite special...”. Another interview extract revealed that people’s attentions were also sustained as they felt curious about the artefacts and wanted to approach and learn more about them: “I thought, why does the fish wear a diving suit? ... Then I was wondering and tried to figure out what it is for? What is the fish doing? Why does the fish need to wear a diving suit?”

It seems that in the experience of fun, people’s perception or imagination could be stimulated by the artefacts whether with the aesthetic features like materials or colour, or the meanings embedded in the artefacts. By evoking people’s mixed feelings of familiarness and unfamiliarness, the artefacts trigger people’s curiosities and engage people to look or think about the artefacts in a more profound way. Besides, people’s different levels of interests or sensitivities towards graphic design could also result in different levels of involvements with the artefacts at their first encounter.
**Challenge-achievement**

Another common theme is the process of “challenge-achievement” that people are driven by their curiosities and then actively involve in “working out” the ambiguity of the artefacts through interpretation or association. As one of the participants stated: “...The most obvious part is the slogan on the bottom of the poster. It become easier to understand by the slogan ‘for people who don't like water’ as it seems to be the answer to why the fish wears a diving suit...I finally understood why the fish wears a diving suit. Because the fish doesn't like water, it wears a diving suit to seclude itself from water, which is a connection between the image and the slogan”.

It shows that to some extent the communicational artefacts has to offer a moderate challenge to its audience, so that they are not only stimulated to approach the artefacts but also could achieve the goal of understanding the artefacts [7,10,25]. In addition, different people with different prior experiences and knowledge result in different levels of skills for “challenge-achievement” [29]. As one of the participants stated: “But for people of my age on the Jaffa cakes, it's something instantly recognised that is a treat, then when you realise that was it...”.

**Out of expectation**

One of the determinants of people’s experience of fun is “out of expectation”. From the study, most participants significantly addressed the elements of “unexpected”, “surprise” or “novelty”. For example, one of the participants commented: “...because it is unexpected, around the contemporary of these herbs and spices in that body of packaging...I think, that's interesting, that's novel”. Similarly, another of the participants stated: “I think it's because on that busy moment road out side the rail station, I wasn't expecting this, experience something I would find it amusing, it would amuse me...”.

It shows that not only people have to involve in the process of “challenge-achievement”, but also the factor of “out of expectation” needs to come into play together to construct their experience of fun with designed artefacts. It also reveals that the role of novelty is crucial in shaping fun with graphic design. As another participant explained when asked why one particular poster produced the feeling of fun compared to another: “The fish one is more striking because I've never seen a fish in a diving suit...the mash potato one is not special, you saw anthropomorphic approach, things with legs, quite frequently.”

**Positive emotions**

Apart from physical expressions like smiles or laughter, positive emotions were generally generated as a result of people’s experience of fun with graphic design, whether towards the designed artefacts, related parties (e.g., retail stores or brands), or people themselves. In this study, the positive emotions created towards the artefacts range from high-intensive feelings like a “WOW” feeling, “feeling excited”, “feeling
fascinated”, “feeling interested”, to attitudinal affections such as “it is clever” or “I like it!” People could also have a sense of achievement or satisfaction from their experience of fun with graphic design as they achieve the challenges, just like they find the answers of puzzle-like artefacts. As one of the participants mentioned: “… after I find out the relevance existed, I feel, hmm, how do I say that, well, a bit, a sense of achievement”.

It shows that those positive emotions created as the outcome of a process of appraisal [12]. They involve different degrees of evaluation in terms of people’s different concerns or values that are subject to individual differences. Particularly the variables of people like cultural background that involve people’s value towards artefacts [13] play an influential role in generating positive emotions in the experience of fun with graphic design.

In summary, it appears that the experience of fun mostly starts when people feel confused and attracted by the artefacts at the first sight. Driven by their curiosities, people are then actively involved in achieving the challenges and they find the artefacts out of their expectation. They also generate positive emotions about the overall experience. The experience of fun with graphic design hence is considered as the interaction between artefacts and people. An ambiguous quality in artefacts catches people’s attentions and engages them in different aspects of experience towards “uncovering the truth” of the artefact. Moreover, for facilitating the process of “challenge-achievement” in the experience of fun, the challenge in the artefact has to be moderate, not too easy not too difficult for the people designers design for [29]. However, not only the intriguing artefacts but also people’s active involvement is necessary for shaping the experience of fun with graphic design. Both people’s prior experience and knowledge come into play to process “challenge-achievement”. Moreover, in terms of achieving “out of expectation” and “positive emotions” in the experience of fun, people’s different expectations and concerns also determine if they could experience fun with graphic design.

### 6.3 Social interaction

The feature of “Sharing” appears to be a significant part of the experience of the fun people could have with graphic design. Some researches point out that social interaction inevitably affects the way in which artefacts are perceived and experienced [1]. For the experience of fun with artefacts, it plays a larger role. Sharing fun appears to be one of people’s intrinsic activities. If one see and find something fun, he or she will go to share with others [27]. In this study, some of participants did share their experience of fun with their friends at that moment they encountered the artefacts, or after they took the photos of artefacts. The others intended to share with their friends or colleagues by email.

The participants mentioned they felt much fun when they share the “fun graphic design” with the others. As some of the participants said: “I found it more interesting when I was discussing with my girl friend,
It appears that people’s experience of fun could magnify by sharing as the subjects have “re-run” experience of fun and also obtain a sense of satisfaction from being able to mediate others’ experiences. Moreover, for people whom the subjects share fun with, their attentions are drawn to the artefact, their chances for experiencing fun with the artefact are optimised. As one of the participants recalled when he and his girlfriend encountered the same poster: “At the beginning it's me to feel this design interesting, she just said what is that interesting about? After I explained to her about why I found interesting, she also found it interesting too...”.

Besides, when the participants talking about their willing to share the “fun graphic design”, it seems to depend on the degree of fun people have with the artefacts or the people they would share with. If people have high degree of fun with the artefacts, they seem to be more willing to share with others. Also, people would like to share with someone whom usually shares things with them, or someone they felt sure would feel the same way about the artefacts. This suggests that the higher intensity of fun people could have with graphic design, the more likely they are to share it with likeminded people.

### 6.4 Contextual factors

Apart from the interplay among artefacts, people and other people, contextual factors also play a vital role in the experience of fun with graphic design, such as situational and temporal context. The situation in which people’s encounter with the artefacts takes place includes the physical environment where the artefacts are distributed, located, and presented, and people’s ongoing situation like what they are doing, thinking and feeling. For example, one of the participants stated why he did not feel attracted by the artefacts until his second encounter: “That's because we were looking for something at the first time, kind of in rush, we were occupied by other stuff. When we come close to it at the second time, we have found the thing we were looking for, so we walked slowly and looked around...”. Similarly, another participant mentioned that the physical environment was the reason for drawing his attention to the artefact: “…the design of that poster was attractive to me. They are on the payphone booth, which is isolated in the middle of a path. It's more obvious than the other ones on the wall...”.

When asked about the reflections of current feelings compared to the first-time encounter of the artefacts, most participants still felt fun towards the artefacts but in different degree. It seems that the experience of fun could wear off with time because the intensity of fun fades out with time as the degree of enjoyment from the discovery decreases. Nonetheless, some participants claimed they still felt the same way as their first-time encounter of fun-driven artefacts. As one of the participants said: “Yes, it is still fun, because it is really special. Maybe I should put this way, I've never seen a piece of graphic design which uses the shape-transforming approach like that among print ads, so I think it is really special...”. It appears that the higher intensity of fun generated from novelty could last for longer.
7. Conclusions

In this paper, we argue that designing for the experience of fun could be a valuable approach to graphic design and that to take this approach that requires we understand people’s spontaneous experience of fun with graphic design. By exploring the concept of fun and the nature of experience, and investigating the experience of fun in real-life contexts, the preliminary understanding of the experience of fun with graphic design was captured in our tentative framework: fun is the interplay among artefacts, people, and context, rather than a property of designs; people could experience fun with graphic design by engaging themselves in sensual, emotional and intellectual ways that are intertwined into the holistic experience of fun; the factors contributing to or influencing people’s experience of fun with graphic design are also identified as: “feeling attracted”, “challenge-achievement”, “out of expectation”, “positive emotions”, “social interaction” and “contextual factors”.

As Wright, McCarthy and Meekison [30] claim, we cannot design experience we can only design for experience. By gaining a holistic and systematic understanding of people’s experience of fun with graphic design, we could explore opportunities and insights for graphic designers to design for the experience of fun. For example, there seem to be different degrees of fun with graphic design. The further question is how to approach the experience of fun that is conceived as highly engaging and enjoyable? In graphic design, the sensual involvement of the experience of fun with artefacts mainly focuses in the visual domain. If we engage people by other sensual modalities like bodily reactions, perhaps people’s experience of fun could be further enhanced. Moreover, the intensity of fun might wear off with time, but by sharing, it could be sustained and be more intense. “Sharing fun” appears to be significant to enhance the experience of fun with graphic design. Considering social aspects of fun seems to have potential as an approach to designing for highly engaging and durable fun experience. Moreover, “sharing fun” could facilitate the effect of “word-of-mouth” with respect to mass communication in graphic design. The issues in relation to how to design for “social fun” with graphic design could be worth further investigation.

8. References


