A Case Of Values Conflict In The Video Game Design Field. A critique of Schön’s appreciative system.

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Abstract:  
Schön’s model of design as a reflective conversation with the situation is one of the most important models in design research, but it is not often criticized. This paper questions Schön’s vision of values by contrasting it with Dewey’s vision. It presents a case study from the video game industry to show the difference between Schön’s and Dewey’s value system. Game designers were interviewed about their values concerning casual games. The results show that some designers have had a change of values during a project: they moved from a negative position on casual games to a positive one. In terms of Schön’s fixed appreciative system, a change of values is unusual, and it risks jeopardizing the design project. But this fixedness is contradictory with the idea of conversation with the situation, and Dewey’s vision of values, which is more flexible, demonstrates stronger coherence with the model.

Keywords: game design, casual games, Donald Schön, John Dewey, values, appreciative system

1. Introduction

The way designers think and work is a significant object of study in the design field. And towards this end, Donald Schön’s contributions to the field have been important. His work has been described as a “reflective turn” in the design world (Bousbaci, 2008) and as a new “paradigm” in the field (Galle, 2011). However, as exposed during the last Design Research Conference, Schön’s work tends to be accepted without much questioning (Beck & Chiapello, 2016). Schön is highly cited and used in design research, but his concepts are rarely criticized or built upon. This paper is an attempt at expanding the discussion around Schön’s work. It aims to unpack some issues concerning his way of conceptualizing values in his model of the “reflective practitioner”(Schön, 1983).
Schön’s concept of design as a “conversation with the situation” is mostly based on Dewey’s pragmatist philosophy. In particular, Schön refers to Dewey’s concepts of “inquiry” and “transaction with the situation” both in his book, *The Reflective Practitioner* (Schön, 1983, p. 150), and in his paper, *The Theory of Inquiry: Dewey’s Legacy to Education* (Schön, 1992b). However, Schön did not follow Dewey on every aspect of his model of design as a “reflective conversation with the materials of a design situation” (Schön, 1992a). He had other sources of inspiration. For example, he used Vickers’s work on values and *appreciative systems* (Schön, 1983, p. 53).

In this paper, our aim is to question Schön’s use of Vickers’s work on values in his model of the reflective practitioner. First, we will describe Schön’s vision of values as *fixed* and suggest that Dewey’s vision is more *flexible*. Then, we will use a case study on casual game design values to examine whether Schön’s departure from Dewey’s vision was a coherent choice. The questions guiding our aim are: How do designers rely on design values? Are values *fixed* guidelines that direct the design process (Schön’s fixed vision), or are values *developed* during this process (Dewey flexible vision)?

2. Two visions of value

2.1 Schön’s vision of values: the appreciative system

In *The Reflective Practitioner*, Schön discussed his vision of values. Values are a part of a practitioner’s *appreciative system*, which is itself a part of what Schön referred to as the constants. In addition to the appreciative system, *media, language and repertoire, overarching theories* and a practitioner’s *role frames* are part of the constants.

The *appreciative system* is characterized as a set of values held by a practitioner. It is used to frame a design problem and to evaluate the solutions that arise from the design situation:

“It is, in the final analysis, on the basis of our appreciative systems, the values we place on things attended to or overlooked, that we judge the adequacy of a way of setting a design problem.” (Schön, 1990, p. 136)

Schön openly states that Vickers’s work inspired the term *appreciative system*:

“Clearly designing depends on such qualitative judgment. Geoffrey Vickers speaks of them as appreciations and he refers in his writings to the appreciative systems through which they are made. He posits, in effect, system of beliefs, values, norms and/or prizings that are possessed by individuals and/or sometimes shared by groups or whole cultures, on the basis of which positive and negative judgments of phenomena are made.” (Schön, 1992a, p. 7)

If we go back to Vickers, values (which include norms and beliefs) are interpreted as points of reference for judgment:

“Vickers sees norms as the ‘governing relations’ we currently take as given—though they too will change over time with new experiences and new interpretations and judgements.” (Checkland, 2005, p. 270)

According to Vickers, if appreciative systems are never totally fixed, they are quite slow to change and are *temporarily* seen as fixed. Indeed, for Schön, values are stable during a defined period – especially during a design project. This is why Schön’s describes them as “relatively solid references” (Schön, 1983, p.270), and adds that:
2.2 Dewey’s vision of values: the authentic moral judgment

In *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (Dewey, 2003 [1938]), Dewey devoted a chapter to judgment and morals. He begins by explaining the dominant vision of morals: there are ends-in-themselves whose “moral value” is known. Exercising moral judgment, then, means to implement actions to achieve these ends-in-themselves of great moral value. Concerning other desires or ends, the agent has no moral obligation and may proceed as he pleases:

“The common, perhaps prevailing, assumption is that there are objects which are ends-in-themselves; that these ends are arranged in a hierarchy from the less to the more ultimate and have corresponding authority over conduct. It follows from this view that moral ‘judgment’ consists simply in direct apprehension of an end-in-itself in its proper place in the scheme of fixed values.” (Dewey, 2003 [1938], p. 169)

According to Dewey, this model of moral judgment cannot function because what is described is not a genuine moral judgment. What is moral is predetermined, and individuals only have to adhere. The one who does not know how to act is not in a dilemma – he is just an ignorant who does not know which is the highest value he has to follow (Dewey, 2003 [1938])

Obviously, Dewey rejected this vision of morality based on values that one should use as a guide to determine its course of action. For Dewey, this is not an authentic moral judgment. Situations are always dilemmas – they are always troubled – and they cannot be solved by using values as prescriptions. He thus reconsiders what is a value.

Dewey distinguished the meaning of “to value” or “to prize” from “to evaluate” or “to appraise.” Prizing refers to an action that is made immediately, without thinking, and habits fit into this framework. This is not really a judgment, but more a spontaneous appreciation. On the contrary, appraising implies a form of thinking, of reflection. It is mediated through inquiry (Anderson, 2014).

Hildebrand gives a simple example of prizing versus appraising. He says he loves sugar and will then “value” a donut. However, that assessment does not decide whether to eat or not the donut. In order to know that, he must “evaluate” the situation, taking into account his health (Hildebrand, 2008, p. 1379). Evaluation is “the rational construction of desires, interests and purposes in a concrete situation” (Bidet, Quéré, & Truc, 2011, p. 9, our translation).

Evaluation helps answer questions such as: “Should we now commit ourselves to such an attitude? If we do, may we not regret it later” (Dewey, 2003 [1938], p. 174)? For Dewey, answering these questions demands imagining the consequences and the interaction of these consequences with other existential conditions. He thus concluded that “in order to obtain a grounded final judgment there also has to be evaluation or appraisal of principles” (Dewey, 2003 [1938], p. 175).
As Bidet et al. emphasize, Dewey never defines values as something guiding judgment from above but rather as something adjusted during the judgment process – and something that can be questioned and changed during inquiry:

“The principles and the reasons on which they [the judgments] are based are not, for Dewey, absolutes transcending the experience, but mere generalizations from past experience; these are tools to effectively examining problematic situations, and nothing more. Such is the Dewey central concern for values; rather than designing them in terms of mental processes, arbitrary preferences or abstract principles, he shows that values are things that happen in the world and that their making can and must be submitted to the methods of the inquiry.” (Bidet et al., 2011, p. 4, our translation)

Hence, Dewey saw values as adaptable to each unique situation. There is no higher value that will guide inquiry. One has to reflect on values in order to judge a specific situation. Values are not a fixed framework. They are part of inquiry and can be discarded and replaced. They are flexible.

3. The case of casual games

3.1 Context

To illustrate these abstract notions and show why it can be useful to know more about design values, we will present a case study from the video game design field demonstrating value conflicts encountered by designers working on casual games.

The concept of values has been on the rise in video game design. This rise involves the development of the Values at Play framework (Flanagan, Howe, & Nissenbaum, 2005; Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2007; Flanagan, Nissenbaum, Belman, & Diamond, 2007), the growing interest in values embedded in video games (Barr, Noble, & Biddle, 2007; Kultima, 2009; Kultima & Sandovar, 2016), and studies concerning values in video game companies (Tschang, 2007).

In this literature, the importance of values is often revealed during value conflicts (Flanagan et al., 2005; Kultima, 2009). Value conflict can happen in various situations where different people “hold” different, incompatible values. Resolving value conflict is an important subject of research because these conflicts can jeopardize the design project.

In this paper, we use the case of casual games design as an exemplar value conflict. Casual games are a type of video games that have eclipsed the stereotype of the “hardcore games” aimed at male teens who prefer particular activities (e.g. shooting or racing), and have reinforced the idea that games are accessible for all audiences (Juul, 2009). Casual gaming is a recognized phenomenon, which do not seem to fade, and its economic importance makes it a leading market for the games industry (Entertainment Software Association, 2011, 2016).

One might expect casual games to be viewed as a promising and exciting new category, but there is instead a predominantly narrow and pejorative vision of the sector. Casual games are seen as shallow, purely commercial products without any substance (Consalvo, 2009; Juul, 2009; Kuittinen, Kultima, Niemel, & Paavilainen, 2007).

For these reasons, we believe casual game creation is an exemplar value conflict in the sense that “designers [are] required to design for casual games which opposed their personal design preference” (Kultima & Sandovar, 2016, p. 351). We found similar “value conflicts” in our own study.
of casual game designers (Chiapello, 2012), thus we thought that the case of casual games design is well-fitted to illustrate an examination of design values.

3.2 Method
In order to gain insight about game designers practice, the study was designed to collect “professional knowledge” as defined by Donald Schön in *The Reflective Practitioner* (Schön, 1983).

We collaborated with eight game designers in the province of Quebec, Canada. The sample is intentionally non-probabilistic and was formed deductively from the literature, following Pires definition of a sample by homogenization (Pires, 1997). Each participant had worked as a lead designer on at least one casual game. We did not impose any definition of “casual game” and instead relied on the designers and their companies to designate their product(s) as casual games. The eight designers worked at five video game companies, which had different sizes and different target platforms, from Nintendo Wii to downloadable PC Games.

The collaboration was mainly done through interviews. Before the interview, participants worked through a booklet – designed by the researcher – to sensitize them to casual games design paradoxes in order to collect more substantive information during the interviews (Visser, 2005).

The interviews were semi-structured, and the designers were asked to build a “practice account” (Goodman, Stolterman, & Wakkary, 2011), which is a story that relates the events experienced during the development of a video game. Questions from the researcher helped designers articulate these stories. Participants were asked to share their experiences in different project phases, from pre-production to post-production, without any imposed theme. In this paper, we present only those results associated with the appreciative system.

4. Results
4.1 A devaluation of casual games
Among our participants, only two (coming from the same company) held a positive vision of casual games when they started working on them. The other six communicated negative sentiments – especially Participants 1, 3 and 8.

The first *a priori* perspective they had was that casual games were not good but made money anyway. Participant 3 described the vision he had during his first experience on a casual game: “For me, who did not have much experience, a casual game was a way to make money”. However, Participant 3 also found this financial success incomprehensible, since the game mechanics are “simple,” and the game system is obvious and lacking originality: “You can see the huge strings that pull everything, like for a puppet” (Participant 3).

Participant 1 and 6 also described casual games as “simple”, which they intended to be a pejorative description. And participant 8 reported that framing casual games as “simple” even provoked some division within companies:

“People think that ‘casual’ means small, simple games. And it even creates a mess inside the company because, basically, in our own company, people working on hardcore or next-gen projects saw in a negative light what happens on casual games”. (Participant 8)

These six participants also reported that casual games were deemed less interesting to design than hardcore games. They emphasized their appreciation for creating hardcore games and their distaste
for making casual games. And Participant 1 explained that making the kind of games they like is a motivating factor for designers in general:

“From the designer point of view, [when you make a casual game] the main feeling is that we will not make the game we want to play. [Designers] they want to make the games they want to play. This is an industry that is led primarily by passion, people are here by passion, that's why there are so many people who are ready to enter the industry. If they have the choice between a game that does not interest them and a game they want to play, it will be the second.” (Participant 1)

These responses lend credibility to the idea that casual games are not well respected by game design professionals. Our participant designers describe casual games in ways that could be interpreted as embodying negative values. These descriptions include framing casual games as economically driven, overly simple, and dissatisfying to design.

4.1 A change in values

Most of our participants seemed to be contributing of the negative vision surrounding casual games. However, some also explained that their perspective changed when they made their first casual game.

Participant 3 stressed the difficulty in designing “good” casual games. He explained that his vision evolved during the design process and he now believes that:

“[Designing casual games] has to be done seriously. It requires thinking ahead, and anyone cannot improvise himself creator of casual games.” (Participant 3)

For Participant 3, the design process turned out to be more interesting and engaging than initially expected. Similarly, Participant 8 explained the complexity of designing casual games using dancing games as an illustrative example:

“The dance games are complex [to design]. We must make perfect choreography, which will mix moves at a certain pace, in order to have a feeling of novelty, but not too many moves because otherwise you burn your players out, so it has to be done at very specific times...” (Participant 8).

Gradually, Participant 8 came to consider designing casual games as worthy of effort and questioned his initial negative assessment: “Are casual games really that stupid?” (Participant 8). Similarly, Participant 3 stressed the fact that making simple games for everyone is a form of expertise that ought to be valued:

“My concerns are more about what we could have done if we had had more experience in the team... It was the first time we made a casual game. In the video game industry, a team does not remain welded together and does not progress as a whole. Plans change, people are boarded out... In my case, I made two casual games and I went out of the genre. So can we say that it is an expertise that is lost?” (Participant 3).

The participants who started their projects with negative views of casual games – especially participants 3 and 8 – explained during interviews that their views changed with experience. Both participants refined the way they value casual games. Interestingly, whereas they used to criticize casual games for their simplicity, now simplicity is one of the qualities they value. Moreover, whereas initial assessments of casual games suggested that the design process was dull and uninteresting,
current perspectives suggest that it is in fact challenging and requiring important skills. Finally, while money may have been an initial reason for making casual games, participants’ perspectives seem to have softened. Making money is not the sole motivation for making casual games. Overall, our participants re-evaluated casual games (and casual game design) and seem to have shifted from negative views to positive ones.

5. Two different interpretations

How can we interpret these changes of view? It would seem as though the value our interviewees associated with casual games (and casual game design) changed deeply. Should we treat this as an epiphany for game designers or as something to be expected? Schön and Dewey offered different answers to this question.

5.1 In Schön’s view: a revolution in one’s appreciative system

Schön’s vision of values supports a straightforward explanation of the participants’ initial pejorative vision of casual games: there was a disjunction between designers’ appreciative systems and the project (since they did not like to play casual games), resulting in a value conflict (Schön, 1990).

Schön explains that one way to solve the conflict is to try to understand another appreciative system in order to make concessions. It is not to change one’s appreciative system, which is actually very difficult to do:

“Across processes of inquiry, differences in evaluation may not be objectively resolvable. Resolution of such difference depends on the little-understood ability of inquirers to enter into one another’s appreciative systems and to make reciprocal translations from one to the other.” (Schön, 1983, p.273).

This seems to fit the experience of Participant 8, who first said that he was satisfied with the game he designed even thought he would not play it: “Do I like the game I got? Yes! [...] Ok, as a player I will never play it. But I’m very happy with what I’ve done”.

However, this does not account for the change of value that this participant and Participant 3 seem to have experienced. By the end of their projects, both participants had a positive perspective on casual games – their values had changed. For Schön, this would be a unique event. Changing value requires substantial self-reflection, and Schön stressed that practitioners usually struggle to find ways to trigger this change (Schön, 1992b, p. 136).

So if we follow Schön’s vision of appreciative systems, our participants changing appreciative systems is an unusual phenomenon deserving of special attention. It is an event that could jeopardize the whole design process, since the evaluation of the solution can no longer be done with the same criteria. Finding the conditions and causes of this transformation would be worth a research in itself.

5.2 In Dewey’s view: the flexibility of human judgment

If we consider the transformation from Dewey’s perspective, then we might say that the designers were in a problematic situation that is similar to ones we encounter every day. On the one hand, their experience as gamers taught them that large, complex games are enjoyable. Consequently, they tend to value (or to prize) this type of game. However, confronted with the task of designing casual games, they revised their values according to the situation and embraced simplicity in games. They appraised the situation. The same re-evaluation happens concerning the (initial) prejudice
towards casual games. These prejudices were ultimately rejected as the designers gained exposure to this type of game.

Dewey explained that values are not applied blindly to a situation. They are formed according to a situation. Dewey characterized this as a form of “objectivity,” since these values are not just attached to the subject – they depend on the situation. Schön characterized Dewey as an “objectivist” because of the way Dewey considers values in his model:

“[Dewey] is well aware, it is true, that our constructed problems determine what facts we select for attention, and that our ways of constructing problems from problematic situations are subject to variation from culture to culture, person to person, time to time, and context to context. He appears, however, to hold a robust belief that ‘observed facts’ being just what they are, judgments about problems can be tested against them.” (Schön, 1992b, p. 123).

Schön seemed to think that Dewey did not take into account the individual and his subjectivity. We disagree. In our view, Dewey meant that values themselves can be subject to an inquiry – inquiry that blurs the distinction between subjective and objective since both the subject’s desire and the situation are taken into account. Thus, a designer can value complexity in certain situations and simplicity in others. One value does not have to supplant the other on an abstract scale of values. Each project (even a short one) is an event where one negotiates and actualizes its values.

From this perspective, the game designers’ changes of value are characteristic of the flexibility of human judgment. For Schön, the values of a practitioner may be a source of conflict. But for Dewey this is impossible. Values are always related to the situation and change according to it. One always has to actualize his values. This actualization is not a conflict. It is the regular way of exercising judgment. Changing values do not put a design project at risk. It is a normal phenomenon in the course of an inquiry.

6. Discussion

There are many ways of defining values. This study uses Schön’s and Dewey’s competing accounts of values, which, we believe, is of great interest for design thinking.

Schön is one of the most important authors in design research and his idea are not often criticized (Beck & Chiapello, 2016). Inspired partly by this lack of criticism, we want to argue that it is possible to see Schön’s vision of value as a flaw in his model of design as a reflective conversation with a situation.

By choosing the work of Vickers (instead of following Dewey) Schön went back to a conception of values as attached to the subject and separated from action. Values thus transcend action, which means they are not created in the course of action but determined a priori and applied to the project. This might be reassuring in the sense that it is not the role of the designer to interrogate values during the design process. Values are thus understood as a “constant” in an otherwise complex, uncertain and ever-changing process. But by fixing them, Schön denies a whole dimension of the conversation with the situation: the questioning of values.

Dewey’s view of value is consistent with the transactional dimension of the inquiry. The designer’s process is continuously examined and reflected upon, which leads to new meanings and new actions. If some parameters (like values) are suddenly fixed, then the transaction is stopped since the facts are judged according to a fixed framework from which nothing new can happen. The facts no longer
inspire new meaning. And, according to Schön, keeping the conversation with the situation alive is precisely what enables practitioners to deal with uncertain and complex situations.

In our study, none of the participants who experienced a change of values failed in their design projects. And they tended to view this change as an important step towards better casual game design.

Dewey’s conception of values might seem counter-intuitive or out of place in a world where everyone and everything – from politicians to corporations – claim to have strong, stable values. But these stable values might be insufficient in dealing with new phenomena, such as new styles of games, new types of audiences, or new usages. New situations bring new questions, and it seems simplistic to judge them using old values.

Based on our analysis, we suggest that while it might be reassuring to think about values as fixed, it might be useful for designers to treat values in a more flexible way in order to always stay reactive and creative. The way one “values their values” might have a significant impact on the project. Designers who hold on to their values might hinder their reflection-in-action and paralyze the design process.

7. Conclusion

This paper aim was to question Schön notion of appreciative system in his model of the reflective practitioner, especially the fact he used Vickers’ instead of Dewey’s vision of values. Using a case study coming from the video game industry, we illustrated how Schön’s vision of value could be revised using Dewey’s work in order to better fit the model of design as a conversation with the situation.

According to Schön, designers encounter “value conflicts,” which describes situations where designers hold values (too) tightly thus resulting in intractable dilemmas. We argue that our case study demonstrates that although Schön’s framework allows us to analyze value conflicts, it does not explain the change in designers’ values. This change, when occurring during a project, appears as an anomaly for Schön – a sudden renegotiation of values, which has the potential to disturb the design process.

However, following Dewey’s approach, every situation is an opportunity to reassess one’s values. Values are not strict guidelines to follow but tools to evaluate a situation. Importantly, they can change depending on the situation. Dewey’s perspective on the case study reveals a regular inquiry into values – with the emergence of new, improved set of values during the project. None of our interviewees who experienced a change in values felt that the change jeopardized the project.

It also seems that value conflicts can impede designing since they hinder reflection-in-action. Adopting Dewey’s vision of values thus seems like an interesting and useful strategy for designers to conduct the game design process as a conversation with the situation.

Moreover, the results suggest that Dewey’s vision is better fitted to envision design value on innovative design projects, such as projects for new audiences or new hardware, etc. In these situations, new values are necessary. It does not make sense to hold tight to old ones.

However, adopting such a vision might not be easy for practitioners. We suggest that it is the role of design programs to facilitate aspiring designers’ reflections on their own values. The reflective questions are not necessarily about which values to hold, but about what is a value and why a designer should hold or change them.
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