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The ‘Story’ as an Alternative Mechanism for Revealing the Silent Language of Objects

Abstract

This paper explores the idea of ‘story’ as an alternate mechanism for reflection on the relationship between designer, user and object. The intention is to give voice to the shifting, context-driven, location of desire in our interactions with objects as creators and users. It argues that stories in the style of Hans Christian Andersen provide an alternate way of communicating the ideas and feeling embedded within the creations we produce.

The story element of the paper is a mechanism used to allow an object to speak, to tell its tale. Within this paper the story talks to and for, the light design ‘UMM’. The UMM is juxtaposed with a relatively mundane object, a box of matches. This provides a context that allows the character of the object to be expressed in a way that is different to a more ‘normal’ critique or analysis of objects.

The paper presents an introductory context, then a ‘story’ for reflection followed by an elaboration of Hans Christian Andersen’s writing style. The paper attempts to bridge the ‘object design’ practice/ theory conundrum providing an alternative mechanism for revealing the messages embedded in the silent language of objects through the mechanism of a ‘story’.

Biography

Michael Dickinson’s professional background has been in Industrial Design, graduating from the University of Technology, Sydney. He has designed consumer products but has also utilised his skills in the fields of TV and theatre. This practical experience has been added to by employment within the Centre for Photovoltaic Devices and Systems, a research facility within Electrical Engineering at the University of New South Wales. While there, a Master of Design by Research was undertaken; his thesis was “The Design of a Static Concentrating Photovoltaic Roof Tile”. He is currently employed by the University of Newcastle in the School of Design, Communications and Information Technology where he is responsible for design theory subjects.

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Introduction

“There are two kinds of contact, that of quality, and that of power. By the former a body can be touched only by a body; by the latter a body can be touched by an incorporeal reality, which moves that body” (Aquinas).¹ The silent language of objects is powerful and located in the imagination.

This preamble introduces *Umm and the Matchbox*, a ‘story’ for reflection. This is followed by a short justification for using a Hans Christian Andersen-styled story as a mechanism for us to hear the silent language of objects as opposed to a clinical report which, as Wood has argued, can be the equivalent of being “clubbed to death with words”.²

To give voice to objects a ‘story’ format is being experimented with. Language is an issue here. Csikszentmihalyi says:

The written word allows us to understand better what is happening within ourselves. In recording real or imaginary events, the writer arrests the evanescent stream of experience by naming its aspects and making them enduring in language...thus understand more accurately how we feel and what we think. Fragile thoughts and feelings are transformed by words into concrete thoughts and emotions.³

The thoughts of Wood and Csikszentmihalyi identify apposing views, so any attempt to reveal the silent language of objects, the story embedded in a design, must acknowledge it is dealing with a very fragile, flexible entity. The translation could be lost or reduced to dry words of no real value. According to Wood, “In the academic context the idea of ‘rigour’ stands for ‘logical accuracy and exactitude’ and derives from the Latin word ‘rigere’-to be stiff. As such it has come to signify not only strict enforcement of rules but also great harshness or austerity”.⁴ By utilising a story to give voice to the emotion and thinking instilled into a design, the author hopes to reveal not only the objects silent language, but present a reflection upon the ever-changing positions between the designer, object and user.

Umm and the Matchbox (A story by the author in the style of Andersen)

There was a well-travelled man of taste and discernment, who being well-travelled had seen many things, as travellers do, or so I am told. And so it was that these exploring eyes did spy a lamp, the light of which did please his eye. First impressions have their effect, so his desire for the object took root. The reason for this story is based crucially on that instant, that initial first reaction. For I am the artisan who created that object of desire, of pleasure, but without the meeting with this particular travelling man, the events as set out would not have occurred. The story could well be another story altogether. So in time it came to pass that I was summoned to the gentleman's residence to present the lamp, whose name was Umm. Umm preferred her name pronounced with the 'u' of beauty not the 'u' of mundane. This was important because she was a proud lamp, proud of her heritage, and she thought these things made a difference.

Umm took her place in the house of the well-travelled man. She was placed on a pedestal, a commanding position from where she could see the comings and goings of the household. It was a happy house, neither grand and overbearing, nor cold and sterile. Umm was happy to find herself placed in such a prominent position in such a distinguished house. You see, this object of desire knew her value. She was the product of love, and even though she had no facility to talk, she spoke the language of the unheard, a silent language reserved for objects that capture and impart desire and pleasure.

She was proud of her lineage: she had sisters who had enticed their way into other places of importance, fulfilling their destiny of being an object of desire; dispensing their affective power; waiting silently, expectantly, to catch the eye of the passing beholder. Umm enjoyed enticing the eye with her sleek lines, allowing the eye to caress her form until deep in the viewer's heart, the cup of joy or desire would take its fill, sometimes only taking a sip, sometimes requiring the noisy slurps of rushed attention, until a point was reached where a slight cracking of the lips occurred, sometimes producing an 'ah', sometimes an 'oh', sometimes rendering a slight sense of embarrassment or a giggle, but always leaving the sweet taste of pleasure on the viewer's lips, taken straight from the alchemist's cauldron of pleasure.

She was conceived in Italy between Florence and Siena, in the sleepy remains of the medieval town, Colle Val d'Elsa. The town was perched on a rocky outcrop, the business centre of the town having apparently slid down the hill. This had occurred during the Mussolini years with its resulting implications for the architecture. The old town centre still existed, but was presently being invaded by Danes 'snow-birding' the winter in the exotic remnants of its old-world charm. From its earliest days Colle Val d'Elsa had always been, and still remained, a glass-crafting centre; a centre of excellence and innovation, where ideas were exchanged, created and given form. Umm's creator, the artisan, was there both for those reasons and also to learn more, more about the mysteries and science of glass. But this was no longer the Middle Ages. To the east of the township was a huge factory where the artisan spent most of his days, not a Dickensian monstrosity, but a modern facility, clean and organised. It continued the tradition of local glass production but followed the worship of technology and the pursuit of efficiency.

During the day, the artisan learnt from the masters the wonders of working and manipulating the liquid crystal we call glass. During the day, the glass was dealt with as an inanimate material, observed and recorded with scientific rigour for its matter-of-fact properties. But at night, the ambience of the Tuscan Hills mixed with the lessons of the day. In Italy it is impossible not to see beauty. It is captured at every turn, in the little nuances that can turn a mundane thing into an object of desire, the little touches. And so it was that the seeds of an idea were planted in the mind of the artisan. It started as a simple dimple in the forming of a glass, something that captured the voluptuousness of a peach with the cheeky beauty of Italy's finer sex.

It may have stopped there, but the artisan had been busy planting seed elsewhere. His lover was with child; he knew this as every day her shape changed as the external surface of her body grew to accommodate the love that grew inside. Umm was growing as well, though both offspring were still nameless at that point. Developing in unison, the artisan's notion would develop into an object that would try to capture - as well as is possible without insulting "Beldame Nature"⁵ - to evoke the beauty of life in formation. In due course the artisan returned home, but the concept for Umm had taken hold. He searched out other artisans to help him as this was not to be any object, but an object of desire; and like a birth it would be difficult, an undertaking where, because of skill and experience, many things were known. But in the end, like childbirth, it would venture into the unknown, it would be risky. This piece needed to capture an idea, a notion; to *embody* desire, not simply to execute a function.

The furnace was lit, the artisans gathered. It was time. A crystal of white was selected. Not any white, this white had to be the colour of clouds, of dreams; the colour of beauty, clarity and hope; not hard or sterile. A white that allowed light to pass through it and impart desire, presenting a glow that asked the viewer's mind to stop and linger, caress the form and savour the

moment. To this was added layer upon layer of the purest Tasman crystal. Impurity was banished. Like layers of meaning, a new coating was added with each passage through the furnace. In the stifling heat, the artisans performed a dance, an industrial ballet, poised and positioned in a precisely orchestrated performance between the fires of danger and desire, catching and throwing, teasing and manipulating the slow formation of the subject of their energy, their thoughts and desires. Passed from one artisan to another as it grew, reaching the very limits of the artisans' ability to carry on. Then she arrived. They could go no further. Artisan and object ceased their frenetic activity, satiated, and cooled off in their respective ways.

The Umm is a complicated affair: capturing simple elegance has never been as simple as it appears. As the artisans gather to admire the fruit of their labours, her affective life has begun.

Located as she is now, prominently in the room of the well-travelled man, Umm beams forth its message of desire to his many guests. She is proud of her position as pleasure-giver. From her vantage point she notices that some guests also give pleasure; some come only for business; still others merely clutter the room for a while and are gone. She comes to realise that the difference between objects and people is not so great. Some are useful, some are for show, and yet other guests serve no particular purpose at all. They are a dime a dozen, like the matchbox, which has been left thoughtlessly on the coffee table. To her they are simply clutter. From her vantage point she contemplates the dilemma of the matchbox, an object of mass production. She looks at the matches with pity, using a condescending eye. Soldiers of uniformity who march forth on a short, tawdry life, like many common objects which are to be found everywhere; uncared for, often lost, forgotten and discarded. Utilitarian yes, but not created as an object of pleasure or desire. She laments the sorry predicament of the matches.

This line of thought consumes the Umm as she basks in her elevated position, illuminating the room, casting her light on the other characters that make up these four walls and a roof, which the well-travelled man proudly calls his home. She amuses herself by ranking the collected objects in order of their ability to provide pleasure to the master. There is the comfy chair, the picture that was on the wall only the other day but having lost favour, was gone in an instant, the TV and the remote. Oh, the remote. Hideous little upstart! Forever running away, and the cause of no end of fuss. Desired yes, but such a love-hate relationship. And the matchbox, sorry excuse of a thing that it is. Cast into a position of prominence, but without care or deliberation.

Then, without warning, she felt her light source fade. Through the window she could see her elegant cousins, the streetlights, also dimming in unison. Finally, the red dot on the TV was also gone and she was left in total darkness. As disconcerting as this was she was not panicked; she recognised it as a blackout and settled herself down to wait it out. These things fix themselves you know, they always do.

A key finds its way into the door lock; it turns. The tumblers click, the door opens, a switch is flicked, a grumble ensues. The master scans the room, tracing the imagined outline of Umm in disappointment. He sees only the fused dark form of nothingness. The couch and the TV have become one. He looks at the space where a picture had hung, but despite the darkness, knows it is no longer there. He is worried about standing on the remote, a pesky creature that could be anywhere. He surveys the ground ahead but sees only the black amorphous void where the entirety of his treasured objects meld into one. He estimates the location of the coffee table and by stealth moves forward to the right-hand corner. Using his hands as eyes, he searches for the matchbox: the object of his desire. He caresses the form of the box to find the top and enter inside, careful not to spill its treasured contents. "...ritch!... how it sputtered and blazed!"⁶ A match burst forth with light, losing his life to please his master.

The master's collected objects are all there, in their places as they should be. By the light of the match, his eyes caress the Umm. For the first time he sees her not in her intended luminous white. She has picked up the splutters and fizz of the match's ignition. There is a definite reddish hue, like a blush. The thought occurs to him that the Umm is embarrassed as he sets off in the direction of the kitchen in search of a candle.

The room is now dark again. The Umm is humbled. The ability to give pleasure is a fleeting thing. At present it dances on the tip of a matchstick, wafted with each step by the air that surrounds it.

Epilogue

When Hans Christian Andersen used language he did not dumb down his message; rather he enlivened it by using techniques that spoke to everyone. There are lessons in design to be learned from reflecting on Andersen's style and approach. Csikszentmihalyi makes the case that "An intellectual problem is not restricted to a particular domain. Indeed, some of the

most creative breakthroughs occur when an idea that works well in one domain gets grafted to another and revitalizes it.”⁷ This can be seen in Andersen’s work, his ability to cross over between domains, even into that often lost domain, a childlike perception of the world.

He typically does not embed a moral into the story; he lets the allegorical and ironic levels impart meaning. This is a distinctive feature of his writing, a move away from the type of fairytales produced for the French court by Charles Perrault and his contemporaries⁸, writers of stories like *Cinderella* and *Little Red Riding Hood*. Andersen enters into a conversation in much the same way as we do when we encounter the objects we find in everyday life. These are encounters in which we are left to draw our own conclusions. The communication real or imagined presents for us “...the queer secret life that may enter into inanimate objects, and possess anything from a porcelain figure to a darned needle.”⁹ Just to entertain the notion that what we design can have a secret life of its own opens our mind to new perspectives.

“Indeed the fairy tale world, for all its strangeness, is the world of common experience. However complex a man’s development, however numerous his activities, he lives essentially in three things; in human relationships, in imagination, and in his relation to whatever final reality there may be.”¹⁰ Robb goes on to argue that the “miracle of Andersen’s art” is that he reveals ideas through the private imagery of children, which allows a fundamental joy of life to be experienced or even re-experienced.

His stories express living thought and feeling, just as our designs should. Stories allow us to perceive with clarity, yet understand that whole which often eludes definition. When we think in terms that a child can understand: using their language, we are allowed to re-enter, as Robb says, those

... rare intervals in which life, holding, as it were, all its elements in solution, is so illuminated for us, that we see it no longer as the aimless sequence that it often seems to be, but as a whole in which everything has its appointed place, and from which no atom falls away. Imagination and experience, knowledge and faith are, for a shining instant, perfectly attuned.¹¹

At this point there is a common language between the object, the viewer and the outer world.

His use of language is revealed by studying *The Ghost*¹² a pre-existing story and *Travelling Companion*¹³, Andersen’s version of the tale. Grønbech’s arguments for the success of the reworking are: “First, he put into print spoken language with all its inconsistencies of logic and syntax; second he removed all those words and expressions, particularly the abstract ones, that only adults used.”¹⁴ This argument has contemporary applications, exemplified by the UK-based firm Parable Consulting, which uses ‘Story’ techniques to enhance its clients’ competitiveness, arguing “Facts, information and data are not the same as knowledge and insight.”¹⁵ There have been a number of academic explorations of the idea of ‘Story’ as a way of revealing complex issues (Dunne¹⁶, Wehrle, N.¹⁷ and Myers, C.A.¹⁸). The story produced by Kidd, C¹⁹, is also worth noting, which through the mechanism of a story provides an amusing but insightful reflection on design.

Language use is critical. Andersen successfully rendered inanimate objects with life, with voice. What can we learn from how he did this, and should it affect how we write about the objects we design? Grønbech suggests “The simple, pseudochildish narrative style is no more than an intriguing disguise, a refined naiveté permitting irony or seriousness to have a stronger hold.”²⁰ Whether it is a trick or not, understanding how objects can have a language opens the doors to a greater understanding of how designs are perceived.

Andersen stopped using the terms ‘fairy’ or ‘tale’ after his first publication, referring to his later creations as *Eventyr* or ‘stories’. Mitchell states that “During his lifetime he was by no means principally concerned with writing tales and still less with writing for children”²¹, but when he did write a story he allowed us to see the secret life of objects. Designers who take the time to reflect on the possibilities opened through an exploration of the secret lives of their designs, will be better equipped to reveal the silent language of their designs.

¹ Aquinas, T. 1259, quoted from ‘The Electronic Disturbance’, *Critical Art Ensemble*, Autonomedia, Brooklyn, New York, 9.

² Wood, J. ‘The Culture of Academic Rigour: Does design research really need it?’, *The Design Journal*, Volume 3, Issue 1, 50.

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- ³ Csikszentmihalyi, M. *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, 1997, 238.
- ⁴ Wood, J. 'The Culture of Academic Rigour: Does design research really need it?', *The Design Journal*, Volume 3, Issue 1, 48.
- ⁵ Hill, J.S. *John Milton: Poet, Priest and Prophet*, Macmillan, London, 1979, 54.
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- ⁸ Perrault, C. *Histoires ou contes du temps passé avec des moralités*, Paris, 1697.
- ⁹ Robb, N.A. *Four in Exile*, Kennikat Press, Port Washington, New York, 1968, 128.
- ¹⁰ Robb, N.A. *Four in Exile*, Kennikat Press, Port Washington, New York, 1968, 135.
- ¹¹ Robb, N.A. *Four in Exile*, Kennikat Press, Port Washington, New York, 1968, 153.
- ¹² Grønbech, B. *Hans Christian Andersen*, Twayne Publishers, Boston, 1980, 90.
- ¹³ Andersen, H.C. *Eighty Fairy Tales*, tran. R.P. Keigwin, Pantheon Books, New York, (with preface by Elias Bredsdorff) 1976.
- ¹⁴ Grønbech, B. *Hans Christian Andersen*, Twayne Publishers, Boston, 1980, 89.
- ¹⁵ Raymond, M. (Ed), *Viewpoint: The trends brands futures and ideas magazine*, Metropolitan Publishing BV, Amsterdam, Netherlands. No. 12, 2003, 66.
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- ¹⁹ Kidd, C. *The Cheese Monkeys: A novel in two semesters*, Scribner, New York, 2001
- ²⁰ Grønbech, B. *Hans Christian Andersen*, Twayne Publishers, Boston, 1980, 92.
- ²¹ Mitchell, P.M. *A History of Danish Literature*, Det Berlingske Bogtrykkeri, Denmark, 1957, 150.