How slow design and play theory can combine to create a better framework for designers

Abstract:

This paper explores the relationship between slow design and play theory with an emphasis on the latter as a possible solution to the shortfalls of the former. It looks at these with the thought that embracing slowness in design could help make a more user centred and environmentally sound design practice, aiming to create products which fulfil the objectives required of them. This is done through an examination of the slow movement from slow food to slow design, with a discussion of the potential shortfalls in slow design as a viable design movement. The essay defines play in itself looking at theorists such as Frederich Schiller, Karl Groos and Hilde Hein, then uses a framework created by psychologist Jean Piaget, which distils play into a set of activities - mastery, make believe and rules - to discuss what play as an activity can offer. The essay then looks at what elements of play can be applied to slow design to counter the issues discussed previously, how play can offer new methods and experiences, be educational and exploratory and support a successful design practice. It shows how Piaget's play methodologies are applicable to slow design and where they already feature.

Through this conversation a resolution is reached where the theories and ideas suggested about play by Piaget can be used as an aid by the slow designer in order to create an exciting, contemporary slow design practice, and allow the designer to take appropriate time in the design process, make informed design decisions and the freedom of expression to create well considered outcomes. This conclusion offers a practical and fun option for exploration, openness and inclusivity within slow design.

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Introduction

This paper explores the relationship between slow design and play theory with an emphasis on the latter as a possible solution to the shortfalls of the former. It looks at these with the thought that embracing slowness in design could help make a more user centred and environmentally sound design practice, aiming to create products which fulfil the objectives required of them. This essay provides an examination of the slow movement and of the potential shortfalls in slow design, defines play in itself, then uses a framework created by psychologist Jean Piaget, which distils play into a set of activities - mastery, make believe and rules - to discuss what play as an activity can offer. The essay then discusses the shortfalls of slow design in the context of play and Piaget's framework showing how play can be used as an aid by the slow designer, looking at what elements of play can be applied to slow design, how play can offer new methods and experiences, be educational and exploratory and support a successful design practice.

Slow

Slow as a philosophy began as a reaction to contemporary farming, food production and consumption practices and was known as the slow food movement.   Originating from Piedmont, north west Italy in the late 1980s slow food was in opposition to what could be called a fast way of living. Price characterises this as 'the here -and-now mindset , being on the go, at lightning speed 24/7 [which] seems to be modernity's approach to going about daily affairs' (2009, p.23) where slow is 'a cultural revolution against the notion that faster is always better. … It's about seeking to do everything at the right speed. ... It's about quality over quantity in everything'(Honore, 2008).

Slow food is a commitment to the localised growing and traditional, artisan production, sitting, sharing and conversing over food in a relaxed manner, along with a sense of community built through tacit knowledge of the producers being shared with the patrons, history and narrative of food through production, tradition and respectful consumption.
This unhurried, deep thinking approach to food led to a global movement which expanded into philosophies and lifestyles, connecting humans with their everyday - meals, possessions, cultures, jobs and more.
Slow is a philosophical commitment to living at an appropriate pace and doing things as well as possible.

Fast and slow do more than just describe a rate of change. They are shorthand for ways of being, or philosophies of life. Fast is busy, controlling, aggressive, hurried, analytical, stressed, superficial, impatient, active, quantity-over-quality. Slow is the opposite: calm, careful, receptive, still, intuitive, unhurried, patient, reflective, quality-over-quantity. (Honore, 2005, p.13)

Since its inception the slow movement has branched into many areas including parenting, reading, fashion and gardening and has also become a design movement. Taking the principles of the slow movement and applying to them to design practice, slow design refers to a methodology for designers. Working within this paradigm allows them to take appropriate time within their design and making processes, and to develop their practice at due pace. Slow design can be considered a politicised stance as these 'design activists … demand that we pause to examine rather more different time frames. Long term horizons are invoked by the sustainability debate but rarely given form or substance' (Fuad-Luke, 2009, p.123). Slow design has a consciousness of decisions, of impact and of society. It focuses on materials, production, outcomes and life-cycles. With environment in mind it looks at traditions and technologies, tacit know how and knowledge sharing (both physical and mental). It steps out of the given constructs for design and opens itself to evolution and new systems, along with potential new structures and guidelines developed by the practitioner for the practitioner. It has many proponents including design activist Alastair Fuad-Luke, who has championed slow design through his work with SlowLab, maker Helen Carnac who uses walking as part of her practice and curated the 2009 exhibition *Taking Time: Craft and the slow revolution* and researcher Rebecca Earley who used slow design to explain her Top 100 project.

SlowLab, formed in New York in 2003, comprises of a mixture of designers and architects. Their aim is to promote slowness in design, in part by creating a set of slow design principles 'as a positive catalyst … [towards] individual, socio-cultural and environmental well-being' (SlowLab, 2008)) and continued with active projects. In short, their manifesto is: reveal, expand, reflect, engage, participate and evolve. (Strauss & Fuad-Luke, 2008).

This set of guidelines is a typical example of a framework for slow design. From their research SlowLab have developed several projects both as a group and as individuals. For example, in an effort to create connections between people and their jobs, board member Judith van den Boom creates 'warm relationships' between herself and the manufacturers of her pottery lines, from the manager down to the factory floor, collaborating with employees on her designs. (SlowLab, 2008)

Another example is Slow Ways of Knowing, a group project focussing on the art of walking and exploring. Following historic trails and investigating recognisable artifacts in order to encourage responses, actions, 'sensory awareness and intuitive imagining' from the participants. (SlowLab, 2008) This project picks up on other slow actions, such as walking and taking in one's environment, similar to the "sitting at a table to eat principle" of the slow food movement.

Due to its artisanal roots, slow design has come to imply a high level of craftsmanship and quality in the process, material and end result and an gives expectation of tacit knowledge, time and effort, although this is not necessarily an accurate assumption of its meaning.

These expectations could mean high costs for materials and workmanship, leading to consumer exclusivity as previously seen in the Arts and Crafts movement. This implied need for practice and training, reliance on tradition and heritage could lead to a lack of spontaneity in the design process. These potential issues lead to the question how can slow design be further democratised?

One methodology that could address these potential issues is by using theories of play within the slow design process.

Play

Play is an action is widely acknowledged as a recreational or diversional activity. It can be undertaken inside or out, alone or with others.   It can be realistic or entirely fictional, with or without rules, boundaries and equipment.

In the late 18th century philosopher Frederich Schiller suggested that everyone has the impulse within them to play and that the excess energy of childhood results in play, a manifestation of non-pragmatic, free, loose exercise and expression. Schiller said 'the play impulse will endeavor to receive as it would itself have produced, and to produce as the sense aspires to receive' (1994, p.74). He then goes on to say 'this play impulse would aim at the extinction of time in time and the reconciliation of becoming with absolute being, of variation with identity' (Schiller, 1994, p.74). To play is to be lost in ones own world and circulate energy and knowledge within oneself from play activity.

Psychologist Karl Theodor Groos stated in the early 20th century that children play to practice actions they will need as they mature. He 'saw in play a phenomenon of growth, growth of

thought and of activity' (Piaget, 1951, p.151). He defined play as a trial and error exercise in which to develop adult functions.

Aesthetics researcher Hilde Hein says 'human play … is expression intermediary between our sensuous, animal nature and our formal or purely rational nature' (1968, p.61). Her understanding is that the longstanding philosophical links between play and aesthetic activity are well founded and says that 'our understanding of art and aesthetic experience might profit from an elaboration and clarification of the concept of play' (Hein, 1968 p.71)

From these theories we can see play as helping understanding of environment and situations, as an instinctive reaction, lacking in pressures, giving gentle, flexible, often self imposed boundaries and allowing for freedom of expression

This essay focuses on the theories of Jean Piaget as these are most applicable to slow design. Piaget says that although play is autotelic, its use goes beyond that. Play allows us to create skills in actions, and then use them in real life, practicing within the realm of play then applying actions outside it to create our own balance of 'assimilation and accommodation' (Piaget, 1951, p.87). Piaget's three classes serve well as a general framework within which to view play; games of mastery, games with rules and games of make-believe and fantasy. He feels that these divisions create a manageable, all-encompassing set.

In his book Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood (1951) Piaget says that play is a way of mastering functional actions, and once these are mastered they are then are repeated through pragmatic use or pleasure. Thus all actions made through choice and not necessity could be considered play. As play is a relaxed activity the urgency of need is removed, so to master an action through play rather than reality allows us the time to commit to the repetition of actions needed. Once we have mastered a task through play we may acquire a 'feeling of virtuosity or power' (Piaget, 1951, p.89), giving us the confidence to use that skill in a non-play situation.

Make-believe or imaginative play is, to Piaget, a method of exploring representations as a real experience. He says it is a way of linking things or situations to one another, and also back to one's ego as an 'expansion of tendencies' (Piaget, 1951, p.87). Play is 'a symbolic transposition which subjects things to the child's activity' (Piaget, 1951, p.87) and tends to aim only for the individuals satisfaction. He implies that although this play format always links elements to our own experience and knowledge, through use of our imagination we can expand our knowledge and understanding of the new. Possibly by always linking things back to

ourselves we make new experiences more familiar, thus feel safer and so open up the possibility for further exploration and comprehension through make-believe or pretending.

Piaget suggests a couple of interpretations of rules. He says that they could be ritualistic, such as sucking your thumb to imply sleep, or emotion based (Piaget uses the example of not walking on cracks in the pavement). The details of these rules can also be used out of context (not walking on the cracks when you are on a non-cracked surface). Rules can be used to represent the constraints of a situation and can be seen as 'constructions which are still spontaneous but which imitate reality' (Piaget, 1951, p.87).
He also says that rules can be 'intellectually complex' (Piaget, 1951, p.106) and that 'rules which have been handed down by the social tradition of children and which change a sensory-motor situation into an organised competition.' (Piaget, 1951, p.108). Rules could be seen as systemic, either for offering equilibrium on the (literal) playing field by offering boundaries to adhere to or a system of elimination, by which the best participant plays longest.

Play in slow design
These play practices are often seen in design and making, albeit under other names or unacknowledged.

Malcolm Gladwell quotes Levitin as saying 'ten thousand hours of practice is required to achieve the level of mastery associated with being a world-class expert - in anything' (Gladwell, 2009, p.40). In slow design repetition, revisiting and practice are common place; to reach 10,000 hours, to become an artisan, a master, one must form good habits. This often involves apprenticing, learning skills, copying actions or traditional methods, building and rebuilding, designing and making objects, old and new. To become a virtuoso one must be engaged in ones process as 'all craftsmanship is on founded on skill developed to a high degree' (Sennett, 2009, p.20).

Make-believe is as important in slow design as play, creative thinking encourages us to expand beyond that which we already know. Speaking about the Bauhaus as a ludic approach to design education Frayling says 'the creative industries want to above all to be stimulated with strong creative ideas. And the experimental workshop is a good place to start' (2011, p.135) The explorative nature of make-believe exists in slow design, particularly in such projects as SlowLab's Slow Ways of Knowing.

Rules also exist in slow design, whether they are followed or broken, new ones made or old ones remade is the player's/designer's choice. Traditions within design could be seen as a form of systemic rule book, offering a set of boundaries within which to design.

However spontaneous writings or rewritings of design rules can appear through the use of new materials, or in cross disciplinary collaborations amongst other experiments, linking this element of practice back to make-believe as systemic rules from one's normal design practice are then applied to unusual situations, materials or ideas, becoming more ritualistic. Material traditions in jewellery design usually dictate preciousness, however if that was to be taken as a ritualistic rule or out of context, non-precious materials might be used, worked to a traditional design, or not.

Piaget's play theory and slow design have several things in common. The freedom of expression they offer mean both the player and the designer have the opportunity to communicate themselves, experiment with themselves and their ideas through these methodologies.

Both play and slow design can be planned. In play this could be the laying out of the rules. Slow design could be seen as relying upon planning to an extent as this allows the designer to allocate appropriate time to the stages of the design process.

Play explores and pushes rules and boundaries, slow design questions accepted boundaries. Both allow the participant freedom to understand their place in the world further; play explores in an informal, safe environment while, for slow design, exploration is an part of the journey to greater understanding, engagement, and potentially a more holistic design practice.

One of the problems discussed about slow design was that the implied need for tacit knowledge and training could deny spontaneity within design practice. Make-believe within design practice could encourage spontaneity, as could the use of either ritualistic or systemic rules.

Where slow design could offer a framework for an expected result, through the workmanship of certainty (where the certainty is provided by the framework) and could allow for exploration within set boundaries, play offers a framework with no set boundaries, except those constructs set at the time. Although traditional play comes with systemic rules, as we are looking for spontaneity here we would look to the ritualistic area of the rule framework set by Piaget here, to explore one's practice within the workmanship of risk.

The educational value of play, through mastery, make believe and rules can increase tacit knowledge of the player, it has intrinsic value and builds skills. So the slow designer, by embracing play as part of his or her practice could improve his or her knowledge of his or her field.

As the expectation of quality from slow design could stifle freedom within design practice, play, as part of design practice, could help create an instinctive freedom of expression, particularly as there is often no expected result from a play session by the participant.

As the player can be lost in play, so the slow designer should be able to lost in design. Piaget's notion of make-believe in play as a way of linking things back to oneself as an 'expansion of tendencies' (Piaget, 1951, p.87) translates to slow design in choosing to take time to play within the design practice, allowing the slow designer to lose themselves in play. Make-believe play can be used as a tool to increase understanding of one's own practice by linking old and new, familiar and unfamiliar. Hence the notion of choosing to take appropriate time to play while designing becomes imperative rather than luxury.

Playing within slow design should mean the designer examines the final needs and uses of the product aimed for, mastering the actions needed of it, make-believing as the user or consumer, and using their parameters as rules. By enacting as many outcomes as possible the designer should then be able to make informed choices about form, materials, and manufacture leading to a fully thought out end product, appropriately made and priced.   This should eliminate exclusivity in some ways and give integrity to the final product.

By allowing a different route through slow design practice, play could help broaden the appeal and understanding of slowness in design. Play could be used to explain slow design philosophies to new people potentially previously excluded, it could help open up traditional disciplines and skills to more people by allowing them to make-believe as practitioner, thus taking out some of the inaccessibility created by the perceived need for tacit knowledge and by using play as a method for sharing.

Conclusion: Play theory and slow design as good design practice

The ludic exploration of ideas through mastery, make believe and rules could allow slow design a new framework in order to consider its practice of questioning and standing against given norms. Play could offer a safe arena within which to experiment with this political side of slow design practice. Play can give the designer the space to explore ideas and allow their practice, ideas and products to mature in new ways.

Hein says play 'by definition is spontaneous activity engaged in exclusively for its own sake, [and that] ... to value it for its possible consequences is a denial of its essence' (Hein, 1968, p.68). However through mastery, make believe and rules, slow design could use play to explore ideas with no expectation of what the results should be, only knowing that the results of the play session will be of interest, regardless of what they are, keeping the playness in play. This involves an amount of trust in the notion of play from the designer but, as play has a long history of being educational and successfully exploratory this trust is well placed. This works with the principles of slow design as well - in reference to the SlowLab manifesto, play could encourage the revealing of new experiences, expansion beyond givens to look further than accepted uses, forms and lifespans of things. Play can be reflective, engaging and participatory, and also allow evolution: 'Slow design recognizes that richer experiences can emerge from the dynamic maturation of artifacts and environments over time' (SlowLab, 2008). Play is an activity that can lead to learning and understanding, it can increase communication and should be used as a tool for slow design.