

The Emotional Life of Objects

Souvenirs of life? The importance of objects around us

Count your family members. Count your friends. Count your loves, your colleagues, your enemies and your idols. You probably have more relationships than you first thought.

Tally the successes and failures; the times of elation and times of worry; the important times, moments you'll remember forever, moments that changed your life. Now notice all the objects around you. They are the witnesses to these personal experiences. Their account is silent, but you remember. You remember because their very existence serves to remind you.

We do not fully realise our relationship with objects, though they play a huge part in our lives. We interact with products all the time, from the moment we wake to the moment we fall asleep. This interaction is both physical and psychological.

Mrs. Jones pours the tea for her daughter. Of course to pour the tea Mrs. Jones must physically interact with the teapot, but emotionally the teapot carries meaning, reminiscent of her own mother doing the same when she was a young woman. It's not only the teapot either. Countless objects in the Jones household are loaded with memory and are tokens or milestones of different parts of the family's life. Call it sentimentality, reflecting on the past or a *symbolic ecology* – a collection of objects that refer to meaning locked within the products inside a domestic environment. Csikszentmihalyi's study of objects within people's homes finds that our favourite objects are ones that evoke contemplation and that have attachments to certain people or particular times in our lives. She suggests the symbolic meaning within these domestic forms is so huge that it *holds our lives together*. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1995:126)

'An old china cup, a houseplant, a ring, or a family photograph has symbolic power if it produces a sense of order in the mind...Without such feelings, life is not worth living. The objects we surround ourselves with are the concrete symbols that convey these messages. The meaning of our private lives is built within these household objects.' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1995:126)

From Daddy's chair to Teddy bear – childhood memories

Memories of fathers and favourite chairs are common. When father returns from work he relaxes in it, on a Sunday morning he reads the paper on it, he watches the match on it whilst

drinking beer and sometimes falls asleep on it. Daddy's chair.

In *The Simpson's*, Homer usually sits on the left-hand side of the sofa. The creators of the cartoon recognise that within a family unit, a father usually has his favourite seat. The chair or sofa has not been produced with this specification in mind – nevertheless, our own habits and behaviour embed specific meanings and memories into it.

My grandfather died when I was four. My lasting memory of Granddad is of him sitting on his majestic, brown armchair. Granddad's chair seemed throne-like to me, velvety reaching arms with robust little wooden feet carved like the paws of a small dog. When we visited he'd lean down from the magnificent chair and give me and my sister a Rolo each. When I think of my Granddad my memories are synonymously tied with the armchair and the chocolate treat, and years on when I encounter the chair at the house or a packet of Rolo's at the corner shop, both objects linger with meaning, at once returning me to that particular memory.

If we think back to our childhood most of us can remember something that we regarded with the utmost meaning. Though the moment passes, the object remains as something that later in life might call to mind a gush of lost memories. You might discover an object from long ago, a photograph, a toy, a teddy bear or a rag. It's a treasure that means something to you, something personal and something highly emotional.

Our relationship with the object – An object's hidden narrative

Our lives take place around objects and within environments and when we are gone, these things stay behind. The objects we own usually outlive us. They are witnesses to our lives. The question of how we regard objects, value objects, the way we treat objects is an intriguing one. It affects the way we understand and interact with our surroundings.

When does an object acquire value? Within the domestic environment, we might place our most valuable objects in a glass cabinet away from harms reach. In an illustration of importance, value and narrative within objects, 'performative archeologist' Mark Dion undertook an excavation project in collaboration with the Tate gallery – the *Tate Thames Dig*. In the summer of 1999, the banks of the Thames were beach combed for fragments of forgotten and discarded objects of the past. They were then cleaned, classified, and finally displayed in glass cabinets, polished and labeled within the museum.

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‘The assorted fragments are metonyms of the lives of London’s inhabitants – driving the dig is Dion’s quest to unearth these hidden narratives. Because the fragments release something of London’s lost texture, its overall ambience is constantly re-found through the sensation of tactility.’ (Coles, 2000:60)

Every object has its own individual story. Stories about its life; a life that we can only imagine, guess at, or wonder about. Though an object cannot tell its stories aloud, memories might linger on its surface: the scars of mistreatment and accident, the lovingly-worn smoothness of routine, or the unevenly carved initials of long since lost owner. These are the textures of time.

If the penny in your pocket could speak what stories might it tell to you? Your coin could have been participant in 31,235 transactions, the decision maker in 4,303 situations, thrown off 105 bridges or into 175 wishing wells, spent five years doing time in a piggy bank, been responsible for three scratched car bonnets or been the ‘lucky penny’ for six different people now deceased. It even has a date of birth.

The idea that the objects can observe our lives, that they are witnesses to our moments, that they have a silent gaze upon our actions is interesting. Even as bystanders they share in our moments, and their very presence reminds us of times now absent. Maybe this is why certain objects can evoke emotional responses like the curiosity for a penny; Mrs. Jones’s affection for her mother embodied in the teapot; or the love for a Granddad that I never grew to know remembered in a packet of Rolo’s.

Manufactured emotion and the ‘emotional hit’

We need, as organisms, emotional as well as practical rewards in our lives and it’s a designer’s job to deliver them. (Seymour, 1999:14)

Realising the importance of sentiment in products and the potential this has to harness the wallet of the consumer, designers have attempted to design emotion into products. How is this done? The objects that mean something special to me may not be regarded as important from your perspective. The objects that evoke personal emotional reactions rely on the subjective response of an individual. How can designers successfully design emotion into objects if the response may vary from person to person?

There are physical and emotional rewards to the user in good design. What about that

little light in a BMW limo that doesn’t just ‘go out’ when you close the door, but which slowly dims in a stately and, frankly, luxurious manner? (Seymour, 1999:12)

Richard Seymour calls these product-qualities ‘emotional ergonomics’. The reassuring clunk of a car door, the smooth sliding feeling when opening a drawer or the crisp tactile ‘click click’ of the buttons on a computer keyboard produce a feeling of satisfaction to the user. For him, good design equates with the emotional effect these objects give us when we use them. Instead of infusing emotion into familiar products through our own personal experiences and environments, these products (previously unknown to the user) glow with pre-empted emotion, a manufactured experience that produces a feeling of satisfaction and pleasure for the consumer. This process of attraction is instant, magnetic, often unjustified and hard to explain. How can we explain why we feel drawn to a particular product when we don’t consciously know?

Your brain ... made an almost instantaneous analysis, at a subconscious level, and then pumped yum-juice into your limbic system until it lit up like a Christmas tree. You didn’t actually think anything initially, you just felt it and it came out as a sort of ‘I like it, I want it ... now what is it?’ process, which your conscious mind then qualified. (Seymour, 1999:14)

The unfounded, emotional pull of objects is something that designers realise is powerful and one that is familiar to the western consumer – an unconscious emotional response, want, need for a particular thing for no particular reason. Function no longer drives us or appeals to us as the primary reason to buy a product. In a competitive product market it is important to have something extra, a tiny detail, a secret weapon if you like. When consumers have fleeting demands, fleeting emotions and fleeting wallets, the emotional-hit of a product can become the crucial weight that tips the fragile scales of choice at the checkout desk.

A bond between two living beings

Could there be more something more substantial to the emotional-hit than the short-lived ‘I like it, I want it ... now what is it?’ process Richard Seymour describes? Could the emotional-hit grow to be a richer territory for the object to exist in??

Let’s re-assess Richard Seymour’s description of the BMW’s little green light. Does the suited city-worker feel good because the dimming light makes him feel *stately and luxurious*; or might he feel fulfilled because the light feels to him like the gratifying sigh of

reaching home or the gradual nodding off to sleep of a young child? If a user associates the product with real human emotions, he is no longer experiencing the 'satisfaction' of emotional-hit, but is engaging in an emotional rapport. The object is, in his imagination, a living being.

For this rapport to take place the user must identify with an object or make a personal association with it. In order for a user to emotionally engage with an object there has to be something that they can engage with. How can a designer bring an object to life?

Fairytale, cartoon, fiction, and film are a rich territory in this aspect, where objects take on a life of their own and they live out a secret life far from their dormant everyday existence. Disney for instance bases a large portion of their characters on the anthropomorphic animal, object or product. In *Beauty and the Beast*, the candlestick waiter, the chattering teapot, and the animated wardrobe are all the inhabitants of a magical house. In *Fantasia*, a series of enchanted mops hover in time to music, merrily washing the floor. Such fantasy is a familiar scene in literature. In Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* a pack of cards becomes a hierarchy of individuals from bad-tempered royalty to anxious gardeners. In *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice meets garden flowers that have faces and behave like a gaggle of gossip-hungry housewives.

'Never mind!' Alice said in a soothing tone, and, stooping down to the daisies, she whispered 'If you don't hold your tongues, I'll pick you!'

There was silence in a moment, and several of the pink daisies turned white.

'That's right!' said the Tiger-lily. 'The daisies are worst of all. When one speaks, they all begin together, and it's enough to make one wither to hear the way they go on!' (Through the Looking Glass p140)

If there was a particular human quality to relate to as part of a product, would this change the way we treat objects? For Alice, a pack of cards had always been a pack of cards until she fell down the rabbit hole and was confronted with the short-tempered Queen. The consumer market is a place far from Wonderland, but if we can identify with the anthropomorphic object within literary framework, might a consumer find it easier to build an emotional relationship with an anthropomorphic product?

The book *Faces* by designers Jean and Francois Robert is a collection of found faces within objects and places. The photographers snap any object with a face, and capture



personality *a grinning garden tool, a puzzled meter, a wide-eyed camera bag, a pouting clock, a smirking radio and more, each communicating a world of expression.* (Robert: 1) The images are beautiful in their subtlety. They capture accidental faces that are unintended in their design and even more imaginative in discovery. (Fig 1)

Figure 1

Is the face of an object the means to creating an emotional relationship with a user? If laying a cartoon face on the front of a steam engine transforms the article into something instantly accessible (*Thomas the Tank Engine*), might the emotional power of the face be the key to making products more communicable to the consumer?

Human tendency to want to seek faces – Psychological explanations

Many types of product may appeal to a consumer on an emotional level, but product that embodies facial aesthetics can strike a primitive recognition system within the human psyche.

The magnetic pull that faces exert on babies' attention has stimulated much research by psychologists over the past 30 years. Despite their vague take on the world, infants have an innate preference for gazing at face-like sights, such as a pair of round blobs over a horizontal line. (Bower, 2001:10)

In a study on newborns as young as 43 minutes (by Scientist Mark Johnson) babies were shown a series of patterned boards. (Fig 2) The experiment found that infants look significantly longer at face-like configurations



Figure 2

than un-face like patterns. This was shown to illustrate an internal instinct for facial recognition. This primitive instinct is an important thing to note when building a relationship, especially as in human interaction it is important for communication to be face to face.

If face to face communication is paramount in human interaction, might this mean that the relationship between a person and an object could be enhanced if the object was given the ability to stare back at the user?

Figure 3



Face as example: Henry and Alessi

The Alessi ‘Diabolix’ bottle opener (Biagio Cisotti) (fig 3) has this vital attraction factor. It looks like a cartoon devil, is simple in shape and has a face with a gaping mouth. Emerging from the grin is a set of stainless steel teeth that pounce with magnetic force onto the bottle cap. The user then levers the product and it literally ‘bites off’ the lid. Alessi have been clever here, giving a product a personality and a ‘face’ but also playfully utilizing the features of the face as a crucial part of its function. The face has a purpose, a role to play both in the functionality of the object and towards the emotional response of the user.

It works just as well as any other bottle opener I’ve ever used, but it also makes me smile every time I open a bottle. It gives me a little wink when I’m at my most frazzled in the evening. (R. Seymour, 1999:12)

The vacuum cleaner *Henry* made by Numatic International is further example. He sits on four black wheels and trundles like an unsteady puppy across the carpet, trailing the footsteps of the user. Two huge eyes look up and to the left as if glancing at something person-height. His trunk is a long black concertina-like tube. Through this tube Henry sucks away household dirt happily and without complaint. His mouth is a broad closed smile. Henry is one of a series, (Fig 4) a family of other characters with varying colours: Edward (blue), George (green) and Basil (yellow). These traditionally English names support the gentlemanly ideology of the product.

Prioritising the personality and cheerful convenience of the product rather than exciting the consumer with systems of the machines mechanics, is what separates the Henry from a product like the Dyson. The user builds a owner-pet relationship with Henry. Henry’s product semantics are designed to reflect the idea that he is reliable, trustworthy – not distant and mechanical. Henry and his brothers are the domestic series within a large range of commercial and industrial vacuum cleaners manufactured by Numatic International. Interestingly, the vacuums for industrial and commercial use are produced with neither faces nor names.

Why are only the domestic series produced with faces? Is the anthropomorphized object only successful within a domestic environment? Is there something about a life within domesticity that craves character or allows character to exist? Some might regard Henry as a companion or family member and attach emotions of sentimentality to him. Does this make him hard to replace?

For my part, the idea of replacing Henry would feel like a betrayal whereas it wouldn't with another vacuum. I'd imagine his voice, echoing pleasurably in my head 'What did I do wrong? Don't you like me anymore?' This manifestation of Henry's character only exists because of his silly, docile face. It would be easier to discard the industrial Henry because it hasn't a face to stare back and prompt your guilty conscience. The same product without a face would be less likely to evoke feelings of attachment.

Given the differing semantics of this product for two very different markets, it is perhaps important to understand what it is to be without face and the difficulties arising through lack of face, and the emotional consequences with the consumer.

Without face

In *About Face* neurophysiologist Jonathon Cole writes about a patient called Mary, a woman who had suffered from facial paralysis due to severe brain damage.

Mary's appearance was so impenetrable that I could tell little about her. Her facial paralysis had left her with no fixed or recognisable expression. Without face, she as a person was all but impenetrable. (Cole, 1998:2)

If Mary was impenetrable, perhaps a faceless product would also be hard to form a relationship with. Indeed, it is easier to talk about or slander somebody without facing them, 'behind his or her back', and maybe why to 'stab someone in the back' is a metaphor of cowardice and why 'facing up' to something or someone is an act of courage and moral duty.

To strip away the face from the soul would be in some sense to denature the soul itself, or at least to deprive it of that content it received from the face as its expression and representation. The absence of a face would then imply the lack of a soul, for without visibility, nothing may be inferred to exist. (Vidler, 1992:89)

In *The architectural uncanny*, Vidler considers Rowe's argument that the lack of interest in the face has been a constant failing of modern architecture.

Like the face, the facade operated .. as 'a metaphorical intersection between the eyes of the observer and what one may dare to call the 'soul' of the building.' For Rowe, indeed, the face/facade, 'the existential interface between eye and idea,' was necessary for any interaction between building and observer to take place: 'when considering intercourse with a building,'



Rowe concluded, 'its face, however veiled, must always be a desirable and provocative item.' (Vidler, 1992:85)

Figure 4

Similarly, the industrial vacuum range at Numatic International being without face and without expression, is without soul. In environments where the vacuum has a strictly functional priority, emotions and sentiment have no place. Within the domestic environment however, the vacuum becomes part of the family, has his own place (cupboard) and becomes the friendly character whose eyes bear witness to the years of messy birthday parties, numerous haircuts, hundreds of spillages, and mindless one-way banter. Henry has a soul, and exists as a being within the household.

What products inspire imagination and what products try too hard?

A thing that looks nice but doesn't function practically is a sculpture. And a thing that works but doesn't reward emotionally is a machine. (Seymour, 1999:15)

At this stage it is important to consider differences between types of product with facial characteristics.

There are vast numbers of products on the market that have faces. Toys, novelty products, robots, cyber pets. It is important though to define them, as some products' faces are superficial or only for novelty/comic value, where others are more considered, the face being embodied in the concept of the product as opposed to simply 'stuck on'.

Toys are products designed to be played with, or non-functioning replicas or miniatures of something else; (cited from Collins English Dictionary) any function they might perform exists on a recreational level. Toys are the most obvious example of objects embodied

with faces – from the very human-like faces of dolls, action figures and Barbie's, to the more caricatured, or more animal-like faces of softer toys. According to Richard Seymour, the toy might be regarded as a sculpture. It is the simplicity and functional redundancy in a toy that makes it an object that can be part of play, imagination, and idle adventure.

The 'Henry' is not a toy because he serves a serious and necessary domestic function. Yet it has a face like a toy, thus blurring the boundaries between toy and serious domestic product.

If we make this boundary too sharp and try too hard to create this relationship with the object the design can fail. Were the fates of the Japanese Tamagotchi and the Aibo such examples? The responses of the Tamagotchi's were predictable, unlike real those of real animals and their death after a couple of days of neglect may have dulled the emotional impact on the user. Sony's Aibo could perform a number of tasks, but fundamentally lacked the unpredictability and tactility of a real pet. Did the technological sophistication of these products diminish their imaginative appeal, reducing the owner's capacity to invest his or her emotions in them?

In the book *Brand.New* Celia Lury analyses the way we might think and imagine with everyday products and identifies Disney's 'Toy Story' as an example of prescribed play, where our would-be imaginative-thinking is programmed for us. Lury identifies 'concrete thinking' as an important imaginative skill, and a stage of childhood development. It involves thinking with objects as opposed to concepts and is *immediate, synthaesthetic and situated*. (Lury, 2000:178)

The film *Toy Story* and its attached merchandising allowed children to obtain the on-screen characters in their exact form. However, the film prescribes in advance the nature of the characters, the narrative and the ending. What then, is left to imagine?

'Through the multiple mediation of promotion, packaging and theming, branded merchandising anticipates perception, foreshortens our perspective, intervenes in habit and reconfigures gesture. In doing so, the brand erases the gradually built-up memory of an object's generic or common-sense meanings, de-contextualises patterns of use and replaces such memories with information, a catch phrase or a logo.' (Lury, 2000:179)

The prescribed product that performs the thinking process for us denies us the space and freedom to imagine and make our own stories.

In Alessi's 'Family Follows Fiction' series (Cisotti's *Diabolix* bottle opener amongst them) the objects are designed to have an emotional affect on the subject and instigate playful thinking. They are a series of domestic kitchen accessories that appear to have lives of their own, some with legs, some with faces – all have this imaginative thinking space. They do enough to suggest, to nudge us into the realms of imagination without saturating us with information or story.

The object is transformed into an instrument of play. It tells short fables and gives endearing answers to how that object can be commonly used; suggesting indirect links with play, and stimulating transposition into the fantastic. 'Play' as a tacit agreement allowing the construction of an imaginary world in which we can recognise ourselves, protects our innermost tenderness and creativity, finding a way of sharing it.' (Polorino, 1994:134)

Car faces – an experiment

Since I was small, the fronts of cars always appeared to look like faces. I'd always stare out of my window at the oncoming traffic where hundreds of personalities and faces would speed past, some looking angry, some seeming apologetic, others seeming pretty and some that were ugly.

Car manufacturers also draw on people's natural aesthetic responses in order to give their cars 'personalities', which will contribute to eliciting particular responses. The front of vehicles can look rather like faces – the lights as the eyes, the bumper and radiator grill as the mouth. Some cars may look aggressive, powerful and exciting; others calm and safe. The bodywork may also mirror animal, or indeed human characteristics. A car might look 'lean,' 'perky', or 'muscular'. ...the form of some four-wheel-drive jeeps makes them look as if they have been working out in a gym. (Jordan, 2000:47)

Television portrays many anthropomorphic cars: Disney's *Herbie the love bug*; *Benny in Roger Rabbit*; *Knightriders*' talking *Kit*; and Penelope Pittstop's *Compact Pussycat* in the cartoon *Wacky Races*. There is something that attracts, or at the very least interests us in cars with personality.

I conducted an experiment to investigate the emotional and imaginative reaction to the common car on the street. Head-on photographs of the faces of different cars were taken, the body of the car digitally removed leaving nothing but the 'face'.

I wanted to find out if a subject could fit a particular personality to these faces. I designed a questionnaire incorporating the faces of twenty cars old and new, placed side by side in a cartoon-style identity parade; with questions deciphering gender, expression, and personality. (Fig 5)

The results were interesting. Seat's *Ibiza* was voted as the most *trustworthy* and *heroic* by both male and female participants. It appeared to appeal to both sexes and none of the subjects paired it with negative descriptions.

The Citroen *Xsara* was voted the *happiest* car, and the majority of those asked thought it was *feminine*, the women naming it Emily. Its eyes are wide set, their shape like two teardrops being drawn down to a centre point. Its grill is a upturned sweeping curve like a huge friendly smile. Its face matches its target market, the family-friendly car.

The MG 1600 was the most likely vehicle to be '*intelligent*' 'Hilda', an 'old and wise character' in a story. An extra pair of headlights (inset and slightly forward from the actual headlights) has the appearance of spectacles, this maybe connoting intellect and a personality of an older generation.

The Land Rover was most likely to look *scary* and a *villain-like*. Might this fit with the tough, fearless Land Rover aesthetic and marketing strategy, or its reputation for operation in hostile terrains?

We could see the vehicle market as something similar to a pet shop. Pick your animal, pick the colour, pick the breed, assess its condition; but the real clinching factor will always be the lovable face that catches your eye amongst the rest of the litter. The one you feel an immediate affection for, the one that you want to take home to keep, to nurture, and to care for. This is where the Citroen *Xsara* and the Seat *Ibiza* have succeeded.

Conclusion – Imaginative space

Everyday interaction with a familiar product can have the effect of this imaginative relationship. It is important in this study for the word 'domestic' to not simply signify a product used mainly in the home, but more importantly, an object with which a user has regular and prolonged contact with, giving rise to and facilitating creation of a bond and relationship.

The imaginative space is, in its aesthetic dimension, a representation of a mental state of projection that precisely elides the boundaries of the real and unreal in order to provoke a disturbing ambiguity, a slippage between waking and dreaming. (Vilder, 1992:11)

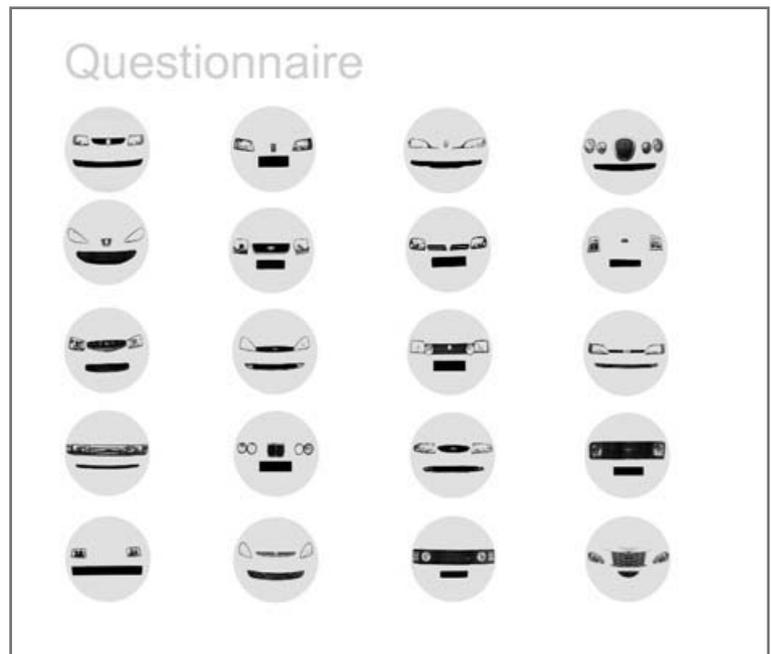


Figure 5

The key to entering this space lies in the ways of seeing. The designer could learn from this, from the inspiring images from looking at objects in new ways.

The *I-book* by Macintosh nudges the user into the imaginative space via a green light on the back of the laptop that dims and brightens as if to suggest a heartbeat or that the computer is breathing. *Kit*, the car from *Knightrider* has a red LED between the headlights connoting heartbeat and moreover the signal from the heart monitor. These tiny features give the user enough information to imagine the product as a living, breathing, being, but not so much that imagination is left redundant. For this product, the 'suggestion of life' is the key factor in creating the imaginative space in which the psychological relationship can take place.

The pleasure of discovery

The reason for the success of the Henry machine and Alessi bottle opener is due to this key proposition of 'life', the way their characters subtly 'coax' the user into that space without being over-suggestive. The user then discovers this special relationship of their own accord. The designer need only create a clue, hint or slight indication of what could transpire in an imaginative space, and the user is left to decipher the rest, and through this process derives subconscious gratification.

Henry smiles, Alessi's bottle opener grins wickedly, the computer breathes, the Land Rover stares with stony eyes, and the Citroen *Xsara* beams happiness. But it's not necessarily the smile, or the eyes, or the indeed the face as a whole, it's the human response that is quintessential. It's the human response

when we see a product breathing or looking at us, and the imaginative process this evokes.

A robotic dog can only ever be a machine, and never be a real dog. Products designed to specifically mimic real living things are destined to fail. We might appreciate the technological skill it takes to make the robotic dog walk, but we cannot deny how remote the machine is from the real thing. The key to creating the illusion of life lies in our imagination, a realm free from prescription, and where anything can become possible. Technology and the prescribed product do not give the user chance to engage their imagination. The simple, subtle objects in our domestic relationships can be whatever we want them to be.

When a mother buys her child an intricate, over designed toy, and the child prefers to play with the box it came in, we can see that imagination is beautiful in its simplicity. There is something to discover in the box, but little new to find in the branded toy.

If objects are the new vehicles of imagination, their imagery in turn will become, in the world of communication and expression, new vehicles for a confidently creative relationship and easing of tension.' ('Alessi: The Design factory' page 132)

We need to understand the importance of imagination as an indispensable medium in interacting with our environment and the objects within it. Designers are beginning to engage with this idea but how we might teach this way of thinking in schools?

Design teaching inevitably has certain requirements to focus on the functional understandings of objects, but is it too focused on the physical, factual elements of an article? The classroom needs to realise the emotional content of an object plays an essential function in itself. It can govern our behaviour, the way we interrelate with objects and our own relationships. It is something powerful, increasingly influential, but something also quite inspiring. This thinking needs to permeate into the ways we teach.

Treat this essay as a design brief, or use it to form the basis for a project in the classroom. A project that a student can be inspired by, something that changes the way he or she regards design, and fires his or her imagination.

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