

How critical?

An analysis of the IBM project outcome as a critical design work



IMAGE CREDITS: UNSPLASH

1. Introduction

Critical design has become a growing design practice over the last two decades (Jakobsone, 2017). This essay introduces critical design, establishes the project outcome as a critical design work, and appraises it against criticism of critical design.

2. Background

It is difficult to identify exactly when critical design began (Malpass, 2012). Although it grew to prominence in the 1990s, it is part of a longer heritage of conceptual and politicised practices, such as radical and anti-design, that challenge mainstream design principles and convey critique via designed artefacts (Robach, 2005; MoMA, 2022; Ward, 2022).

As a term, 'Critical Design' was conceived by Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby at the Royal College of Art (Johannessen, 2017). First used by Dunne in his dissertation, *Hertzian Tales* (1999), Dunne and Raby later elaborated on the term in *Design Noir* (2001): "Instead of thinking about appearance, user-friendliness or corporate identity, industrial designers could develop design proposals that challenge conventional values." (p. 59).

Consequently, critical design proposes "an approach to provocation" (Bardzell et al., 2012) that accounts for: 1) products that create confusions and dilemmas among users in order to encourage investigations of prevailing norms, and 2) design processes that lead to these products (Mazé and Redström, 2009).

3. On criticality

What sets apart critical design from other practices would presumably be its goal to bring about more critical attitudes – i.e. its criticality. Dunne offers a definition of criticality:

“The critical sensibility, at its most basic, is simply about not taking things for granted, to question and look beneath the surface. This is not new and is common in other fields; what is new is trying to use design as a tool for doing this.” (Dunne and Raby, 2009, cited in Bardzell and Bardzell, 2013).

What are we not to take for granted? What are we looking beneath the surface of? We can adopt a clearer understanding from *Speculative Everything* (2013), where Dunne and Raby position Critical design against Affirmative design.

A (Affirmative design)	B (Critical design)
Affirmative	Critical
Problem solving	Problem finding
Provides answers	Asks questions
For how the world is	For how the world could be
Makes us buy	Makes us think

Fig 1: Excerpt from A/B manifesto (Dunne and Raby, 2013, p. vii).

Affirmative design works within the status quo (Johannessen, 2017; Malpass, 2012) and subscribes to dominant ideological contexts, rules and values that are "determined by (capitalist) government and industry" (Dunne and Raby, 2013, p. 4). Critical design, in contrast, seeks to reveal the limited choices that are “hard-wired into [these] products for us” (Dunne and Raby, 2001, p. 45), using “the language and structure of design” (Dunne and Raby, 2013, p. 35).

In relation to this characteristic, our project encourages people to inspect their usage of loyalty cards. Although seemingly innocuous, supermarkets collect huge amounts of data to create detailed consumer profiles of shoppers, which are then used and sold for massively unequal benefits (Poulter, 2011; Ferguson, 2013; BBC News, 2018).

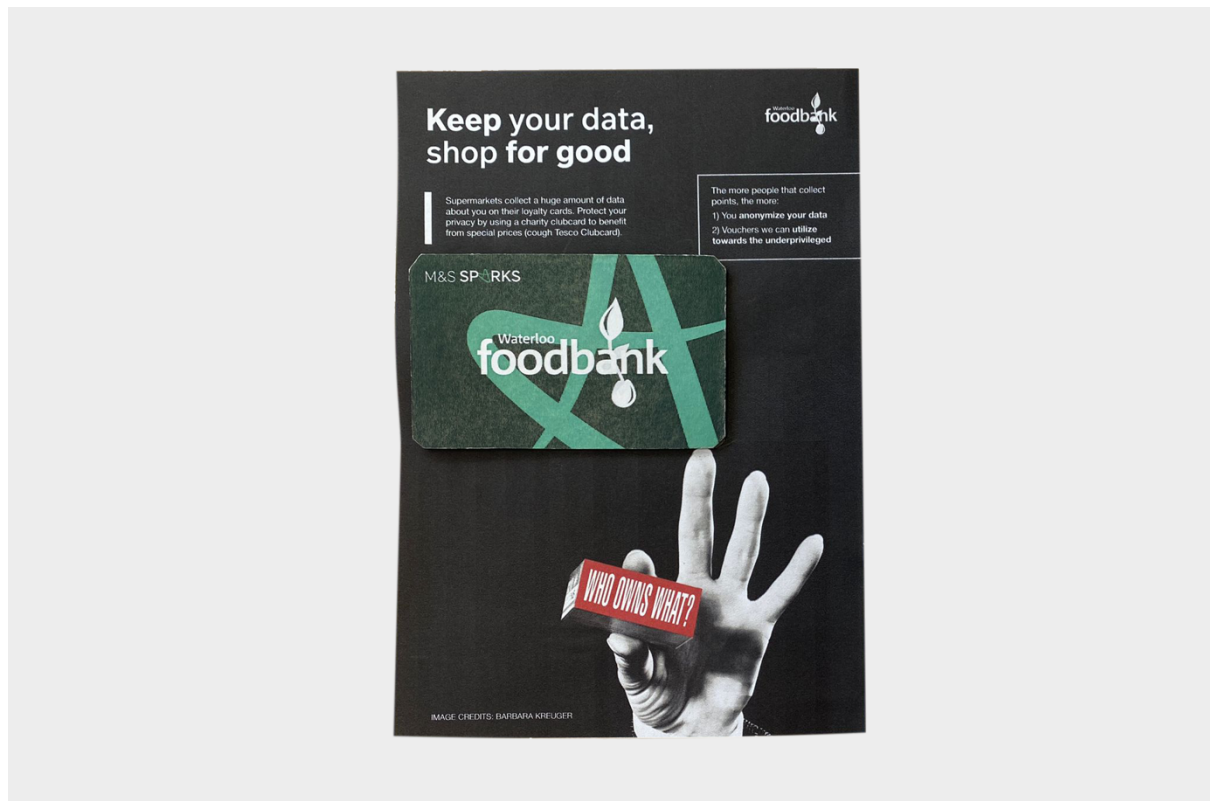


Fig 2: Project outcome: flyer

Therefore, through flyers, we educate people and encourage investigation of the conventional practice of using loyalty cards. Then, we suggest a different usage of loyalty cards by creating a new loyalty card – hence, proposing an alternative to current limited choices through design. We can therefore establish that criticality is a clear trait of the project outcome.

4. Criticism

The most frequent reproach of critical design is that it is egocentric (Jakobsone, 2017), grounded in the statement that critical design is about problem finding, not problem solving (Fig 1). Moreover, Dunne and Raby argue that “[design] needs to establish an intellectual stance of its own” (2001, p. 59). Mazé and Redström (2009) note that this could tend towards an excessively hermetic and self-reflexive autonomy. Indeed, critical design has been called “design for designers” – limited to “design magazines, niche publications and gallery showcases” (Malpass, 2012).

While affording critical reflection can enable improvement in a present situation (Calhoun, 1995), critical design must be directed at and used by those who can affect this status quo to make it relevant (Koskinen et al., 2011; Mazé and Redström, 2009). This would require moving out of the gallery (Malpass, 2012).

Our project consciously tackles this criticism of critical design. Inspired by prompts from our professors to “get out there” and “make it real”, we sought ‘leverage points’ (Meadows, 1999) where consumers would be most likely to utilize our product: at the till, right before they paid (Fig 3).

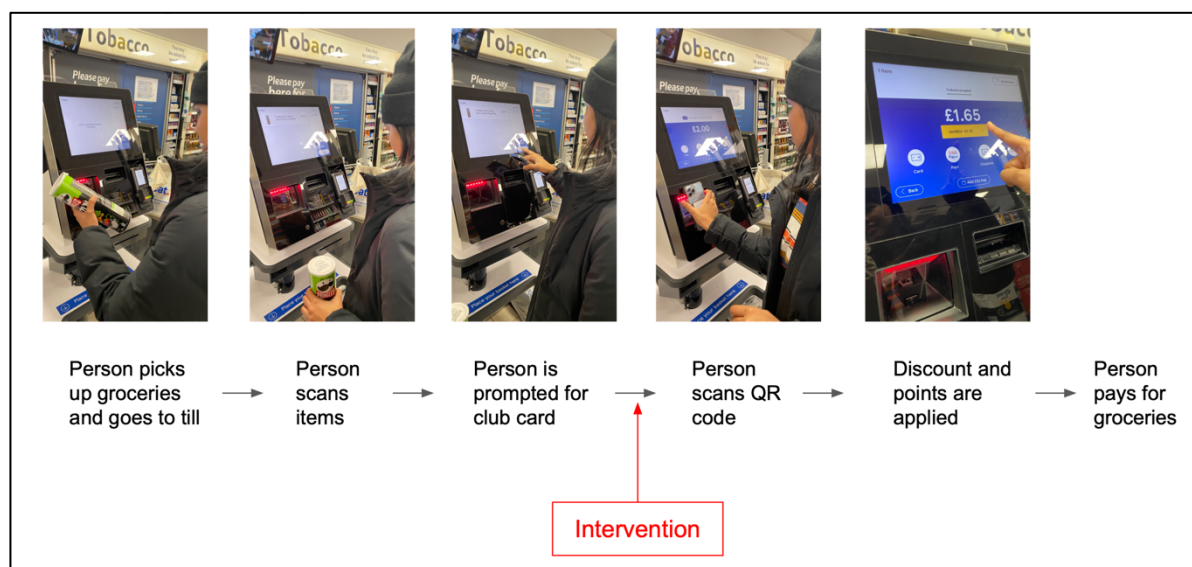


Fig 3: User journey

We also observed how people used physical cards and digital QR codes and designed for both instances. Indeed, shoppers we interviewed told us how they would probably participate in our project: most of them were on board with the message, but more importantly, the cards were easy to takeaway on highly accessible flyers, and others were comfortable with downloading the mobile app as well. However, we could have taken the project further, for example, through contacting the charities themselves and getting them to distribute the flyers. Nevertheless, we believe we targeted and obtained the buy-in of an apt target audience to a satisfactory extent.

5. Conclusion

This essay has argued for the Macro UX project outcome to be considered a work of critical design due to criticality being a key trait, and has examined it against a popular criticism. On a personal level, this project was crucial as an introduction to, as well as my understanding of critical design, and I hope to continue to investigate everyday experiences through a critical lens.

803 words

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