Methods of contextualisation

Statement

Team discussion of accessibility experiences made my position relational due to inability to work after orthopedic surgery in 2023. My position is contextual after returning to study which brings perspective on everyday Graphic Communication Design tools, specifically Adobe software.

Investigating the scanning and mental mapping method of designer Keith Rosson (Rosson, 2018), who has Optic Nerve Hypoplasia (commonly known as tunnel vision), prompted reflection on how I take my sight for granted. Our first step was making goggles to simulate ONH to deepen our group's understanding. '"Scanning"' was unnerving, slow and tiring and I felt excluded. Subsequent research into accessibility law, government guidelines, charity reports, Adobe Accessibility Principles, Spectrum 2 and user posts in Adobe Community, prompted questions of access and ethics of the most widely used design software.

Choosing to reimagine the Adobe Photoshop toolbox, we redesigned icons, experimented with navigation which considered user field of view and discussed ableism from an economic standpoint. After tutorial assistance we focused on icons and sent roughs to GCD practitioners with visual impairment active in the accessibility debate, for feedback to take into our iterations.

User feedback on our first set of icons from Simon Cotton, whose work is grounded in accessibility, helped define guidelines for an entire toolbox redesign. We iterated icons by reducing to their simplest form using contrast, uniformity and universal recognisability. This feedback and process has shown a crossover between navigation and icon design, which is something to develop.

Personally, this project has connected deep research with the value of co-design to help change my thinking and approach to work. I am able to now look at my practice from a community-led perspective, conscious and aware of the othering and ableism that can happen when you don't involve a community in a project.

References:

Rosson, K. (2018) *What It's Like To Be A Legally Blind Illustrator And Graphic Designer*. Available at: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/legally-blind-illustrator-designer_n_5b19589ce4b09d7a3d6fe7fa (Accessed: February 2025).

Annotated bibliography

Lynam, I. (2015) *Why we should really be concerned about the visual identity for the Tokyo Olympics*. Available at: https://medium.com/@ianlynam/why-we-should-really-be-concerned-about-the-visual-identity-for-the-tokyo-olympics-969830d0e819 (Accessed: February 2025).

In our second tutorial, we realized the importance of community engagement in the process of designing for disability justice and accessibility. We felt that designing holistically without the user in the process is inherently ableist and inhibits the process. Lynam quotes lead designer Otl Aicher, who 'emphasized the **process** of designing, and how the act of designing itself could and should inform the outcomes of a design project'. She contends that 'design competitions underlie cultural misunderstandings of design. The 1972 Olympic identity was great because it was designed from the ground up'. After our second tutorial, we approached various sources to gain feedback on our initial work to genuinely inform the final iterations. We wanted to avoid the work being just another 'piece of *cultural hairdressing*'.

Lynam's commentary ably describes a holistic, grid-based approach to the 1972 Munich Olympics identity led by Otl Aicher, alongside Rolf Müller, Alfred Kern, Thomas Nittner, Gerhard Joksch and Elena Winschermann. This varied team brought different viewpoints but agreed a tight grid system to guide designing the Olympic icons. In addition to involving community-led feedback to our work, our culturally rich team worked together to agree a set of guidelines for our icons, offering up feedback between us to iterate a universally recognizable set within a system.

American Artist (2018) *Black Gooey Universe*. Available at https://unbag.net/end/black-gooey-universe/ (Accessed February 2025)

In the same way as Lynam, American Artists' critique of the GUI's journey reminds us of the value of ground-up design and inherent, often unintentional bias within processes.

Described as an incubator for whiteness and 'a place for straight cis white men in business ties to sit on bean bag chairs and embrace consequential ideas without fear of retribution', Silicon Valley pioneered the first Graphic User Interface but without a truly representative starting point. The same migratory group of white men between technology companies made the GUI 'a literal instance of a white ideological mechanism created with the intent of universal application'. There is a kind of saviorism here, whether unintentional or not, which reminded our group of the importance of including the audience in our process.
In their concluding remarks, American Artist contends that 'it is in Blackness that the development of gooey from Alto, to Lisa, the smartphone and beyond is indebted', which highlights again the inescapable relationship between audience and result.

My ethical position became gradually more affirmed as yet another reference described the disconnect between an inclusive approach and commercially driven results. From the management of the Tokyo Olympics design competition to Silicon Valley's tech bros, I am reminded of Adobe's march forward with more updates for the sighted than low-sighted audience, perpetuating commercial monopoly. It seems that advancing technology has excluded communities over time, from the first inception of a GUI. It is now curious to note our final iteration uses high-contrast, white-on-black icons for users of low sight, much like the pre-GUI black screen and cursor prompt.

Rosson, K. (June 9, 2018). *What It's Like To Be A Legally Blind Illustrator And Graphic Designer*. Available at https://www.huffpost.com/entry/legally-blind-illustrator-designer_n_5b19589ce4b09d7a3d6fe7fa (Accessed February 2025)

This article is the reason I suggested sight as our starting point. Instead of a dry, academic report that could make accessibility impersonal through data, appendices and recommendations, this text connects to the reader *lived* experience rather than dwelling on the wide societal context of impairment. The tone is informal, personal, fair, inclusive, interesting, inspiring.

Rosson describes his experience in and out of his design work, his daily decision to sit down at the table and start working. He questions *'"What am I going to do with this?" Am I going to move through it, or let is still me into inaction?'.*

What made this engaging for me personally was finding Keith's work within my specialism, book cover design. Not only are his covers world-class, fully designed and illustrated by him, but he wrote the books too.

In the article, Rosson writes *'Try looking through a pair of eyeglasses with each lens the size of, say, a bottle cap. That's it, that's all there is. There's nothing else there, just a visual field the size of two bottle caps. That's about as close as you'll get to experiencing ONH. Now try spending a day walking q with your bottle cap glasses on. Scan constantly, assessing that visual field. Cross the street. Buy groceries. Try jogging at the local park. Watch out for cupboards, steps, children, cars, electrical cords, pets. On and on. Memorize where you are from one second to the next. Scan again. Memorize again.'*

So, I did. I made ONH simulating glasses, wore them, walked round the house, worked. It was the closest I could get to Keith's visual world and guided my entire response.

Guffey, E (2023) *After Universal Design: The Disability Design Revolution*. 1st edition. USA: Bloomsbury Publishing

Guffey goes deeply into co-design and the advantages of engaging the maker. At the heart of this engagement is making itself as a form of empowerment for everyone. What if a sight-impaired user could redesign the Adobe Photoshop toolbar? Even without the necessary technical expertise to do so? What if Keith Rosson could have his own, bespoke user experience to optimize the way he works?

For those projects that do not engage with an audience, Guffey highlights the projects that can look good but fail to engage more deeply.

‘Liz Jackson coined the term “disability dongle” for design concepts that purport to address a problem in style, but fail to understand and answer accessibility issues. The dongle embodies the aspirations of many young designers and is a particular concern with student projects. In my relatively short teaching career, I met no less than seventeen students proposing “technologies to guide the blind.” . . . While earnest young designers want to produce impactful products, students may lack the time and guidance to fully research needs, or avoid simpler products and focus on aesthetics to gain advantage in course evaluation or even look for potential for public coverage. Emphasizing the value of small and collaborative DIY projects may avoid this pitfall.’

At the start of this brief, there was a temptation to try and fix a problem for a community I didn’t know, to do good with my design. Whilst the intention to do good is noble, the method needs to be authentic to its audience and purpose through knowledge and understanding. With rigorous research, discussion and collaboration within our group and with visually impaired stakeholders, we were able to avoid another ‘disability dongle’ and simplify a tool and emphasize access.

RIT Production Services (2012) *Patricia Moore - 2012 RIT Innovation Hall of Fame*. Jun 13, 2012. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cpNIBML2FFo (Accessed: February 2025).

'I didn't understand this hierarchy that some people deserved good design and other people didn't'

Moore's immersive experiment bridges a gap between communities. My first instinct with the Methods of contexualising brief's second prompt was to research user experience. Though the brief did not demand it, we nominated low sight as our point of interest and researched practitioners within graphic communication design who have shared their experiences online. We felt that as colleagues working in visual communication, that could be an interesting position to begin from to examine any inherent bias or ableism.

When watching Moore describe the lengths she and her team went to, involving clouded lenses to simulate sight impairment, a back brace to inhibit movement among other devices, I noticed a kind of transcendent attitude in her approach to work.

'Universality seems to be the most sensible course of design in our eyes. What we were looking at was designing with equity; designing for all people as equal and recognizing that there were not consumers that we could call 'those' people but rather all of us have the same discreet and individual and unique needs and the same commonalities.'

This raises an interesting question about the act of grouping communities at all, a dichotomy of naming. Do we need some labels to produce effective design for people who may be different?

Moore's work, and our group experience of dipping into the practical experience of ONH for this project, shows that immersive models of exchange can connect individuals and communities. My personal approach is now one of deeper consideration for anyone and their unique needs.

Experiments with Google (no date). *Creatability*. Available at: https://experiments.withgoogle.com/collection/creatability (Accessed: February 2025).

‘Exploring how creative tools can be made more accessible for everyone.’

Google are doing it. Creatability uses web and AI technology to challenge our assumptions of technology. It shows us that with resourcing and time, inclusivity is possible. You can play the piano with your nose, make shapes with your voice, make melodies out of words. And the interfaces are beautifully simple. Creatability says that anyone can use tools with simple interfaces to MAKE.

Sound Canvas allows you to locate a cursor on the screen, within a canvas that is labelled 100 x 100 % on the x and y axis. It’s black and white interface, which sits on the left hand side of the screen has only 6 tools and the associated keyboard short cuts which are typeset in an accessible manner. It echoes my early experiences with Deluxe Paint or Quark Xpress, where Graphic User Interfaces were governed by the resolution of the screen. The technology kept it simple. Fast forward thirty years and the tech is regressing to a simplicity for accessibility’s sake.

But is it ultimately equitable? Do you need the latest laptop or smart phone to be able to access it? So far in my research for this project, I have only seen economics. We’ll see what Adobe can do with Spectrum 2.