Hipsters, Trendies and Rebels: If Fun is Cool, is Game Design Cool Design?

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Abstract
Recent discussions within the HCI community around designing software and devices for "coolness" have identified the importance of playfulness as an aspect of cool products.

Game studies, as a field of inquiry, has long been occupied with understanding playfulness, so it stands to reason that findings from this field might also support playfulness and therefore coolness outside the context of games. In this paper, we briefly explore potential overlaps between the research into designing for coolness and that of designing for playfulness. An example of an overlap in terms of motivation is presented and potential future directions are discussed.

Author Keywords
Cool, game design, gamification, game studies, motivation, fun

ACM Classification Keywords
K.8.0: General: Games

General Terms
Design, Theory

Introduction
Cool products are not defined purely by functional and aesthetic concerns, but are bound up with their place within a social and cultural context. Frustratingly for HCI practitioners, the most efficient and effective

products frequently fail because they lack some mysterious measure of "cool". Therefore, it is of great importance to the field of HCI to understand what makes things cool, and more pressingly, how we can create coolness in our products.

In recent studies and explorations of coolness as it relates to HCI, one particular aspect appears to continually resurface as an important aspect of cool – playfulness. Cool products "make work feel like play"[7], and that joy forms "the absolute centre of cool"[8].

Playfulness, as a valuable aspect of design, is not a new area of interest. Game Studies, as a field of inquiry, has long sought to understand playfulness and its impact in terms of fun and enjoyment in games, both digital and on the tabletop that may be applicable [5]. Unfortunately, game design is difficult, and designing for fun and playfulness is more complicated than it seems. As such, there is no single agreed model or methodology within game studies that can fully illuminate playfulness in a manner that can support designing for cool, however there is a long history of literature that can support these continuing explorations.

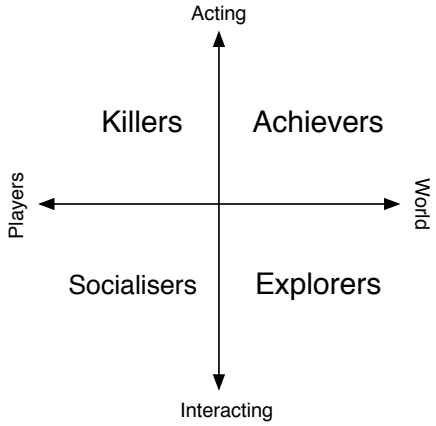

Figure 1 - Bartle's first model of player motivation, reproduced from [1]

Gamification

One area of particular interest is that of "gamification". This has recently emerged as a popular method for designing for increasing the fun in non-game services. Drawing from the literature of game studies, the process of gamification uses mechanics and processes from game design in order to increase enjoyment and engagement with products (see [4] for an excellent review). As the value in applying methods of game design in non-game context becomes realized, it becomes important to understand how this literature can support the design for coolness.

What is Fun? And What is Cool?

To support this argument, here we present one example of the overlap between the literature on understanding fun in games, and that around understanding cool in HCI. Specifically, those aspects of a game or product are motivating for potential users to choose them ahead of the alternatives.

Fundamentally, just as different individuals and social groups have different perceptions of what makes something cool, so do different individuals and groups have different ideas about what makes particular games fun.

In 1996, Richard Bartle, co-designer of the seminal MUD, published a paper describing the styles and motivations of players within virtual worlds [1]. His argument was that players of multi-user social games showed great variety in their preferences and styles of play, and that when designing new games, this wide range of tastes should strongly inform the design process. His model, shown in Figure 1, describes the relationships between these play styles.

Since then, understanding the motivations behind play has become an important area of inquiry within game studies. Many researchers have conducted research in order to explore the various factors at work (e.g. [3][10]). Indeed, Bartle himself later expanded the play styles model to include a third axis, between implicit and explicit motivations [2].

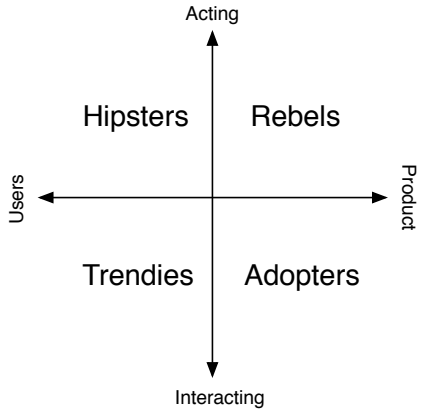

Figure 2 - Motivations for using cool products

Figure 3 - The Nokia 3310. Functionally obsolete, its only value is in its use as a social message by *hipsters*

Modelling Aspects of Cool

Given that playfulness is apparently an important factor in deciding what is cool, it stands to reason that there may be similar processes behind both the personal motivations that define what games we find fun, and the processes that determine what products we find cool.

In a first attempt to explore this potential connection, we present a reinterpretation of Bartle's model of motivation based on the aspects of cool as discussed in Read et al's study of teenager's attitudes towards cool in [9]. Rather than Bartle's "player ↔ world" axis, we have relabeled this as interest in the product itself (which may be a device, service, software or anything else) as opposed to interest in the people who use it. The reinterpreted model is shown in Figure 2.

In this example, users who are motivated by *interacting* with the *product* are typified as the *adopters*. This behaviour closely matches the "innovative" facet of Read et al's study into the aspects of cool [9]. This behaviour is driven by genuine attachment to the product itself, where the product genuinely makes some task simpler (or more fun), and therefore cool.

The *rebels* are those who repurpose and appropriate the product for their own ends. Similar to the rebels in [9], they use products in ways that divert from the stated purpose. For example, the BlackBerry Messaging protocol played an important part in the organization of the London riots in August 2011 [6], perhaps making BlackBerry devices cool and desirable in spite of their decidedly un-cool faux-trendy corporate marketing.

The *trendies* are users driven by social approval. For them, the intrinsic value of the product itself is not as important as the value of being seen to associate with the product in a form of social identity management. This connects to the aspect of "Authenticity" in [9], "Identity" in [8], and the importance of being associated with the currently "hip" and cool products, based on what messages this communicates to their peers.

Finally, the *hipsters* are also more concerned with the social communication around using cool products but, in opposition to the *trendies,* esotericism and irony are much more important. The resurgence in popularity of the outdated (both functionally and aesthetically) Nokia 3310 mobile phone (Figure 3) fixed-gear bicycles and Pabst Blue Ribbon (a low quality and budget American beer) are examples of this sort of behaviour. By associating with these products, the users are broadcasting to their peer groups about their position regarding popularly cool products (i.e. those that the *trendies* like). The products they use become cool through association to this viewpoint.

Importantly, as with Bartle's model, this model does not describe individuals, rather it describes non-exclusive behaviours. A single individual may well show a combination of behaviours regarding a product at any one time. Similarly, as a user's tastes change over time, or their experience with a product grows, their attitudes towards coolness will naturally change.

Discussion

Many of the arguments for better understanding how to develop and design cool products have strong overlaps with the arguments for developing an understanding of

fun. The literature on designing for cool frequently reinforces this idea through the apparent importance of playfulness as a feature of cool products. Because of this, we may be able to learn from the literature of game design (whose explicit aim is to understand how to design fun and engaging experiences) in order to provide support in the search for coolness.

Games as playful experiences have a long history of great success, and the field of game studies, that seeks to understand them, has grown proportionately. In the study of games, there are key questions around motivation to play games, and ways in which specific game features and mechanics afford players enjoyment.

In this paper, we argue that the literature of game studies can similarly support the movement to understand and better design for "coolness" in devices, software and services.

As an example of the potential value of the game studies literature in understanding the appeal and design possibilities of cool products, we have reinterpreted Bartle's classic model of player motivation in terms of motivations around the usage of cool products. We note especially that Bartle's motivations of play very closely match the aspects of cool as discussed by Read et al [9]. By using this model, we can highlight the relationships between the different motivational and value aspects associated with cool products. By understanding these factors, we can better design for cool, just as the Bartle model is used to better design for fun.

Although this paper provides just one example of how our understanding of cool appears to follow closely with our understanding of fun, we argue that there are exciting synergies between these two areas of study.

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