What Makes a Good Design Critic?
Food Design vs. Product Design Criticism

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Abstract

This panel will bring together leading food design and product design critics. The panelists will include: a leading Atlanta-based food critic and writer, a food stylist, a restaurant architect & designer, and a well-known product design critic familiar with the field of user experience. Together, the panel will compare and contrast how design experts from these two disciplines provide design criticism, and whether there are any novel learning points from each perspective.

Keywords

criticism, culinary, food, metaphors, user experience

ACM Classification Keywords

D.2.9 Management - Productivity, D.2.10 Design, K.7.1 Occupations, H.5.2 User Interfaces

General Terms

Design

Background and Motivation

Every user experience professional is essentially a design critic [4,8]. We spend an inordinate amount of time criticizing designs, whether they are our own designs, or those made by others [1]. Some HCI researchers suggest that the field of HCI is in fact a form of criticism, albeit based on scientific method and laboratory based testing [4]. Usually, the objective is to get to a better product. Sometimes, it's criticism for criticism sake [1]. But in order for criticism to be

effective, does it need to follow some kind of process as well?

Bertelsen & Pold think so [2]. In fact, back in 2004 they defined a formal 8-step framework and guide for interaction design criticism in "Criticism as an Approach to Interface Aesthetics" [2]. In a panel at CHI2009 on "What Can User Experience Learn from Food Design?", Venkatacharya et. al. discovered that there were in fact a lot of similarities between the food design and interaction design processes [11]. The focus on the complete end-to-end user experience was just one of them.

But could we perhaps learn something more by better understanding how people critique the overall food design experience? [3]. Is design criticism even a valid domain to consider when comparing these two seemingly different fields?

We may not be stretching this idea too far after all. In fact, in evaluating a new audio-photography desk technology, Blythe et. al. incorporated a cultural critique technique that had a theatre, film, and comic book critic review an innovative new product design [4,8]. What was not looked at in their study (and rightfully so) was what impact food critics might have had on a particular design. Could food critics bring a different *experiential* form of criticism to interaction design? What would these experts say?

Over the years, many other aspects of design criticism have been discussed, including technologies which support more effective incorporation of critical feedback into the design process [6]. The very fact that systems are being developed to harness criticism suggests the high importance placed by user experience practitioners on critical feedback in the design process.

Bardzell et. al. argue that HCI should create a more formal discipline around interaction design criticism [1].

Perhaps what we need to also incorporate in this new discipline are the cultural and aesthetic issues of an end-to-end user experience – something similar to what all the different collaborators in the food design process routinely strive for.

Overview
Pick up a popular gourmet food magazine, and what strikes you immediately? The mouth-watering images. The stylish cover pages. The fold-out centerfolds showing off the most delectable recipes, created by some of the world's greatest chefs. You get hungry. It's often an immediate emotional response. And perhaps, you will actually be tempted to go and read what the accompanying review might say. Many people do just that.

The pictures may be like a thousand words, but a well-written food review is certainly nothing to laugh about. Food writers tend to go into enormous detail about the texture, color, placement, and style of the food, in addition to the taste and aroma. They also often look closely at the complete food experience, from the decor of the "eating space", to the kitchen design, and the aroma of the food. Perhaps a detailed exploration of what it takes to simulate a real food experience can tell us something not only about the amount of work it takes to create the experience itself, but also perhaps what food critics might say. Cho simulated a real-life food experience in his paper on "Dressing and Modeling Food" for the Pixar blockbuster "Ratatouille" and focused on "orchestrating an [entire] experience for the audience" of what a restaurant kitchen would look like[5].

Ultimately, professional food critics have a tremendous amount of influence on diners. What criteria do these expert critics use to decide what food is good and what food is bad? Is it just the overall visual appeal of the entire experience (the aesthetic) and taste, the design of the kitchen where the meals are prepared, or is it about something more than that? Is there a codified

process they use to determine their perspective, or is it just more of a "gut-feel" process?

When contrasted with user experience, the same questions emerge: Is good design just about the aesthetic, or something more? [2]. When UX folks criticize designs, is it just a "gut feel" based on their extensive experience, or is it more of a process? Are there any differences in criticizing a single design vs. a variety of options? [9]. Is there anything product design critics can learn from food design critics, and vice-versa?

Panelists

Moderator – Patañjali S. Venkatacharya, Oracle USA, Inc., Redwood Shores, CA
Patañjali is currently Chief Evangelist & Architect in the Applications User Experience division at Oracle USA, Inc. in Redwood Shores, CA. He is also a Certified Natural Chef, and completed his externship at the world-renowned Michelin-starred restaurant Chez Panisse, in Berkeley, CA. For his work on food design, please see: http://www.patanjaliskitchen.com

Food Critic & Writer – Jonathan Kessler, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Atlanta, GA
John Kessler has been a writer at the Atlanta Journal-Constitution since 1997. For the first seven years he worked as the paper's dining critic and then began writing a column for the weekly Food & Drink section. Kessler graduated from Williams College in Massachusetts with a degree in the History of Ideas as well as L'Academie de Cuisine culinary school near Washington, D.C.

Food Stylist – Tami Hardeman, Atlanta, GA
*Portfolio: http://www.tamihardeman.com/newsite/portfolio.html
Tami Hardeman started her career as a nationally acclaimed fashion writer and stylist. She merged her love of food, photography and design when she changed careers and pursued food styling. Her work can be seen on store shelves, billboards, menus and commercials across the country - some of her clients include Olive Garden, Publix, and McDonald's. In 2005, Tami started her food blog called Running With Tweezers http://runningwithtweezers.typepad.com/, where she regularly shares recipes, stories and photography. She is currently working on a cookbook of her own, to be released in late 2010.*

Architect & Interior Designer – Ed Seiber (Founder & Partner, Seiber Design Inc.)
*Portfolio: http://www.seiberdesign.com/
Ed Seiber is an architect and interior designer, founder of Seiber Design, a studio specializing in restaurant, hospitality, retail and residential projects.*

Seiber, graduated with a bachelor's degree in architecture from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and is a licensed architect in 19 states and the District of Columbia. He is a member of the American Institute of Architects (AIA).

Product Design Critic – Bill Buxton (Principal Researcher, Microsoft Research)
Bill Buxton is a relentless advocate for innovation, design, and - especially - the appropriate consideration of human values, capacity, and culture in the conception, implementation, and use of new products and technologies. He served as Scientific Director of the Ontario Telepresence Project. In 1994, Buxton joined Alias Research where he was Chief Scientist. He is now a principal researcher at Microsoft Corp., where he splits his time between research and helping make design a fundamental pillar of the corporate culture. In 2007, Buxton was named Doctor of Design, Honoris Causa, by the Ontario College of Art and Design.

Future Plans

The aim is to use this panel to continue the exploration around food design and user experience. The hope is

that this will establish new research avenues, and provide innovations to both user experience experts and food designers in the work that they do.

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