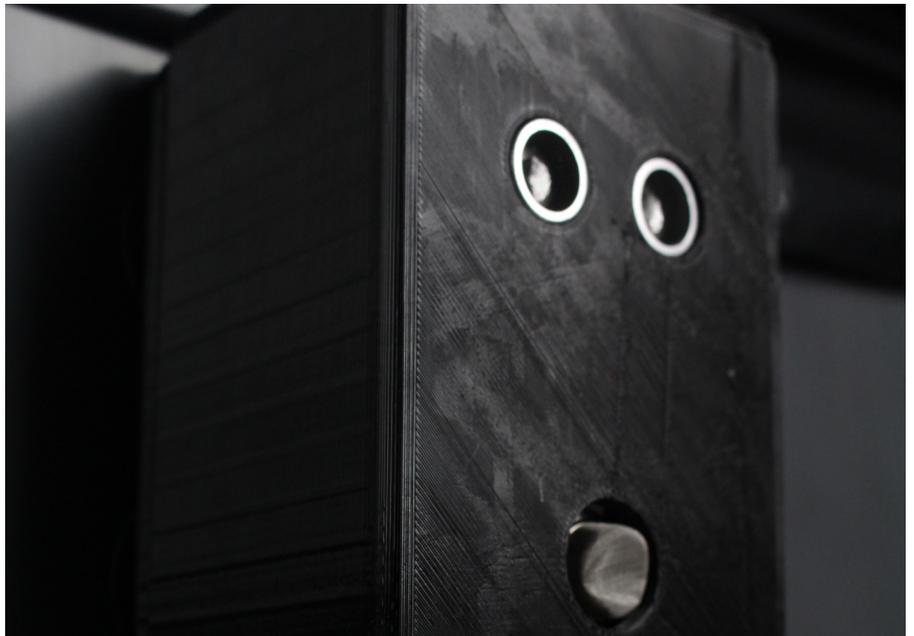


**Proceedings of the 4th
Biennial Research Through
Design Conference
19–22/03/2019**



Marechal, N., Bonafont, D., Koscielniak, C., Amatayakul, P. 2019. 'Design with neotribes'. In: Proceedings of the 4th Biennial Research Through Design Conference, 19-22 March 2019, Delft and Rotterdam, The Netherlands, Article 35, 1-14. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.7855820.v1>.

**Method&
Critique** *Frictions and Shifts in RTD*



Design with Neotribes

Nicolas Marechal¹,
Damia Bonafont¹
Clara Koscielniak¹,
and Pipe Amatayakul¹

¹University of the Arts London,
London, United Kingdom
n.marechal@lcc.arts.ac.uk,
dbonafont@gmail.com
clara.koscielniak@gmail.com,
tapanon.a@gmail.com

Abstract: The neotribe is a sociological concept which postulates the return of tribes in a contemporary form. French sociologist Michel Maffesoli sees them as an emotional community, sometimes ephemeral, changeable in composition and which often lacks organisation and routinisation, in contrast to the original form of a tribe. This paper reflects on three interactive design projects made to test this theory, undertaken in 2017 and 2018. The projects were developed around three tribes: the People's Fridge, the Freegans in Brixton (London) and the Tuskers on the EVE Online game. These groups are of interest because of their strong purpose and shared values. The notion of emergence is of particular interest in their development as it unites ethnographic and design approaches. This paper explores the research (divergence) and the making process (convergence). The research engages with theory and object analysis as catalysers. Finally, the process allows us to explore concepts such as DIY citizenship, the gift economy, values in an online game community and critique the notion of 'smart' in the Internet of Things. Hence, we hope this methodology allows more designers to contribute to a subject that goes beyond practice.

Keywords: community based design,
social innovation, interaction
design, tribes



Introduction

Community based design has a long history of research and practice in communities going back to the late 1960s. As a practice, it shows that communities can organise themselves to design, and has become a point of collaboration for designers who design for or with these communities. To name just a few, Guerrilla Gardening, the People's Fridge, Freegans and the Geezers are examples of community based design in London. Inspired by the work of these communities, we look at the field of community based design through the lens of neotribes. Michel Mafessoli, a French sociologist and emeritus professor of Paris Descartes University, has written a number of books on the subject. He offers an interesting alternative to the usual definition of community through his study of tribes in a postmodern context.

Rather than a static community based on geography (the neighbourhood for example), he proposes a dynamic perspective, seeing the community as an 'astonishing impulse that drives one to seek oneself, to assemble oneself, to surrender to the other' (Mafessoli 1992). Communities can be spread out, but still have a combined purpose. Mafessoli calls this a community of emotion or mood (Mafessoli 2000), by which he refers to the concept of *stimmung* as used by Martin Heidegger, which relates to the general ambience which surrounds us and which determines our modes of thought and ways of being (Tildesley 2013). In his argument, Mafessoli refers to one of the fathers of modern sociology, Max Weber, stating that such an emotional community may have never existed but can be a useful idea of revealing emerging situations:

The major characteristics attributed to these emotional communities are their ephemeral aspect; 'changeable composition'; 'ill-defined nature'; local flavour; their 'lack of organization' and routinization (Mafessoli 2000)

To us, emerging social practice should be at the core of design, the margin helps us understand, then conceive new perspectives on, the existing situation. Marcel Bolle De Bal refers to this as the difference between the static of the social fabric and the dynamics of weaving (Bolle De Bal 2003). The weaving, the coming to order, and the places where it might fail, are the dynamics we observe. In a recent paper, the Prayer Companion, Gaver *et al.* define a group of cloistered nuns through a unifying feature, the 'commitment to a spiritual life' and 'not their age' (2010). This is a case where the dynamic of weaving is stronger than the social fabric. This is also an argument against the practice of lean ethnography and rapid prototyping methods such as the use of the reductive 'persona', for example.

In order to approach developing our projects, we looked at methods from human centred design. In the paper The Plane Spotters, Gaver *et al.* (2008) look at a group of people assembled around their interest in spotting aeroplanes. A project was designed and tested specifically for this group, using a co-design approach focusing on 'what people say' (Steen 2011). According to Steen (2011), this uses ethnographic techniques, and is about understanding current practice and envisioning alternative practices, thereby being future oriented. On the other hand, in a previous project we worked with candidates of the Mars One initiative to design a social musical

instrument for the 7-month journey to the planet Mars. We made a prop 'connecting a group of people with their own desire and ambition' to go to Mars (Zhang, Marechal 2018). This prop was the result of empathic design, giving the initiative to the designer, focussing on 'what could be' (Steen 2011) and intervening in people's practice. Human centred design gave us the methodology, but we chose to work on 'design research practice' (Mullaney, Stolterman 2014). We did not focus on solutions but rather on developing experiments around the purpose and the values of the groups we were dealing with. We designed interventions, then technologies, as objects and as 'physical tools that could help us test our ideas and ask questions' (Mullaney, Stolterman 2014). They all strongly related to the tribes we worked with.

But who did we design with?
The concept of dialogic design

introduced by Manzini interests us. It is a conversation 'in which the various stakeholders (design expert included) bring their specific skills and their cultures' (Manzini 2016). To us, the conversation is central to design, but why not start a conversation on a subject that personally concerns the designer? Our three co-authors used their desires and frustrations as starting points. In the first project, Damia enjoyed playing online games and found a way to contribute to game studies through the study of values. In the second project, Clara worked with the People's Fridge in Brixton and adapted it by focusing on the opportunity of exchange that it procures rather than the technology. In doing so, she reflected on the concept of 'smart' in the field of the Internet of Things. In the last project, Pipe started by looking at extreme ways of living in London such as freeganism. Dumpster divers search for food as a statement about our economy, and through her project she managed to expand the network of participants and reflect on the gift economy.

The search for a neotribe often starts like this, the hunt for an existing group of people with a purpose. Often, we tried to overlap the designer's interests with the purpose of the tribe as a way to approach the tribe in an informal manner. In the three examples, the purposes ranged from simple (finding cheap food in the city) to complex (the values of online gamers). In all situations they were close to existing human preoccupations. There were also similarities to community based design. In their paper, DiSalvo *et al.* (2013) first ask whether the community is activist or hobbyist. This preoccupation with the level of purpose is central to this approach in most of our cases, but less so in the first, 'Weapons of Virtual Destruction'. However, our first case study has an internal shared sense of belonging (DiSalvo *et al.* 2013) that matters a great deal, and from which we

were easily able to extract the values of the group and increase their sense of belonging.

To design with neotribes, as research-through-design practice, shows that there is a need for dialogue with groups of people who place themselves at the margins. But the dialogue is not limited to the people we design with. The methodology allows us to look at the individuals, but also to envisage them as part of a group of people through their purpose as a whole.

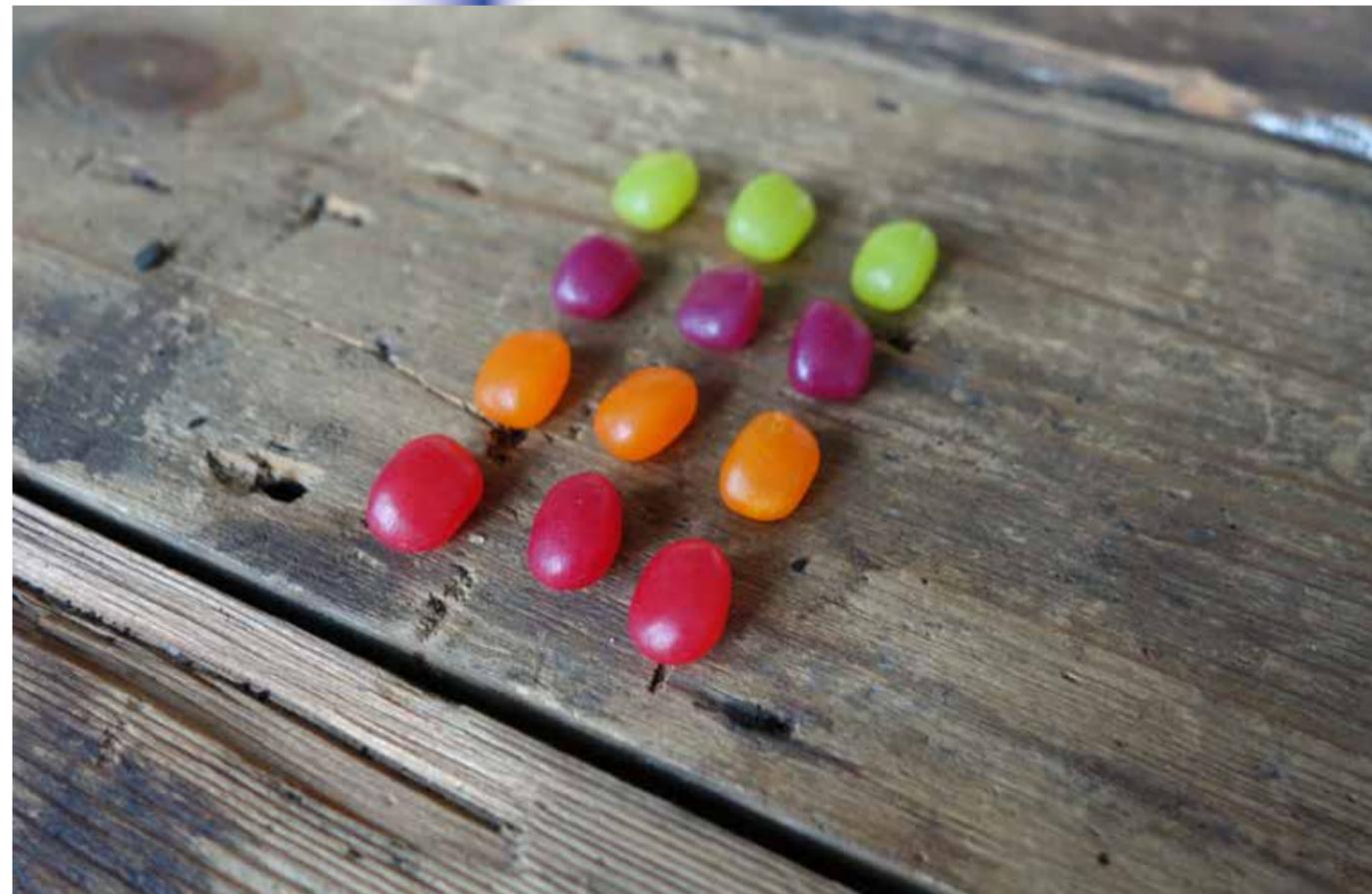


Figure 1. Weapons of virtual destruction. Photo: Damia Bonafont. First iteration of home-made jelly beans representing in-game combat boosters. These were part of 1 of the 4 artifacts created during this project; commonly named the 'booster box' by the tribes.

1. Weapons of Virtual Destruction

EVE Online is a well-established, space-based, massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) released by CCP Games in 2003. The gameplay enables players to choose from a great range of play styles, and with a growing player base of 500,000 individual pilots within the virtual New Eden star cluster that stretches beyond 7,000 explorable systems, EVE Online is the home of an incredibly diverse community. This diversity and complexity has regularly been leveraged for research purposes over the years, most notably by Columbia University Business School that use EVE Online for social media research programmes (Casey 2018).

1.1 The Tuskers

EVE online can be played individually or in alliances, with some groups having up to two thousand members. The Tuskers is a small-scale alliance of around 30 pilots. Created in 2008 by Ka Jolo and taken over by Suleiman Shouaa in 2013. The Tuskers' name and iconography come from its founders' love for boar hunting. The Tuskers live in a wormhole system that enables them to generate temporary portals to hunt and destroy unsuspecting prey across the whole galaxy. Their headquarters is named 'Tortuga', a reference to a 17th century pirate stronghold in the Caribbean

What makes the Tuskers different from most EVE Online organisations is that they follow a pirate code created by their founder 10 years ago. During all these years, they have managed to preserve a common purpose, overcome significant game mechanic changes, and develop explicit (e.g. honouring pre-arranged fights) and implicit (e.g. care for your own group) values to ultimately generate their own culture. They have formed one of EVE Online's most tightly-knit social structures, making them a perfect environment for ethnographic research. This project explores the social, political and economic values of the Tuskers. As an avid player of online multiplayer games, I'm often disappointed in the overwhelmingly negative, one-sided, addiction-centric narrative offered by mainstream media on the topic. This research offers an opportunity to shine a different light on this evolving field by exploring an established gaming group and bringing to life the complex forces that bind them together. Having played EVE Online in the past and being well aware of the importance of human



interaction within the game, choosing this particular universe as a research environment made complete sense to me.

1.2 Research

The project took place over a period of 5 months and was divided into two parts, divergence (exploration and intervention) and convergence (creation). The first part involved a deep ethnographic study of the Tuskers, using the observer-participant methodology. This approach advocates the active participation of the researcher within the studied group in order to gain an understanding of said group. Even though EVE Online is a popular game, it is renowned for its complexity - the first couple of weeks playing with the Tuskers were mostly dedicated to up-skilling myself. When I felt I was being accepted as a full member, I started documenting my gaming sessions. I did so through video and audio recordings as well as text and conversation logs. To complement these sessions, I organised multiple virtual workshops including an open discussion on what being a pirate meant in both virtual and physical worlds. Multiple members shared and discussed their personal opinions. Over multiple weeks, by combining play and research, I was able to generate a wealth of insight that mapped the group's history, motivations, aspirations and struggles.

1.3 Intervention

In order to conclude the first part of the research, we decided on an intervention within the group. Due to their space piracy heritage, the Tuskers follow a historical pirate code which they ask recruits to adhere to before joining their corporation. However, the old code was outdated, lacked detail

Figure 2. Weapons of Virtual Destruction. Photo: Damia Bonafont. The 4 final artifacts: the 'polite coaster', the 'loot box', the 'booster box' (left to right) and the 'wormhole abacus' (below).

and did not do justice to the complexity of the current group. I therefore decided to update it with the help of the Tuskers, focussing on the group's core values, proposing 20 individual values divided into 3 categories, social, political and economic. I chose to leverage values as they provide a common point of comparison between virtual and physical worlds. For example, discretion has a common meaning in both physical and virtual worlds. The categories represent key aspects of EVE Online's gameplay as they mirror the values of society. Each value was illustrated through a concrete example, to avoid confusion.

The Tuskers were encouraged to re-order, edit, remove and add any of the values on the list until it best represented them as a group. This approach was inspired by the Rokeach value survey (RVS), a values classification tool famously used by Milton Rokeach between 1968 and 1971. He was the first to map and study the evolution of American values through a questionnaire in which 1400+ individuals ranked a list of values dear to them. I first involved a small group of 5 key members, that organically expanded to the whole group due to recurring discussions of group values (for example: are we even pirates?) during gaming sessions. This offered a wealth of learning. One included a stark reminder of the importance of properly labelled and contextualised documents when working with multiple stakeholders with varying levels of involvement. The process eventually led to the updated code, which is now used as a reference for the recruitment of new Tuskers and guidance on day-to-day activities.

1.4 Co-design

The second part of the project involved the co-design of a collection of tangible objects (Figure 2). Each object needed to fill two roles: firstly, they had to embed one of the central Tusker values highlighted in the code and, secondly, they had to be useful in order to be used on a daily basis. Of the values originally listed, 4 were selected to take the form of objects, collective ownership, courtesy, huntsmanship and entrepreneurship. Alternating between small and larger workgroups, 4 objects were created, a glowing connected loot box (Figure 3A), home-made jelly beans (Figure 3B), a drinks coaster and a wormhole abacus (Figure 3C). The loot box is an LED strip that deals with collective ownership, telling members about the status of their loot. The drinks coaster is about courtesy, reminding them of the need to be polite in online discussions. The home-made jelly beans or 'booster box' celebrates the entrepreneurship of the tribe. An Austrian Tusker, Patrick, produces and sells combat boosters to the tribe as a way to improve ship abilities for short periods. My version is the offline equivalent, a homemade sweet that boosts physical ability during gaming (Figure 1). Finally, the wormhole abacus deals with huntsmanship. In order to do what they do, hunting and destroying other players, the group have learned to master the use of wormholes. I made this tool in order to perfect the art of crossing wormholes, so the Tuskers can quickly get in and out of fight situations. This particular object has been well received by the tribe.

All objects were produced on a larger scale, in order for all 30 members of the tribe to receive a full set and take part in the next and last phase of the experiment. With the objects now used by the Tuskers on a daily basis, and multiple future touch-points set up with them (monthly discussions, yearly code updates), I can track the evolution of the group's values over time and better understand

how these come to life, evolve and sometimes retire.

1.5 Learning

Beyond the ethnographic research, this experiment introduced the design of objects as a complimentary research method to explore human values. Both during the making process and once the objects were being used on a regular basis, the artefacts acted as powerful catalysts for the generation of additional research. The iterations and questions emerging from the making process openly challenged existing values. For example, although historically part of how they presented themselves, piracy was ultimately removed from the list. It also generated unexpected values such as plurality as a key Tusker attribute, through a discussion of the homophobic nature of some

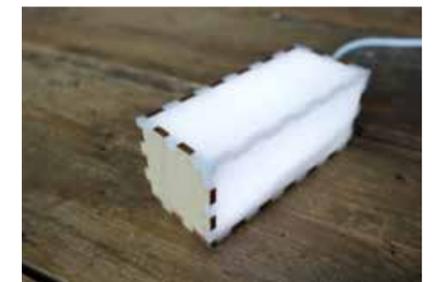


Figure 3A, 3B, 3C. Weapons of Virtual Destruction. Photo: Damia Bonafont. The 'loot box' (3A), the 'booster box' (3B) and the 'wormhole abacus' (3C).

other EVE Online groups. The presence and use of finished objects influenced the members' behaviour and acted as visual reminders of the importance of values within their virtual group. Having tangible objects enabled the project to be presented to a wider audience, such as other gaming communities. It has also enabled the project to be presented to a wider audience, such as other gaming communities.

2. The Collaborative Fridge

The People's Fridge in Brixton is the first community fridge in the UK. It was bought in 2016 through a crowd-funding campaign that resulted in the installation of a free-access fridge in Pop Brixton (People's Fridge Brixton 2018). Any member of the public or local business can put food that is about to go to waste in the fridge, and anyone who needs it or has a use for it can collect it. The study is human and object-oriented, and the evaluation focuses on a collaborative fridge and the people running it as a means, not an end. The study angle is an analysis of the open-access fridge system in general and the ways in which design could improve it. In 2017, I discovered the concept of a collaborative fridge in Paris, where I was living at the time, through a local initiative called 'Les Frigos Solidaires' (Mehtoul 2018). I decided to engage with the British equivalent when I moved to London. The main People's Fridge volunteers are Ben, Mala, Seb, Jo, Jason, Kat, Katie and Dottie, all of whom live in the neighbourhood of the open access fridge. My first gatekeeper was Seb, who is in charge of the email communication of the People's Fridge. He welcomed me to the Monday evening group meeting, where we talked about the logistics of the fridge, the organisation of events to raise awareness and research about new ways to make the fridge more effective. Shortly after, I joined the organisation as a volunteer and started working with Dottie, a marketing professional who volunteers there. Together, we created visual content for the organisation. I also worked with Katie, currently unemployed, with whom I collected surplus food from the Pret food shop on Saturdays. Along with the organisers, I often met with Martin and Kadhija who



were regular Fridge users living in Brixton. They were interviewed several times along with another eight other users who did not want to specify their names or professions.

Since opening, the fridge in London has made an international impact. I met with Dounia and her mother who own a restaurant in Paris and who created the Les Frigos Solidaires the French equivalent to the People's Fridge and three French users of the fridge who lived in the 18th arrondissement of Paris.

2.1 Research

Since I have followed this initiative for some time, my purpose was to become a volunteer and fully engage with the actors in the community. As a trained graphic designer, I felt I could contribute to the project at a deep level and bring a personal set of knowledge and skills to the operation. Firstly, I helped organise events and create visual communication, but my commitment to the community gained a second dimension when I started investigating Les Frigos Solidaires operation and making comparisons to the People's Fridge. It was very interesting to see how the different cultures were shaping the fridges differently. I reported on each of my trips to Paris, and the resulting research, back to the People's Fridge volunteers and, by presenting ways in which the two projects could inspire each other, I initiated a dialogue between the two projects. For example, in my first report from Paris I gave an explanation of how the people running the French fridges were always present,

Figure 4. Collaborative Fridge. Photo: Clara Koscielniak. Board of switch buttons situated on the side of the open-access fridge. It allows the residents to communicate which category of food is missing from the fridge.

as they run the restaurant next to the fridge, and this allowed them to get to know the users, their backgrounds and their needs and to explain the concept to them. Afterwards, a decision was made by the People's Fridge volunteers to start fridge shadowing on Sundays, when Pret's surplus food is available and it is therefore most crowded. We asked the users questions and stood next to the fridge to answer bystanders' questions. The research shifted from participant observation to drawing a holistic picture of 'smart' social interaction, depending on location and cultural differences. Having experience of living in both countries, I could bring my own perspective to the table and understand how the French initiative embraced the concept in their own cultural manner. It started with the same crowd-funding system but added a more meaningful connection between the object and its users. For example, the community started to engage in the process of crowd-funding by sharing the social media comments of the people who participated, usually living nearby, thereby creating connections even before the fridge was installed.

2.2 Empathic design

While the first observations gave a better understanding of the actors, problems and goals, the intervention prepared me to consider what the fridge users' practices and daily routines could be. As the fridge is left unsupervised, it wasn't easy to know how people were interacting with it. I decided to design a simple intervention by placing a guest book in which people could leave a few words about the experience. While experimenting with different types of pages (some blank, some with specific tabs to write about the type of food or expiration date), I discovered that when people were not given any guidelines, they tended to make their notes more personal, thanking people for their donations or expressing their uses for it. I therefore reasoned that, while the fridge starts social interconnection just by existing, there was a need for a free space to continue the discussion, either physical or digital.

The first experiment led to the conclusion that the design would be intended for a smaller community. I decided to set up a second intervention, but this time I worked with the residents of my own building where I installed a fridge. Experimentation started in my hall with people of various nationalities: Shreya and Shinjini from India, working in fashion; Mateus and Marianna from Brazil, respectively working in service design and illustration; and Zixhuan and Cara from China, students in art foundation. They had active involvement in the prototyping iterations. Throughout the stages of the project, they interacted with six 'low-fi' prototypes, and interpreted situations for themselves.

At the beginning of the research, I thought each newly designed object would be an improved version of the precedent, with their feedback taken into account. But soon I came to realise that observing their behaviour, experience and active involvement with the objects constantly broadened the perspectives and help me reframed the system and context. They evolved a deeper and more personal relationship with the future outcomes and functions of the item.

This iterative approach to reframe the problematic and functional elements led to outcomes facilitating the food sharing process and adding guidance (Figure 4 and Figure 5). For instance, the fewer social guidelines required by the objects, the more personal



Figure 5. Collaborative Fridge. Photo: Clara Koscielniak. Fridge magnet destined to be put on the residents' personal fridges. It is equipped with led lights which display the current categories of food that the fridge would benefit from the most. Whenever a light is on, the user knows that someone in their building is currently in need of a certain type of food, creating a personalized motivator to give away surplus food.

and meaningful their responses were. Our common analysis was that, while the fridge started a social interconnection by simply existing, there was a need for a free space between the fridge and the community to continue the discussion, either physical or digital. This led to the creation of a group chat driven by automated messages sent from the fridge. While household food waste habits have been scrutinised in order to raise awareness and change behaviours, no research has been done into the emotional appeal and responses that this object can create or the kind of guidance - or lack thereof - needed, especially within a social context.

Both practices were used with the aim of researching the issues of the fridge's interactions and finding a means to enhance its abilities to act as a reminder and facilitate people to give their food away before it goes to waste, creating a personal connection with

the user and the fridge and bringing the community together.

2.3 Learning

This project has allowed me to reflect on the purpose of a ‘smart’ object. In the Internet of Things, a ‘smart’ object is one fit for all solutions and engineered exploits, but the Collaborative Fridge suggests a different approach to the idea of ‘smart’. By making the fridge as low-tech as possible and allowing it to act with an electronic aura, we argue that that we reinforce the social structure of a community by giving them a sustainable goal (reducing food waste). The fridge becomes smart because the community makes it smart, re-establishing the balance between technology and humans.

Tackling large-scale food waste and improving the fridge’s communal use goes along with the approach of Victor Papanek, a pioneer of morally and environmentally responsible design, who puts the relationship between the designed object and its user(s) first. In *Design for the Real World*, he says: ‘We are beginning to understand that the main challenge for our society no longer lies in the production of goods. Rather, we have to make choices that deal with “how good?” instead of “how much?”. Moral, aesthetic, and ethical values will evolve along with the choices to which they will be applied’ (Papanek 1985). Although the fridge holds a moral role in raising awareness and educating people about surplus food by simply existing, its biggest asset isn’t raising consciousness, as people’s attitude towards food waste is already positive, but helping them reflect on their behaviour. The object’s creation has an organic, straightforward and transparent fit into the users’ daily routine.

Other initiatives to fight food waste in the physical environment have mushroomed over the last couple of years, such as the Brixton Pound Café or the Third Space Canteen, where the food served is made from surplus food and there is education on how to use it in mindful ways. My proposal is to make a hybrid space, both tangible and digital, with apps that connect people with surplus food to those in need, and a community fridge that creates meaningful connections.

3. Dumpster Doctor

This project began when I noticed of the South London Freegans group on the website meetup.com. The objective of the first meeting was for people who had already done dumpster diving to share tips with those who were about to do their first dumpster dive. For those who have never heard the term, ‘dumpster diving’ in the US or ‘skipping’ in the United Kingdom, is the activity of picking up food from the large bins outside restaurants or supermarkets. People do this for many reasons, but the freegans are a group of activists who have made a choice not to buy anything as a way of ‘minimizing the detrimental impact of consumption and reducing and recovering waste and independence from the profit-driven economy’ (Freegan.info). According to Michelle Coyne, ‘Freeganism is an overarching lifestyle of chosen simplicity’ (2009), but diving in a dumpster is neither easy nor tempting. Among the anti-consumerist movements, this one proposes living ‘on the remnants of consumer and capitalist culture’ (Coyne 2009). It was very interesting for me to explore this way of living which, in my opinion, is unpleasant and difficult, but raises issues about type of society we live in. I didn’t necessarily want to help find a solution to an issue but to make an object that would amplify the issues they are concerned with. The object could be the opposite of their lifestyle, normalising their intention, I thought,

to support their purpose.

3.1 Research

The research began with the generic ethnographic method, observing and participating in the freegan community. During the first meet up, the organiser of the South London Freegans, Eleanor, ran a workshop discussing the topic of freeganism and sustainability. She shared her experience as a long term freegan. She mentioned that she had sometimes been looked down on by people passing while she was dumpster diving. Some people had tried to give her money. Being a dumpster diver attracts pity, if you look only at appearances. She also mentioned being caught by the police and eventually let go, which is a reminder that what they do is often not legal. By looking at a specific area, Brixton, for the pattern of the freegan way of sustainable living I have met various stakeholders. At first, freegans often try to negotiate with local store owners. Alternatively, they go to the huge bins outside local supermarkets. These are challenging, however, because they often have security at night. This led me to make my own personal map (Figure 6) in order to understand the links within in the circle of the freegan lifestyle, including all the primary research information I gained during the conversation and meetup, and some from the secondary research.

3.2 Empathic design

As an object, the dumpster was patented by George Dempster in the US in 1935. The idea was to make a container that could be easily engaged, lifted and transported by a truck. It was used in construction before becoming a refuse collector when sanitation became an issue in American cities. The skip, or skep as it was originally called in the UK, was a basket

used as a home for bee colonies from Shakespearean times until the Second World War. The basket was made bigger and given wheels for use by cotton mill workers and coal miners. Examining the history of the object led us to see the irony of an object that started as a way to make honey now being used as a bin. It gave an opportunity to see the object not just as a refuse container but as an object of foraging. The dumpster is incontestably at the centre of the freegan lifestyle and freeganism as a movement. It is a controversial object as it contains waste, literally food that has been rejected, but, at the same time, it is private and therefore access is illegal. Its appearance is also very unappealing and would deter anyone from approaching it. In emotional terms, it is an object with a strong anti-affordance. Ultimately, it is the place where the freegans act on the wasted food. Thanks to them, it is no longer rejected but desired, not just for what it is but also what it represents. Because of the negotiation with shop owners, one could see it as part of a new ‘gift economy’, a place of utopian vision of non-market exchange. Terry Leahry, a lecturer in Sociology specialising in non-market socialism, sees the gift economy as ‘an everyday life and political act that results in social change’ (Nelson 2015). I was inspired by their alternative strategy for living and my project aims to create a stronger freegan community using physical computing, adding to the idea of urban foraging.

With the help of a friend, I decided to find my own dumpster in the Hoxton area. I found one, marked the location, and took a picture (as told to in the workshop). Then I came back at night to see if I could sneak into the area. We were lucky enough to find, and pick up, a still functioning printer in the dumpster space. Doing my first solo dive helped me to understand how to spot the right sort of dumpster in an open area, that is not too big but would allow a newly practicing freegan like myself to enter and exit. After reflecting on the object

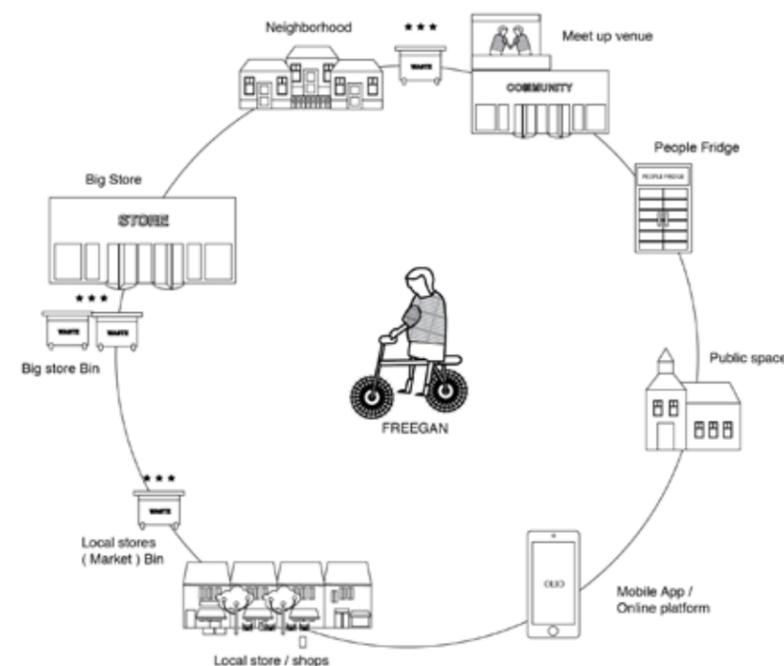


Figure 6. Dumpster Doctor. Photo: Pipe Amatayaku1. South London Freegan Network: online and offline stakeholders and tools.

itself and experiencing a dive on my own, I decided to develop a tool to help the members of the community (Figure 7). It is an electronic tool with sensors that can be secretly installed inside the bin. The sensors provide information to the freegans about the ‘freshness’ of the food (when the dumpster is open) and the toxicity of the space from the methane gas emitted. It can act as a beacon for the community, but doesn’t replace common sense. The freegan community provides training to new members, and that training ought to be followed, but the beacon can signify that a dumpster is ‘safe to access’.

3.3 Learning

Through this project, I have been exposed to freegans and their way of life in the city, with its barter and negotiation. The idea of DIY citizenship has helped put a focus on my project. According to Ratto and Boler (2014), DIY citizenship is ‘a twenty-first-century amalgamation of politics, culture, art and technology that in turn constitutes identities rooted in diverse making practices’. In this tribe, the politics is strong and well defined, but I found that they are not willing to accept technology easily. By being with the tribe, and believing in their motivation for reducing waste, limited consumption and using resources more effectively, I brought a technology that wasn’t separating them but bringing them together and expanding the possibilities of the group. Feedback from Riccie Janus, UX Lead at IBM design in London, points out that the Dumpster Doctor project could better fit the so called part-time freegan, who wants to support the idea of freeganism. Although it hasn’t been tested extensively, the technology would give social value through the sharing of data within the community of freegans. It

would support the secretive element of the community and encourage negotiation with the business community to support an approach to economy that puts an emphasis on gifting. The map I created has helped identify such stakeholders, and I would encourage working collaboratively with other businesses, as they are the most influential stakeholder for the freegan.



Figure 7. Dumpster Doctor Photo: Pipe Amatayakul. Dumpster toolbox in a 3D printed case with proximity sensor and gas sensor.

Conclusion

This paper looks at the sociological concept of neotribes as defined by Michel Maffesoli, a French sociologist and emeritus professor of Paris Descartes University. It re-examines and defines anew, emerging forms of societal connection. Our ethnographic research supports Maffesoli's intuition about this postmodern form of tribe. In his original book, *Le Temps des Tribus* [The Time of the Tribes], published in 1988, he identifies hobbyists, sports enthusiasts, the environmental movement, consumer lobbies and affinity-based political groups among the tribes of his time. Our work shows new groups who bond around an online game and sustainability, further to our previous work which looked at the bond between a scattered group with a desire to go to Mars (Zhang, Marechal 2018).

In all the projects, we used ethnography as divergence, with no idea where the tribes would lead us, as we were genuinely curious about their purpose. After a phase of ethnographic immersion as observant-participant we looked for an opportunity to distance ourselves through an intervention. The intervention was a quick way to prototype an idea with the tribe. The guest book for the Collaborative Fridge was key to the success of that project as it helped us better understand the interactions around the fridge. The group wasn't collecting any data about the use of the People's Fridge, just the contents. The necessity of redefining the community started to emerge from the use of the guest book. In the case of the Dumpster Doctor, it was the object analysis that, ironically, helped us find a purpose. By researching the origin of the word 'skip', we found that a 'skep' was originally a home for bee colonies. Association of words reinforced the idea of dumpster diving as foraging. For the project on the Tuskers, it was the reworking of their values that helped us decide where the project would lead. In the book *'Inventing the Social'* the authors see the combination of 'representing and intervening in social life' as 'inventive research' rather than an 'experiment on – or rather with – social life' (Marres, Wilkie and Guggenheim 2018). Whether we were able to work as co-designers or empathic designers, the collaborative element of working *with* the social life was essential.

In order to converge in these projects, we looked at the results of the interventions and decided to imagine objects that would represent the values of the group (Weapons of Virtual Destruction), use a fridge to bind an existing community (the Collaborative Fridge) or make an object to encourage foraging in dumpsters (Dumpster Doctor). Of all the projects, only the first one is still ongoing, while others have not managed to go further. From the notion of values in online gaming to global citizenship to the gift economy through DIY citizenship in freeganism, we have been able to shed new light on existing subjects. While these are the first results of this approach, they are promising in our opinion, as the tribes offer the right amount of complexity and contrast with the lean methods of ethnography. In *'Design, When Everybody Designs'*, Enzo Manzini says we should 'consider the elderly not only as a problem but also as possible agents for its solution' (Manzini 2015). When we were working on the People's Fridge, one issue was that the fridge referred to a community solely based on location and its contribution to the social fabric could have been improved. In the first iteration, we put a fridge in a dormitory, but we were already thinking of using the fridge as a link between two complementary communities, one young (far away from their parents) and the other old (far away from their children). So, we made the decision to continue without the People's

Fridge community in the making of the prototypes. However, we were able to come back to the original group, show them the project and get their feedback. While it was not their idea anymore, they were very enthusiastic about the inspiration their project had given us.

We wish to conclude with the words of Robert Nisbet, historian of sociology, from whom Maffesoli takes that 'the ideas which may later be structured in theory are primarily the product of "imagination, vision, intuition"' (Maffesoli 2000). What Maffesoli emphasises here is that sociology is as much an art as a science. The discipline develops a rigorous set of tools, but he insists that it should rely on intuition to build new theories. To us, Maffesoli's intuitive exploration is a way to close the gap between the discipline of sociology and the subject of design. However, what was lacking from the original theory was a way to verify how it might apply to the world around us. Grounded theory has often been brought into the debate on the role of research through design. According to Charmaz, grounded theory 'serves as a way to learn about the worlds we study and a method for developing theories to understand them' (Charmaz 2006). Through these projects, we started with a theory that help us see the world around us in order to develop or contribute to existing theories. But, what differentiates us from an ethnographer is the need to act or frame a situation. As interactive designers, we engage in research through design as a way of 'broadening the scope and focus of designers, of challenging current perceptions of the role and form of technology' (Zimmerman, Stolterman, Forlizzi 2010). Using neotribes as a designerly way of knowing has allowed us to look into the corners of society, to focus on the weak and the marginal as a way to understand the emergent with the possibility of developing new radical ideas for all of us.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Wesley Goatley, Helga Schmidt, Riccie Janus and Rania Svoronou for their comments on the projects during their development.

Damia would like to thank Suleiman for allowing him to do this project on his online corporation and the following tuskers: Ashnazg, Jaxley, Johnny, Patrick and Rhythmic.

Clara would like to thank the People's Fridge (Brixton) and les Frigos Solidaires (Paris) for their warm welcomes.

Pipe would like to thank the Freegans (Brixton) and Michele Darshad.

We all would like to thank the Creative Computing Lab at the London College of Communication and Tom Lynch in particular for helping us through our technical hurdles.

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