

# The Pillow: Artist-Designers in the Digital Age

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## ABSTRACT

The Pillow is a treated LCD screen which shows changing patterns in response to ambient electromagnetic radiation, challenging viewers to consider our constant invasion by electronic information. It is proposed as a product for mass-production, one that people would purchase for home use. In this paper, we describe how this admittedly impractical value fiction illustrates some of the ways that designers can pursue research.

## Keywords

design, design centred approaches, telecommunications

## THE PILLOW

The Pillow (Figure 1) was designed by the first author and shown at an LG Electronics sponsored exhibit at the Royal College of Art. Essentially it is an LCD screen enclosed within a translucent plastic block, pierced by eight holes, and surrounded by a clear plastic inflatable pillow. Coloured patterns, reflecting the block's configuration of eight circles in a rectangular field, fade in and out on the screen, illuminating the block, the pillow and its surroundings.

The glowing pillow is beautiful and evocative in itself. But the experience gains impact with the idea that these patterns reflect ambient electromagnetic radiation in the environment. The changing colours and lights of the Pillow are designed to reflect television signals, radio, cell phones, even viewers' electromagnetic fields, allowing the object to become a kind of window onto this invisible world.

Thus the Pillow raises issues about our existence in an omnipresent sea of electronic information. It questions the notion of privacy: even if we may not contribute to the myriad streams of data which surround us, we cannot avoid them, as other people's information invade our homes and even our bodies. From this perspective, the Pillow is confrontational, facing us with the literal intrusiveness of information.

The design of the Pillow challenges the usual aesthetics of computer displays, however. Images shown on current displays tend to be flat, clearly defined, and hard-edged. Using the translucent plastic block and pillow, lights and colours are given depth, and made softer and more subtle. Thus the Pillow is able to raise its issues gently, perhaps evoking a feeling of wonderment rather than shock.

## Design and Value Fictions

The Pillow is not a work of art, but of design. It is a prototype of a device to be mass-produced for wide-spread home use, as ubiquitous and unremarkable as a toaster or a television. The Pillow was *not* made to be isolated in a gallery space (making its exhibition problematic), in which the experience of seeing it and the questions it raises can be compartmentalised and separated from everyday concerns. Instead, the Pillow is designed to live in the home, raising its issues as a routine part of day to day life.

What establishes the Pillow as design, not art? Two things: First, the physical design makes use of inexpensive components and construction techniques characteristic of mass-produced objects, avoiding the precious materials and crafted appearance that would tend to isolate it as a unique exhibition piece. Second, the sheer assertion that it is a prototype design encourages viewers to consider it in that context, and thus to ask different questions (e.g., would I own one? why?) than if it is treated as an artwork.

Of course, we realise that the Pillow would be unlikely to succeed as a mass-marketed product. That is precisely the point of the project. The Pillow is a kind of cultural thought experiment we call a *value fiction*. In much science fiction, ideas emerge from imagining impossible technologies in recognisable cultures. In a value fiction, ideas come from imagining possible products, based on existing technologies, and trying to understand why they would not work in our current culture.

The unfeasibility of the Pillow is not technical, nor economic. Instead, it is impossible because of current cultural values. Insofar as the Pillow is perceived as impractical, this prompts questions about what we *do* think is practical or useful (especially for electronic technologies), about the values that would be necessary for the Pillow to be accepted in the culture at large.

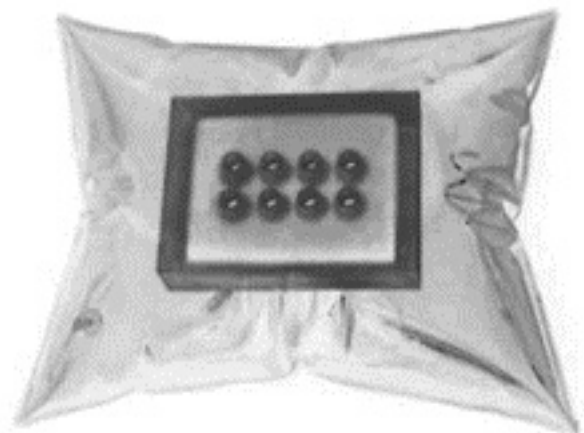


Figure 1: The Pillow

From this point of view, the deepest question the Pillow raises is: “why not?”

The creation of value fictions illustrates one role that designers can play, that of the *artist-designer*. In this approach, the designer becomes a sort of applied artist, drawing on the issues and techniques raised in the arts to inform and inspire design. There is historical precedence for this role both in architecture and graphic design. However, the artist-designer is often thought of as making things beautiful, in improving their look and feel. With the Pillow, the aim is to draw on issues raised by conceptual art from the ‘60’s onwards, to explore the form of values rather than the form of things.

We believe that artist-designers and the value fictions they create can play a valuable role in the development of future technologies. Their designs—possible but unfeasible—can serve as pointed criticisms of the bland uniformity of current hardware, interfaces, and functionality.

### Design Centred Approach

Although the Pillow is meant to be an exploration of conceptual issues, and is purposefully designed *not* to address users’ practical requirements, the reactions of its potential audience are a crucial part of the project. Clearly, a user-centred approach is not appropriate for this sort of work. At the same time, we do not want to fall into the sorts of solipsistic design practices that user-centred approaches have tried to combat.

For the Pillow, we have developed a new method, in which prospective owners are presented with the prototype as an already existing design, and asked for their reactions. The aim is not to assess the design’s usability, of course, nor the degree to which it fills recognised needs. Instead, the purpose is to trigger people’s imaginations, to challenge them to consider how this sort of technology might fit into their lives. How did they get it? Where do they keep it?

So far, this technique (which involves a lengthy interview) has been completed with only one person, but the exercise was quite illuminating. For instance, when asked how she got the Pillow, she told about her friend Jock, a gadget-lover who found the Pillow in a shop and gave it to her because he was too impatient to live with it himself. Although she would have never found the Pillow herself, she said, she grew to love it so much that when Jock asked for it back, she refused. By engaging her imagination, we gained insight into how such objects might circulate, and into issues of patience, identity, and audience.

We believe this sort of *design-centred* methodology might be generally useful for research designers. It turns the user-centred approach on its head, with designers using their imagination and skills first, and introducing prospective audiences to the results for comments and insights afterwards. Of course, audience reactions might lead to an iterative design cycle, as traditionally understood. The key point, however, is to start with designer’s unique ideas and perspectives as a way to help potential users see possibilities beyond those they already know.

### CONCLUSION: RESEARCH THROUGH DESIGN

The Pillow is an example of our ongoing attempt to understand how we can do research while respecting the methods and perspectives of designers.<sup>1</sup>

Broadly speaking, research on computers and interfaces, as pursued for instance by computer scientists, psychologists, and sociologists, has followed a scientific tradition, aiming for an objective stance in which practitioners articulate, analyse, abstract, and facilitate users’ needs. In contrast, designers are less concerned with the reality, possibility, or even desirability of objectivity.

Subjectivity plays an important role in design, with designers developing their own points of view in their work. Background research on a subject is important, but in the end the designer’s reaction determines the work. No single solution is considered “correct”, but instead designers tend to explore many ideas and concepts related to a subject before developing any given possibility.

Thus we seek alternatives to the role of “facilitator” implied by techniques such as user-centred or participative design. We are frankly sceptical of the idea that interaction design could be reduced to a finite number of precise engineering principles. Instead, our work practices tend to aim at eliciting a personal approach to a problem, rather than achieving a supposedly objective truth.

The Pillow can be seen as an extreme form of design, one purposely aimed at avoiding utility, functionality, and practicality. As such, it illustrates the potential role of artist-designers in challenging current assumptions about what computers are and what they are for. It takes a very functional approach in its design and implementation, but to achieve aims that challenge, rather than fit, our values.

The work can also be viewed as conceptual design, in which hypotheses and ideas are explored. Usually, this is understood as an initial phase in design, used before ideas are filtered for practicality and utility. In contrast, we are suggesting it as an activity in itself, one aimed not towards realising marketable products for industry, but instead towards raising challenging ideas for the public.

While the Pillow is an extreme form of design, however, it highlights a number of contributions design can make to digital technologies. First, it points out the possibilities of emphasising aesthetics as much as practicality or usability. Second, the design attempts to provoke a search for meaning, using evocation rather than explicit communication. Third, it illustrates a design-centred approach grounded through contact with users. Finally, and most fundamentally, it suggests a role for designers in raising deep questions about the meaning of digital media and in suggesting alternatives to our current assumptions.

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<sup>1</sup>While everybody who develops new systems is a designer in some sense, we reserve the term for those recognised by the mainstream design community, usually people trained in colleges of art or design. Still, we feel the risks of generalising about such a diverse group. Perhaps it would be better to refer to “research designers,” or, more simply, “designers like us.”