

# DESIGN MASHUP: PERSONAL OBJECTS MEET NARRATIVE IN CONTEMPORARY DESIGN

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## ABSTRACT

An engaging story is at the heart of every notable design. This paper proposes a method of teaching students how to employ narrative in their own design work. Students first construct a short, written narrative about an object that is meaningful to them. Then they discover how notable contemporary designers use narrative by collecting images of products that resonate with them. After collecting images of products, students define the essence of its narrative in one word.

Finally students are asked to design a product with a new narrative by combining the narrative of their meaningful object with one of the narrative trends that they discover in their exploration of contemporary design. This paper gives an example of how the development of narrative helped students create meaningfully designed products. Ultimately, Design Mashup is a method of teaching students that narrative is an essential component of any impactful design, and it shows them how their own design work can be enriched by incorporating it into their design process.

*Keywords: Students, narrative, tropes, design, mashup*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Everybody loves a good story, and all products (even those that aren't designed) have a story. The narrative can either be intriguing and convincing, or it can be boring and confusing. Design students often find it difficult to understand the role of narrative in their designs, and as a result, they are unable to effectively incorporate it into their work. In essence, they are unable to tell a good story. This paper proposes a method for helping students employ clear and engaging narrative in their design work. It is anticipated that as students learn how to effectively incorporate narrative in their design, that their final products will become more meaningful and engaging; ultimately it will help them to design better products.

## 2 ESTABLISHING NARRATIVE AS A DESIGN ELEMENT

Successful designers let narrative drive the content of their design work because, as Jerome Bruner says, "narrative organizes experience" [1]. Consequently, if the narrative of an object is unclear or confusing, then the meaning of the object is lost and the object itself will be considered insignificant by consumers.

A great example of a product with a clear narrative is Patrick Jouin's *C2 Solid Chair* as seen in Figure 1. This chair was displayed in the 2007/8 product design exhibit in The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. The exhibit featured objects from around the world that the curator Paola Antonelli selected to "emphasize the diversity and ingenuity of contemporary design" [2].

The *C2 Solid Chair* is both diverse in its form and ingenious in its manufacturing. The design is plagued by irony. The full-scale, rapid-prototyped chair is celebratory of the height which industrialization has reached, yet it abandons all current industrial production methods. The complex and extravagant form suggests that an excessive amount of waste would result in its production, yet the chair is an argument against the old, resource-heavy methods of manufacturing and exposes a new and promising future of resource-light (or in this case zero-waste less) production.

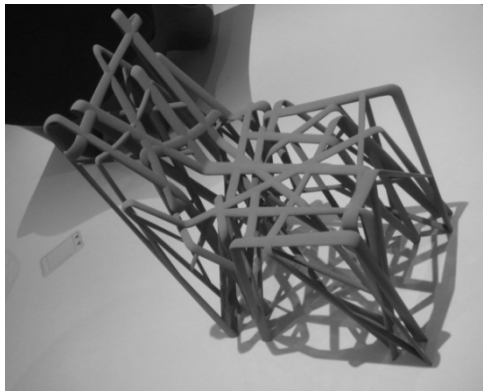


Figure 1. C2 Solid Chair, Patrick Jouin, 2004

Jouin's design work was included in the exhibit primarily because of the clear and compelling story behind the design: using new rapid prototyping techniques to manufacture complex, yet resource-light, consumer products. The aesthetics and functionality of the chair, though important, were secondary to the narrative dictating the design decisions.

### **3 NURTURING THE NARRATIVE**

Students have historically found it difficult to develop design stories from the ground up, the first step in this “design mashup” exercise provides students with a foundational narrative upon which they can build. Students are asked to select an object that is meaningful to them. It does not matter whether the object is cheap or expensive, ugly or beautiful, old or new. What does matter is that the object is somehow meaningful to the student. For practical purposes, it is suggested that the object be small and simple. However, the size and complexity of the object does not necessarily affect the outcome.

Students are then asked to write a short narrative (no more than 250 words) for their meaningful object. Since there is already an existing reason why the object is important to the student, they find it easy to give narrative to the object. The written narrative (which is really more of a memoir in the sense that it is primarily composed from the students' personal experiences with the object) becomes the tool whereby the object's meaning is clarified and validated.

The “Power of Storytelling,” defines this method of incorporating a student's personal history into a classroom environment as “narrative enquiry.” Lindesmith states “Narrative enquiry gives permission to learners to tap into the tacit knowledge embedded in their experience as well as to learn from each other in the process. It also serves as a springboard for dialogue about the deeper issues of their professional discipline that may not be easily illuminated through other methods. Because narratives rely strongly on communication and relationships, they can facilitate connections between people and create a sense of 'shared history'. Thus the environmental context for learning becomes one that supports the strengthening of collegiality and collaboration, and builds self-esteem” [3].

Just as getting started is often the most difficult part of writing a paper, developing an intriguing narrative has often been the most difficult part of designing for students. The meaningful object and its written narrative create “a springboard for dialogue” (as Lindesmith concisely stated). It gets the students talking and telling stories. Starting off the project with a narrative that is already meaningful helps push the students over the hurdle of storytelling and gives them a firm foundation upon which they can build the final narrative of the products that they will be asked to design. It is anticipated that this “narrative enquiry” will help students develop final designs that are intriguing, clear in meaning, and convincing.

### **4 THE ESSENCE WITHIN THE NARRATIVE**

The reason that students are encouraged to write short narratives that are limited to 250 words is to help guide them to discover the most significant parts of their selected object's narrative. It pushes them to deeply consider the main reasons why the object is meaningful to them. The written narrative helps the students to clarify the story of the object and is a formal means for the students to validate the importance of that object to themselves. However, in design, it is not enough to validate one's

work with oneself; the designer has to be able to meaningfully engage an audience. Thus, students present their meaningful object and its narrative to the class.

While presenting their objects, the audience is asked to help identify the primary reason(s) why the object is meaningful to the student. Based on the responses from the audience, it is easy for the student to see whether or not their narrative was clear and impactful. If students did not clearly transmit the story they intended it to, they are encouraged to revisit and revise their written narrative.

Most often, an object's meaning is not only derived from its form and function but also by the associations that are exposed in the narrative. These deeper associations and meanings are referred to as the essence of the narrative. Typically the connections are very personal and filled with deep emotion. For this reason, students are sometimes reluctant to expose themselves by sharing the meaning of their object. So far, most of the students' objects fall into one of four categories of essence: mindfulness, experience, security, and utility.

Mindfulness [4] is the attentiveness of a family member or loved one who was significantly involved with the student but has passed on or is somehow no longer accessible to the student. Mindfulness is typically developed over time, usually years. Experience is also based on relationship. However, the relationships are still intact and accessible. Experience connects specific outstanding events with the people that were involved, e.g., family, friends, and/or loved. The object conjures memories of a moment that will likely never be repeated.

Security involves comfort (primarily emotional but can also be physical). It is typically connected with "home." Thus the object offers a sense of belonging and provides an identity. It also invokes feelings of support and protection that are associated with "home." It is primarily matriarchal.

Utility is concerned with the functional ability to assist the individual in experiencing the extraordinary. It celebrates technology and its ability to allow humans to be superhuman. It is centered on adrenalin rushes and feelings of accomplishment. Utility is focused on the individual and his/her quest to overcome certain obstacles.

Identifying the essence within the narrative of an object broadens the student's understanding of what makes a product valuable; it pushes them to reconsider the derivation of a product's meaning. This exercise expands the students' existing mindset. It encourages them to discover or redefine an object's meaning thus increasing the probability that they will design something that will transcend established functional and historical norms.

## **5 NARRATIVE TRENDS IN CONTEMPORARY DESIGN**

The first exercise in the Design Mashup left students with a strong foundational narrative upon which they can build. However, even though students have developed an engaging story about their meaningful object, they struggle to see how this story can benefit or, let alone, drive a design work. So the students are directed to discover how successful contemporary designers effectively employ narrative in their designs.

Students are asked to search for and collect a variety of images of contemporary product designs that resonate with them. The internet, magazines, certain design-oriented stores, and key tradeshows around the world are all great sources from which students can gather images. These sources will expose them to a variety of contemporary product designs and ideas. Students are then asked to define the essence of the design's narrative in one word, such as "ironic" or "zoomorphic." Afterwards, they group all products that share the same narrative.

Identifying a product's narrative can initially be a bit daunting for students, so they are given a few examples to get them started. In "Acts of Meaning," Bruner explains that "Narrative is not just plot structure or dramatism. Nor is it just "historicity" or diachronicity. It is also a way of using language. To a striking degree, it relies upon the power of tropes—upon metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, implicature, and the rest to explore the full range of connections between the exceptional and the ordinary" [5]. The examples shown to students demonstrate Bruner's explanation of what lies at the heart of narrative; it shows them how contemporary designers rely on "tropes" such as metaphor, hyperbole, and antithesis. The examples help students on their way to discover for themselves the tropes that exist in the narratives of contemporary design. Ultimately this second exercise helps students realize how they can employ narrative in their own design.

The following are some of the examples of tropes found in the narratives of contemporary design.



Figure 2. Irony



Figure 3. Antithesis

Irony: uses design to convey a meaning that is opposite to the product's literal meaning; it is often associated with humor. The Flower Grenade in Figure 2 is an example of irony because contrary to the inherent destructive nature of a hand grenade, this clay hand grenade promotes growth by spreading seeds after it has "exploded" in a field.

Antithesis: the juxtaposition of contrasting ideas or objects which ultimately creates a new way of seeing or understanding the seemingly concrete characteristics of an idea or object. Lighting fixtures and cheese graters normally have nothing to do with each other, yet in Figure 3 when the two objects are combined, the perforations are no longer seen as elements used for grating cheese, but rather as diffusers of light.

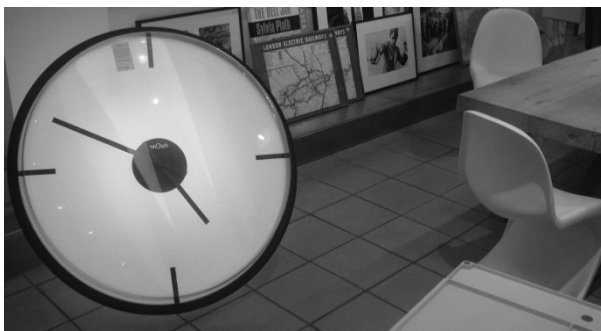


Figure 4. Hyperbole



Figure 5. Zoomorphic

Hyperbole: an obvious and intentional exaggeration of an object beyond its normal function and visual values. Figure 4 is an example of hyperbole because the kitchen clock is so large that it doesn't need to be hung on the wall in order to be easily viewed; it can just rest on the floor.

Zoomorphic: giving an object an animalistic character or trait. In Figure 5, common household drawers and tables uniquely, and very effectively, imitate a variety of animals.

Identifying different narrative trends in design is both fun and enlightening for the students. Not only do they get to surf the web endlessly for designs that inspire them, but they also come to realize that famous designs can be deconstructed by their narratives. After they categorize the designs that inspire them, they find that many of their favorite designers incorporate the same ideas into their designs. Now that students understand how notable designers employ narrative, suddenly famous designs seem a little less intimidating, and students become confident in their capacity to produce great design work.

## 6 THE MASHUP

Now that students have a foundational narrative and now that they understand how contemporary designers use narrative in their design, they are asked to create a new design of their personal object by "mashing-up" or combining their foundational narrative with a narrative trend that they discovered in contemporary design.

For example, a student who has selected a lunch box as his personal object because it is filled with memories and stories of his grandfather, mixes the lunch box and its narrative with a contemporary narrative such as irony. This act of combining the basic elements of two different stories naturally

leads him/her to a new narrative. The student visualizes this new narrative to create a new product design.

Students are asked to explore a number of solutions. Repeating the process by changing any of the elements of the narrative will result in a myriad of new narratives. With each new visualized narrative, a new product idea with depth and meaning emerges. Some of the new narratives and products are silly, but others are profound. As students repeat this process, their judgment of their new objects improves. They generate many meaningful designs with clear narratives; this is the end goal of this exercise.

In order to help students see for themselves whether or not their new story is clear and engaging, they are once again asked to write. They are, again, limited to 250 words in order to help them discover the essence of the narrative of their final design. It is anticipated that a clear and engaging story will greatly increase the interest and quality of the final product. As part of the final presentation, students share the narrative of the new design with the class.

## **7 A STUDENT EXAMPLE**

Jon Black selected his grandfather's lunchbox as his meaningful object (see Figure 6).

This is part of Jon's written narrative for the lunchbox: "My grandfather died when I was six years old... One of the last artifacts from my grandfather's life is his old lunchbox from the 1940's or 1950's. I keep it and cherish it as a memory of my grandfather and his past" [6].

The class helped Jon identify the essence within the narrative: a cherished mindfulness of his grandfather who has passed on.

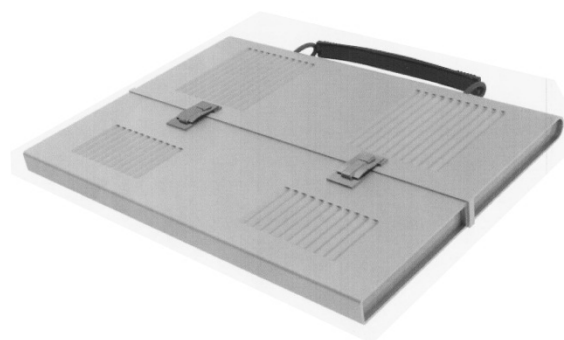
With the key ingredients of a new story, Jon then began generating a variety of new designs by mixing and matching narratives. He combined the memory of his grandfather with a variety of contemporary design narratives (Irony, Antithesis, Hyperbole, and Zoomorphic). By mashing-up these narratives, Jon discovered that he could generate a variety of new lunch box narratives with relative ease. In fact, he proposed a number of outstanding new designs with intriguing stories. Typically students have difficulty generating a number of thoughtful, meaningful ideas. In this case, Jon had more ideas than he knew what to do with. The process worked for him.

However, Jon struggled to recognize which of his new narratives was the best. There was an unexpected aspect of this struggle: his object and its narrative were so personal to him that they were almost sacred. Perhaps the students' meaningful objects were so dear to them, that they could not effectively explore mashing it up. Perhaps next time a different exploratory object will be used for this exercise such as an object that they don't like or an object that they think is ridiculous. Students most likely would not have any problem mashing up those types of objects.

After Jon had thoroughly explored a variety of new narratives for his design, his final proposal was a thin, lunchbox-influenced, laptop computer carrier as shown in Figure 7.



*Figure 6. Grandfather's Lunchbox*



*Figure 7. Laptop Computer Carrier*

The foundational narrative was about memory. The object was a lunchbox. The trope from the narratives of contemporary design was "hyperbole," or an obvious and intentional exaggeration of an object beyond its normal function and visual values.

In Jon's new design he exaggerates what his grandfather's lunchbox means to him. To Jon, the lunch box is not a container for storing and transporting food. It is a relic inextricably linked with memories and stories. So, Jon's new lunch box is not made to store his lunch. It is made to store memories. All of Jon's memories and stories of his grandfather are stored on his laptop computer. So naturally, Jon's "new lunchbox" is not a lunchbox at all; it is a laptop carrier which protects his memories. Because Jon incorporates some of the aesthetics and characteristics of his grandfather's lunchbox into the laptop carrier, it not only serves as a personal visual cue to himself of what the carrier holds inside, but it also results in a very unique and appealing hard-case laptop carrier. The clear, engaging narrative resulted in both a visually and functionally engaging product. Jon said his design "feeds memories [for] people who struggle with memory loss."

## **8 CONCLUSION**

In "The Art of Storytelling," Nancy Mellon explains that "because there is a natural storytelling urge and ability in all human beings, even just a little nurturing of this impulse can bring about astonishing and delightful results"[7]. The Design Mashup is a simple and engaging method to "nurture" the storytelling abilities of students. It helps students to create a foundational narrative derived from an object that is meaningful to them. It allows students to see that narrative is not only used by contemporary designers but that it actually defines their designs. In the end, it teaches them to how to create new narratives that result in "delightful and astonishing" designs. Ultimately, Design Mashup enables students to create meaningful and engaging product designs by employing the use of narrative in their design process.

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