

Review: Laurel, Brenda (ed.) (2003) *Design Research: Methods and Perspectives* Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 334pp.

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Brenda Laurel, has an impressive track-record within the digital creative industries of Southern California. By opening up a hitherto restricted specialism to a cross-disciplinary approach, her first book, *Computers as Theatre* (1991), was highly influential in Human Computer Interface studies. Her second book, *Utopian Entrepreneur* (2001), considered the problems of being a socially-conscious businessperson with capitalism. Laurel was a key figure at the Interval Research Corporation (1992-7) and founded *Purple Moon* (1996), a consultancy specializing in video games production for pre-teen girls. She is clearly well-placed and extremely experienced within the design for digital media scene.

*Design Research: Methods and Perspectives*, which Brenda Laurel has edited, features reflections and ruminations by 49 authors on techniques and experiences of undertaking research. The dominant focus of this publication is on the use of design research within the profession. It doesn't expend much time justifying itself or in cross-examining the ethics or hermeneutics of its craft. Instead it moves rapidly to its task of empowering designers into using research to enliven their work and build more effective client relationships.

This is a handsome production. The text is highly accessible in its voice and its editing, illustrations and diagrams are effective. It is divided into four sections of equal length. The first focuses on 'People', encompassing approaches to user and consumer research. Section two, 'Form', takes us into the realm of designing as research. This is followed by a section on 'Process' that discusses the organization of research stages. Finally, 'Action' gives us a section of reflective case studies that show how research may be implicit within design projects. The book is topped by a useful table that maps the issues

dealt with against its various authors and is tailed by a fullsome index. Furthermore, authors are cross-referenced throughout and further web resources are given. Through this publication one is given the impression design research not as a programmatic, step-by-step activity, but as a practice that engages a wide range of overlapping approaches to be carried out at conceptual and practical levels. On first inspection this book suggests that there is a lot to this design research business.

Having recently written and delivered a postgraduate programme in design research methods and practice, we were excited to receive this title for review. We try to make various design- and non-design-specific research methods 'real' by getting the students to consider and critique them in relation to their own design projects or by reference to design practice examples already in the public domain. The latter requires the sometimes repetitive citation of the work of larger design consultancies such as Ideo, Seymour-Powell or Design Continuum, information technology specialists such as Microsoft, Intel or Apple and marketing and management companies such as Cheskin. It is difficult to find examples of the smaller players of the design industry or related fields to make a convincing case for design research in the professional domain. The danger is that design research methods are either perceived as something that only highly capitalized corporations can tackle or that it remains an academic exercise to fulfill the requirements of research committees and funding boards. Laurel's edition is therefore a welcome response to this problem. Packed full of real-life examples of design practice, *Design Research* provides students of design with an accessible starting point toward deepening their approach. Only nine of its 49 authors are embedded in academic posts; the rest are out there doing it. Case studies and designer experiences are served up anecdotally. But

there are also plenty of lists, diagrams and bullet points that help to generalize some of the ideas that emerge out of these stories.

One research technique that *Design Research: Methods and Perspectives* does not include is the 'moodogram'. This is where positive to negative feelings are plotted into a 'y' axis against time along an 'x' axis. This is a useful way to map changing user experience against material circumstances as part, say, of a design audit. Were we to do a 'moodogram' of our own experience of this book, it'd start very positively but end in an oscillation between frustration and indifference.

While this publication's energy and no-nonsense self-belief may be endearing, it is hugely frustrating to read a tome so lacking in critical self-awareness. At worst this low reflexivity quotient emerges in a few articles that bear no explicit relationship to design research. For example, a chapter on decoration in graphic design could be used as an exemplar of using a knowledge of one's place in history to position one's research; instead its fatuous claims demonstrate nothing more than a caricatured grasp of design history. Equally, a chapter on 'brand alignment' reads as just another of the many 'how-to-do' branding stories that currently clog our library shelves. Elsewhere, the notion of 'design research' is sprinkled liberally but the semantics of what this means in different contexts goes unexplored. We searched hard for a detailed exposition of the various levels by which designers can use research or, at least, for exposés of how little they might be able to get away with.

Of the 49 authors, only one is not based in the USA. And this might not be a problem except that *Design Research* is weighed down with a frightening level of cultural bias. Despite an interesting chapter on researching Hispanics, the assumption throughout this book is that designers design for an American market. Yet many of the design examples that are cited involve global clients. The first section, 'People', provides a useful starting point for considering the nuances of undertaking qualitative research amongst varied user groups. But global challenges do not get

acknowledged. What of the booming Indian market? What of the 400 million or so new consumers of capitalism (or versions of it) in the former Soviet bloc? What of America's own population of 35 million who live below the poverty line or its growing college population of branding refuseniks? How do you deal with these nuances and differences? Of course, no book can address all demographic challenges. However, a broader reflection on the context of the US design industry and how this frames research in its commercial sphere would have helped with the transferability of some of its claims.

Indifference to this publication is reached when, having ploughed through its 300+ pages, one realizes that it actually addresses a very limited scope of design practice. Most of the authors and their material is directed at print or digital graphics. Fashion, urban design and product development do not get a look in. Interior architecture is only alluded to in one interesting chapter on museum design. Otherwise, design methods for capital intensive sectors such as entertainment, leisure and retail are absent. We are told that 'computer games are currently the most exuberant region of the recently flat-lined technology sector' (p.242) and they demand the incorporation of user-needs with innovative forms. So maybe research methods in this discipline can be used elsewhere, although you'd have to work hard to make the links for yourself. Design for computer interfaces is probably the most researched and research-methods-explored sector of visual culture in academia, it having been explored in psychology, cognitive engineering, ergonomics, information technology, anthropology and beyond. Meanwhile, we wish that the authors had looked wider for examples of design research in practice. For example, a wealth of current research exists, particularly in northern Europe, concerned with Product Service System development. Here the innovation and testing of new forms of consumption provides rich, interdisciplinary approaches to research. Alternatively, while the micro-practices of design as research are frequently explained, we do not see this notion applied, for example, to more

materially- and process-based work such as craft.

Design Research is therefore laden with assumptions. Its mono-disciplinary, mono-cultural and, almost, mono-theistic tone would do little to inspire the creative design researcher looking to innovate new forms of practice. Some of its language is scarily quasi-religious. We are told of, 'design's own intelligence' (p.14) and that, 'design has power' (p.19). 'Design' is seemingly disembodied from human action. The implication is that it is somehow a pervasive and persuasive free spirit. (Such a totalizing line of writing resonates with Nelson and Stolterman's recent book *The Design Way* (2003), a publication that is equally unaware of the designer's own its economic,

ideological, cultural and social context and how this produces the discourses it inhabits.) This is nowhere more tellingly demonstrated than in a chapter about the design of America's Army , a computer video game designed to explicate, 'the integrity displayed by American soldiers in the deserts and cities of Iraq' (p.268) and eventually encourage potential army recruits to sign-up.

This publication shows that research in design is embedded into some of its everyday practices. There are quite a few anecdotes and theories in this publication that will be worth recounting to design professionals and students alike. But given the narrowness of its focus, it will be of limited use to non-US readers.

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