CREATIVE

SOUND & MUSIC ISSUE

BEND IT LIKE BLAIR
Compose your own eccentric tunes

DIGITAL RADIO UNVEILS
More scope for creativity

NEW KIDS IN SOUND
A shift in audio production studios

AUSSIES IN AMSTERDAM
Take a dip with agency Twofish
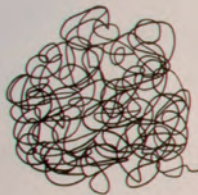
Redesigning design

Jackie Hawkins gets to grips with the recently launched Change Agents project and chats with David Gravina, principal of Digital Eskimo, and Adam Blake, director of programs and partnerships at the Creative Industries Innovation Centre.

Agents of change.

In a world of messy problems …

… the power of Design offers a way …

DESIGNERS ARE FACED with all sorts of challenges and none more so, perhaps, than how to challenge oneself. In an industry where innovation, adaptation and progressive practice are benchmarks, are we always the best at being introspective? Is there something more we could be doing, something different we could be offering than the multitude of other creative agencies essentially offering the same service?

In a landmark project, Digital Eskimo, in partnership with the Creative Industries Innovation Centre, are asking professional designers to help determine the future of the industry. The idea is to rethink how the skills inherent in design can be applied to a whole host of other complex and 'messy' problems, for the betterment of the environment and society at large.

What is the Change Agent project and how did it come about?
DAVID GRAVINA (DG) The project was originally presented as an idea at the AGDA Design a Better World conference last year, hosted by Alan Saunders. The conference asked whether graphic design could save the world. We answered this rather loaded question by positing that while it has a significant role to play – in shaping how our societies create meaning, interpret value and so forth – it is the way designers think and the process of design that could really impact on efforts towards a sustainable world.
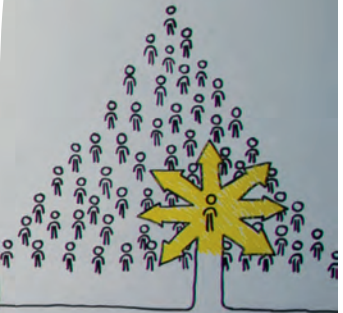
We have since partnered with the recently established Creative Industries Innovation Centre (CIIC) to create the Change Agent project, which aims to support designers who want to apply their creative problem solving skills to a much broader array of problems than the industry has tended to work on to date.
ADAM BLAKE (AB) Our involvement with the project is aligned to our mission to increase the competitiveness, profitability, productivity and innovation of Australia's creative industries. The CIIC, hosted by the University of Technology, Sydney, offers a range of services to support creative businesses of all sizes in Australia, and also focuses on developing collaborative opportunities across and between industry sectors which strikes a chord with this project.

What exactly is a 'change agent'?
DG In this context a change agent is a designer who acts as a catalyst for change in society. We're referring to designers across all disciplines that are passionate about the capacity of design to bring about transformative change in society for positive social and environmental outcomes. We're hoping to attract designers who don't see design as being confined to a discipline or the creation of artefacts; people who see design as a creative problem-solving process that can be applied to any situation.

A change agent is a designer who is ready to engage with their colleagues, collaborators, clients and the broader community to embrace the opportunities that design offers for engaging with the more challenging problems. These 'messy' or 'wicked' problems tend to be those that are hard to define up-front, involve complex interactions between people and systems and often continue to morph over time. The design approach is perfectly suited to addressing these.

… the power of Design offers a way …

… to embrace the mess.

What oppo you see for your world?

Agent Project.

2 yrs

Can you give an example of how such principles have been applied in practice?

DG One example that's particularly close to us at Digital Eskimo is a project we worked on last year. Businessman and peak oil expert Piers Dawson-Damer came to us with a brief to create a peak oil viral campaign that would frighten and shock Australians into action. (Peak oil refers to a point in time at which the maximum rate of global oil extraction is reached). From insights garnered through research we designed a response that barely mentioned peak oil but instead aimed to inspire people to return to a more local way of living, thus avoiding the contentious and divisive themes of peak oil and sustainability, while still championing intelligent responses to its impact. It turns out that what's good for your local community is almost always good for the environment and local resilience.

Through the design process we were able to completely rethink the project's strategy and purpose, ultimately creating the Live Local project. The first prototype – all design processes should emphasise prototyping – for the idea is a website that hundreds of people have used to document stories about their experiences improving their local communities. We call these endeavours 'experiments' and they range from simply smiling at your neighbours, to giving up your car to a blow by blow account of making your house more sustainable.

Live local has since been incorporated into a not-for-profit organisation, of which Piers and myself are directors, and is in its early phases of development. We are now designing the strategic plan for the organisation that includes partnerships with local councils and other organisations that can use the platform to provide a voice for their communities. We are also exploring the project's potential as an educational program in schools, a television show and a social change campaign much like the Life.Be in it. campaign. (See www.livelocal.org.au).

Another example, this time from the UK, is live|work. They were commissioned to reduce energy usage in households situated in a mining district. Through their research, they began to understand that energy efficiency was an abstract concept that was hard for the target audience to engage in, and actually not a huge financial priority. Using these insights, they designed and developed 'Saverbox'. Saverbox is basically a home improvement energy saving loan that's paid for through the savings households make on their energy bills by reducing their energy use. All this information was actually programmed to be displayed on the home television, which visually represented energy usage and how this was affected by consumption, thereby encouraging people to use less. It was an innovative project that not only reduced emissions, but made energy efficiency accessible, desirable and affordable for everyone. (See www.livework.co.uk/our-work/DOTT-07).

Why does the design industry need this project?

DG Design has been primarily employed for servicing consumer capitalism since the 1950s and the rise of the consumer product and advertising industry. With few exceptions the design disciplines have struggled to reduce their reliance on the consumer product and advertising industries. As a result, for the most part, our role has become one of servitude to our clients rather than trusted strategic partner.

We have become part of the problem, ironic for people who often become designers to solve problems. The winds of change are blowing and whole sectors are positioning themselves for a resource-constrained future. The design industry on the whole is only just beginning to engage with the shift. An increasing number of designers are looking to rethink their approach to value creation and their relationship with their clients and society, whilst a number of agencies and individuals have been forging ahead for years and have insights and methods to share.

It is about each of us redesigning our own design practices and ultimately the design profession itself. Through the shared method library we aim to give individuals, collectives, agencies and practices of all shapes and sizes some of the tools and knowledge they need to begin the process of transformation.

We accept that changing such fundamental aspects of our businesses will take time. Designers will need to prototype and implement the new ways in which they will interact with their clients and society. This project offers a platform to begin that journey.
AB Design and creative agencies have a great opportunity to apply the design processes they use in their daily work with clients to social, environmental and economic challenges, which we believe can have a positive impact on a wide range of industries across our economy. This is important for the CIIC as our remit is to uncover and support new market opportunities and approaches for the growth of the creative industries. The Change Agents project allows us to partner with leaders from industry, government and business to develop new ways of engaging the creative industries with other sectors. Designers as change agents act as innovation catalysts in this way.

How do you propose that designers can start to enact change?

DG We propose to co-create a shared toolkit that designers can utilise to map out and action a change program for themselves or their practices. This may take some people say two to five years to complete, with the goal being to go as far as personally viable and desirable.

We don't want to be too prescriptive as to what this tool kit will look like – this is a collaborative project so the people involved will have a big say in how it evolves. However, we envisage that it will likely contain a method library of case studies, stories, processes, materials and other useful design tools that we can all share and draw on, as appropriate.
AB This online tool kit will allow us to collectively build and share leading design thinking, practices and tools that facilitate people working in the creative industries to make a real contribution to sustainability. I think we all realise that often we need to draw on knowledge beyond ourselves, in order to ensure we are achieving best practice. This open source tool kit provides the opportunity to do just that.

So what is the next step for this project and how can designers get involved?

DG We're now calling for input from the design community to help shape the initial strategy and direction of the project. Towards the latter part of the year we hope to begin the creation process in earnest. ©

To get involved contact David Gravina at Digital Eskimo on (+612) 9212 3366, email changeagents@digitaleskimo.net or visit www.digitaleskimo.net.

Creative Industries Innovation Centre call (+612) 8217 5000, email Adam.Blake@uts.edu.au or visit www.creativeinnovation.net.au.