

Spirited Away: Calling Forth Plural Worlds in Design Research

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ABSTRACT

Peripheral discussions are emerging in Participatory Design (PD) that questions literal and pre-defined notions of participation to make it 'leaky', and to recognise how it is assembled through people, culture, values and place, and more, as its constitution. This paper extends this exploration further to speculate 'what if' design research and PD could embrace plural worlds, and acknowledge omitted phenomena such as the 'uncanny'? What relevance might this have for our ontologies in inhabiting urban, smart-cities environments and designing technologies that can commune with more-than-human worlds? This proposal experiments with possibilities to see if it can be explored and catalyzed through the workshop.

KEYWORDS

Spirits, ontology, more-than-human, Japanese philosophy

1 "WE ARE STILL HERE, DON'T FORGET US"

In December 2012, almost a year and a half after the 3.11 Tohoku Great Earthquake in Japan, I visited Kesenuma, a fishing town located 500km north of Tokyo. I was part of a team to participate in one of many local projects already underway to rebuild lives and livelihoods. Kesenuma had lost 1,353 people including 220 still missing [5]. The scale of trauma of this compound disaster had set the scene for a challenging visit.

On our first night there, I was visited by spirits. It's a sensation that I have experienced before where I suddenly feel a heavy weight on my chest during my sleep. This wakes me up with some discomfort. The next morning, upon being asked how I slept by my Japanese research colleague whom I shared a hotel room with, I told what happened. She heard my story with nonchalance while getting dressed, and told me how the spirits only visit those who can feel their presence, to remind the living that; 'we are still here ... don't forget us... '.

I start with this fragment to open up a discussion to experiences and phenomena that features little in design research or Participatory Design (PD). In this paper, I aim to explain why this might matter and ask if PD can usefully incorporate many other concepts, ontologies, philosophies and worldviews outside of its usual disciplinary heritage. I ask this of PD, not for the sake of 'diversity' to include a Japanese (minority) voice, but by

acknowledging that many worldviews (epistemology) and non-human worlds (ontology) participate in the making of all of our worlds. The phenomena I open with are observed, shared and are part of the ontologies of many other cultures beyond Japan. Constructing useful frames for objects, materials and non-human actors have been a strong and welcome influence of STS and anthropology in PD, and I will build on such discourses further.

Yet, the topic I aim to explore is far more complex than the manner in which I attempt to write and open them up for discussion. It comes with many problems. Firstly, the phenomena I shared and others more to follow, are in itself contested experiences or concepts, often dismissed as mysticism due to scientific legacies that pervade in research. Secondly, such 'uncanny' phenomena do not have theories that adequately explain, and can resist analysis or understanding because they belong in the realm of the sacred and non-human. How do I respect and honour what cannot be analysed, ontologies that cannot be described and translated effectively into written language, let alone English? Herein lies the significant challenge of this paper.

Another complication (and political agenda) of this paper is to push the conventions of design research, especially in PD, that I see as trending more towards an emphasis of reporting on technology, processes and methods as interventions into the lives of others. This reflects another entrenched legacy of research towards replicable and generalizable knowledge that dominates. Many notable postcolonial and feminist scholars have already reminded us that this framing of 'knowledge' is just one of many worldviews [4]. For many 'others', words, ideas and knowledges cannot be detached from places, people and practices in which they are embedded in so they cannot be moved to another 'context'. STS scholars, John Law and Wen-yuen Lin reminds us that 'Translations are simultaneously sites of judgment and locations of continuing, power-saturated struggle' ([12]:259).

Following such arguments, this paper seeks to speculate 'what if' design research and PD could embrace plural worlds and acknowledge omitted (dismissed) phenomena, such as the account I opened with? What if these ideas were recognised or even foregrounded as a welcome addition towards an ontological 'vocabulary' that could begin to establish a richer dialogue in design research, especially for cultures that have eroded ways to make sense of these? Furthermore, such richness in understanding may enable ways to accommodate the heterogeneous and unbounded conditions that are becoming strong characteristics of

PD ([3][6][13]). The places where we live and work are becoming more ‘multi-cultural’ and this continual movement of people and ideas requires greater openness and curiosity on one hand, and a questioning of judgment and hegemony on the other to curb the surge of intolerance and fundamentalism we see globally.

The challenges embarked on by this paper is rather ambitious, but it is undertaken in response to PDC'18 conference theme, to trouble PD's own power, politics, constitution and relevance in worlds beyond PD's dominant borders. As such, I hope to argue and illustrate my case as clearly and respectfully as possible.

The approach I take here is experimental for this reason. The writing in italics, called fragments, mixes verifiable narrative with anecdotal, first person account. This approach borrows from John Mason's ([14]:57) *Discipline of Noticing* to give ‘brief-but-vidid-narrative’ and Stacy Homan-Jones' ([7]:229) *critical auto-ethnography* as a ‘language that unsettles the ordinary’. This continues a trajectory in my research to accentuate moments and perceptions that matters in co-designing, yet ‘evades capture in a transcript or a video recording’ (**Error! Reference source not found.**:21).

The structure of the paper is similarly unconventional for design research. Instead of the traditional ‘methodology’ section for generalizing approaches, or to conclude with an ‘implication for design and technology’, the paper follows a story-telling in form. In writing this way, I aim to jolt myself out of complacency of replicating normative (academic) habits because this doesn't suit the content or argument. Arguably, separation of theory and story, case study or practice is a symptom of a particular epistemology [12]. Rather I see theory and story as complementary and mutually influential. Learning from Holman-Jones, she argues; ‘Theory asks about and explains the nuances of an experience and the happenings of a culture; story is the mechanism for illustrating and embodying these nuances and happenings’ ([7]:229). As such, I am letting form follow function. Here, I request some leniency and liberal oversight by the reader, rather than demanding a rigorous and precise language, in order to accommodate such exploration.

2 CALLING THE SPIRITS

I later heard on the radio about another local initiative in Otsuchi, a coastal town, not far from Kesenuma that has one of the highest numbers of missing people, at 421 [15]. The story was about a local resident, Itaru Sasaki, who had lost his cousin a year before 3.11. Sasaki-san bought an old-fashioned phone box and installed a black dial phone inside, disconnected from any phone line. He placed it upon a hill that receives the sea breeze from the Pacific Ocean. It was his way to speak to his cousin:

‘... my thoughts could not be relayed over a regular phone line, I wanted them to be carried on the wind. ... So I named it the wind telephone (kaze no denwa). The idea of keeping up a relationship with the dead is not such a strange one in Japan. The line between our world and their world is thin’ ([15]:np).

Soon after 3.11, Sasaki-san offered the phone for others to use, and people have showed up randomly from all over. This has been going on for five years. Now, thousands of people have come to speak on the phone [17].

On the radio, we hear about Sachiko Okawa, a resident of Otsuchi, who visits regularly with her two grandsons. They lost uncles and grand-dads in the tsunami. One of the boys enters the phone box to make a call:

‘Hi grandpa... how are you?... I'll be in forth grade next semester. Wasn't that fast?... Grandma is doing well too’ ([17]:np).



Figure 1: Mari calls her sister on *kaze no denwa*. Photo from Japanese newspaper, Yomiuri Shinbun, 11th September 2017.

Another visitor is Mari, the girl featured in the newspaper above. The article reports that she is calling her older sister, who at aged 6, died in 3.11. Mari says:

‘You were always so helpful, thank you, sister. You must be in high school by now...’ ([20]:7).

These phone calls are deeply moving, yet familiar. It has traces of the everyday that resonates with my family ritual at the small Buddhist alter at our home. There, I greet my father and sister who had passed away with daily offerings of rice, water and incense, together with updates of our lives and gratitude for their love and protection.

They are still here, and we haven't forgotten. These realms are always connected, but sometimes we need an auspicious reminder for the time and place to reinforce this connection.

3 RESEARCH OF THE SUPERNORMAL

Anthropology, from its inception, attempted to debate, interpret and ‘accept’ accounts by people that claimed how gods, demons and spirits exists. According to Rapport and Overing ([18]:274), many anthropologists have continued to see mythology as ‘falsities of other cultures’ and mere narratives that express the

fantasy origins of a 'primitive' culture. This dismissal is based entirely on a theory of the mind and rational progress, thus 'Myths, magic and religion all provided testimony to the ways in which the "primitive mind" was unsound in intellect, or at least lacking in knowledge' ([18]:275). The anthropologists who have inherited an enlightenment and materialist worldview could only see such realities of myths and spirits as imaginary, as a narrative, as political indices or merely performing a pragmatic social function. By framing spirits within a socio-psychological human production, this has also 'emptied the spirits of a *wordly* existence' ([8]:156).

Closer to home in design research, Stuart Walker [21], a scholar of sustainability, provides how spirituality was systematically eroded in northern Europe through modernity that emphasised scientific investigation, empiricism and technological developments, coupled with emergence of liberal societies that were becoming increasingly indifferent to religion. He argues that this spiritual erosion has accelerated consumption and severely damaged our social and natural environments. His interpretation of spirituality is not based upon embracing that spirits exists, rather, he describes this as a state closely aligned to intuition, contemplation, creativity, personal meaning and sense of transcendence, which taken together, is linked to ethics, social equity, justice and respect for nature. He argues for developing a material culture 'in accord with spiritual understandings and reflective of the awareness that contemplative practice yields' ([21]:103). This systemic spiritual erosion may go some way to explain the lack of cultural practices, languages and modalities to provide footholds to engage with supernormal phenomena.

In contrast, there is a growing, scholarly discourse in supernatural phenomena, echoing my concerns with 'how to facilitate engagement with spirits in a way that is not overdetermined by the assumption that such entities do not really exist' ([8]:150). Many in anthropology and beyond are facilitating such engagements with spirits, possession, vision, deification, magic, the miraculous and the paranormal (see Kripal [11]). For example, Paul Stoller [21] ethnographically studied spirit possession in Niger and apprenticed in *Songhay* sorcery for 17 years. He confronts the possibility of his cancer caused by a magic arrow discharged from Niger, 10,000 miles away, to his home in Washington, DC. Rather than attempting to reconcile entirely contradictory logics – one that views cancer in scientific medicine and another as death sorcery – he opts for the 'uncanny' to figure prominently in his personal and professional life to think about the boundaries of possibilities, because these are 'vexingly indeterminate ... but they can also generate sparks of creativity and extend the well-being of wonder' ([21]:228). The role played by such 'uncanny' phenomena is resonant with a Japanese anthropologist, Atsuro Morita, who describes an 'encounter with a perplexing alterity that refuses to fit the given framework but rather anticipates a new understanding presently beyond imagination' ([16]:246). This is illustrated well by a Japanese microbiologist, Minakata Kumagusu. His scientific fame of discovering a particular slime mold was in fact triggered by a dream that foretold that he will find this near Mukoyama, Japan

[8]. After visiting this place and searching endlessly, he took a detour and subsequently came upon them by chance. Minakata attributes this discovery, not because of 'psychic' reasons or some form of sub-consciousness, but because he 'searched carefully, inspired by the revelation of a dream' (Minakata in [8]:162). This could be called serendipity or coincidence that we experience all the time, and there is nothing spooky or suspicious about this phenomena. The only difference here is that for Minakata, the dream catalyzed a *heightened attentiveness*, which he calls '*tact*' that 'worked by modifying what was perceptible to Minakata in, and as, broader ecologies of practice' ([8]:162). This tact and heightened sensitivity to inter-connectedness of broader ecologies are described as 'invisible threads that connect humans and nonhumans... brought to attention through unexpected meetings' ([8]:161). Most Japanese people, including Minakata, will call this invisible, inter-related, time-collapsing, cosmic webs as *en* (縁). *En* is a notion that connects plural worlds.

4 A JAPANESE SPIRITWORLD

In a Japanese worldview through *en*, everything is connected and participating in the becoming of many worlds. This is because rocks, mountains, trees, animals, land, water, wind and so on, are forms that imbue spirits, energy or gods (*tama*, *ki*, *kami*). Such diversity of *kami* is rendered beautifully (with wit) in Hayao Miyazaki's world-famous animation, *Princess Mononoke*, *Spirited Away* or *Totoro* that parades the immense diversity and population of spiritual entities. For the reader who may not understand how spirits and rocks inter-relate, a philosopher of Asian Studies, Thomas Kasulis [10] warns not to think that *kami* (spirits/energy/gods) merely visits or inhabits the form (like a tree), based on a view that starts from separating the form and *kami* to construct an external relationship. Instead the form is already *kami*. It is a relationship that was never separate in the first place but intimately co-constituted ([10]:18). This means nothing exists in-and-of-itself, but always a part of a whole that is continuously ebbing and flowing. Shinto, the indigenous spirituality of Japan, is about such inter-relatedness of plural worlds. Particular awe-inspiring form and places are designated as sacred with markers like a shrine, a rope (*shimenawa*) or torii (*gate*) that, according to Kasulis, acts as a 'bookmark for connecting people to awe-inspiring power' in order to remind us of the intimacy and belonging with the world (ibid). This feeling of awe and power might be akin to experiencing natural wonders, like seeing a spectacular sunrise or visiting the Grand Canyon.

Shinto incorporated Buddhism upon arrival in the sixth century, and strongly inflected the idea of transmigrating spirits of the dead, ritualized in the festival, *Obon*, every August. Ancestors are welcomed back into the family home to maintain relationships with their descendants, and this ritual is shared by many other Buddhist cultures. Even the busiest Japanese office worker would take time off during *Obon*, return to their home town to pay respect to their ancestors, offer a drink (usually *sake*), flowers and favorite foods and objects. at their family grave. This ritual is important for my family too and I was taught to be thankful to our

ancestors for our very existence. The ritual is an extension of offerings and continued communion that are performed everyday before the small household altar, which my family undertake. This ritual maintains our heightened attentiveness of inter-relatedness (*en*) as an ongoing relationship, respect and reciprocity that goes beyond one's lifetime and geography, to have a generational view of many worlds that have existed, and will continue to exist.

5 IMPLICATION FOR SMART CITIES?

For many cultures around the world, participation of spirits is not so strange. For the *Tohoku* community, the participation of departed or missing spirits is clearly central to recovering and rebuilding communities' lives, towns and livelihood post 3.11. For the thousands who travel for miles to call the *Kaze no Denwa*, and for the millions who participate in *Obon* or talk to family and friends at the altar, this reinforces the connection with the spirits. Indeed, there are also complex interlaced religious, psychological, habitual and cultural reasons, and *Kaze no Denwa* has been described as sentimental or psychotherapy to 'help the grieving process' ([17]:np). But such logical reasoning denies the spirits of a *wordly* existence [8] and ignores the intelligence and wonder that permeates through natural systems and beyond.

Such spirits also visit strangers like myself, uninvited and unannounced. Like Minakata's dream, instead of searching for causal and logical reasons, this has reminded me to see 'the visit' as *en* – an unexpected meeting that reveals the invisible threads of interrelatedness. It has also taught me to respect what my cultural wisdom can reveal that my design research training (in the West) has taught me to ignore. Such (silent and embodied) politics can manifest in different ways so that *Kaze on Denwa*, as a design and technology intervention for social outcomes, might be described differently – one that accommodates the spirit and plural worlds, and another that is centred upon the anthropocene. We could say that the politics of this choice goes to the heart of PD, especially for a discipline that attempts to champion the participants' worldview, who in this instance, have travelled for miles to call the spirits from a disconnected phone box.

If we embraced this worldview, what might be the implications for smart cities and design research more broadly? What wisdom might we learn by listening to the winds, trees, animals, water, rocks and consider our connection through geological time, which many Indigenous ontologies respects? Objects, materials and invisible systems are already acknowledged as participating in ongoing configurations of infrastructuring [9]. What if spirits, gods, animals, slime mold, supernormal and the 'uncanny' were embraced too? Could this help unseat the authority of human-only perspective of smart cities, to move away from merely understanding worldviews (epistemology) to instead, embracing and inhabiting plural worlds (ontology), so PD and design research more broadly can contribute to the flourishing of more-than-human worlds?

I hope this paper is one way to open up such discussion, demonstrate how 'uncanny' phenomena can be written experimentally, and inspire others to similarly go beyond the

'boundaries of possibilities' of conventions, as encouraged by the anthropologists, Stoller [21] and Morita [16]. In fact, for design researchers who are already adept at anticipating the mess, errors, disruption, serendipity and uncertainty ([2][19]), 'uncanny' encounters of 'perplexing alterity' need not be ignored or analysed with suspicion, but can become a generative methodology. This follows Minakata's 'tact' of developing a 'heightened attentiveness', after having a slime mold dream. Exciting possibilities awaits.

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