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Speculative Design in a Summer Camp: Tensions around Infantilization

Critical Design. Ethics in Design Showcase / 0 

Authors:

- Madalyn Wilson-Fetrow, *University of New Mexico*
- Vanessa Svihla, *University of New Mexico*

Authors' Note: This blog contains the exploration of the use of dark themes in ideation, including natural disasters, gun violence, and poverty.

Why would you design a doghouse with rotating blades for walls?

Design fixation, or the process of being taken with and sticking to your first idea, even if it isn't a particularly good one, plaguing novice designers and requiring consideration from experienced designers. Activities that are intended to increase creativity during the ideation process often reduce empathy (because of the emphasis on unique ideas); conversely, focusing on human-centered ideas exclusively generates fewer and less diverse ideas. This sets up a natural tension for designers who have to make decisions about how they should approach ideation. It becomes an even more critical tension for instructional designers who are themselves facilitating design work. These facilitators, with their choices of how to support ideation (particularly with non-expert designers) impact the potential outcomes and ideas that designers have. This favors outcomes based on the ethical considerations of the facilitators, namely whether they favor creativity or empathy.

In an attempt to balance these considerations, we developed the Wrong Theory Protocol (WTP), which asks designers to generate ideas that are specifically harmful and humiliating, before even beginning to consider possible beneficial solutions to the problem. The specific phrase “harmful and humiliating” distinguishes the types of ideas we are soliciting from uncreative bad ideas and encourages staying in a more fanciful space. The standard example we use in the facilitation is of a doghouse with rotating blades for walls – something that goes beyond simply bad but is actively and specifically harmful. We chose this during initial development of WTP as an accessible example – most people know what the attributes of a doghouse are and what would make a lazily bad design (such as having a drafty building, which is bad but not particularly harmful), making the distinction we are illustrating between a lazy design and one that is creatively harmful and humiliating. This example also has the added benefit of being unrelated to the design problems we have implemented WTP around, minimizing our direct influence on the designers during the process.

This is a process we have engaged in with adults in several contexts, including graduate engineering students, federal civil servants, and teachers, on topics that were both large (how to increase accessibility for disabled individuals) and small (how to create consensus on a multi-disciplinary project). The process, in our experience, can be uncomfortable. Some participants, coming from a point of empathy and care, don't want to visualize or suggest harmful ideas.

Why ask people to design a harmful doghouse?

We drew on the ideas of failure as a productive and often key element of the design **process**, and ideation strategies such as “**reverse brainstorming**” which suggests considering ideas that *cause* the problem before trying to solve it.

To these concepts, we added ideas about speculative design, with its focus on design as a way to engage directly with problems and trauma of the present (in contrast with utopian design, which focuses on an idealized design future where the problems of the present don't exist) helps to engage with disempowered and minoritized people who have to directly confront the present problems. While this stance does often ask disempowered people to focus on their disempowerment, it also allows for acknowledgement of the realities they exist in. In this, speculative design folds in beliefs about the value of lived experience as part of design and instantiating the world in imagined futures. Like reverse brainstorming, speculative design asks for exploration of the problem as it exists.

How do you ask people to design a harmful doghouse?

We follow, in broad strokes, a codified **protocol**. Presented with the design brief for the larger challenge, participants generate a problem statement, constraints, and stakeholders. The facilitator then frames WTP, including a discussion of why sticking with your first idea is often not the best, why “harmful and humiliating” rather than simply bad, and providing an example of harmful and humiliating (which is key to helping participants stay engaged with the process and feel less uncomfortable). Participants generate ideas, often in teams, and often writing or drawing on paper with the facilitators encouraging participants to take their ideas further – more harmful and more humiliating. Participants then share the ideas they think are the most harmful and humiliating before generating beneficial ideas that negate the harmful and humiliating ones, or have opposite design features, as well as the constraints and stakeholders identified at the outset.

In the protocol, the example we give is “Imagine you had a small dog, and you wanted to design a doghouse. A lazy design would be an oversized box that is drafty — still be better than no design. But in the wrong theory design, we want the design to be worse than

having no design. A truly terrible doghouse would have rotating blades for walls, a sprinkler roof, and a bed of glass shards.”

Can we ask children to design a harmful doghouse?

While WTP helps lessen the impacts of facilitator ethics in the decisions about how to ideation and doesn’t ask facilitators to make a definitive choice between ideation for creativity and ideation for empathy, choosing WTP does not make the facilitator’s choices ethically neutral. This is the case most starkly when engaging in WTP with children. We highlight two conflicting desires present in summer camps that differ from many other contexts. For one, summer camps are intended to be fun and informal, and shouldn’t necessarily be a place to confront difficult and potentially traumatizing ideas. On the other hand, denying children the opportunities to consider the real-world problems that face their communities doesn’t allow for meaningful engagement with the learning that the camps seek to provide in favor of keeping learners disengaged from reality.

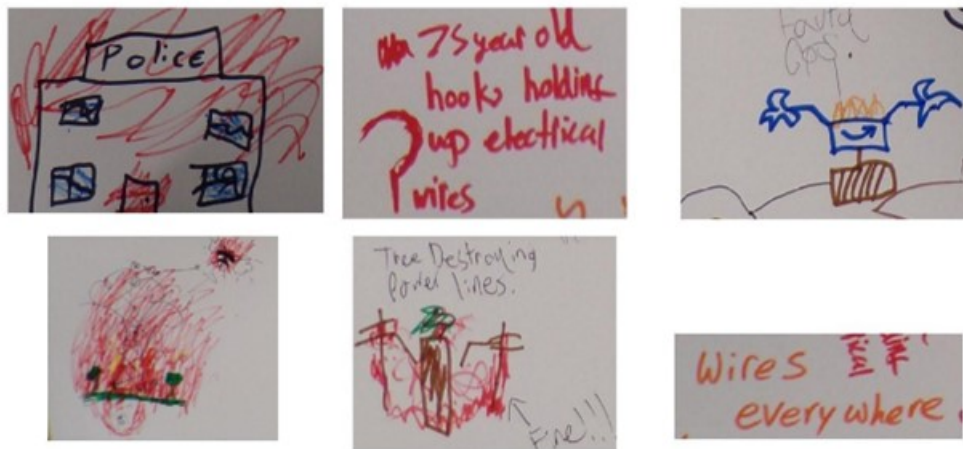
Facilitating this type of process with children is fraught and several concerns naturally arise. Soliciting intentionally dark ideas could theoretically open the door to harassment or ideas that stray from fanciful spaces. By the same token, exploring real-world problems in playful or even flippant ways, even as a method of approaching beneficial ideas, could possibly create or exacerbate trauma.

In the face of this, we argue that, particularly for teenagers, creating space to explore and interrogate problems they have experience with is key to their persistence. Children who were more able to engage in critical issues have the opportunity to engage with issues in their communities, as well as find empowerment within **STEM**.

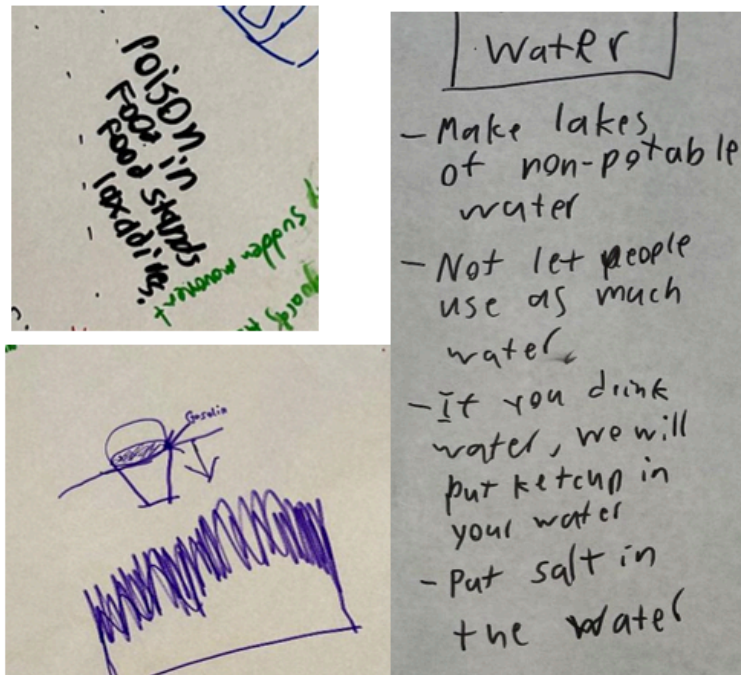
What happens if you ask children to design for harm and humiliation?

We have conducted the WTP process with three one-week camps focused on learning and designing with microcontrollers for middle schoolers. We report here the results of these uses of the protocol, and then afterwards share the strategies we used to navigate the conflicting constraints inherent in using WTP with children.

Participants were asked to generate a solution to a problem in the city where the camps took place. Participants indeed generated harmful ideas: only rich people get food and water; give everyone drugs; no one gets a house; everyone/babies get a gun; placing bombs where “homeless might sleep”; damming all rivers; air conditioning that cannot be turned off. These are all particularly salient for the community the camps took place in, where housing and food insecurity as well as gun violence are looming issues. One team in iteration 1 grew interested in fire – also particularly salient as wildfires were raging in the region – as both a social and environmental harm. They connected issues of wildfires to issues such as police brutality and Amazon monopolies. They added fire to police stations, started fires with old electrical wire infrastructure, and even set the delivery drones on fire.



Still other teams considered food insecurity, including poisoning food people need to survive, dropping fire on crops and making water unconsumable. Here they identified specifically the destruction of resources rather than lack of resources or inequitable distribution.



Still more considered school shootings and gun violence more generally. They identified issues with gun availability, gun laws, and where guns are allowed, including how school shootings could be made worse, and where to put guns on buildings for maximum damage.

We found that drawing participants to the humiliating portion of the prompt helped keep ideas playful and creative – with the argument being that you cannot humiliate people if you simply kill them. While the topics they tackled were certainly dark, they remained

extreme and playful rather than vindictive. They were able to ground the issues within their experiences while retaining creativity.

Tips for generating ideas with youth

We used several strategies to both support youth to successfully ideate with WTP, while holding space for the potential downsides.

- Make sure explicitly frame why you are doing WTP, and that it is to generate creative and empathetic ideas at the end.
- Give an example of a bad idea vs a harmful and humiliating one, emphasizing *creativity*.
- Set the expectation that the goal is to generate ideas, not harm and humiliate other participants, and identify that anyone who at any point wants to disengage is welcome to.
- Walk around during the process and ask teams to share their current most harmful and humiliating.
- Encourage making existing ideas more harmful or more humiliating.
- For teams stuck on murder – nukes, bombs, snipers, etc. suggest that people being dead means that they can't be harmed or be more humiliated, so it isn't the *most* harmful or humiliating it could be.
- For teams stuck on not sufficiently whimsical or cartoonish solutions, ask members to justify how their ideas are creative (as the more creative a solution is, the more whimsical it is likely going to be) or require them to move onto a different portion of the previously established constraints.

Want to learn more?

Svihla, V. (2020). [Augmented humanity: Where Technology meets the humanities In Wrong Theory Protocol Ep 1: The science of great ideas](#). C. Goldsmith & E. Dornan.

Svihla, V. (2020). [Augmented humanity: Where Technology meets the humanities In Wrong Theory Protocol Ep 2: Pursuing Catastrophic Failure](#). C. Goldsmith & E. Dornan.

Svihla, V. (2020). **Augmented humanity: Where Technology meets the humanities In Wrong Theory Protocol Ep 3: Ambitious and Wicked Problems.** C. Goldsmith & E. Dornan.

Svihla, V. (2020). **Augmented humanity: Where Technology meets the humanities In Wrong Theory Protocol Ep 4.** C. Goldsmith & E. Dornan.

Svihla, V., & Kachelmeier, L. (2020). **The Wrong Theory Protocol: A design thinking tool to enhance creative ideation.** Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference on Design Creativity, 223-230.

Svihla, V., & Kachelmeier, L. (2022). **Latent value in humiliation: A design thinking tool to enhance empathy in creative ideation.** International Journal of Design Creativity and Innovation, 10(1), 51-68.

Svihla, V., & Kachelmeier, L. (2020). **The Wrong Theory Protocol: A pre-ideation technique to enhance creativity and empathy.** Proceedings of the American Society for Engineering Education Annual Conference & Exposition, 1-17.

Wilson-Fetrow, M., Svihla, V., & Hsi, S. (2023). **Supporting framing agency with the wrong theory protocol in a youth radio camp.** Proceedings of the International Conference of the Learning Sciences, 1006-1009.

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