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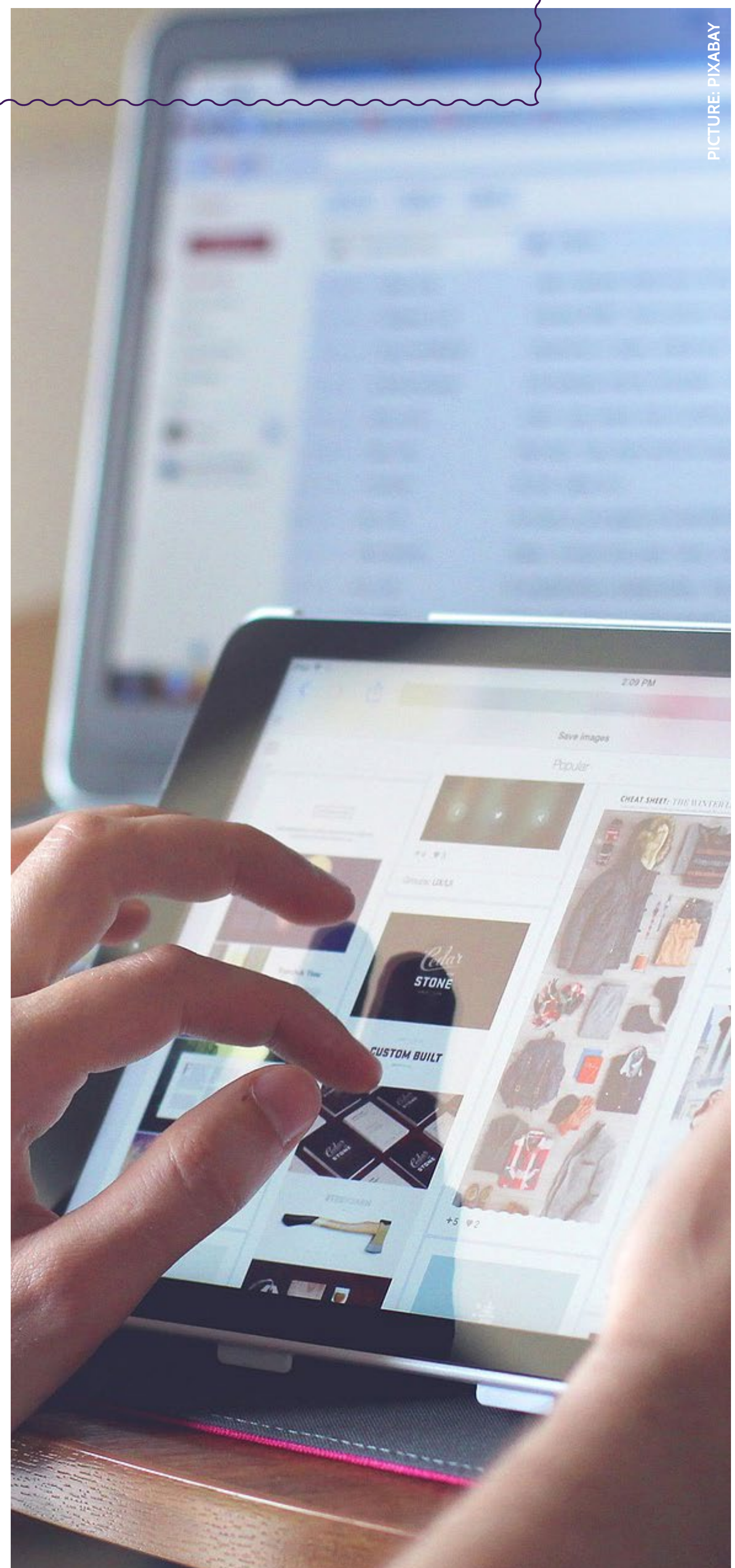
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SKETCHING AN ELUSIVE PROBLEM OF DISTRACTION

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THIS ARTICLE IS ABOUT ONE OF MEDAIA'S developmental experiments where we gathered together a group of volunteer designers and developers in Helsinki to discuss the problems of the current digital design paradigm. We borrowed our name and operational logic from a movement called Time Well Spent. During the process, it became clear that emotion-based design has created intangible problems, and all the parties seem to feel powerless when faced with them. In this article, the broader situation is opened up and some suggestions for further development are introduced.



PICTURE: PIXABAY

Gadgets, mobile apps and web services are in the center of the current global economy. There are a plethora of digital solutions for different situations and sectors of one's life. This abundance of rival services has changed digital design practices deeply and permanently. Web pages, applications and services fight for our time and attention. This is why user experience and user affection have shifted into the center of digital design. An app has to seduce and convince us in seconds, otherwise its game is over. If people have a positive emotional connection with a digital service, they will probably use it again and again, and form a new habit around the service. Habit formation through emotional engagement is how a service provider can create loyal customers. That's why hooking is the new black in digital design. (See e.g. Eyal, 2014.)

This paradigm shift from usability to emotional engagement has radically changed the way we are using our mobile phones and other gadgets. Because all apps are competing for our time, we can feel that we are drowning in hooks, notifications, suggestions and triggers designed to persuade us to return. This is also the reason why we are annoyed: we don't feel we are using our time wisely. We might feel distracted and even isolated from real human connection. The problem is that even though end users have some idea about these problems they might not have the tools to verbalize or analyze the issue. Additionally, they might feel there is no alternative for the services or the ways they are using these services. Are we trapped in an unsatisfactory situation without a possibility to escape? (See e.g. Turkle, 2015.)

When we started to uncover this territory in a MEDAIA developmental experiment in 2016, the issue was already being studied around the world. The suggestions for the main remediation were roughly located in two categories: changing the design principles (e.g. Calvo & Peters 2014) and building user's resiliency (e.g. Pang, 2013). We used a design movement called Time Well Spent (later TWS) as our starting point. The idea behind TWS is getting designers to meet and discuss the distraction problem of digital services and trying to find new design-based solutions for users to have more decisional power over their service usage. We found instructions for this method and suggestions for discussion topics from the TWS web site (<http://www.timewellspent.io/>). Our first meeting was in spring 2016 and since then we have had many more.

There were several people present at the first meeting, but after that the number of participants decreased and stabilized. After the first couple of meetings, we noticed that the discussion was revolving around the same recurring topics, and it was extremely hard to find even small solutions to the small subproblems. This might also be one of the reasons why the topic hadn't interested larger audiences in the long run. What if the problem we were trying to solve was too vast and complex? On more than one occasion, the participants felt powerless. Even though we varied our approach in each session, we came back to the notion that the problem was multifaceted and hard to define. The problem was like a tripod made out of twigs. If you tried to fix the position of one twig, the two other fell apart.

First, it seemed that even we ourselves were feeling perplexed and conflicted with our digital usage: it was obvious that on the other hand, digital services made our life easier, but we also recognized many annoying behavior patterns in our own usage. The pros and cons were intermingled. The desire to use digital services and to 'be connected' was many times stronger than our rational thinking. There was some delight in feeling in control of your world through digital services, but because this was an emotional response it was hard to verbalize, understand and resist. It seems to be impossible to know why we are doing what we do, because impulses override rational thinking and this is concealed by the rationalization of impulsive actions (Kahneman, 2012). Also, our emotional sensation of knowing is in most cases confused with the cognitive act of knowing (Burton, 2008). So, it seems that a person's suffering from a compulsive behavior might go fully unnoticed. Thus, the demand for change is not likely to come from consumers.

Second, we found that designers are also in a difficult position. Current design principles and metrics were based on maximizing user attention and positive emotional response. Today's design paradigm is full of tools for producing a sensation of easiness as well as constant disruption. If a designer wanted to do things differently, the user's experience of easiness of use or the customer engagement scores would suffer. Thus, the designer would also be left trapped in the current design paradigm. The need for a paradigm shift is hindered by a lack of demand.

Third, most of the services and applications are designed for generating profit. They are built by startups and companies, whose objective

is to get return on investment. If there is no real pressure to change the operational logic behind service development, the economic competition directs developers to create even more seductive and time-consuming services. A company deciding not to maximize the usage time would be deliberately impairing its competitive position.

It seems that users, designers and companies are all in a double bind. Users have the option to accept the current distracting situation or to stop using digital services. Designers can continue to reinforce the current seductive design paradigm or decide to leave their jobs. Companies can try to gain more profit by labeling their self-centeredness as user-centeredness or choose to impair their own competitive status.

The ambiguity of these double binds can be seen in the case of the Siempo phone. Siempo was an attempt to produce a distraction-free smartphone. Developers tried to fund the first batch of phones through a Kickstarter campaign in the spring 2017. It didn't succeed. My interpretation is that Siempo failed because users' demands were contradictory: they insisted on having the possibility to use all the apps and services they were used to but they also wanted to have all distractions removed. This was the underlying message users gave when they explained why they didn't back Siempo in the Kickstarter campaign. There was sympathy but no funding. We have to also keep in mind that these consumers were the ones who had recognized the distraction problem, but they, too, had mixed intertwined needs and demands. From the designers' and companies' point of view, the case confirms that the consumer-base for these kind of gadgets

is too diverse and small at the moment. Thus, the current design and economic paradigm holds. There is no pressure for change even if designers and developers did notice the darker side of their design decisions.

Reflecting the case of Siempo, it is easy to see why the participants of our TWS group felt occasional powerlessness and why the number of participants was not growing. Based on our discussions, we came to the conclusion that the first step to start fixing this problem is to make more people aware of the design-economic background of the current situation. Education is needed to unmask the current design paradigm and the way it works in different applications. Through this knowledge, users could understand how design is influencing their lives, and realize what they might want to have changed. After that, we can come back to the solutions of changing the design paradigm or enhancing user resiliency.

The main outcome of this experiment is the analysis of the current situation. We were surprised by the complexity of the problem and by the slowness of the process of gaining new understanding of it. This is an important finding because the current ethos is trying to solve problems in a flash. Pitching, hackathons and other impatient labor-evasive methods are exalted at the moment, but what if it takes years just for the necessary insight of a problem to mature? There is a need for a broader picture. All problems are not solved in a minute with an app.

There is a need for further analysis of the different aspects of this topic. It became clear that this is going to be an uphill project which might benefit from having a reasonably stable

actor take the lead. I think that this would be an ideal task for a university of applied sciences. An educational institution has the possibility to examine things from a wider and longer perspective. The analysis, education and practical solutions can be weaved into the normal university practices. Furthermore, this kind of an actor is not as locked in double binds as other actors in the field. Because of this, we should continue this project with several different experiments and initiatives.



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