What is recoding?

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Introduction

Recoding is by my experience an expression that is mostly used in the context of recoding or reusing programming code. It can, however, also be used in a wider context. Recoding can also be used in the context of giving new meaning to objects or parts of objects, and thus give it a new meaning or lose its old meaning. In this course the main focus has been on *fair* technology, and that is also the case in this report. In this report I discuss what recoding is, as well as proposing points of thought when doing a recoding process.

Recoding physical objects

As previously suggested, the concept of recoding can be interpreted quite widely. As the different uses of an object may vary from user to user, so does also the meaning of the *object* to *us*. The degrees of these differences are also up for discussion. Where is the line drawn between "different" and "paradigm shifting", and which constitutes recoding?

The Oxford dictionary defines *recoding* as to "put (something, especially a computer program) into a different code: *this allows many changes to be made without recoding application programs*"[1]. In this course, however, our focus is not on recoding computer code, but rather on recoding objects and social structures. My impression is that recoding often has a focus on sustainability, so in this report I will have *sustainable interaction design* (*SID*) in mind, as defined by Eli Blevis (Blevis, 2007).

The prime example of recoding used in the course is the Fairphone[2]. Fairphone is a smart phone designed and produced not to harm people and the environment. In the movie *Blood in the mobile*[3] it is shockingly clear how much mobile phones harm entire countries and populations, but it seems little is done about it. Fairphone tries to change this by using *fair* minerals and wages, as well as making components last and easy to change yourself. This is a good example of recoding; putting the mobile phone into another code; giving it a different meaning.

My personal favorite recoding is the High Line[4] in New York. They have taken an abandoned elevated section of the railway network above street level, and instead of demolishing it they have made it into a park. Transforming the busy and noisy railway line into a relaxing place that is good for the environment, while keeping the function of getting from point A to point

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[1] http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/recode, visited on November 24., 2014

[2] http://www.fairphone.com/, visited on November 24., 2014

[3] http://bloodinthemobile.org/, visited on November 24, 2014

[4] https://www.thehighline.org/, visited on November 24., 2014

B, is a good example of recoding. Transportation from A to B is still possible, but it is done by different means.

This is good on many levels. Firstly; there is no pollution by demolishing it and getting rid of the garbage. I'm sure it took some refurbishment to get it strong enough to support the park after not being in use for a while, but this would be less impacting on the environment than if the entire structure would have been discarded. Secondly; it's green, and it produces oxygen. Air quality can be poor in big cities, and this is one of the largest cities in the world. Third; it provides an opportunity for relaxation. Four; it's a new form of transport in its own right, and it's very different from the busy streets below. This may encourage the users of the park to think differently about the city around them.

Recoding of non-physical entities

When using the definition from Oxford, recoding does not have to be performed at physical objects, it can also be performed at laws and social codes, both written and unwritten. The example of Fairphone does not only require recoding of the phone itself, but also recoding of the way we look at it. Rather than seeing it as a thing we as consumers need to renew every year or two without thinking about the people sacrificing their lives to make it cheaper for us, it requires us to be able to put ourselves into a larger context.

Personally, I believe that this non-physical recoding is required in most recoding processes. We need to look at things in a different way, and because humans are creatures of habit, this is not always done easily. When you are buying a new mobile phone, if you're like many of us, you'd want a new model with cool features, and you want values for money. Because the cheapest goods may not be the ones with the fairest production, we have to be able to recognize other people in the production chain than ourselves.

Points of thought in a recoding process

It all begins with an idea. A good place to start the recoding process would be to assess what the environmental consequences of the recoding you have in mind would be. When recoding with the environment in mind, it would be preferable with the least possible environmental impact. In this section I propose points of thought that should be considered in a recoding process.

In "Sustainable interaction design: invention & disposal, renewal & reuse" (Blevis, 2007), Eli Blevis proposes "the following rubric for understanding and assessing particular interaction design cases in terms of forms of use, reuse, and disposal from the perspective of sustainability, ordered very approximately from greatest to least negative environmental impact": Disposal, salvage, recycle, remanufacturing for reuse, reuse as-is, achieving longevity of use, sharing for maximum use, achieve heirloom status, finding wholesome alternatives to use, and finally active repair of misuse.

The process of recoding would be individual from project to project, as there is no single solution to this. However, Tony Fry proposes six strategies for elimination design (Fry, 2009, pp. 76-80). "Elimination design is based on identifying unsustainable products and the

redirective practices that will change them or that will eliminate them completely." (van der Velden, 2014) The six strategies Fry proposes for elimination design are:

- Erasure of 'need' by exposing it as a fabricated want
- Functional substitution
- Product multipurposing
- De-materialization and re-materialization
- Symbolic devaluation and the destruction of sign value
- Prohibition

Conclusion

Recoding may take on many different forms, and it includes both physical and non-physical entities. As suggested earlier on, there is no definitive correct answer to what constitutes a good recoding process, as this will differ from project to project. It is however a view in fair technology that recoding should not negatively affect the environment. It would be advisable to explore several different aspects of the proposed recoding project, according to the strategy from Fry and Blevis' rubric, as to make sure the recoding is kept *fair*.

Bibliography

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