Empathizing with the Mind of a Child

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Empathy is an indispensable tool in design. But poorly executed, the application of empathetic thinking can lead to worse results. When examined more closely, empathy is problematic both in concept and in practice. Deconstructed into the component parts — compassion, sharing and mentalizing — we can begin to explore the particular nuances of empathy. Beyond the incentives of the designer, compassion, successful empathy requires the user to be able to share their experiences with the designer. Translation and articulation limits of the user can make this difficult. Designing for a pre-verbal child, for example, is extremely difficult. Finally, mentalizing, the act of the designer creating a proxy of the user's internal state, is problematic when they do not share the same cultural foundations or basic cognitive similarities. Designers are most facile when designing for people similar to themselves. But as design anthropologists, we are tasked with creating bridges that enable people to create mental maps of people who share fundamentally different outlooks on the world. Limited by the intersubjectivity of the endeavor, validation again and again is essential.

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