

RENEWING ETHNOGRAPHIC THEORY

DESIGNING the End

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We consider implications for the active, intentional design of the endings of products, services, institutions and other structures and processes pervading our societies. We suggest psychological reluctance to some kinds of endings even in the context of broader social benefit. We propose direction for and encourage attention of this community to certain kinds of work designed to end some things while creating other things. We introduce the notion of “creative idiosyncratic ritualization for renewal” and propose that the EPIC community is uniquely situated to ask “strange” questions in the most “familiar” of ways to increase our collective general welfare.

PROLOGUE

Social commentator Ellen Goodman said it best, “there’s a trick to the graceful exit.” And it’s true. So many times when we, as ethnographers or design strategist, are engaged in initiatives we tend to focus our efforts on the needs, desires and aspirations (articulated or not, real or not) of individuals and how to address them. And we imagine that if we meet their desires – or the imagination of their desires – at one time, then we’ve met them for all time, or at least a long time. We try hard to foster loyalty and longevity through our technologies, products and services to make them more relevant and useful. And this is good work. Yet, simultaneously, we recognize the increasing pace of technological development, of product evolution and change, of companies coming and going. And we do not tend to focus our efforts guiding people from one thing to the next, that is, on managing the transitional experience, of leaving one thing behind and moving onto something else. It’s almost as if, building up is cool; tearing down, isn’t.

In this new economy – where “things” and “experiences” vie for value, the importance and relevance of long-term possession is under question. There are new models of “fractional” or “shared” ownership and new possibilities where digital experiences are created, popularized and marginalized in very short periods of time. In these contexts, managing transitions and endings is going to become as critical as designing for attraction, relevance, or desire. What we hope to do in this paper is raise awareness of the need for focusing on endings – in both the small, e.g., products and services, and in some rather larger contexts, e.g., institutions and even nation states – and provide a few initial guideposts for ways in which the ethnographic praxis community can consider a focus on transitional experiences into their strategy toolsets.

We also note that this view is not entirely new to our industry thinking. It has been present in service design initiatives for some time, e.g., with emphases on customer journeys service design practitioners have focused efforts understanding the total experience from beginning to end and designing touch-points to bring someone through complex journeys. Yet still, there has been little

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focus on how to best stage purposeful endings and perhaps converting that to successful beginnings; and dare we say: Renewal.

INTRODUCTION

When we hear: “The End.” Does it suggest “finality?” Perhaps it’s the completion of a story, a play, a movie, or a song. Perhaps it’s the ending of a relationship, “*that’s it, I never want to see you again*” or of a contest: “*well, it’s over, let’s throw in the towel,*” or even better: “*We won.*”

Clearly, there are good (satisfactory, expected, desired) endings and there are bad (undesired, painful, tragic) endings. We often celebrate these good endings: Go Team! And we often don’t mind endings when the “journey” has been distasteful - like concluding a terrible course of chemotherapy. Some endings are much anticipated for what they demarcate - final exams (as the *dénouement*, perhaps more so than the commencement), the departure of a houseguest who has overstayed their welcome. Some things we think shouldn’t end, and some endings are more acute than others: the sudden death of a loved one, the sudden fall of a be-loved public official, the termination of a contract. And some ends can signify beginnings, e.g., revolution.

From these, it seems we rationalize some “goodness” from the end; we look for the “silver lining,” we look for the (psychic?) “good in it” – and there’s almost always some goodness to be found – even if, as last resort, it’s the proverbial “god’s will” or “if it does not kill you, it makes you stronger.”

In talking about graceful exits, Ellen Goodman goes on to say:

It begins with the vision to recognize when a job, a life stage or a relationship is over – and let it go. It means leaving what’s over without denying its validity or its past importance to our lives. It involves a sense of future, a belief that every exit line is an entry that we are moving up, rather than out.

It’s odd, we admit, to refer to Ellen Goodman. But we think here, she captures the common or conventional wisdom an elder would impart to a youngster. Why is it necessary to rationalize the end as a beginning and to move “up,” rather than “out?” Why can it not be what it is: a simple ending, a thing that’s done?

What is this rationalization that even in the admonishment to “let go,” seemingly prevents us from actually letting go? The making of such attributions – some real, some fantastical seems to be one of the things we do as humans. It perhaps helps makes sense of understand the people, things and events around us. We explain; we make attributions and judgments and in so doing we develop schemas and mental models for how to act, react, think and even feel in different situations. If we wish to reconsider “endings,” we need to reconsider the schemas with which we process them and attempt to design accordingly.

SCHEMAS

Numerous theories of cognitive development suggest we become psychologically and physiologically attached to people and events, e.g., attachment theory (Bretherton, 1992) and attribution theories (Menton et al, 1999) respectively. Another contributing reason might be the nature of how we learn. Cognitive studies of learning suggest strongly that learning is “hard work” and that we operate best when we learn something well, and internalize it – create mental “schemas” – so that

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we don't have to expend significant effort on the same task repeatedly (i.e., we have shortcuts) while simultaneously putting effort into some other pressing task. Latour calls these "black boxes," where we encapsulate "known" whole related sets of phenomena whereby subsequent opening of the black box becomes a non-trivial, effortful endeavor (Latour, 2005)). Arguably it is changing them – re-assessing their worth, learning some thing new that requires changing something old – that seems to be more difficult as the old maxim: *can't teach an old dog new tricks*, seems to suggest.

As individuals, we develop "mental schemas" over the course of our lives. Classic examples include how to act in social situations, or what we expect from a high-end restaurant, or even how we read maps (or now, interact with GPS systems). Schemas also inform us about endings; how to interpret them, how to act when they happen, when to expect them, whether we're disappointed or elated at them. Schemas tell us individually how to participate in the endings, even sudden ones, like what to expect from a funeral. And while we don't have schemas for everything making new ones is a part of development and learning—it is what we do (Willingham, 2010).

We find the changing and altering existing schemas to be the real challenge for us. We are challenged to comprehend events that don't match our existing schemas, as when something ends that we hoped or thought would never end, or some previously unimaginable or improbable event actually occurs. It is here when we experience dissonance – the inability to harmonize or explain one set of observations with a belief or expectation based on a different set of expectations. We predict December 21st, 2012 will be a "day of dissonance" for many people who are planning for the (apocryphal) Mayan end of the world.

We want to consider teaching the old dog new tricks is what we should focus our efforts. As ethnographers, user researchers and design strategists, we typically focus our efforts on innovations and new product/service experiences that may be unfamiliar to people – they require a schema-shift or a transition to fully embrace— and people need a foothold to make the transition.¹

WHY ENDINGS

While change is challenging, the world we face today is one of continuous systemic adaptation. We do not refer here to the trite adage that "the only constant is change" – which we see a fatalistic abandonment of at least some responsibility. The point is that uncontrolled environmental change – change occurring outside of your control and influence – requires systemic adaptation on our part. Adaptation requires the constant allocation and reallocation of power and resources, the continuous attachment, detachment and re-attachment of psychological bonds, the repeated opening, examining and resealing of our black-boxed knowledge and hence, the repeated creation and re-creation of mental schemas for "how things work." That is, continuous adaptation requires that (at least some) things must end. And yet, system change imposes endings on us, creating uncomfortable dissonances when our expectations are misaligned with actuality – that is, these disconnects breaks the foundational expectation of our schemas and it requires cognitive work to get them stabilized again. And we, as humans arguably, do take the path of least resistance - the reason we have schemas in the first place -

¹ In this paper, we are addressing endings that are, presumably within our ability to influence; that is, we are not addressing tragedies, unexpected deaths, heinous act, etc.

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and will tend to avoid or devalue experiences that are not aligned with our expectations (Festinger et al, 2011).

Focusing on endings is becoming increasingly importance because we are experiencing more transitions than in the past. More things come-and-go with more frequency and/or greater numbers – jobs, mortgages, phones, phone providers, computers, movies, serials, spouses, the list goes on – at rates that we would have never thought of in even the recent past. Furthermore, traditional product life cycle management seems dissonant with respect to the new digital economy.

Arguably, things that were, at one time, tangible, physical objects and practices are now digital objects and practices; this is obvious. Less obvious, perhaps is that as more and more of the physical becomes digital, it appears cultural values begin to shift as an adaptive response to the new resources and attributes of those resources. Concepts like ownership, accountability, privacy, social participation all shift in terms of their value, meaning and relevance to individuals, institutions and society.

As more “analogue” things become more “digital” things, the balance of resource scarcity also shifts – things that were once scarce are increasingly plentiful – a paper book was just a paper book; that same content in digital form is, theoretically, far less scarce. Further, control of production is shifting – digital goods allow a broader swath of the population to control the means of production. (Pointedly, leading professors have and are teaching computer science to large classrooms not of 40 or 50 students, but of 150,000 students through electronic means. (Hsu, 2012)

Finally, if cultural values are in flux, resource scarcity is rebalancing, and production control broadening, it follows that there will be a new ecosystem of beginnings and endings, starts and stops, commencements, completions and shifting schemas to accommodate attention to endings.

From a practical, point of view, there is precedent for actively considering the shift from “accidental” to “intentional” endings. Schumpeter (2006) and Drucker (1993), for example, have carried Marx’s notion of “creative destruction” forward with considerable force. The general idea is that innovation – a creative force – is a force that draws from, and often draws the life out of, the thing it replaces or displaces. Drucker pointedly argued that in an information age “...change is normal and...healthy... and doing something different rather than doing better what is already being done...the entrepreneur upsets and disorganizes. As Joseph Schumpeter formulated it, his task is “creative destruction.”

That’s fine as far as it goes. The notion of creating something new by disorganizing something else suggests renewal in and of itself – by “shaking-up” the status quo in the context of “the market.” There’s also an implicit assumption of, “progress,” of forward movement, of improvement. It’s not *just* shaking-up for the purpose of shaking up. It must be useful, useable and desirable for its intended audience.

And it is here that we would like to encourage extending of the practice of our field. Can we make endings useful, usable and even desirable? Can we actively design with endings in mind– endings that provide less of a schema-disconnect, or leverage existing schemas to help people experience them appropriately as part of the design process. Given the pace of technological advancement and a new generation of consumers with a more disposable mindset, we believe we will have to.

SOME EXAMPLES

A major charge card provider had a high-end card that was a step up from their traditional consumer cards. They card had additional benefits and services that came with it, and it also involved a

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significant fee increase. Prospective Card Members, typically from the traditional consumer-lever card, would request the card, and if the financial requirements were met, they'd get a card mailed to them. Once the card was activated, the Card Member would be charged the new fee. The company experienced high number of requests for the high-end card, but a low number of activations. The company initially felt that the low activation rate was due to people second-guessing the fee increase. But people knew of the increased fee when they requested the card. What was happening was that the high-end card arrival did not appear to have significant value to warrant the increased fee. In essence, company felt their job was done (ended) when they go people to request the card. And people were expecting a step-up "high-level" transition. Once the company recognized this, they changed the card arrival experience and experienced a 90% activation rate.

Some years ago, a large consumer computer company believed their job was done when you got the computer hooked up correctly. They spent considerable effort on helping their customers select and customize a computer as well as considerable effort with helping them connect the components when it arrived—providing color coded components and a large map. This computer company stopped their "out of box" experience when you get it connected correctly and started it up. However, customers were not satisfied. Getting their computer connected and started was one thing, getting their stuff off of their existing computer and on to their new one was another - this was the real ending/beginning of the experience. Their customers had a schema that they would be working on their new machine that day because the computer company had promised them that it was easy. The computer company had to change their ending mindset, and recognize that their consumers' expectations were different (and largely because of their promise) and that they had to help people complete the transition to the new machine.

These are two, relatively simple examples of companies recognizing their customers' dissonance. Arguably these sorts of "endings"/beginnings are increasingly recognized. But we don't necessarily anticipate the endings of favored institutions, e.g., a favored coffee shop shutting or other local community institution. Sometimes people even spring to action to save them. The US Postal Service recently began to shut post offices in rural areas; for example, in North Dakota a whole town mounted a defense of their Post Office, not only as a source of mail distribution, but as a local community center. In Woonsocket, Rhode Island some years ago, a local theater had fallen into disuse and disrepair and was scheduled for demolition when some townspeople resurrected it and today it thrives again. The found themselves more attached then they knew when faced with its demise. That is, the post office and theatre had acquired additional significance independent of the institutional significance and the institutions failed to recognize that significance.

FRAMEWORKS FOR RENEWAL THROUGH ENDING

Let's not be confused. Endings are endings; beginnings are beginnings. To use a metaphysical analogy: a life ends, an "afterlife" begins – and that afterlife is often construed as wholly new, qualitatively different, though, albeit influenced by the quality of the life itself. More prosaically, businesses are exposed to Drucker's notion of "creative destruction," but it's often one company creates and another is destroyed; Drucker was arguing at the market level, not the individual. Christensen's Disruption Theory is an exercise in creative destruction – others create new value, while your value is diminished.

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Thus, we argue that while there may be threads of connection from the ending of one thing to the beginning of another, from an ethnographic and “designerly” perspective, it is more useful to consider them separately. For sure, some beginnings do lurk behind certain endings. But that should be a choice, not an assumption; cycles don’t necessarily “repeat” just because. Retaining a customer or institution should be considered with intention, not by default. To that end, endings, per se, are intentional or not, planned or not, ritualized or not, liberating or confining, freely undertaken or imposed on us. But they are endings and we argue they should be considered and designed for with intention – at every level.

We’ve made an initial argument that global ecosystems— are increasingly digitally animated, changing the balance of resource scarcity, affecting the meaning of certain cultural values and changing the possibilities of what can end and when. We need not only to make new products, services and institutions relevant and attractive, but understand how to transition from one to another, not necessarily continuously, but appropriately.

For example, what might it really mean for the US Postal Service to “end?” Would it be that bad? Would something newer and better replace it? We might argue that we need to turn “creative destruction” onto one’s own business. We suggest considering “creative destruction” not as a “between groups,” macro-economic-social activity, as Drucker argues happens, but as a “within group,” emic activity, as something we “do” to ourselves. That is, we need to plan to disrupt/destroy our own work freely of our own accord, with intention to create or open a new “possibility space,” perhaps elsewhere, for renewal. We suggest at least considering “creative idiosyncratic ritualization” as a means of drawing closure and liberating individuals and groups to begin again.

CREATIVE IDIOSYNCRATIC RITUALIZATION THROUGH RENEWAL

The essence of this paper is a two step approach: first, intentionally design for things to end and second, purposefully design the ritual to go with it.

It’s that easy. Below, we’ll go through our examples, add a few more, and suggest where and how we should design for endings with creative idiosyncratic rituals. Of course, what’s most interesting here is to intentionally design a thing with its ending in mind and to intentionally design for some things that already exist to end. Of the former, there’s a wide range of things we can and should consider. Of course, there’s the bits about sustainable design – products whose parts decompose or that are readily parted into various components for appropriate disposal and/or recycling. This is one kind of ending, but it’s not so much the kind of ending that creates the opportunity for renewal – it’s merely the functional ending of disposal. Another example of this the concept of hand-me-downs, etc. Vintage clothing is a great example of how a “discard” is reconstructed as “vintage” and given a “second life.”

Novels also end; they are designed to end. And the design of the novel itself is a ritualized ending. Concerts end. They must, even if only to obey noise ordinances. None-the-less, they not only end, but their ending is designed – often spectacularly – and the design itself has become increasingly ritualized through encores – several at times – and/or standard songs or ballads that signal the true ending, such as “Freebird,” leaving no ambiguity of anticipation for “more.” Movies end.

In France, movie goers often attend the movie and *then* attend dinner, where the ritual of a meal and conversation permits a second, more personal *dénouement* of the experience of the movie. (In The United States, at least we personally have always found the ending of a movie and subsequent

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departure of our group to be rather too hasty.) Perhaps in addition to the employees hurriedly racing to clear the theatre, there's potential additional ritual associated with movie-going endings in the theatre. Here would be an opportunity for ritualizing "the end" of the movie.

We'd also like to extend "ritual endings" in non-traditional locations. A shirt could "track" its contextual history, celebrating its demise as it frayed – or transfer – with a narrative based on its journey – perhaps in combination with other "shirts" over time. Of course, shoes – hiking boots, ski boots – could certainly track their "journeys," linking their presence with other contextual elements – working, *er*, walking towards their own "ends."

A "social" consumer electronics device, e.g., a phone, could function for a year or 18 months. You can buy it only in the month of January and a collective narrative of some sort unfolds over the year culminating in a glorious ending on an especially auspicious day the end of the year – the devices can be recycled, a new one available in January. It's not that odd – fantasy sports already does it – aligns its activity with a ritual ending (aligned to the championship ending of the season – events rife with ritual).

Moreover, we can design technologies that specifically offer affordances to end other more abstract structures. Consider for example the impact of "the internet" on US politics. The first author of this paper had a personal communication with a former head of research for a leading presidential candidate in which "the internet" was identified as the cause of the terrific polarization currently in evidence in US politics:

Me: "The internet?"

Him: "Yep. It allowed the most extreme ends of both parties to hold every congress person accountable for every single vote, magnifying excursions from the extreme view in the primary system and thus preventing the possibility of any compromise in the capital. And the system was built and based on the ability of congress people to compromise."

Me: "So, how do we fix it?"

Him: "Oh, you can't. It's too late. Can't be fixed as it is today."

So the answer is that the system is broken and can't be fixed as it is. We can actually accept that. Though it might seem oddly defeatist, what if – what if – it's actually a fair assessment of the situation. What if, as it is, it can't be "fixed" given that it was created at a very different time with very different affordances? What if the technologies initially designed to ensure communications during a nuclear attack have provided what Edward Tenner (1997) refers to as a "revenge effect" undermining our communications when there's *not* a nuclear attack? What if, we've nuked our own system from the inside? And if we have, are we going to simply try and "fix it?" Really? Now *that* seems defeatist.

We propose to design our way out of it. Maybe it's actually time to consider – to genuinely consider – an ending to at least some parts of the system as it is today. How might we design not only the new system to accommodate the new communications technologies we've invented and build on them, but also to design the ending of the current one. Gently. Suppose we design our systems to fix not only the proximal challenges facing us, but to fix the long standing challenges facing global human society. Here are three:

Let's celebrate the end of pyramidal organizational structure by designing new networked structures of social power. Consider that hierarchies exist in human society to control access to scarce resources and production of goods. Suppose that those erstwhile scarce resources are no longer scarce (digitization) and production of goods are no longer specialized skills (Maker Faire). If this is the case,

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can we construct societies based less on hierarchies and more on networks that are flatter, more dynamic, more agile, more global? We can design the end of hierarchies and celebrate them as we do it, freeing us to pursue socio-economic-cultural-political structures through networks.

Let's design the end of massive asset valuations by designing the redistribution of asset ownership. According to the Economic Policy Institute (Allegretto, 2011), the top 1 percent of the United States owns 30% of its assets. And yet, technological advancements have provided opportunities for people to shift the value of those assets and shift the value of their own assets changing what it means to own something. That is, if individuals can monetize their own assets, this has the potential to redistribute wealth more equitably. We're not arguing for communal ownership, but for individual ownership in a way that support massively local commercial enterprise. E-Bay, Etsy, Air BnB – all examples of redistributed wealth away from current wealth sinks.

For ethnographers and designers, we might consider directing our engagements purposefully in directions of this ilk. For example, student projects should actively consider “endings and transitions” as well as beginnings. We might consider programs and projects that shift away from more “traditional” business models and focus on endeavors that recognize the new distribution of digital resources. This would give both students and practitioners experience with a new way to not only design, but also to work – alone and with/for others.

For practitioners, we could, as a community of practice, advocate for, seek and lead work that pushes individuals and organizations in directions that emphasize a more networked, participatory economy. If these concepts hold, it's something we will need to lead, not something that will happen accidentally or naturally as if on a “trend-line.”

In an extreme case, perhaps to make the point, we might be able to work toward the end of the nation state as we know it and their associated institutional structures as we know them. We can design technologies and systems for transparency, accountability and social participation. We can also challenge the nature of accountability. Adam Smith (1776) in *Wealth of Nations*, to whom many politicians refer when bolstering (neo-)capitalism was quite clear that it's only on a level, transparent playing field that the invisible hand of the market function with prosperity and justice. Transparency is crucial. Up until now, we've had to rely on honest, complete self disclosure or the contentious legal system provide accountability. However, more and more we can design technologies – from our built environments (e.g., glass walled meeting spaces in city halls) to our transaction recording and reporting processes to enable transparency, and thus accountability. Moreover, this form of accountability can leverage the “vocal” or “interested few” who would then promote a form of social participation we've only seen inklings of today, but which could well become less contentious.

So, our assertion is, that as ethnographers, as an EPIC Community, we should strive to design explicitly for transparency, accountability and broad social participation and ceremoniously plan for an ending to the structures that we've come to hold dear to us up until now, structures that by their nature were designed for different world of different affordances. Perhaps as a community, we might work together to develop perspectives and design work that moves society and institutions in directions more in line with emerging resources, such as increased ability to organized as “networks” rather than hierarchies. Let's consider three very different cases.

First, let's consider the simple institution of “the conference.” What is the point of being at a conference – even this one? What's the purpose for the time and miles? Perhaps rather than imagine that conferences continue ad infinitum (er, ad nauseum), perhaps we should re-imagine that they exist for a period of years, acquire a particular narrative arc and then end, freeing people to re-form or form

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into something else or nothing else as warranted by conditions. Perhaps rather than “ending,” they are completely restructured, re-considered, with a more explicit purpose, or goal – perhaps as outlined above. This is precisely the sort of question the EPIC community should consider. We are ethnographers, designers, etc., and yet, we are working in, with and through the same century old structures as used by physicists, physicians and psychics.

Far more challenging: what would it take to consider that the US Constitution – a document prepared in a hot, malarial infested, river delta city more than 200 hundred years ago is, in actuality, arguably, somewhat outdated? What would it take to realize that a nation of roughly 350 million people, who can communicate with each other at a moment’s notice might not be benefiting from the electoral process as we know it today or from the institutions of government as we know them today? As an EPIC community, we might consider actively designing courses with our political science colleagues for high schools and certainly for universities that actively, conscientiously address what “constitutions” could actually mean as a continuously adapting document in pace with current society, rather than ensconced in the sacred myths of history.

And perhaps most poignantly at the time of this writing, one might argue that perhaps the Greek institutions of government aren’t serving their constituents particularly well and maybe it’s time for a refurbishment. Hierarchy, power, ownership, transparency, accountability, social participation – as construed actually may not be working in their best interests. Perhaps the institution of the Greek state – or any state at various times – should be reconsidered. For example, in one account (Inman & Smith, 2010) a German official proposed they sell some islands, and though at the time this was met with rioting in Greece, it’s an idea that has some merit, or at least some practicality as since that original comment, apparently the Greek government is actually selling certain assets, including “leasing” several uninhabited islands. (Smith, 2012)

CONCLUSION

Ethnographic and design, research and researchers could help find the ‘inflection points’ where meaningful change - led by ending something - needs most to occur (or would be most welcomed or rejected). We need to more actively guide the strategies of the organizations for which we work – we need to find the business models that allow for decision makers to shift from old to new models. We need to engage collectively – or at least as subsets – or at least as networks – to engage across disciplines and organizations to drive perspectives that emerge from our individual and collective work. We need to extend our “conference” beyond the confines of our hall and actively catalyze and engage the best interests and intentions of others with purposeful, active design.

Our skills and talents, our research and knowledge enable us to ask very hard questions with a familiarity that may be quite strange to other disciplines. We can, when we’re inclined, question the very assumptions of our own relevance and re-invent and renew our contribution. By actively considering the ends of things – of a product or service, of a conference or nation state, of a company – of our company – of our institutions, our small comforts or our collective roles, rights, responsibilities and obligations, we question the very notion of continuity and suggest that we can design not only for renewal, but for renaissance.

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