Music is My Life: Disseminating Design Research to the Community

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Abstract
This short paper asks the question: How might we disseminate design research to the community? One possible response is discussed wherein drawings and stories created by 129 homeless young people became an art exhibit called, Music is My Life.

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Research through Design; Homeless Young People; Music; Art

ACM Classification Keywords
H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Introduction
Lately, researchers and designers of interactive systems have considered the intersection of research, design, art, and community, asking questions both practical and epistemological [e.g., 1,2,5,6]. This short paper joins in by focusing on a particular question: How might we disseminate design research to the community? This question arose in regard to drawings and stories of music devices that 129 homeless young people created during a large-scale, exploratory study of the role of music in their lives [10]. This paper discusses how these drawings and stories came to be the topic of an art exhibit, called Music is My Life [3,8].
Background – Study and Design Activity
The study took place from February 2012 to February 2013 and engaged over 200 homeless young people, aged 15-25, half from Seattle, WA and half from Vancouver, BC. Participants took part in surveys, interviews and design activities answering questions about music, risk-taking, and technology use, among others. Findings from the overall study are being reported elsewhere (e.g., [10]). Here, we focus on goals and dissemination of the design activity.

Participants in the design activity completed steps on a self-guided activity sheet where they were first prompted to imagine a music device that could help a homeless youth. Then, participants responded to a number of questions (e.g., Who would use the device?), drew a picture, and wrote a story about a situation where the device would be used. Participants remained anonymous and also chose whether to give permission for their drawings and stories to be used in a public art exhibit (see Fig. 1 for a completed example). Since the overall goal of the study was to explore the role of music in the lives of homeless young people, the design activity built on value scenario techniques from prior work [e.g., 9], yielding findings that are useful for design but which also tell the stories of the everyday lives of homeless young people. Thus, the design activity fits most cleanly within the discourse on research through design.

Disseminating Design Research
Research is disseminated in a number of ways, with peer-reviewed journals and conferences being primary venues. I knew that 129 young people who participated in the study wanted their drawings and stories to be shared. I also knew that few people in the larger community had the opportunity to meet and have extended conversations with homeless young people. However, it seemed unlikely that many community members would find out about the drawings and stories by reading academic journals or attending conferences. So, a public art exhibit might be the right approach. Yet, questions remained, particularly about how to proceed and who to involve.

Music is My Life Art Exhibit
In order to find a way forward, in November 2012, I assembled a team of 20 volunteers. Volunteers represented neighborhood stakeholders including homeless young people, business owners, curators, service agency staff, and faculty and students at the University of Washington (UW). We discussed possibilities, and decided to move forward with an exhibit. We named the show Music is My Life, after a quote from one of the study participants. With the goal of opening Music is My Life in May 2013, we held regular meetings and followed a project plan we created as part of a successful grant application to the City of Seattle. Although loosely coordinated, we kept three primary themes in mind: 1) Spread the word; 2) Develop expertise; and 3) Lower barriers.

Spread the word. To date, we have: done outreach at public events; been featured in newspaper articles [e.g., 4]; designed and distributed 100s of postcards and posters; created a Facebook page [5]; and given public presentations [e.g., 7].

Develop expertise. Everyone on the project had opportunities to take on new challenges. For example, homeless young people assisted with outreach,
The Music is My Life exhibit consists of two parts: 1) A website with all the 129 drawings and stories (http://musicismylife.ischool.uw.edu); and 2) A set of 8 physical panels depicting 18 drawings and stories.

The photo above shows one of the physical panels being viewed by a guest at the opening of the Music is My Life exhibit in Seattle, WA. Note that this panel includes “A Little Note” (see Fig. 1).

(Photo: Robert Wade)

Music is My Life and “A Little Note”

1. Tommy was having a bad day. His mother had just passed away, forcing him to become homeless. His girlfriend left him because he smelled bad and his friends no longer wanted to hang out with him because he had no money. He was downtown Seattle contemplating suicide when he was approached by two Orion Outreach workers. In addition to giving Tommy socks, snacks, and a flyer to connect him to services that he so desperately needed, they handed him “a little note.” He had seen these on t.v. but his mother would never purchase him one because she didn’t agree with the music he listened to. Instantly he popped the headphones in and logged on, pulling up “My Girlfriend’s Dead” by the Vandals. After that he had the drive to get up and walk to Orion, where upon entering he asked to speak with a counselor to get all of the ideas off his chest. He spoke about his recent homelessness, his mother’s passing and the loss of his girlfriend + friends, all the time flicking through all the songs that he could remember, each one slightly more uplifting than the last until finally he felt well enough to go out for dinner, sign up for shelter, and made an appointment with the counselor for tomorrow morning.

2. Figure 1. “A Little Note,” a music device imagined by a homeless young person in Seattle. This completed design activity includes: 1) Original story; 2) Verbatim story transcription (not part of the original design activity, included here to enhance readability); 3) Completed design activity sheet; and 4) Drawing of “A Little Note.”
transcribed stories, and took part in curating the show. In another example, some UW students gained experience with exhibit design, while others honed their skills for web and visual design.

Lower barriers. We wanted Music is My Life to be available to the largest number of people. So, we built a website that people could access at any time and booked the show at venues with no admission charges.

Summing Up
We began with a question of how we might disseminate design research to the community. Although time will tell, it appears that a public art exhibit such as Music is My Life may be one meaningful response. To date, Music is My Life has appeared at three no-cost venues in Seattle, including a café at a contemporary art museum (Fig. 2). Subsequently, we estimate that the physical panels have been seen in Seattle by 5,000 people with many more accessing the Music is My Life website. Knowing this, we laid plans for the show to travel to Vancouver, BC. Happily, we have recently been awarded funding from Fulbright Canada with support from the US Embassy, and a team of volunteers in Vancouver are currently securing a venue where Music is My Life will be shown concurrent with the dates of the DIS 2014 conference.

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References