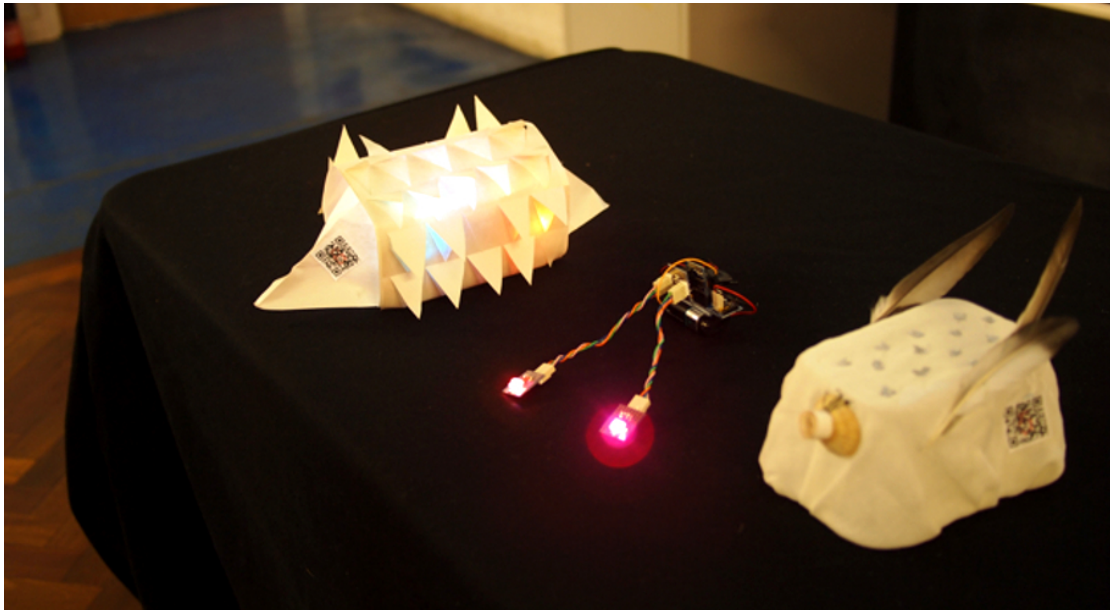


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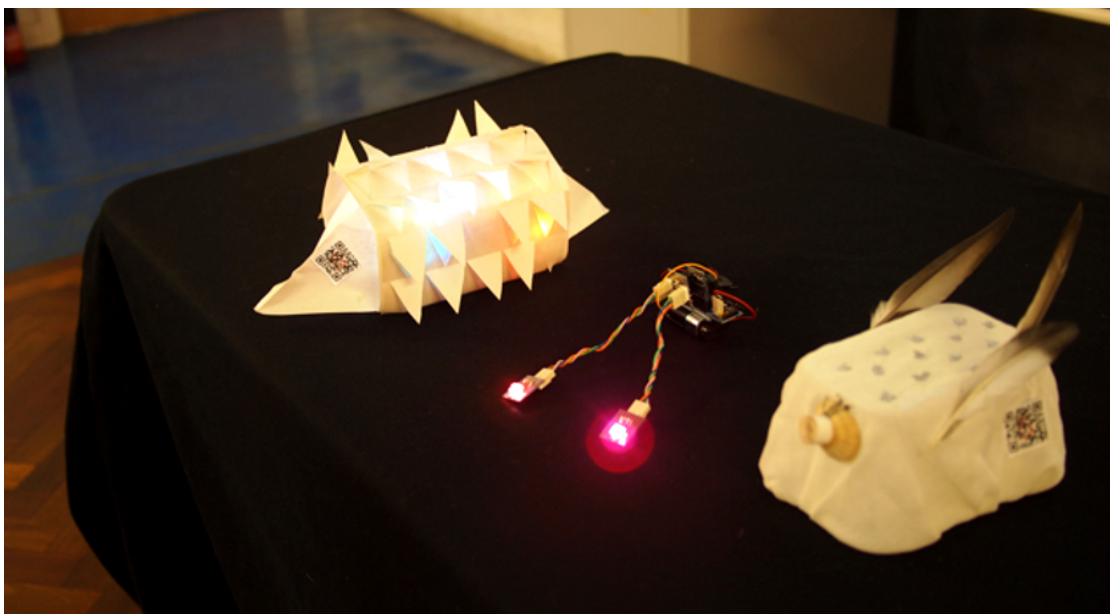
6 minutes reading time (1100 words)

Little creatures

Imperica

Friday, 29 June 2012

As the Internet becomes increasingly embodied and made physical, our relationship with it inevitably changes.



The Internet has also changed our relationship with each other, particularly as an enabler for collective endeavour. A project from Evan Raskob and Fiona French has brought all of this together, in the form of group-designed, digitally-enabled beings.

The Life Project is a collaborative workshop. Its purpose is to explore the relationship between the world around us, and "creatures" which the delegates create. These creatures are made from everyday materials – card, fabric, papier mache, glue - and contain electronic items such as LEDs and Jeenode boards. The end result is rather like a hand-made Tamagotchi. Raskob wanted to bring a number of disparate real-life concepts – evolution, husbandry, breeding, technological ubiquity – into an event which enabled the delegates to

then consider these concepts themselves, and their relationship with them. As part of Raskob's call for participants, French saw *the Life Project* as a great opportunity to get involved in some big thinking. As she says, "... it was fueled by a sense that anything could be achieved if only we could imagine it well enough."

Given the constraints of cost and time, the handmade creatures are rudimentary - which is part of their charm. Very few of us have a chance to get back to those feelings of boundless creativity which we had in our classrooms of early schooling. During the project, the balance of responsibility constantly shifted between concept artists, programmers and engineers, with the artists free to envisage mutating and evolving creatures with multiple personalities, and the latter constrained by their own awareness of what could possibly be built and programmed in a six-week period.

Such a level of openness runs through Raskob's practice, although a key learning from *The Life Project* ended up being almost a little too free. *"We conceived a very open workshop, almost harking back to Fluxus and DIY art. Anyone can take control and guide it. My role was as a facilitator, with an open group of around 20 people with backgrounds covering textiles, electronics, musicians, broadcasting, and fine art. There's a huge tradition in art - the amateursque. Going out and building what's inside your head. However, what we learned from this project is that people crave a certain structure. They lead professional lives, rather than just hanging out there and leaving themselves to fail ridiculously."*

However, the delegates were understanding about this level of unburdened freedom, become self-selecting because they had all volunteered for the workshop and knew that it was going to be collaborative. While taking someone else's work and subjectively improving it can be seen as intellectually threatening, the context of this project helped to prevent such a structural weakness.



Raskob happily admits taking cues from Fluxus' way of working, also citing [Rauschenberg](#) as a key personal influence. His admiration of Fluxus' ability to simply go out there and create is easy for all to see, calling this free-form approach "*sculpture of the mind*". Breaking away from professional expectations of form should not lessen the merit of the effort and the work; if anything, the unrestricted creativity within it helps to validate it. And this is evident here. The project is clearly – and highly – playful. French strongly argues that this is a quality that we are in danger of losing.

"Tinkering and making non-essential things is a form of constructive play for children and adults alike. As electronic artifacts have superseded mechanically operated devices such as car windows, people have lost the ability to repair or create their own things. All the functionality is hidden on a microchip, which means that broken items are either replaced or sent back to the manufacturer. This can be a source of frustration to practical people who have relevant skills or knowledge they would like to deploy. I think that this is one of the factors accounting for the rise in popularity of open source electronic development environments such as Arduino and Jeenode. They are aimed at amateur enthusiasts, as well as professionals."



Camille Baker with materials for The Life Project's creatures

Appropriation

While Raskob cites a range of artistic influences, he also cites a practical one: open source.

"It has given me a different idea of ownership, especially in art. It's idea that art should be the driving force, especially in the work. It should be the creative vision. I like to be more of the facilitator at times, where I'm not making aesthetic judgments on it, where the process of making becomes part of the work itself. It's almost pedagogic: it's education and work at the same time, almost a ritual process. It's the idea that no-one can do something on their own, which is a very deep aspect of humanity. Hopefully art can start to reflect that a bit more."

However, while this may look like a rather exciting future, there is clear disappointment in a potential remaining untapped. Raskob doesn't see a significant interest in, or understanding of, an open culture from his students. Something of a safety behaviour comes into play: it's OK to take if it's there, but it's a problem if someone's taking it from you. While Creative Commons and open source projects have collectively done a good job, according to Raskob, of laying down an intellectual bedrock, the critical point is getting these concepts out to more people. It's this challenge that Raskob is helping to overcome on his own steam, ensuring that all of his students read Lessig's [Remix](#) as part of their studies. *"Every creative professional should read it. There's no excuse not to."*

The Life Project is not necessarily idealistic, because it's about us as individuals and our relationship with technology – the "creatures". Of course, it's also about collectives – collaborative endeavour, and wider society's acceptance of such a culture and practice. The future may bring bigger projects from Raskob and French; Raskob rails against Turkle's [Alone Together](#), and the points that the book makes about the digital relationships between ourselves. It's a work which Raskob admires, but he would clearly appreciate the opportunity to develop a counterpoint. *"It makes me want to do an intellectual, artistic project - a big argument to go against it. Hopefully The Life Project is the start of that."*



Information on future courses is available at [Openlab Workshops](#).

Evan Raskob and Fiona French are presenting "The Life Project" alongside Camille Baker and Nick Rothwell at EVA London, 10/07/12 – 12/07/12. For further information and to book, visit the [EVA London](#) website.

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