

Objects in development: An analytic tool

This chart can be used to analyse objects, particularly those which combine immediate functions for the user with communication to audiences. Apply each of the lenses below to the object you want to analyse. It could also be used to design objects.

Fluidity lens

'Fluidity', described by De Laet and Mol in their paper 'The Zimbabwe Bush Pump - Mechanics of a Fluid Technology' (2000), is a measure of an object's appropriateness for use in contexts such as the developing world. It has these 3 components:

The object's boundaries - what does the object rely on to function well? Users? Other equipment and documentation? What does it have in common with other technologies? How widely, and how narrowly, might you draw its 'boundaries'?

Its working order - what compromises does this technology make in order to function well in some areas, while sacrificing in others? Does weakness in some places make for strength in others? Is it strong but brittle, or tough and flexible?

Its maker - what kind of figure is the designer, producer or promoter of this object? Do they hold tight control? Do they claim sole credit for it? Or do they acknowledge the influence of others, and learn from how the technology is used?

Interventionist art lens

Interventionist art aims to intervene materially in society, addressing social issues. This can involve produce functional objects to equip vulnerable groups, that also act as commentaries on the social issues they address.

The object's relationship to circuits - what systems in society does it take from, contribute to, or reveal? To whom does it distribute benefits?

The object as a 'critical vehicle' - for what actions does it equip the user? Does it give them a platform, or a voice? How does it carry issues to other audiences?

Critical design lens

The designers Dunne & Raby outline approaches to a 'critical design' practice, where objects and scenarios of use are designed less for their instrumental usefulness, and more to stimulate debate, and reveal our relationship with present and future technology.

The object's 'para-functions' - how could the objects functions be 'read as criticism'? What does the object enable, and how does that relate to societal norms and ethics?

The objects as 'material tale' - could this object be a prop in a story? What type of stories does it tell? How could you interpret it as a character in a narrative?

Antiprograms lens

Objects intended for use by the poor in the developing world may not be welcomed as intended - they may instead be rejected for their 'political properties', especially if they enforce such agendas as privatisation of basic services.

Programs and antiprograms - what are the political properties of the object? How might it be seen as 'prescribing' certain ethics or values in the user? If this object was a person, what would be their character?

Protest and participation - what level of representation is used to gain acceptance for this technology? Is it effective? How might it become a site of protest?