

Reflection | M1.2 Research

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I don't like research, I know that now. It is not fun, but it has to be done. This is something I needed to deal with, and there will be other things in life I don't enjoy but that have to be done.

I was looking forward to this research project with an external client, it could even be possible to have *real* customers as participants! However, I quickly discovered that my identity and vision don't quite correspond with the products and goals of the client. This made it challenging to find a research topic that aligned with my interests (that would be feasible to research), but after a long search I managed to find something at least a little interesting. After all, I do not intend to pursue a career in research, but I need something to work on to help me learn how to manage a design research process. I felt that my topic was just that.

And learning I did. Doing research is hard, all the documenting, making sure to have a good reason for anything I did, making it reproducible, finding actual knowledge I could contribute to the field, everything comes with its challenges. Doing this with a real stakeholder - a client - that can hopefully use my results for something does not make it easier. When I started, I was fairly naive about working with a client who doesn't really know what they want yet. This is a major thing I learned about working with a client: They don't magically know what they want from me. It is my job to listen to what they would like to achieve, and come up with specific things that can be researched, and form a research question around that. And since I'm a student, I also need to consider what I would like to learn and achieve, to make the project relate to my PI&V. In all honesty, I don't think it is possible to do both, unless my interests happen to closely align with the client's. In a way, I am also a stakeholder of my own project, so perhaps I should try to learn more about stakeholder management the next time I work with a client.

After this project, I can say that I have experienced how to do research and manage a research process. Starting with deciding the topic and reading literature, it was challenging to find an interesting (researchable) topic and relevant literature. Slowly, I managed to formulate a topic and early research question with a little bit of alignment with my interests, but finding relevant literature about the topic was still difficult. Eventually, I slowly discovered a more structured approach of finding literature, which was helpful. I found that I should first specify for myself what I want to find something about, then figure out what that's called in the academic vocabulary, and finally narrow down my search term gradually using "AND" and "OR" operators. Especially how to find the right words is something I underestimated before. For example, I wanted to find literature on the effects of exploring a product on the user experience. I searched for "product exploration", "exploring existing products", "explore AND 'existing product' AND experience", but kept finding sources on exploring new products to buy. Once I learned that what I'm looking for is actually called "creating new uses", things became a lot easier. Based on this experience, I have become very aware of the importance of using the right words when searching literature, and I am confident that the next time I need to search literature, it will not slow me down as much anymore.

Once I was able to find proper sources, I quickly noticed how papers define their methods based on other papers. I tried to do this as well, by making two different versions of the user guide and splitting my participant group in half. One half would receive the variant with some intervention, the other half would receive a control variant without this intervention. This way of A/B testing seemed very common in the topic I was working on, but unfortunately I had to make the last-minute decision to only test one version, since it was no longer possible to use participants provided by the client and I did not have enough time to find enough participants for the A/B testing method to yield statistically valid results. In hindsight, I am glad I took this decision and believe my research still generated useful knowledge.

Next time I work with a client, I aim to learn more about stakeholder management. The client is a stakeholder, but my development is an even more important one. This might be soon, since I have reached out to Athom, the company behind Homey (a smart home bridge connecting multiple services and focusing on intuitiveness), and we are currently in the process of seeing whether we are a good match and what kind of project I could do. Luckily, smart home is something I am passionate about, unlike user guides and curiosity.

Since I did not collaborate with the client as closely as I initially (naively) expected during this project, I did not have the chance to speak with other people in the company to learn about their roles. Part of this is also because the design team of Design2Gather is apparently located in Columbia, which I only found out later. However, I did learn some things about how (design) companies like Design2Gather operate in relation with other companies. Perhaps I can learn more about companies internally if I can work with Athom next.

Keeping a visual overview of the process was very helpful to keep things connected and on track. I will certainly keep doing this in future projects, and aim to find ways to use this in the final reporting, as well as integrating reflecting in this process and further refine the process.

Personal Development Plan

The Project

The client company Design2Gather is interested in developing a new fast methodology to quickly gain high-quality insights from their customers and the context in which their products are being used. They first aim to use a narrative survey with a large amount of customers (via a newsletter) to gain initial insights into the type of people using the product and their context. Based on that, they select participants for further more in-depth research, to dive deeper into their context. This could be in the form of a sort of diary study via whatsapp, where at a certain time of day they are asked a question, for every day for a week (for example). This could be asking about their opinion, or to send a picture of the context of how the product is being used.

They first do this with cookingtotem, in the narrative survey they want to learn what types of people use the product and for what usecase like what kind of meals (family meals, more experimental/professional), where it's stored (cabinet, drawer, on the counter, in a caravan), and various other interesting insights about the user. In this survey, people can indicate whether they are interested to participate in a follow-up study. This can be more in the form of a chatbot/diary study via a platform like whatsapp, making it very low-entry (everyone has whatsapp). This could lead to more long-term and detailed insights into the context around the product and intricacies in its usage. In the end, these insights can be used by the design team to create new products/accessories which should fit in this context.

My project is about the user guide, how it can trigger curiosity and enhance creative exploration with the product. Potentially, this can improve the user experience and provide richer insights into the experience with the product.

Goals

Complex systems are complex, also when researching them. Realistically, it is not possible to completely develop a system during the time available for this course, so the project needs to be scoped down to something very specific. Even then, it will be tough to keep a focus on the scope, progress made, and what this means. To help with this, **I want to keep a clear (potentially visible) overview for myself of the entire process, to help with planning and keeping a focus. I am pretty organised when it comes to files, I aim to learn how to become more organised regarding planning and keeping track of a design (research) process.** I want to look into using Notion for this purpose, but am also open to other options (such as Figma/Miro).
Also combine it with a reflection cycle.

Because I will be closely collaborating with a real company operating in the real world, this is a good opportunity for me to explore my potential future profession. I am planning to work in a company after completing my master's, and collaborating with a company for a project allows me to get a better understanding about how a company works. **I aim to speak with people from the company, to learn about what they do in that company. This way, I aim to gain knowledge about the different operations of a company in the real world.**

Professional Identity

In one sentence: *I am someone with a passion for anything smart, connected or clever, who likes to keep trying out new things to work on and learn from.*

I am someone with a passion for smart products, ranging from connected devices to internet-of-things to even a very cleverly designed item or service. My passion for smart (connected) products, like consumer electronics, has been a part of me for many years and resulted in closely following interesting activities in this area, in turn leading to a vast amount of knowledge and understanding about various types of products. Later, this passion expanded into the field of smart home, a rapidly developing market with lots of interesting innovations. Of course, I have and am still making my own home smarter using a wonderful open-source platform called [Home Assistant](#).

My passions partly define me as a person, but also partly define me as a designer. Of course, anything within my passion is something I'd be most interested in working on, as well as this being something I know and understand a great deal about. In design, this could be helpful with determining if something is possible to do or has already been done, as well as knowing where it would be possible to find inspiration. Other than that, I am someone who is always interested in trying new things, which is also true for designing. I do not want to do the same thing over and over again and love to explore new things, be it locations or technologies or anything else that is new to me. This means that as a designer, I would love to work on something different every time, including things out of my comfort zone (and passions) every now and then.

I do not have a specific process or approach to follow during a project. When working on a project, I will do what the project needs in order to progress. This aligns with my identity, because I do not want to have "my own" approach and repeat it every time. To me, this is nice because it allows me to try different approaches. One weakness of mine is that I find it difficult to approach people to do a user study due to my shyness, though none of that shyness is visible when I am working together with people. In a group, I am usually the one who organises our work and files. I am not always able to take a leadership role, this is especially difficult for me if the topic or process are not very familiar to me, but when I know what needs to be done I am comfortable taking the lead or responsibility. When it comes to design processes, I have a strong set of skills for prototyping and am able to work with various materials, electronics and digital tools. I see brainstorming as a joint effort in a group where every person and idea inspires new ideas, therefore I believe that even the silliest ideas are worth mentioning and exploring.

Vision

In one sentence: *I am interested in making increasingly more complex products and systems easier to understand and more intuitive to manipulate and use.*

With more and more technology entering our lives, it can be said that things are becoming more complicated. From self-service terminals in stores, to managing more and more public services online and to dealing with an increasing amount of connected products in the house - many of them with their own separate app. We've got a lot to take care of and not everyone is able to keep up with the developments. New technologies will always keep on coming and existing ones are constantly being improved to make a process just a little easier or more efficient.

Some of these complex processes we don't actually have to do ourselves. In the future, there will be a lot of automations to take care of some complex process, in any fields. More and more robots are being used in production facilities, at some point cars will be better at driving themselves than human drivers, the tax office automatically makes estimations of our income to determine any allowances or taxes, lights and devices in our house could automatically switch states depending on our presence or mood, et cetera.

I don't think these are bad things. On the contrary, since I always like being surrounded with new and modern stuff, I am excited for a future like this. But there are challenges to keep all these complex systems easy to understand and intuitive to control by users. I believe this will be a responsibility for industrial designers. In the future, I want to be surrounded with various kinds of new complex systems like these and turn this complexity into a fun and satisfying experience for users. My goal is not to aim at a specific group of users with more difficulty, but rather at the general user base. I want to make new novel products or systems easier to understand and use.

Do I have a specific field where I want to be active? No, I don't. I like to continuously keep doing different things in my work, learning new things along the way.