

The Evolution of Gift Giving

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Introduction

Marcel Mauss' famous 1924 text *Essay on the Gift* (*L'Essai sur le don*) introduced us to **why** we give and launched gift-giving as a major source of study. He taught us that Gifts are a primary source of social exchange within a society and valuable for the formation and maintenance of bonds in our social networks. Though Mauss wrote about remote tribes in Polynesia, his conclusions seem to hold for our own societies: just a quick glance at the countless gift-giving events in our consumer societies warrants this parallel. However, while Mauss built theories on gift-giving he had trouble applying them to our modern consumer societies.

In the past century, two major shifts have happened concerning the Gift that I will discuss in greater detail.

1. The rapid commercialization of our calendar.
2. Our social networks have changed from being primarily dominated by kin to being primarily made up of friends.

It is hard to believe, but the majority of the holidays we celebrate did not exist more than 150 years ago, yet we still feel bound to recognize these events by engaging in various acts of gift-giving with our family and friends. As a result, major industries have grown to address this need (*or to create it*). Concurrently, as our base level of education has increased, our social networks have moved from one primarily of kin or geographically constrained relationships to one dominated by friends (children and parents being the exception). This means we not only have more gifts to supply in a given year, but because our friendship networks are based on feelings of affection rather than feelings of obligation, it is all the

“Every exchange as it embodies some coefficient of sociability cannot be understood in its material terms apart from its social terms.” – Sahlins

more important that these gifts be meaningful. In other words - when our social networks *were* primarily kin based it was the 'act' giving that was more important than the gift itself. Whereas today, both of these aspects play an equally important role. Of course this characterization is slightly extreme, just as there can be a dimension of obligation in gift-giving in our new, urban, modern network of friends (some friends you like less than others, yet still feel obliged to participate in gift-giving as doing otherwise would be tantamount to admitting to them and others that you like them less); there is also a level of affection giving amongst kin.

The significance of these shifts has yet to be really addressed by businesses and consumers. While we are increasingly bombarded with events, goods and services that are meant to support and encourage these gift-giving activities, we have little time or information to add meaning to the experience (which for many is becoming an unattractive consuming excess).

Part I: Definition of gift

If you were to look up the definition of gift in the dictionary you would come across a description similar to the one listed in *The American Heritage Dictionary* (2003). **Gift:** something that is bestowed voluntarily and without compensation. While this is accurate, it is far from a complete picture. In fact, a dictionary in its conciseness is misleading, given the complexity of meaning in a gift.

In the Social Science literature, the definition of "gift" is problematic, and has led to prolonged debate. Introductions in many papers start with this idea - "Gift-giving is an intriguing, universal behavior that has yet to be interpreted satisfactorily by social

scientists” (Sherry, 1983, p. 157). The goal of this essay is not to attempt to give a comprehensive review of the gift-giving literature, as the field is far too extensive to be covered in the scope of this paper. A quick look at the references for any one of the papers referenced here will lead to another fifty references alone. Rather, I hope to give an understanding of the complexity within the definition of the gift and the variety of attributes that are associated with gift-giving.

As most social scientist have highlighted, defining the gift is not an easy task. One of the few things that is agreed upon is that a gift in its simplest form is generally an object that is transferred from one person (the giver) to another (the recipient), but the gift nature of the object is not an intrinsic property of this object. The nature of the object can assume many forms. In a study by Komter and Vollebergh (1997) they distinguished four kinds of gifts: presents, food (having guests for dinner), lodging (offering guests a place to stay in one’s house), and care or help (pp. 747-757). This alone shows that even within a small list the variety can be endless. Dilnot (1996) in his essay *The Gift* points out “all commodities, all products, are subject to an act of choice as to whether they may potentially function as a true gift” (p. 153). Sherry (1983) similarly explains, “virtually any resource, whether tangible or intangible, can be transformed into a gift. Objects, services, and experiences may be conferred as gifts” (p. 160). It would thus seem that a “gift” is not defined by any intrinsic property of the object.

What makes a gift?

While anything can be a gift, there does not seem to be anything inherent within an object alone that makes it specifically a gift. For example, a photograph is not a gift, but one taken by you and given to a friend instantly takes on new meaning. If the object itself does not

have any special properties then it means we have to look to the relationship of the giver and receiver to understand what *makes* a gift.

Sherry (1983) claims that, “the transformation from resource to gift occurs through the vehicles of social relationships and giving occasions” (p. 160). In Sherry’s description, the vehicles of transformation can be either a social relationship or the occasion. These vehicles are not mutually exclusive and contribute to making a gift on a variety of levels. Nevertheless, the debate in the gift-giving literature appears to hinge on which vehicle is thought to be most prominent in gift-giving.

The concern is that if a gift is overly motivated by the occasion then obligation comes to interfere with the gift. Dilnot (1996) believes that “when conducted as obligation, it (gift-giving) is profoundly depressive” (p. 144). Whereas, a gift that is motivated by the relationship is more personal and thus more “true”. The dichotomy of a true gift is explored a bit later.

There is no doubt that gift-giving can be “depressive”. The vast number of articles with titles such as *Surviving the Holidays*, *Taking the Angst out of Gift-giving* and *Holiday Gift-Giving Can Be a Dreaded Affair* during the Christmas season is a testament to this. However, obligation does not seem to be the only source of negativity in gift-giving, nor does it automatically lead to depressive behavior (remember that obligation, according to Mauss, is at the root of all gift-giving)

Why do we give?

Exchange of gifts is a very powerful way in which people establish bonds and connections. “Gifts are tangible expressions of social relationships” (Sherry, 1983, p. 158). This form of establishing, creating and maintaining of these bonds is at the center of why we give. Once these bonds are formed, we continue to use the gift to inform the status of a relationship. “The value of a gift partially reflects the weight of the relationship, and the changing nature of the relationship is partially reflected in a change in the value of the gift” (Sherry, p. 158).

Since a gift is imbedded with sentimental value through the transformation process, the “value” of a gift does not have to be understood in the strict understanding of monetary worth. A gift that is monetarily low can be considered highly valuable, just as the receiver can consider a gift that is monetarily high of low value. A questionnaire conducted revealed that some of the most memorable gifts in one’s life had some of the lowest monetary value associated.

Q. In your lifetime amongst the gifts you remember receiving what was your favorite and why?

- A teddy bear from my uncle when I was sick with appendicitis because it was the first time anyone gave me a big stuffed animal (and I was 12!) and feeling sick made me starved for affection...
- It was a mixtape/cd that a friend made for me. It was really personal and it told our story through bands we had seen and songs we knew.

Just as the occasions for giving can be diverse, so are our relationships. This diversity is what allows the value of a gift to be increased beyond a pure monetary measure. In the

process of transforming something into a gift, the giver inherently imbeds it with their idea of the receiver. "Gifts are one of the ways in which the pictures that others have of us in their minds are transmitted" (Schwartz, 1967, p. 1). The successfulness of the exchange will be reflective in how valuable the receiver perceives the gift to be. Part of the reward to this challenge is that a successful gift proves that our relationship to the giver has significance (Dilnot, 1996). Unfortunately, even in a meaningful relationship, this construct frequently results in issues between the giver and receiver if the expectations of the receiver are not met. In the same questionnaire, the gifts that were frequently disliked the most were because the receiver did not feel the gift reflected their taste. What was most striking is how such seemingly small objects took on a negative persona far greater than the objects themselves would normally elicit:

Q. Of the gifts you received in the past year (Oct 2002 – Oct 2003) what was your LEAST favorite and why?

- I got a stupid t-shirt given to me by someone who obviously knew nothing about what I really like. Considering that this person was my dad. He should have known better.
- A re-gifted lame jewelry box that had no emotional attachment or reason as to why this person (who is a friend who knows me well) would ever pick such a lame swap meet looking gift.

Why then does a giver run the risk of decreasing the value of the gift by imbedding it with his or her own identity of the receiver?

Not only does a gift embody a relationship, it also carries expectations. For example, gifts can be an effective means to facilitate role modeling by transmitting through an object a set of social values (Sherry, 1983). This is frequently observed with toys given to children that have gender expectations built in. "By the giving of different types of 'masculine' gifts, for example, the mother express her image of the child as a little soldier' or 'little chemist or engineer'" (Schwartz, 1967, p. 1). The acceptance of a gift is then also an acceptance of these encoded expectations. The gift imposes an identity upon the giver as well as the receiver. "Consequently, to accept a gift is to accept (at least in part) an identity and to reject a gift is to reject a definition of oneself" (Schwartz, p. 3). Whether a gift is accepted or rejected this identity component is a valuable aspect of the gift that contributes to an ongoing exchange between people.

Hines (2002) argues that another reason why we may give is, "being generous to others often leads us to be even more generous to ourselves" (p. XIII). This simply means that giving makes us feel good and is what Dilnot (1996) explains as the "double joy" in giving. "The gift ought to be that which, when proffered by the giver, induces a double joy – that of the receiver in the object, and that of the giver at the receiver's joy" (p. 144). Ideally, it is this double joy that drives us so hard to find the perfect gift for our friends and family. Getting it right is not only good for the bond but for both individuals- and we should want to strive harder as a result (not due to pressure that we might blunder, or misperceive the receiver's tastes).

Two worlds of gift

We now have a slightly better understanding of what makes a gift and why we give them. It should be clear that the one unifying theme in gift-giving is the encompassing idea of social exchange. Regardless of the specifics of why we give or how we give, social exchange is the root motivator. Hines (2002) explains, “using objects to make connections between people and establish one’s authority is an ancient and universal form of human behavior. Other species make limited use of tools to establish specific tasks, but only humans – so far as we can tell – place objects at the very heart of their societies” (p. 4).

In his study of the Maori people, Marcel Mauss emphasized the notion of obligation in gift-giving. He argued that the exchange of gifts creates a system of reciprocity, which is fundamental to the ordering of society. This reciprocity entails a moral obligation to return the value of the gift to the donor, either immediately or in the distant future.



Carrier (1991) defines Maussian gift exchange as “(1) the obligatory transfer of (2) inalienable objects or service between (3) related and mutually obligated transactors” (p. 122). What is understood by obligatory transfer is that transactions of buying and selling are free in that once the exchange has been completed there are no further obligations between the two parties. Whereas, Carrier further explains the Maussian view that, “parties to a gift relationship are under the obligation to repay gifts received... the obligation to give presents and the obligation to receive them” (p. 123). This is why Mary Douglas (1990) in her Foreword to *Essay on the Gift* says there are “no free gifts... the whole idea of a free gift is based on a misunderstanding... A gift that does nothing to enhance solidarity is a contradiction” (Mauss, p. 145). In this view, a gift no matter what the motivation cannot and should not be devoid of the implicit bonds of reciprocity.

This is a harsh idea for some and is one reason it is constantly at odds with the other half of the gift “world” who argue that a gift does have the ability to be pure, and free from obligation. The pure gift is characterized by the lack of expectations of reciprocity. It is argued by Dilnot (1996) that the “proper gift” and “double joy” in gift-giving can only be achieved with the removal of obligation. “When someone somewhere is formally expecting to receive a “gift” from us and we are obligated to provide one. The transformation of an act that should be based on love and free will into one based on social and economic obligation ensures that resentment dominates the relation. In this context, what should be the easiest thing – to give joy to others we know – becomes almost impossible” (p. 144).

Yet, such black and white definitions of the gift are not very useful for designers. It may be more appropriate not to define the “pure” gift as a measure free of obligation which will only clash with obligatory gift-giving that finds this inconceivable. Instead, I propose that the pure gift should be understood in regards to feelings of emotion involved in the gift-giving process. A defining factor is that the pure gift is accompanied with high levels of affection by the giver towards the receiver.

From this standpoint, both the obligatory gift and pure gift can co-exist. In reality, any gift will exist on a spectrum between obligation and pureness that is defined by the level of affection by the giver.

Part II: Gift-giving and modern shifts in society

Surprisingly, most of the gift-giving research and theories are based on the observation and understanding of pre-industrial societies and their rituals. While there are plenty of lessons to be learned from understanding exchange in these remote societies, it is no surprise that the theories have been difficult to apply. Douglas seems to understand this as well detailing that while Mauss wanted his theories to be applied to Western society the reality is more difficult. “When it comes to applying his insights to contemporary, industrial society... his own attempt to use the theory of the gift to underpin social democracy is very weak” (Mauss, 1990, p. XIX).

Recent changes in our social networks

While Mauss and the other theorists were launching their views on gift-giving, Western society was undergoing major social changes that are only apparent today. While every generation since the late 19th century has experienced rapid technological growth, longer life expectation and more liberal lifestyles, it can be argued that the current generation of 25–35 year olds has undergone the most radical changes of all, feeling significantly different from our parents and grandparents generation. They are the “never-marrieds” and the fastest growing segment categorized by the U.S. Census. Unlike previous generations who were defined by what they did (the roaring 20s, the depression 30s, the baby boomers, the hippies, the yuppies), they are a population defined by what they *are not* doing.

If they are no longer getting married and forming traditional family structures that all the gift-giving theory was based on, then what were the “fastest growing” group of people



doing with their time? This is one of the questions posed by Ethan Watters (2003) in a recent book called *Urban Tribes*. Watters coined the term “Urban Tribe” to embody his idea of novel social relations, yet the expression also seems to provide this generation with an identity that accurately reflects what it is doing. Watters defines what is an Urban Tribe best through his own description of his tribe:

“Each of these people had a relationship with me, but they all had distinct relationships with each other. There was a web of love affairs, friendships, rivalries, work partnerships, and shared homes. Connect any two of those twenty-five people and you would find a history of activities and hundreds of hours of conversation that held shared secrets, gossip, and all manner of insight about the world” (p. 24).



Watters (2003) is describing a tribe that is made up completely of “friendships” that have no blood bonds and exists solely in the Western world. For this reason the nature of the bonds are very different as Komter and Vollebergh (1997) conclude, “ties to friends are chosen, not born out of obligation or tradition, but out of mutual affection... Family ties are relatively obligatory; the other side of the coin is relatively high level of stability... The ties of friendship have a greater risk of decay” (p. 756).

One central difference between Watters (2003) tribe and the pre-industrial tribes described by Mauss is that it can sustain large geographic distance and can exist in a superfluous state as members move in and out of proximity. This seems to be the very foundation behind their formation in the first place, “devotion to blood ties didn’t seem to interest us enough to stay in our hometowns, and the idea of finding community among our neighbors was a quaint anachronism” (p. 19). Just as the sense for blood bonds has weakened, so has the importance of geographic bonds. In a historic perspective, this is not

so surprising. Until very recently, in all parts of the world, if you needed help you would have relied on your family and neighbors, which makes sense considering that your network, would have been geographically constrained.

This all points to a new type of social network that is amalgamating the best from both friend and kin based networks. This does not mean that our kin-based networks have disappeared. Quite the contrary, they still exist, the “never-marrieds” are just delaying creating their own families beyond the ones they already have. The kin networks still play an important function, it is just now as Robert Putman as cited in Watters (2003) claims, “mobility, divorce, and smaller families have reduced the relative importance of kinship ties, especially among the more educated, friendship may actually have gained importance in the modern metropolis” (p. 101).

This shift in our social networks is a recent phenomenon. Like many others, this shift violated most of our conventions for measuring social networks and thus went by virtually undetected. Going by the traditional standards would lead you to the conclusion that Putnam makes, “By virtually every conceivable measure, social capital has eroded steadily and sometimes dramatically over the past two generations” (Watters, 2003, p. 101). This is not surprising given the evidence that our grandparents belonged to almost twice as many civic associations. Without knowing what you are looking for, it is very easy to miss it.

One last aspect worth noticing in this shift is the high correlation to education. This observation is supported by Komter and Vollebergh (1997) in their study of Dutch social networks. They found that “giving mainly to extended kin is more characteristic of those with less education. Giving to friends is most common among those who can afford to

withdraw from the obligations and dependencies inherent in family relationships: those who are highly educated, nonreligious, and not (yet) obligated by marital ties” (p. 756). This correlation helps establish this shift as a concerted effort to change even if subconsciously and that as long as people continue to have access to higher education and mobility this trend will continue to grow.

The significance of friend based networks for gift-giving

While the rise of a friend-based network is competing with our traditional kin-based networks, it is not accurate to say that it has or will replace it. Instead, it is more likely that these networks will simply coexist, each providing various positive attributes. The significance for individuals is that with the freedom of choice arising from more than one option, no one is locked into any specific community. It is also important to realize though that with the different networks, comes different sets of rules for gift-giving.

The challenge that arises from this new network is that it puts a higher value on the pure gift (higher level of affection), which results in a greater demand on the giver to meet this requirement. A greater emphasis is focused on the giver reflecting the higher emotional values as well as the unique attributes of the relationship between the giver and the receiver. Since friendship networks are more fickle than kin ties, they are also less transparent or predictable. Thus, the primary functions of the gift is to inform and support the relationship. It not only states that a tie is strong enough to warrant a gift, but tells the receiver how important he is to the giver. This contrasts with kin based gift-giving where obligation is a perfectly acceptable motive. Obligatory gift-giving in this context acts as a reminder of the relationship between the giver and receiver (Nass, 2003).

This is not simply conjecture; in their study, Komter and Vollebergh (1997) showed that gifts given to extended kin are accompanied by feelings of obligation almost twice as often as to friends which are more often accompanied by feelings of affection. Thus, in order to successfully evaluate gift-giving, it must be done in the context of our social networks. Of course, there are always exceptions to the rules as neither situation is mutually exclusive. The primary exception is relations between children and parents and amongst partners. Komter's study found "as many as 71% of the presents given to partners are accompanied by feelings of affection, and a mere 1% is reported to be accompanied by feelings of obligation" (p. 753).

Gift-giving and the commercialization of holidays



In some respects, the shift in our social networks can be viewed as part of a natural progression that began with the commercialization of our calendar system a century ago. It may seem a long time, but many of our contemporaries were born before Mother's day was invented and became an American holiday in 1914 (Schmidt, 1991). While "holidays" have been known to exist for thousands of years, it is the gift-giving aspects of these rituals that is a recent advent. In Roman and Medieval times "the holiday season was not so much a religious observance or a harvest festival as it was a final splurge before the coming of lean times" (Hines, 2002, p. 172). Indeed, "magazine advertisements for contraceptives and drugs to induce miscarriage were far more numerous than those advertising gift items for Christmas," (p. 177) as late as the mid-nineteenth century.



It was the impact of the industrial revolution that set into motion a new kind of consumption, celebration and gift-giving. Industrialized societies were producing more and cheaper goods to buy and give. The key to the rise of commercial Holidays and Christmas in particular is what Hines (2002) describes as the rise of the sheltered middle class family. "In America from about 1830 onward, the workplace and the home were increasingly defined as two entirely separate spheres... Americans of the professional and business classes were having fewer children than their parents had... Families consisting of fewer, more pampered children freed more parental time for enjoyment of children, who were now viewed not as economic assets but as enrichments of life" (p. 179).

This change in the American social fabric coincided with the new establishments of malls and retail that were taking root at the end of the nineteenth century. Unlike the industrialist perspective that was focused on productivity and output, the retailers recognized that the power was in consumption. "Long thought to be impediments to industrial production, holidays were found, on the flip side, to have all kinds of possibilities when it came to consumption. Far from requiring suppression, such feast days were to be encouraged, promoted, even, if necessary, invented" (Hines, 2002, p. 179).

Whole industries began to sponsor various holidays and it was their relentless marketing of these holidays that allowed them to spread so quickly. The results are easily witnessed in the holidays celebrated today. Flowers for Mother's Day, chocolate for Valentines, fireworks for Independence Day and cards for all occasions are just a few of the industry promoted holidays. Hines (2002) illustrates just how big a role the retailers and marketers played in creating these gift-giving events. "We often assume that the commercial Christmas we know was a fall from grace from a traditional religious holiday, but in fact,



the secular and commercial holiday evolved simultaneously” (p. 179). By 1926 a “defining feature of the American calendar was its commercialization” (Schmidt, 1991, p. 887). The other Western countries built on similar economic models were not very far behind in adopting this commercialized calendar.

The commercialization of the calendar as holidays has blurred the line for the motivation of gift-giving. One-third of all retail spending takes place in a two month period between mid-November and mid-January. We are told myths in order to feel a sense of obligation. Do we give because we want to or because we have to? There are many positive attributes to the holidays and the celebrations of events help us mark the passage of time. These rituals have always been important to social bonds, but it is the commercialization and creation of the holidays in the past decade that has made this obligation at times overwhelming.



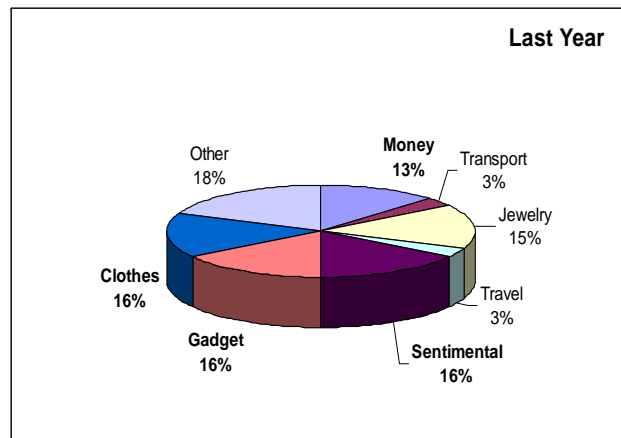
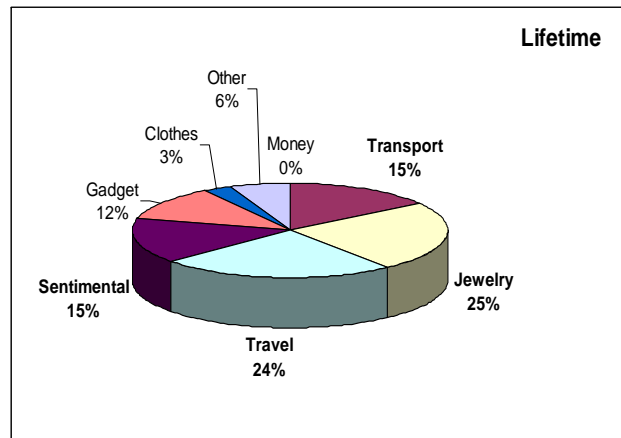
Part III: Collaboration and sustainable gift-giving

In order to truly understand gift-giving and to successfully design for it, it is essential to take into account the contextual shifts within our social networks and our consumer society. Not only is it necessary, but once understood, this framework makes clear the challenges and requirements a designer faces. We have lost the ability for sustained and positive social exchange and continuing on this course can only lead to greater stress and resentment towards gift-giving. This may be a positive aspect for all the people making their livelihood on this flaw, but it cannot be seen as an intended goal.

Even trying to address the problem as Dilnot prescribes by understanding the giver-object-receiver relationship to affect the gift-article is no longer enough. This solution neglects the holistic picture as it remains within the same context that has preoccupied theorists in the past 100 years. This does not mean that the gift-article disappears. On the contrary, it will continue to play an integral role in fulfilling obligation (especially among extended kin) and at times when the giver makes the effort to find or make that unique 'pure' gift. However, for friendship networks, new habits require different types of gifts.

In the past, the gift-giving process was highly ritualistic which provided both clear rules and expectations. As discussed earlier, the cognitive load for this type of gift-giving was extremely low. The unsatisfying side to this was that the act of gift-giving did little to inform us about the status of the relationship and strengthen it with meaningful ties. However, the rise in education and the ability to break free from our 'safety nets' has created expectations among friends who now want highly personal gifts as testimony of the status and quality of the relationship. The major downside is that the same cultural environment that has enabled this has also increased demands on our daily lives. Not only do we have less time, but also the cognitive load is much higher!

All gifts exist on a spectrum of obligation and affection. Striking this balance is the challenge I set to confront in my thesis, using the framework outlined in this paper. In providing tools that allows both givers and receivers to experiment with this spectrum, I hope to have provided the design community with concrete information that can help us design better gifts.



*Please keep in mind that this survey did not rely on a representative sample of any population, and I thus cannot generalize in any meaningful way. It was however, very useful in raising crucial questions for my research. It also suggested further directions of investigation: for example, analyzing responses based on age group.

Experiment 1: Dream Share (www.dream-share.com)

Dream Share is the first experiment, to address these new challenges present in gift-giving. Like the increasing complexity of our social systems, *Dream Share* attempts to weave a multi-faceted solution. *Dream Share* is an interactive community that leverages the communication power of the internet to enable people to share the story of their dream with their social network of family and friends.

In the questionnaire I conducted, I was primarily interested in exploring the relationship of gift and memory and explore the relationship between the type of gifts received and our memories associated with them. I was struck by the different results from two similar questions. The first question asked, "In your lifetime, amongst the gifts you remember receiving, what was your favorite and why?" While the second question narrowed the time line to just a year and asked, "Of the gifts you received in the past year (Oct 2002 – Oct 2003), what was your favorite and why?" It was my assumption that gifts that were most memorable in a life-time would be of a different nature than those viewed most favourably in a given year. The graphs to the left categorize the recipients' answers to each question:

As was predicted, the type of gifts associated to each question had very different attributes. When it came to evaluating the most memorable gift in one's life, the answers clustered around gifts that had a high experiential value such as trips, transport (i.e. first car and signifier of freedom), sentimental and jewelry. On the other hand, last year's most memorable gifts were much more mundane - clothes, gadgets and money. In other words, truly memorable gifts do not occur on a yearly basis*.



A goal of *Dream Share* is to recognize that the most meaningful gifts have high experiential value. Thus, *Dream Share* starts with a user's story about their dream. This narrative structure not only communicates effectively one's desires and goals, but is highly personal. Watters (2002) elegantly captures this idea, "To live without a story is to live without a sense of coherence and momentum. Not to have a narrative of your own is to become susceptible to those imposed upon you by forces around you" (p. 10).

Beyond the personal aspects of the story, it helps us build the narrative that Watters (2002) is talking about. In the giver-receiver relationship, the givers' imposed gift can sometimes make us question our identity. In this regard, a significant aspect of *Dream Share* is the potential to reverse the dynamic of giver driven gift. The occasion and reason to give will still be controlled by the giver, but the complex issues that Dilnot (1996) addresses in his essay on the gift would to some degree vanish. It is along this line that *Dream Share* is attempting to apply the understanding of our various social networks in gift-giving. *Dream Share* provides a highly personal story from the receiver to the giver which can reduce the cognitive load for the giver in trying to fulfil his or her obligations for gift-giving. When a giver chooses to support a dream, she is contributing to something of high emotional value to the receiver, which will further strengthen their bonds.

Dream Share accomplishes this by allowing multiple ways for a giver to support a dream. This reflects the ways in which family and friends naturally give and support each other, other than financially. Other issues the *Dream Share* concept is exploring is connecting gift-giving from what is traditionally a singular and individualist event (i.e. Birthday gifts and Christmas gifts given from one person to another) to one that connects the multiple gift-giving events into a continuous narrative and can be multi-participant.

Methods

Dream Share is a fully functioning product that has been released into the world for real user testing and evaluation. This means that a person any where in the world could access the web site, register, create and publish a dream of their own or support other dreams online. At this moment there are 31 active dreams. As such, the product was evaluated on two levels. The degree in which it functionally does what it is intended to do by users and the degree in which it accomplishes its objective to provide an alternative to gift-giving. With a working product it was easy for me to gain input from users and designers alike on the finer details of the site through conversation, public evaluation and user feedback.

Lessons Learned

1. Designing for kin and friend based networks

Like any product that is an attempt to change people's behaviour, it is hard to get it right on the first go. The first iteration of *Dream Share* only had one way to support a dream via a monetary donation. Additionally, the progress of the dream was simply tied to how much money a user raised towards the completion of their dream and this was reinforced throughout the site design. So the supporters list would not only list who gave but how much money was given in support.

This approach received many responses – while many people expressed excitement about the idea, there were many out there who felt something was not quite right with the concept and felt it to be a bit impersonal. Upon analyzing the comments and the usage of the site, I realized that the comments could be broken down into the two types of gift-giving networks that now exist (kin and friend based). For the kin based networks

(siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, etc...) *Dream Share* was seen to be a positive step forward for gift-giving. This can be understood because the kin networks still support obligatory gift-giving to a high degree – and while Uncle Gary may not always know what his nephew Mark's latest interest are, *Dream Share* allows him to feel more personally connected through Mark's dream and easily fulfil his obligatory gift-giving role in an anxiety free manner of giving something (money) he knows is important.

However, when it came to friend based networks, *Dream Share* was not supporting the ways in which this network naturally supports and gives. The friendship networks put a large emphasis on affection in gift-giving which translates into what they give. Only allowing friends to make financial contributions not only violated their rules for gift-giving but seemed to be saying, "If you can't give me money, then you're not really my friend." Not necessarily a friendly proposition.

Only supporting monetary donations had the same effect on the user as well. Not only was it difficult for them to always quantify their dream, but there was a level of discomfort in sharing their dream with their friends vs. their family. All of this supports the fact that when it came to giving, kin and friendship based networks had different rules. What was acceptable for one group may not be acceptable for the other.

All of this feedback led to the second iteration of *Dream Share* which was specifically redesigned to support these two gift-giving networks simultaneously and smoothly. As described above, that meant expanding the types of support from purely monetary to add four new types of support (see image on next page). Also where external recognition was



focused on how much one gave; it was redesigned to highlight how many types of support had been provided by a friend.

As a result of these modifications, *Dream Share* participation increased from 7 dreams to 31 dreams in a few weeks time of re-launching the idea and shows that these different gift-giving networks do exist.

However, *Dream Share* is still a long way from what I would deem a complete success. Part of the slow uptake can be attributed to a set of marketing issues. If people do not know about *Dream Share* then getting users becomes an arduous task and without the resource to market *Dream Share* it is unclear whether the current approach can reach a mass market of users. Although, some projects with large marketing reach such as Visa and Microsoft's *Ideas Happens* <<http://ideashappen.msn.com/>> suggest it is possible.

2. People are not natural story tellers

Another issue that was learned and somewhat surprised me is that for the most part people are not natural story tellers. I had to frequently work with people who were creating a dream (by asking them questions) in order to make their story rich and salient. As such some dreams have very enticing stories and others are not very interesting at all. While everyone may have a story to share – most do not or are not accustomed to verbalizing it. In response to this, I developed a dream guide of questions (see appendix) to help a user tell a better story. This is a good first step, but in a full commercial version more time would be spent in making this a more integrated process into the dream creation where a series of questions would be asked which would then generate a template for the story (see www.15secondpitch.com as a good, but simplified example).

3. Objects for now may be inseparable from gift-giving

From an ecological perspective *Dream Share's* goal of reducing the amount of unwanted and unneeded objects in gift-giving is admirable. While logically this makes a lot of sense to both givers and receivers when questioned, their practice speaks otherwise. In several incidences when a person would give to someone's dream for an event like a birthday, they would also provide a physical object (present) as well. This suggested that while the non-object form of gift-giving has its place, the removal of objects completely from gift-giving (especially for the friend based networks) is something that is not yet fully accepted.

4. It feels a bit corporate

From aesthetic feedback I received a few comments stating that *Dream Share* looked "too corporate". However, these comments were from various reviewers in the design community but never externalized by any user of the site directly. To the most part, I would agree that the aesthetic could definitely be pushed further, but feel that it was outside of the scope of the experiment and (1) I wanted something neutrally designed so that the a user's dream would be the focus regardless of what it was and (2) the site with little graphic use is optimized for speed – an necessity in web based systems. Moving away from the "corporate" feel would either have compromised these points until a more dynamic user driven design template could be developed.

Experiment 2: Gift It On (www.giftiton.com)

Gift It On is the second experiment in gift-giving. It is based on the tradition of passing gifts on through generations the way a family heirloom may be handed down. *Gift It On* seeks

to make this an everyday occurrence in gift-giving by turning everyday objects into *gifts that are to be enjoyed and then passed on*. The physical gifts can be registered online and tracked as they are passed from recipient to recipient thus creating a virtual thread that connects people through the gifts they give.

Like *Dream Share*, the aim is to reduce the amount of unwanted or wasted objects that plagues current gift-giving while simultaneously retaining the significance that can be achieved through traditional gift-giving. With *Gift It On*, the emphasis is placed on enjoying gifts versus owning them. Therefore, instead of always having to find “new” gifts to buy and give, we can constantly be in possession of gifts that were given to us and eventually need to be gifted on.

While creating a more collaborative gift-giving experience, any of the insights that lead to *Gift It On* were the result of the lessons learned from *Dream Share*. In particular, that it is hard to change gift-giving behavior when the object is completely removed from the process. Additionally, that people have trouble telling their story. Thus, *Gift It On* attempts to move beyond the inherent limitations of *Dream Share* by retaining the object as the central piece of gift but transforming its relationship to the recipient. Additionally, the natural process of passing the gift becomes the process for creating the story that emerges.

As such, the reception of *Gift It On* is met with significantly less resistance than *Dream Share* and has easily allowed a few people to start their own gift threads with little intervention or explaining on my part.

Methods

As *Dream Share*, *Gift It On* is a fully functioning product, so the methods include releasing it into the world for real user testing and evaluation. This means that a person any where in the world could access the web site, sign on and register gifts to gift on. However, it has only been released for a little over a week at the point of this writing so the feedback is limited.

Feedback

With only a few people providing feedback at this stage there are not any lessons learned to be shared. I will thus use this section to highlight areas that I hope to further improve.

1. Labels

The labeling is the main conduit between the physical gift being passed and the virtual thread that is created online which makes it a central piece of communication of the idea. Currently, the label is very basic (see image on left) and made to print off a computer. The format has yet to support the variety of objects that can be registered via *Gift It On* or more seamlessly integrate in the physical gift.

2. Clarity

There are a variety of places in the site where the clarity of what is going on or is expected of the user can be improved. These points are when a user who has been given a *Gift It On* object comes to the site and enters in the GiftID for the first time, a drop page or a short introduction is missing. Additionally, it can be clarified at the point online where the user is passing a gift on to another recipient and is unsure at which point in the process this should take place (before they give the physical gift or after).



Gift Creator: Jon Bruck
Started: London, other - 2004-05-07

1. This gift is to be enjoyed and then passed on
2. Pass it to someone who will benefit from or enjoy it
3. It should be held for no longer than 1 week(s)
4. Join the virtual thread at www.giftiton.com
5. Improvise and keep gifting!

To: _____	Date: _____
To: _____	Date: _____
To: _____	Date: _____
To: _____	Date: _____
To: _____	Date: _____
To: _____	Date: _____

Join and track this gift's story online
www.giftiton.com

GiftID: 002-0000234585

Gifts to be Enjoyed, and Shared

Looking forward

While these two experiments represent only a few of the ideas throughout the project, they are by far the most complex and insightful. Each experiment has successfully explored a variety of issues and ideas addressing the shortcomings in gift-giving. While I cannot say if either experiment has yet to reach its intended goal at this point, I am hopeful that the ideas will continue to mature and be adopted. At the very least they provide a framework for gift-giving that will be part of things to come.

Appendix

Guide for creating your dream

1. When did you first have this dream and why have you chosen this one rather than any other? Can you recall an experience at the root of this dream? Remember, the more personal detail you give, the more realistic and credible your dream will be.

2. When do you plan to accomplish this dream?

3. What are you doing specifically to accomplish this dream and what is your biggest challenge in realizing this dream?

4. How can friends/family specifically help you accomplish this dream? Can you specify intermediary stages that they could contribute to? Try to break down your dream into obtainable pieces that others can readily help you with. Try to think how people can support your dream with financial, emotional, time or other resources.

5. What will you do for the people supporting your dream? Giving people a way to be an active part of your dream is a great way to get people involved. See Kate's dream as a good example <http://www.dream-share.com/dreamScape.php?dreamId=31>

6. Write frequent updates. Dream Share has made it easy to track the progress of your dream/thoughts/ideas. This is a great way to keep people as active participants of your dream.

Survey

The following information is the complete questionnaire. It was created October 22, 2003 and completed by 56 respondents.

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