

# The unused and the unusable: repair, rejection, and obsolescence

Padma Chirumamilla

University of Michigan

School of Information

150 S. State St, Ann Arbor, MI, USA

padmachi@umich.edu

## Author Keywords

repair; planned obsolescence; garbage; disposability; banality; materiality; media

## ACM Classification Keywords

K.4.m. Computers and Society: Miscellaneous

## ABSTRACT

Thinking productively about an amorphous term such as “non-use” requires that we ground our observation, and our critical attention, upon two distinct and dialectically-related arenas: firstly, the character of the material objects that are determined to be “unusable;” and secondly, the cultural and social conditions that delineate states of “unusability”. The choice to (not) use devices of all sorts rests in a wider matrix of possibilities and futures that can be envisioned for one’s devices. What do “use” and “non-use” entail, in terms of temporal visions, in terms of the material futures (or lack thereof) that people envision in the devices and objects that constitute an everyday life? This paper introduces, and briefly contemplates, the notion of “non-use” as part of a wider matrix of ordering and understanding material objects in the constitution of the ordinary, everyday life. I then look at the place of “non-use” in my own ongoing research interests and projects.

## USE, NON-USE, AND THE WORLD OF THINGS

The anthropologist Mary Douglas notes, in thinking about cleanliness in our secular world:

If we can abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from our notion of dirt, we are left with the old definition of dirt as matter out of place. . . It implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt, then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements.[2]

At first glance, it may appear that dirt has little to do with non-use (though the plainly negative connotations associated with both categories are certainly deserving of further examination). My point in thinking about dirt and non-use together is the way they imply a larger system of relations—both to objects, and as Douglas astutely notes, to people. Non-use, as a choice—as a manner of living—does not exist (and cannot be understood) apart from the wider constellation of activity and practice that has been lumped under the term “use.”

As a category, I believe the delineation that Douglas draws attention to—particularly in the idea of dirt’s embodiment of a certain liminality of acceptability and appropriateness—is quite useful in thinking about *why* and *how* non-use needs to be understood and studied. Non-use can be seen, I contend, as a liminal state—a practice that sketches out the outer boundaries of the utility of material objects in the ongoing work of everyday life.

The use of a particular object is (perhaps obviously) determined by its perceived *usefulness*. Usefulness, on its own, does not exist as a stable category: it is, like dirt and cleanliness, more a matter of relation. How does the quality of usefulness come to inhabit an object? John Frow writes of objects that they “don’t simply occupy a realm of objecthood over against the human: they translate human interests, carry and transform desires and strategies[4].” And so in some sense, usefulness is a thing *given*, impressed into an object by social structures, perhaps, or personal *morè*. Thinking about what non-use entails, then, involves a kind of contention with the dynamism and relationality of what use itself constitutes, beyond the confines of a narrow technological lens.

It also forces us, as researchers, to think more carefully about what it means to approach the world—the world in which one, as a person, lives—as a world of things, of goods and objects.<sup>1</sup> Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood’s call in their work *The World of Goods* is well worth noting here, as illuminative of a possible avenue into thinking about consumption, use, and the liminality of non-use and non-consumption. They write:

<sup>1</sup>Jane Bennett’s work on “vibrant matter” (2008), and Bill Brown’s earlier essay (2001) on “thing theory” are both worth noting here, though I won’t dwell on these two authors in this piece. Much has been written in terms of the school of “new materialism/materiality” that is worth thinking about, as far as understanding how one might theorize the “non-user” living in a world of things.

Permission to make digital or hard copies of all or part of this work for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage and that copies bear this notice and the full citation on the first page. Copyrights for components of this work owned by others than ACM must be honored. Abstracting with credit is permitted. To copy otherwise, or republish, to post on servers or to redistribute to lists, requires prior specific permission and/or a fee. Request permissions from [permissions@acm.org](mailto:permissions@acm.org).

CHI’14, April 26–May 1, 2014, Toronto, Canada.  
Copyright © 2014 ACM ISBN/14/04...\$15.00.

DOI string from ACM form confirmation

If it is said that the essential function of language is its capacity for poetry, we shall assume that the essential function of consumption is its capacity to make sense. Forget the idea of consumer irrationality. Forget that commodities are good for eating, clothing and shelter; forget their *usefulness*[emphasis mine] and try instead the idea that commodities are good for thinking; treat them instead as a nonverbal medium for the human creative faculty.[3]

If commodities—interacting with them, *using* them, in some basic sense—are a medium for human interaction and sociality, what are we to make of the decision (and the circumstances under which such a decision comes to be) of non-use? Of retreating from the relations possible through material things? At some level, certainly at the fundamental level that Douglas and Isherwood wish for us to examine, it is impossible to disengage completely from the world of things that surrounds us.

Nevertheless, the decision, or compulsion, to not use—to engage with and exist along the limits and lines drawn by the world of things—needs to be taken seriously, if only because it illuminates the strangeness of things, and throws into sharp relief the construction of their usefulnesses, the imagination of their perceived necessity.

#### OF (NON)USERS

This move, to see both non-use and use as particular kinds of relationship—to value, to societal structure, to normalization of many kinds—forces us to come to terms with the *constructed* nature of use, and perhaps more importantly for the fields of design and HCI in particular, the figure of the user. Writing of the invention of the user in Douglas Engelbart's lab, sociologist Thierry Bardini notes:

The invention of the user as a virtuality via virtual witnessing in Engelbart's lab thus involved the development of the “script” before any “real user” validated it. It involved not real users, but the imagined users who resulted from the thought process of the designer anticipating the potential use of his or her design.[1]

Bardini's observations, while not new to the world of HCI (and certainly not news to its more critical theorists and practitioners), are worth bringing up here because they illuminate the sheer strangeness of that entity called the “user”: an entity imagined into existence, barely scratching at the “really real”, a phantasm of the designer's wished-for audience, a necessary (perhaps absolutely necessary, for can one design for *no one* and *nothing*?) supporting structure to the banal work of design.

The centrality of this strange, phantasmagorical user to the everyday workings of HCI must be engaged with, if we are to take the notion of non-use seriously. Can we imagine a “non-user” in the same virtual fashion by which the HCI “user” comes to be? Is there a “script” of non-use? One could do a bare imagining of the “non-user” as somehow the dark mirror-half of the “user”—everything that the HCI “user” cannot be imagined as, that is what the “non-user” is.

But I think this risks undermining the specificities that constitute “non-use” to begin with: those particular alignments of custom and conditions that indelibly mark the interaction one has with the things that constitute one's world and one's life in the world.

A more helpful imagination of the “non-user” would perhaps be built up from a closer examination of the practices (and perhaps, the beliefs) that the word “use” embodies; its possibilities and its limitations. While the figure of the “user” needs to be accounted for in the kind of critical HCI practice that would allow for consideration of “non-use”, I do not think that the figure of the “user” need necessarily reside in the center of the frame.

Building a binary of “user”/“non-user” risks limiting the critical work possible with the term—in thinking of “non-use”, we may have an opportunity to more closely examine, question, and reframe the commodity-person interactions and relationships that have lain at the heart of HCI practice.

#### DREAMING THE FUTURE: PLANNED OBSOLESCENCE, REPAIR, AND THE TEMPORAL POSSIBILITIES OF THINGS

My own research has primarily been concerned with the work of television and computer repair in regional cities and towns in South India, in an attempt to take seriously the centrality of failure in the material experience of media in everyday life. By this, I do not mean something unduly complicated: what one's everyday life looks like when computers reliably fail, when dust inhabits the air and inhibits the functioning of machines of all kinds; when one's language comes into aggressively nonfunctional contact with the “default” settings on mobile phones—all of these are concerned with questions of varying kinds of nonfunctionality, unusability and (sometimes) utter uselessness. As such, my interests in repair and what Steven Jackson has termed “broken-world thinking”[5] touches upon the questions of use and (non)-use in perhaps oblique, but I believe still relevant and interesting ways.

There are a number of ways to think about a life with *broken* and *nonfunctional* things—of these I find media theorist Ravi Sundaram's work[6] the most relevant to my own research. Sundaram, in writing about the “media” city of Delhi, and the “pirate modernity” that characterized its mediated life (materially and textually) after the liberalization of the Indian economy in the early 1990s, uses the questionable functioning (and reliable *non*-functioning) of illegal cable networks, pirated VCD operations, “gray-market” electronics shops, and squatter settlements to usefully theorize the particular face and flavor of the modern that the postcolonial city has come to embody into the present moment.

Pirate modernity, in Sundaram's writing, comes about after the failures of the high modernist ideals that urban planning promised to the denizens of the city. It is not quite an *alternative* modernity, as it makes none of the promises that were embodied in the cities and infrastructures of the high modernist ideal. But it is the condition of the present, and it must be reckoned with, as a practice and a way of life. The temporality of pirate modernity is that of a flexible, unpromising

present: there are very few future-oriented visions at work here.

Non-use, to me, seems to be a way to approach the question of modern subject-formation in places where failures—of a banal, omnipresent kind—characterize the tenor of everyday life. I do not see at as a condition of absolute alterity, strictly speaking—rather, “non-use” to me seems to speak much more closely to the reality of living with persistent failure and precarity.<sup>2</sup> What does it mean to envision a *future* of non-use? Is non-use temporally bound, a practice forever located in the (uncertain) present?

Temporality—its compression, its mutability—is central to the practice of planned obsolescence, a practice that Giles Slade calls “quintessentially American” in his work *Made to Break*. How designers envision the future depends very much on what is imagined to already be in the *past*, in some ways, beyond the pale of the sensibilities of “users.” Planned obsolescence feeds from, and into, those relations of things and uses, people and objects that non-use skirts and (in some sense) actively defies. Alongside repair, how might we envision non-use as a kind of response to the temporality—to the imagined future—that planned obsolescence envisions and embodies in its practice?

## REFERENCES

1. Bardini, T. *Bootstrapping: Douglas Engelbart, Coevolution and the Origins of Personal Computing*. Stanford University Press, 2008.
2. Douglas, M. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. Routledge, 1984.
3. Douglas, M., and Isherwood, B. *The World of Goods*. Basic Books, 1979.
4. Frow, J. Invidious distinction: Waste, difference, and class stuff. In *Culture and Waste: The Creation and Destruction of Value*, G. Hawkins and S. Muecke, Eds., Rowman and Littlefield (2003), 25–39.
5. Jackson, S. J. Rethinking repair. In *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality and Society*, T. Gillespie, P. J. Boczkowski, and K. A. Foot, Eds., MIT Press (2014), 221–239.
6. Sundaram, R. *Pirate modernity: Delhi's media urbanism*. Routledge, 2010.

---

<sup>2</sup>Precarity, as a way of theorizing the present, seems to have gained traction in recent years: see Judith Butler's *Precarious Life* (2006) and Lauren Berlant's recent work *Cruel Optimism* (2013).