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Pillflower World – an app in development

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Credits: Artwork & Sound Design: Lynne Heller, http://lynnehellerprojects.com/ Programming: Connor Dear, Kenneth Faria, commitlabs.github.io Music: Tony Smith, http://tonysmithguitar.com/ Contributor details Lynne Heller is a post-disciplinary artist, an educator and academic. Her interests encompass material culture, new media performative interaction, graphic novels and sculptural installation. Heller completed her MFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2004 and her Ph.D. in 2016 at University College Dublin, Ireland from the department of Gender, Culture and Identity in the School of Humanities and Arts, with a research focus on feminist practice in online culture. Her research was practice -based, with a specialty in Digital Media Arts. She is an Assistant Professor at OCAD University in the Faculty of Design and the Graduate Faculty, as well as being co-director of the Data Materialization Lab. Heller is also an adjunct faculty membe:r of SMARTlab, Ireland.

Pillflower World – an app in development

Lynne Heller, OCAD University

Abstract

This visual essay introduces and describes an IOS app that is currently in development. The app is based on an ongoing project Pillflowers (2004–present), an aesthetic response to the prevalent use of pharmaceuticals in North American society. Pills and tablets make up the petals of flowers that create 200 mandala-like designs. The essay details the five functions of the app that are either created or in process – grow, gather, play, dream and gift. An analysis and associated images for each function round out the text.

Keywords

app

pillflower

pharmaceuticals

mandalas

pattern

interaction

game

selfie

Figure 1: Pillflower wallpaper, print on paper, sizes variable, 2005. Image credit: Lynne Heller.

Project statement

Pillflower World is a multi-part project (2004–present) consisting of medicinal pills and tablets assembled into miniature flower images and sculptures.

Figure 2: Pillflower wallpaper, detail, 2005. Image credit: Lynne Heller.

These two and three dimensional pillflowers are used to decorate both functional and sculptural objects, through analogue and digital processes. The pieces that make up this ongoing series have been as diverse as a flower-filled toilet, martini glasses, wallpaper, window coverings, tiles, bedding and bouquets – a veritable Pillflower World.

Happiness can seemingly be produced through the use of modern pharmaceuticals; not only by taking them, but also by the magnetism of their colourful and candy-like appeal. The Pillflower Project emphasizes dynamic oppositions in contemporary culture: notions of happiness and sadness, self-remedy and self-sabotage, nostalgia and stark reality, intoxication and sobriety. The omni-presence of pills and drugs in our culture is augmented by practices of self-medication and pill swapping, evidence of a pill-popping society that is continually fed ubiquitous promotion and marketing advertisements that legitimate and foster our induced dependencies. In our culture, there is no space for slow enlightenment, we need revelation instantly. We search for quick-fixes that are often also accompanied by harmful effects.

The pillflower compositions accentuate the range of soft, baby-like tints that pills are typically coloured: pale pinks, blues, purples and greens. Brought together these sentimental colours signal a nostalgia for what we often refer to as a simpler time and domestic comforts. Within the context of the private sphere, they invite the viewer to think further about secrets of pill-taking that occur behind closed doors. The clean aesthetic and sterilized presentation of the Pillflower Project, alluded to by the hospital-green often used as border or background, references the site of illness as much as it does the decorative.

The Pillflower App developed for one of the exhibitions associated with *ISEA2017* in Manizales, Colombia. The work was installed on the second floor of the Centro Cultural Universitario Rogelio Salmona at the Universidad de Caldas. This version of the project is a gamification of the pillflower idea where the user can grow, gather, play with, dream with and gift the designs. The app seeks to engage the viewer with augmented reality and gameplay as a way to make the project interactive and virtual. The *ISEA2017* participants and general public were invited to experience the app on a 12.9 inch retina display iPad. The iPad screen was also mirrored on a large monitor so that observers could see the interaction that was taking place in the app. The first screen that the user is presented with is the home screen.

Figure 3: Pillflower App home screen, 2017. Image credit: Lynne Heller.

On the home screen, amid an opening animation of gently popping pillflowers, the participant can choose to explore the five functions of the app: *grow*, *gather*, *play*, *dream* or *gift*. There is also an option to view the app credits and a project description. The words of the various

functions are deliberately ambiguous. Do you know exactly what it means to ‘dream’ on a Pillflower App? The app plays between the functionality of a typical app, the open-ended nature of an art piece and the ‘serious play’ favoured in the gaming world.

Often the participants would choose to click on the *grow* function to start, which allows the user to challenge themselves to recreate pillflower designs in a type of jigsaw puzzle experience. The user drags individual pills onto the silhouette of an entire pillflower in the hopes of recreating the rings that make up the designs. Once the user places an individual pill onto the proper place on the silhouette than the ring of pills appears in a cascading, domino-like animation.

Figure 4: Pillflower App installation view, 2017. Image credit: Caitilin de Berigny.

The initial puzzle is a training mechanism, the built-in means of teaching the user how to play the game. The most successful apps use design, visuals and consistency rather than words and written instruction in order to tutor the participant. The first puzzle had screened-back images placed on the spots where the user needed to drag the individual pill in order to set off the cascade animation effect. This proved quite easy for most people and elicited a bit of thrill when a simple drag-drop action set off a beautiful animation of pills filling in the ring.

The subsequent puzzles in the ‘grow’ section build in levels of difficulty with challenges such as, no indication of where the pill should be dropped to create the animation effect and/or additional individual pills that do not belong in that particular pillflower design sprinkled in as red herrings.

The next function – *gather* was disabled in the *ISEA2017* exhibition due to Internet connectivity inconsistencies. However, the idea of this task is to appeal to the collecting instinct that is so prevalent in humans, in order to encourage a sustained engagement with the app.

Figure 5: Pillflower App screen shot, 2017. Image credit: Lynne Heller.

Gather allows the user to collect all 200 plus pillflowers that have been designed so far. The sheer number of pharmaceuticals available, particularly in the North American market, is remarkable. There is an endless supply of shapes, colours and sizes with which to design. Collecting the pillflowers reinforces the fundamental impulse behind the entire project – look at how many ways we can manipulate our chemistry!

There are a few ways to collect the pillflowers. The first is to use points accumulated through the successful completion of puzzles from the *grow* function to trade for pillflowers. The more puzzles solved the more you can collect. The second method is to return to the app on an ongoing basis and open the *gather* function. This repeated action triggers a gradual fade-in of a design to augment your collection. Both of these methods, points and triggers, generate random pillflowers to appear that the user does not specifically choose. However, the third way that you can *gather* is to donate to charity in order to, in effect, buy a design, a twist on the typical way that apps generate income in what is usually referred to as in-app purchasing. This way of collecting has two advantages. One, you can satisfy your accumulating impulse on the spot—immediate gratification; and two, you can choose the pillflower you wish to 'purchase' to augment your collection.

The *play* option allows users to interact with a collection of individual pills and pillflower rings, rearranging them, expanding and contracting the images as well as multiplying them. The user can also to choose to submit their design to be 'curated' into the larger pillflower collection.

Figure 6: Pillflower App screen shot, 2017. Image credit: Lynne Heller.

Play is the option that has the most flexibility and freedom within the app. It allows for people to use pharmaceuticals, pills, tablets, that they might even take themselves, to try their hand at designing the pillflowers. The possibility that their design might become an integral part of the app is further incentive to engage with an app, a design process and a community.

The dream function is a mechanism for relaxation in which a meditative Mandela of gently changing pillflowers loops along with music of the user's choosing. The animation works through the whole 200 plus collection and allows for a passive experience of colour, shape, beauty and mesmerizing variety.

Figure 7: Pillflower App screen shot, 2017. Image credit: Lynne Heller.

Though superficially a sight-only engagement, the works with music and rhythm to induce a dream-like state in the viewer. No effort is involved in watching the endless array gently pulse, cross-fade and rotate. When in need, just turn on the *dream* function and drift away.

Finally, the *gift* function allows users to superimpose their collection of pillflowers on real world selfies and images, and then 'gift' them, which consisted of emailing the image to others or even themselves. This is, without a doubt, the most popular function of the five. The delight and fun are evident in the many captured selfies taken over the course of a few days at the *ISEA2017* exhibition. Groups formed to work together, people laughed and signalled for others to join them, couples posed and vogued, participants pondered and experimented. How much has this to do with the fascination with self-portrait? How much to do with the desire to send oneself 'out into the world'? Hard to say but it was with deep concentration, joy and sociality that *gift* was well employed.

Figure 8: Pillflower App screen shot, 2017. Image credit: Various participants.

Figure 9: Pillflower App screen shot, 2017. Image credit: Various participants.

Figure 10: Pillflower App screen shot, 2017. Image credit: Various participants.

Figure 11: Pillflower App screen shot, 2017. Image credit: Various participants.

Figure 12: Pillflower App screen shot, 2017. Image credit: Various participants.

Figure 13: Pillflower App screen shot, 2017. Image credit: Various participants.

The Pillflower App is simple to use with humble aspirations. The idea is to take an ongoing project and bring it into an augmented reality. Puzzling, collecting, designing, drifting and making the self 'goofy' are its lofty ideals. The user is not overtly challenged but gradual understanding the complexity of the project is effected through the innocuous mechanisms of play and gaming.

Figure 14: Pillflower App installation view, 2017. Image credit: Caitilin de Berigny.

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