Chapter 2: Designing Expressive Toys

Here was another great chapter from Ge. In this chapter I recognized a couple of themes and through points that stood out to me: Firstly, the advancement of technology and its influence on our artful design thinking, and secondly, the consideration of the emotional state we wish to put our users in as a result of our designs (calm!).

On the first point, Ge took us through the historical development of the smartphone, which then led us into the numerous apps Ge has created. I understood the purpose of this historical overview to be an example of how things that were once science fiction became reality with iterative design, and how good, near ubiquitous design can change the fabric of society as we know it. However, when this historical overview was introduced, I first thought it would be a history of the development of music in the last century with the explosion of digital technologies. I wanted to follow this historical approach on this angle as well, as I believe that there were other emergences of almost ubiquitous designs within the music we listen to today. As an electric guitar enthusiast in 2024, I think pretty often about the role of my instrument in popular music, and how it has shifted in the last half-century. The electric guitar itself is an example of an artful design, most notably looking back to Leo Fender's original Telecasters and Stratocasters, which remain near ubiquitous designs that appear in most people's minds when they picture an electric guitar. However, the position of this design and of the instrument has shifted notably in the past twenty or so years. The electric guitar, once an innovative ubiquitous artful design, found itself receding from the spotlight in favor of drum machines, synthesizers, and other new innovations. I have always been fascinated by this transition that popular music made, from bass guitar to 808, from rock n roll to hip hop. The lesson here is that perhaps the only thing that can replace a ubiquitous artful design is another, better (or just perhaps more fitting for that time) ubiquitous artful design. We have not talked about the exit and lifespan of our designs and I think this conversation is very interesting.

On the second point, I was very impressed with Ge's Principle 2.7: Design to Lower Inhibition. I couldn't agree more that good designs have the power to change the way that we act and can give us opportunities to do things we usually wouldn't do. It is a great principle, but my mind almost immediately went to the risks of lowering inhibition. Much like alcohol, which can enable you to do things you will regret, designs that we see today in the social media realm lower your inhibitions in dangerous ways. I think of the invention of the infinite scroll, which seems to hijack your attention span, and I think of the engagement-motivated recommendation systems prevalent on YouTube and Facebook, which can lead vulnerable users down extreme politics, misinformation, and echo chambers. We are all also familiar with the fact that the internet itself as a design, with its proposed anonymity and lack of consequences for your actions online, greatly reduces many users' inhibitions for cruelty and immoral behavior. I think of all the hate comments, threats, racism, and general bigotry that due to a lowered inhibition thanks to online

spaces, seems to be more prevalent in our daily lives. Perhaps this is the difference between an artful design and simply a profitable design. Artful designs are meant to design for the human, not to take advantage of the user.