

## Digital art forms as experience design for international development?

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# Digital art as experience design for international development?

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## Abstract

*This paper discusses the use of digital art in international development, the thesis being that digital art can be used as kind of experience design. First some lesson learnt from a development project in Ghana is outlined and a general model for experience design is presented. From this a schema for working with meaningful experience design is suggested. Secondly, this is related to the use of digital art, which is described as observational tool in a global polycentric hypercomplex society. As such it would seem well suited for developmental and didactic purposes. The paper ends with the conclusion that using digital art as experience design for international development demands a concurrent and mature focus on meaning and intentionality, combined with a critical stance against idealism and a deep sense of ethics.*

*The discussion draws on theories of systemic art, emergence, experience economy, experience design, communication for development and business ethics.*

*Keywords: digital art, experience design, experience economy, international development, values, norms, meaning, intentionality, ethics.*

## Preface

The inspiration for this paper comes from a picture on the web. It is taken in Luanda, the capital of Angola, in 2007, when people from the FILE-organization organized an exhibition of digital art works from the FILE-festivals. I liked the situation and the expression in the eyes of the audience. Angola is, as far as I know, a developing country with a history of devastating civil wars. It is not easy to expect digital art on display in such a context. I can only imagine the troubles that some people have gone through to make this event happen.



Fig. 1: Digital art work from the FILE-festival experienced by visitors at an exhibition in Luanda, Angola 2007. Picture downloaded from the FILE website: [www.file.br](http://www.file.br)

## **Introduction**

The combination of digital art, experience design/economy and international development might seem as a contradiction in terms. Shouldn't we first have development and then experiences? Isn't immoral to discuss experience and, how to design them, when we deal with people with more urgent needs to be met, for example nutrition, medical care, schooling and fundamental human rights? Such assertions however, I will argue, rely on a very rigid representation of experiences which presumably takes its point of departure in the work of American market economists Josef Pine & James Gilmore (1999). Pine & Gilmore brought attention to an important part of how economic mechanisms work in modern market driven societies but their popular and easy to read models comes with a prize: They assumed a basic but newer explicated micro economical model of the individual, and they assume a basic - though to some degree explicated - macro economical model of societal development.

As to the first, it would seem that the model owes some to a behaviorist tradition with people seeking experiences first when other needs have been fulfilled. But as other researchers have made clear such models does not include recent neurobiological research on emotions and feelings (Damasio 2003) or newer social constructionist modeling of experience and meaning (e.g. Jantzen & Vetner 2007, Hansen 2010). As to the second, macro scale models like Pine and Gilmore's, that depicts economic development in terms of "fazes", replacing each other through history - e.g. agrarian, industrial, service and now experience economy – does not include research on globalization and international development. Without such inclusion it becomes difficult to recognize experience economy facets of other societies with other histories, than what is experienced in the western hemisphere. In short: Pine and Gilmore's models seem based on a very limited foundation of a traditional American marketing research approach, and this approach excludes a lot of people from the experience economy. This does not imply, in my point of view, that we do not live in an experience society, only that experience economy seem to be a much broader phenomenon than the work of Pine and Gilmore suggests. In my opinion we have not yet truly understood what a global experience economy really *is*. Recently this has been underlined by the combination of business ethics with the concept of a post traditional modern experience society (Rendtorff 2007). It is exactly because we live in such a modern society that new modeling of experience economic behavior becomes relevant. Hence, it becomes likely that all modern societies to some extend share some of the features of a experience society, and that societies witch are only partially modernized - so called developing countries - might be described with these terms in a productive way also. It was with this thesis I studied and participated in a development project in Ghana in 2007. The project was aimed at developing a part of the Ghanian experience economy and the tool was communication and marketing through experience design. In the first part of this paper I will outline the result from this study. In the second part I will relate the lessons learnt to the future use of digital art in similar contexts. Digital art seems to be well suited for this purpose, since it often is configured in a polycentric form. I will return to this point shortly.

## **Experience economy and experience design in a development project: some lessons learnt.**

In 2007 I did a study of the project Digidi Ghana. Digidi Ghana was funded by The Danish International Development Assistance, Danida, and was supported by the World Bank in

Ghana (see also [www.digidi.org](http://www.digidi.org)). Digidi Ghana was an attempt to develop a fair trade, digital distribution concept on the internet, through which Ghanaian musicians could sell their music internationally. In Ghana, as in other developing countries<sup>3</sup>, mass production and global distribution of digital cultural products seems an often overwhelmingly complex and expensive affair which requires substantial investment beforehand. By instead distributing these products through the Internet, a Ghanaian musician would receive up to 85 % of the income from the sale, since the company is conceived as a cooperative owned by the musicians themselves and thus have no unnecessary intermediate stages between them and the consumer. The task was hence, to establish an “upload center” - a small office with a couple of large PCs - and to sign the musicians in as shareholders in the cooperative. Looking for a way to facilitate this we ended up with the complex experience design of a combined union meeting, a free barbecue and a jam session style pool party.



Fig 2: Digidi Ghana facilitated a union meeting in a hotel context in Accra.



Fig 3: Outside the hotel Digidi Ghana presented itself face to face in a white party tent. The equipment was displayed and people could sign up and pay for a share in the cooperative.



Fig 4: Negotiations was performed in the shadow of the tent, while musicians was getting free drinks from the bar and free food from the buffet.



Fig. 5: After the meeting and the free lunch the barbecue continued into the evening as an open jam session.

This design solution combines a lot of interests: In Ghana there is an ongoing conflict about the intellectual property rights of musicians (Guldborg-Andersen 2007). The government has, to prevent foreign exploitation, sought to nationalize ethnic music and has an office for the approval of music with ethnic content, through which musicians have to pay a special tax for the use of cultural material which is considered "ethnic". This is, of course, considered enormously unfair by the musicians, who have problems enough to face when making their music and making a living while doing so. The musicians are normally organized in one large union but this union is broadly mistrusted and thought to be in some collaboration with the government agency in question. To make a new union then, is conceived a radical step that is bound to cause a reaction either from the government or from the union. This was at least the feeling among the musicians, but in fact no reaction appeared. However, the expectation of a conflict lead local journalist to write about the event and the largest radio station made a long thematic section about it, with interviews with leading musicians fighting for their rights. Digidi rented a seminar room and a pool area in an old hotel near the embassy quarters and offered a full free meal, and a pool party, and received in return publicity, goodwill and a chance to present itself face to face to the target group.

An important part of this design is motivation. From a traditional utilitarian perspective motivations are hedonistic endeavors and part of a rational choice situation. So how do we create and motivation for social change? It is perhaps one of the most significant

contributions of experience economy that it brings attention to the fact that the experience associated to the choice on the market place is an integral part of the choice (Jantzen 2007). This opens up for a better focus on feelings and meaning in the interpretation of market phenomena<sup>8</sup>. From a design point of view the media of feeling can be said to be emotions and the form they take a value. This should not, it must be emphasized, lead anyone to an excessive use of emotional triggers, a misconception often appearing in discourse about the design of experiences, but, in some contrast to this, to the use of meaning. The meaning of the event was hence, to create a feeling of solidarity among the musicians. By participating in communicating this meaning Digidi appeared trust worthy. This feeling of solidarity and trust created a positive attitude toward the cooperative motivating people to sign up and actually do it. The use of meaning has been referred to as "meaning management." (Qvortrup & Qvortrup 2005). To manage with meaning signify that values are a crucial design goal. Meaning can be exchanged to values that can be exchanged to artifacts (Schein 1994, p. 24-34). When this is established the process can run in the other direction also. Values are fundamental assumptions and the artifact are representational media that people use when they create meaning. Meaning is however, only possible with intentions. The form of this can be said to be the distinction between possible meaning and realized meaning (Kneer & Nassehi 1997). But since meaning in this approach is seen basically as a social process (Mead 1937, Stacey 2010), meaning also has the form of a rule (Baecker 1999). The rule tells people what the meaning is. In this case the rules could be summed up in 3: "Digidi sells your music on the net", "Everybody can participate", and "The participants own Digidi". These 3 simple rules answer the kinds of fundamental questions that we recognize from the school yard of our childhoods: what is the game about? (Selling music on the net), what does one have to do? (Become a member), who's in charge (you are). Such simple design form are easy to learn and easy to account for. They have emerged in the process of the project tested against the parameters of motivation and accountability.

Having uncovered the rules it then becomes possible to ask for values. Values are meta rules; they tell us how to play the game. With these values we can see the outline of a model for experience design:

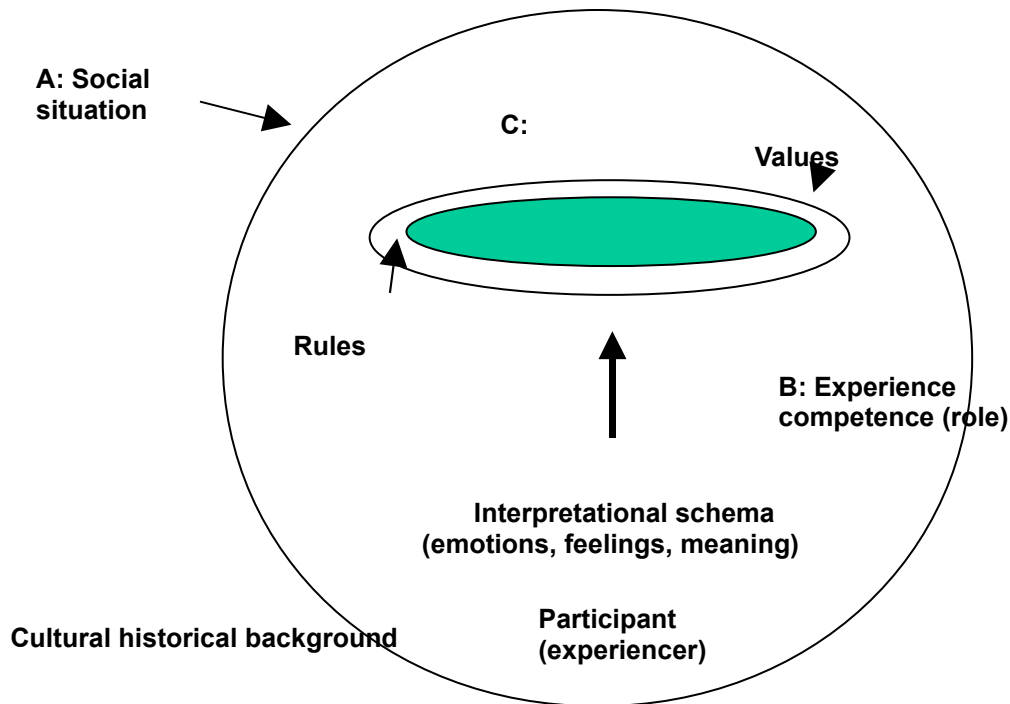


Fig. 6: Experience design model

The design task is, with this model, to seek a balance between three levels: A: a social situation within a cultural historical background, B: embodied in this form a socially represented competence to facilitate the experience (e.i. represented in the form of a role: a host, tutor, guide, instructor etc.), and C: a description of the design in the form of rules and values.

Though the experience design of Digidi Ghana, using this model, seemed well conceived, this model can be used to illuminate some problematic features also. Some of the local musicians did, for example, not understand the meaning of buying a share in the cooperative. They believed that they had bought a service, the selling of their music on the net, and they became very disappointed, when that did not happen (it is not so easy to sell traditional Ghanaian music on iTunes). They had paid, what amounted to, a days salary for a share (10 \$), but did not receive anything in return. In fact some became so disappointed that they afterwards sued Digidi. They had, in short, a bad experience. Such events tell us that we have to pay close attention to one particular part of the design, e.g. the values. Referring to the theories of communication as complex systems of relating developed by Ralph Stacey (e.i. Stacey 2010), we can define values as individually felt voluntary compulsions to choose one desire, action or norm over the other (Stacey & Griffin 2005, p. 6). But values are closely related to the formation of norms. Norms are, in this account, defined as evaluative criteria taking the form of obligatory restrictions which have emerged as generalizations and become habitual in a history of social interaction (ibid). Norms are, then, about moral, values arise in social processes of self-formation. Thus, even though people did choose to sign up from a situational felt value of solidarity, it did not mean that habitual norms had changed. Applying a Danish model for a cooperative thus would seem misconceived; It implied a certain kind of solidarity in another (Danish) cultural historical



context. The problem here, it should be stressed, is not about corporate social responsibility (CSR) a popular research area (for an overview of CSR research see Djursø & Neergaard 2006). To apply a secondary design frame of CSR would not be very helpful as it would, presumably, just introduce more implicit foreign norms in the design process. Instead I will suggest placing more weight on, what might be termed, meaningful experience design, depicting a reflexive process between norms and feelings that continuously produces and reproduces values. This point to a more pragmatic use of business ethics (Rendtorff 2007), and to, I suggest, a possible future discussion of a general experience ethics. Following this suggestion the design task can be organized in a schema (see also Hansen 2010):

<b>Focus</b>	<b>Media</b>	<b>Form</b>	<b>Parameter</b>
Intentions	Meaning	Difference	Motivation
Motives	Attitude	Rule	Accountability
Feelings	Emotion	Value	Appropriation
Ethics	Interaction	Experience	Balance

Fig. 7: Experience design schema involving meaning and ethics.

The task of designing experiences in a meaningful way can, it would seem, be handled with these few elements. The schema depicts a design process with a design start, the intention, and a design goal, the experience. The intention comes with certain normative meaning, which a focus on motives may reveal. The process leads to the formation of rules tested for their accountability in the ecology. The media for this is attitudes since attitudes come with a configuration to act in certain ways, in certain directions, it is hence, closely connected to the parameter of motivation without which there would be no acting out (the figuration). In the process certain emotions are evoked in the participants. These emotions lead through the inner dialectics of the self to the formation of values that can be shared. In the flow of interactions then, rules and values emerge tested by the parameters of accountability and appropriation by real people in actual situations. These two parameters are however, themselves tested by the parameter of motivation and balance. Without motivation there would be no process to begin with and without a balance of media and form (e.g. interactions in relation to a goal) it would quickly come to an end. To manage this testing - which all takes place in the ongoing process of interactions – I suggest invoking a secondary evaluation schema of intention, motives, feelings and ethics. Such a schema of focus allows relevant corrective design questions to be asked: is the creation of meaning motivating enough, are the rules accountable enough, are the values appropriable enough, and last, are the construction of the social reality through interactions relying enough on a balance of reciprocal perspectives, e.g. on a balance of intentions, motives and feelings, i.e. on ethics. This expresses an ethical principle of clearing intention, motives and attitudes concurrently as much as possible. This is much in line with G. H. Mead's originally remarks on ethics: it is possible to get an overview of the



values in play of the given case and to make these values the fundament of rational actions. This is what we can ask of everybody, and more cannot be demanded (Mead 2005 (1937), p. 409, my translation from the Danish edition).

This schema and the experience design model behind it, is, I will argue, highly relevant when digital art is taken into consideration as a new kind of experience design in a development context. Digital art is, in fact, as I will show, very well suited for this purpose.

### **Digital art**

Digital art seems notoriously difficult to define. Today it can seem like all art in some way is digital. How do we make a distinction between this kind of art and other kinds? This is a fundamental question but I will, however not concentrate on this here, since it brings to much focus on the artistic material. Indeed, following Danish sociologist Lars Qvortrup, digital art should rather be conceived as a way to communicate new social conditions using new observation tools, rather than being understood as a result of new digital technologies (Qvortrup 1998 and 2001). Digital art, according to Qvortrup, can be said to represent a new modern polycentric art form (Qvortrup 2001), following the anthropocentric and deocentric art forms of earlier times. In prerenaissance, deocentric art God is the universal format for observation and communication. The ideal perspective is divine, and artistic beauty is about recreating the beauty of God and his divine creatures. Modern ideals of originality and mimesis are absent. In newer anthropocentric art form, emerging in the renaissance, man becomes the universal, modern format for observation and communication. We find the ideal of the linear perspective, beauty and the sublime are categories related to a transcendental subject, and mimesis and the desire of mimesis appear. Finally, in the newest, polycentric art form, it is accepted that observations of the world can newer be communicated fully. The perspective is hyper real, and the artistic ideal is to overcome the border between consciousness and communication. Art becomes a non-mimetic, self-referential system based on differences. And the artist and the spectator become co creators in a hyper complex art system.

In this line of thought digital art is not a product of society, neither is it a new kind of art. It is a tool for observation. In system theory, which is the background for Lars Qvortrup, the society is functionally differentiated, thus the art world comprise a system that observe the other systems (for example the financial system, the legal system or the sports system) (Luhmann 1999, 2000). Digital art then, is the ear or the eye of the art system. It selects phenomena and gives them new meaning within the system. Digital art is especially well suited to express the new polycentric conditions of the postmodern society. It can change the variables in its programming, it can be collective and participatory, it can make use of data from sensors and databases all over the planet. And it always points to the polycentric conditions of our current world.

### **Evaluation**

Described like this, digital art certainly becomes a legitimate tool for international development. To experience it would seem to learn about the fundamentals of the global hyper complex society. Thus taking digital art into a developing context becomes a didactic endeavor. This becomes the implicit motive. With such a motive a need for evaluation will eventually emerge. We can describe such an experience design with the model and the schema outlined above. This might be used as an evaluation effort. But this is a

problematic ambition. How do we evaluate digital art? And how do we evaluate it when it is used as an experience design? Lars Qvortrup suggests evaluating digital art according to interference patterns. By this he means that a digital work of art creates interference between the observation processes involved. An artist who's work Qvortrup uses to illustrate this, is Maurice Benayoun, most significant perhaps, in the projects "The Tunnel Under the Atlantic" where two ends of a imaginary tunnel is "connected" through the interference of two interactive, digital art systems on each side of the Atlantic (one in Paris and one in Toronto, <http://www.benayoun.com/Tunnegb2.htm>).

Interference however, is a contested issue theoretically. It is defined differently in areas such as acoustics, musicology or quantum mechanics (Hansen 2010). Applying the term to digital art runs the danger of an unproductive normativity, where interference becomes an implicit idealistic norm. In short: the aesthetics of interference looks much like a paradoxical and hidden mimetic ambition and something that we should in fact try to avoid. Thus it would seem that aesthetics of polycentric art forms is still missing. In my view we could, in developing such an aesthetics, look, for example, at the relationship between aesthetics and ethics and elaborate on the interplay of configuration and figuration in a poststructuralist account with a focus on social meaning (see later).

As to the evaluation of an experience design people experiences are notoriously difficult to evaluate. This is so, because we are dealing with both highly individual and highly social phenomenon. Human experience is a very complex phenomenon. It can not be managed directly, only managed for. Evaluation then becomes something else. It is not a general strategic instrument for the managing of human experiences but an embedded part of the human relating around the design. It is the choices that we make in the ongoing flow of events leading to the experience. In this case hence, evaluation is to be understood as parts of the ongoing functioning of the way the experience design evolves. Not an activity in the end.

Evaluation might however, be possible as a secondary process where values and parameters are changed or adjusted. This points to the application of a value based experience design. To e-evaluate is after all to compare with values. In the development of the design then, there is a constant use of values and a constant production and reproduction of them. They are fundamentally generic and process phenomena and seem to be generated, adapted and stabilized concurrently in a complex environment. But the social meaning that appears in the interaction is not, it must be emphasized, neo-Darwinistically, just made from the combination of elements in a generative process (Cicourel 1973, Manovitch 2001), nor are they mere indexical forms to be described only in post structural intersubjective narratives (White 2008). The values are themselves generated by meaning. They are reified representational and symbolic media, 'living' in the flow of communication. (Dawkins 1986, Oyama 2000). The meaning can however, be reified in all kinds of physical representational media, also computational (Hutchins 1995, p. 280-285). It is often these kinds of representations that are referred to when people talk about complex processes (for example around digital art). It is, easy to talk about objects, difficult to talk about processes.

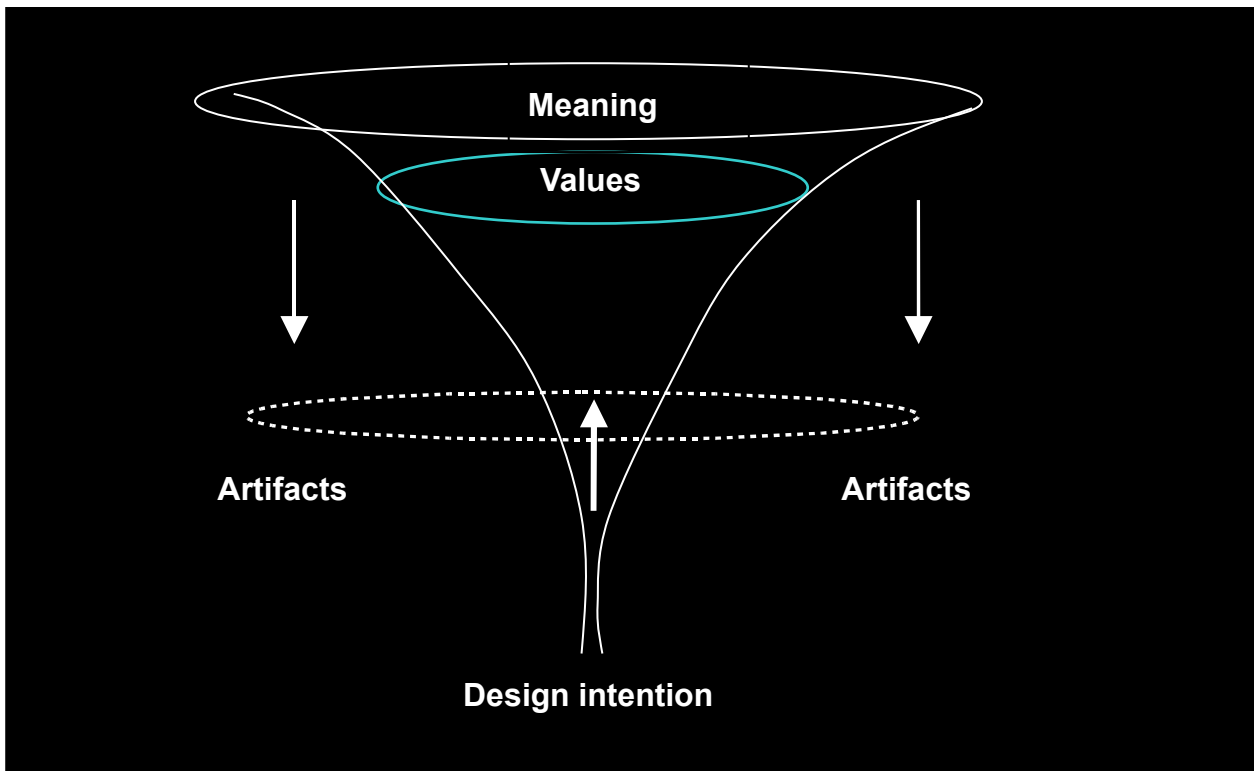


Fig. 8: Experience design as a process.

Thus, though we cannot directly evaluate the effect of using digital art as experience design for international development, it is possible to discuss the values that are part of the process. Further: The sum of micro interactions produces global patterns over time. As stated these patterns cannot be evaluated in a meaningful way. However they can be characterized. To do so Ralph Stacey uses the term coherence. Coherence is the tendency to form a coherent meaning. Thus we are able to evaluate after all: we can always ask if what's going on is socially meaningful.

So: in some contrast to common conceptions of new art, meaning becomes crucial. In fact: to design experiences using digital art in a development context require us to continuously ask one question: what is the meaning of this design?

## Conclusion

In projects of international development it is often an implicit goal to develop sustainable structures. The rationale being, that this will continue to produce the effect that was the goal of the original design i.e. development. It follows from the theoretical approach discussed here that such idealistic principles are mere representational media and, at best, serves as a motivating factor in the design process. However, the energy and effort is not wasted. If the experience keeps being created it will over time produce certain changes in values, attitudes and norms.

Further, since meaning and values and therefore intentionality are so crucial in the evaluation of experience designs used with this aim, and since digital art is a polycentric art form characterized by its reference to the fundamental phenomenological problem of

transcendental intersubjectivity (Husserl 1973, Schutz 1957), it would seem that this situation carries some inherent challenges.

The idealistic intentionality often implied in works of international development might blur the polycentric and collective meaning of hypercomplex digital art. Thus in a paradoxical move hypercomplex art might suddenly become modern. It does as such; no more refer to polyoptical ways of observation but to a certain idealistic point of view. This would correspond to a fixed answer to the question of meaning. Such an answer would surely destroy the experience design by phenomenologically closing the meaning making process.

The same goes for artistic intentionality in a traditional modern form. Again such an idealistic anthropocentric intentionality could easily destroy the experience design, for example by insisting on the meaninglessness of modern art. Basically all idealistic intentionality has to be put in bracket. This is the basic requirement of using digital art an experience design for international development.

Thus it would seem that the use of digital art like this demands some work from an experience designer, who carefully has to develop the design in close communication with all shareholders, here understood as anyone with a share in the creation of the meaning of the design. To balance intentions like these in the design process within a developing country is, indeed, a difficult task for any designer. It demands a strong sense of the motives, norms, values and feelings involved. As such it does, fundamentally, calls for a deep sense of ethics.

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