Wedding Bidder: final report

Cultural Probing

Summary

The research for this project was done mainly using the "Cultural Probing" method, which consisted of creating a set of different kinds of questions and tasks and sending them "home", to be completed by volunteers living in the analyzed culture (to Romania, in this case).

The probe consisted of a word game, a set of questions, a challenge, and a photo task. Since the theme we chose for the whole exhibition was *social code*s, the probes were meant to discover any "unspoken rules" within the culture – traditions or ways of life that for those inside of the culture seem common-sense, while for outsiders may seem odd or exotic.

For this purpose, I decided to slightly adjust the probe – in the word game, instead of asking people to rate the importance of words like *birth*, *death*, *marriage*, *money* to their life, I asked them to write whichever words or phrases came to mind when they thought of those words, in the context of "unspoken Romanian rules".

For Romania, there were 4 people who accepted to take the probes. Only 3 of them completed the photo task, and none of them completed the challenge, although 2 told about a time when they had done something similar to the challenge.

Results

A part of the probing results showed human treats that are more universal, while another part emphasized particularities of the Romanian culture.

Here are some examples of social codes found:

- When visiting: bring a small present, don't bring kids unless host has kids, take shoes off, don't stay too long, don't wander in the host's house
- Eating: eat what is offered, don't eat too much, don't take the last piece from a common plate
- Death: say "God forgive him" when someone has died.
- Annoying things: being pushed, "manele" music on public transport, yawning without covering mouth, swearing, bad smells etc.

Concept grounding

The Romanian probing results offered some leads into possible social codes to approach, but not too many. I supplemented with my own knowledge of the Romanian culture, which offered a much wider range of options.

One of the interesting social codes in Romania is related to weddings: in a Romanian wedding, it is known that everybody will offer money to the newlyweds and that how much one pays depends on the quality of the wedding (and the cost of the meal), on the financial possibilities of that person and many other factors. It is also known that the closer relatives should pay more than normal guests, but rich guests can of course pay more than the family if they want to show their wealth and/or their support to the newlyweds. Even more, attending other people's weddings is often seen as an investment: the more weddings you attend, the more people will come to your own or your children's wedding, and the more money you give, the more you will probably receive. From this kind of common knowledge around the Romanian wedding has the Wedding Bidder concept started.

With all the social and financial factors to be considered when making a decision, the trickiest question to answer when attending a wedding is of course "How much should I give?"

In my design, I considered two main approaches to money collecting in Romanian weddings. The traditional approach, used mostly in the countryside, requires guests to tell and show how much money they are giving – the purpose is to collect as much money as possible for the couple, and to prevent having guests who eat and drink and leave without paying. This approach is considered untactful by many – due to obvious reasons.

The modern approach is much more discrete, and uses envelopes provided to all the guests on the wedding table. Before leaving, the guests will put money in the envelope, take it to the couple and wish them a good start in life.

Concept

What is it?

With the 'wedding bidder', participants to a wedding can get an overall idea of where the sum they give puts them in the hierarchy of the wedding and can adjust their sum accordingly. The bids are anonymous, so the embarrassments of the traditional approach are avoided.

The wedding bidder is a small device (probably shaped as a white glossy plastic envelope), powered by batteries and network-enabled. In the beginning of the wedding, one wedding bidder is provided to each guest (or family). All the devices are interconnected (either to each other or to a central 'server'), and thus form a network of 'bidders'.

How does it work?

Using a control on the device, guests can enter amounts, representing how much they are considering giving. Based on the amounts from all the bidders, a hierarchy is formed. From that, the 'rank' of each guest is calculated, sent back and displayed on their device in real time. Based on the rank displayed, the guest can decide to raise or lower the amount, or keep it as it is. Or, if he is in a playful mood, he may decide to 'bid' differently than he is actually willing to give – either to determine others to pay more and hence raise a higher amount for the newlyweds, or to cause them to pay less, so that his own sum becomes more respectable.

Prototype

The users for the Wedding Bidder concept are guests of a Romanian wedding, with many hours of sitting at a table on their hands. The users for the prototype exhibited at FDC, however, are visitors with no knowledge of the Romanian culture, just passing by, more or less interested by the exhibition, more or less interested by the Romanian piece.

In the context of the wedding, the device would probably have to be elegant and useful, enable social play, and help evaluate one's social status. In the context of the exhibition, the prototype had to be more engaging and playful, transparent, and most importantly, it had to communicate the social context in which it would be used.

I used a computer screen and video sequences to simulate a Romanian wedding, and I created a short 4 minute Flash-based game around it. I asked the audience to play the role of one of the guests, and gave them the task to find the right sum to give. At the end of the game, they are told whether they guessed the right sum or not (this would not happen in the real device, of course, as there is no correct answer). I also gave additional information on the screen, for better transparency.

The 4 minute length of the game proved way too much for most of the guests, who weren't willing to spend that much time on just one exhibit. This is not necessarily a failure, however: the game can end sooner with the press of a button, and if it is left running for the whole 4 minutes, it actually mimics how it would work in the context of the wedding: left running.

Design Process

Probing

I found the probing technique extremely interesting, and of course this project was a perfect moment to learn it. I think it was useful to our project, but maybe not as useful as it could have been or as it could be for other projects, because:

- We already know our own culture pretty well

- The theme we chose was pretty hard to probe. “How do you get people to tell you what’s obvious to them but not to others?” is a tough question
- The probes our group created in the end weren’t good enough. This is probably because of the short time available.

Regarding my decision to adjust the probe sent back to Romania – I don’t know if it was good or bad. It was against the requirement of all the probes to be the same, but I took it because I strongly felt that the probe could be improved, and the suggestions for improvement made by the whole group to the subgroup handling that part of the probe at that time had simply been ignored, and the results of their original five-minute brainstorming had been kept, whereas other subgroups had adjusted their part after the group feedback.

Process – short description

The time available for this project was very short and my aim to build an interactive prototype quite high, so I used most of the time for the implementation. This included working in the wood workshop with Matias, in the electronics lab with David and programming at home. It also included leaving school 2 minutes before locking time on the Friday before the K3 exhibition.

The aim was to have a first version of the prototype working by the K3 exhibition, in order to test it then and there, and then to improve it for the FDC exhibition. Unfortunately, I missed the first target by a potentiometer.

The second target I met, though some things still had to be fixed after the opening, including improvements in usability after the first round of testing.

Process – good and bad

Bad: I didn’t make paper prototypes and test the interaction before making the actual prototype (which can be considered the final product, in a way). I didn’t make paper prototypes even after realizing that I hadn’t made paper prototypes. The lack of time could be an excuse, but not a very good one – I should have found one day for it or planned my ‘features’ for each deadline a bit differently if necessary.

Bad: I made changes to the final product without taking all possible precautions first – After uploading some changes to the Arduino, I realized I had used a previous version, and I didn’t have the version from the Arduino anywhere. I should have learnt this before uploading the changes, not after.

Good: I aimed high. This made me push my limits, and also helped me learn a great deal in the process, although it wasn’t always fun. Maybe I aimed a bit too high for the first deadline (since I didn’t make it and also I couldn’t take part in the group work), but if I hadn’t, maybe I couldn’t have made the second one. And I was pretty close to making the first one, too.

Good: I managed to calm down after realizing I didn't have the last version of the Arduino code anywhere. This helped me rewrite the last changes plus the extra changes that were needed in good time, without affecting the visits to the exhibition.

Good: Tested the prototype and noticed it being used, and fixed the biggest usability issues found.

Any feedback or advice on the process and what I could improve would be extremely welcomed!