

The ethics of SYNE

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In this article I am going to comment on some of the ethical aspects raised by my project in relation to the issues raised during the Design Ethics classes. The purpose of this article is to reflect on the morality of this project, especially on the most visible points, and to analyse the repercussions it can have on society, for better and for worse, taking into account the context in which we find ourselves today.

To begin with, I would like to introduce the project I have been working on: SYNE. The main purpose of this project is the creation and development of tools and devices that allow us to experience, play, feel and empathise with the senses. It aims to give another perspective to what we understand as perception and thus understand the environment in a different way and realise things that perhaps are not so obvious. Furthermore, this set of artefacts is designed to be socially inclusive, being accessible to people with disabilities and even providing other ways of identifying the environment in the case of people with sensory disabilities. The intention of all this is for SYNE to be a repository of tools related to the senses and environmental sensing, whether for functional, artistic or other purposes.

Having defined the project, I think it is necessary to understand why. From my point of view, society is moving towards a very cold and distant future. Technology, which used to provide us with facilities and help us with complicated tasks, now takes more and more importance in our lives in the form of screens and electronic devices that absorb all our time and make us be hooked to applications and social networks. Every day, young people spend an average of 3 hours on social networks, which means that, at least during that time, they are isolated from their surroundings. If you add up the hours spent on Twitch, Youtube, video games, etc., you realise how much time they spend on social networks. One realises how much time society is spending without interacting face to face with someone. I think this isolation is taking away empathy, humanity and also less appreciation of the environment and therefore the planet earth. As Charles Chaplin said in *The Great Dictator*:

"We have developed speed, but we have shut ourselves in. Machinery that gives abundance has left us in want. Our knowledge has made us cynical. Our cleverness, hard and unkind. We think too much and feel too little. More than machinery we need humanity. More than cleverness we need kindness and gentleness. Without these qualities, life will be violent and all will be lost..."

As if that wasn't enough, big companies like Meta and Google are betting on creating virtual realities where you can exist in a digital world from your bedroom. I understand that this can provide good things like connectivity and being able to share (non-real) spaces with people all over the world. Even so, I think it is a mistake to go for those technologies that isolate us from our surroundings and that are not very inclusive (how can a blind person access the Metaverse?). In the same way, I don't quite understand why Elon Musk's and Jeff Bezos' companies invest millions and millions in creating ships to flee the planet instead of investing them in improving the conditions of the world we live in.

Taking up Chaplin's words, I believe that we need to feel more, connect more with reality, enhance face-to-face human interactions, empathise and think about designing inclusively and for the common good. These are the values I want to give to my project. I believe that technology is basic and has an extremely important role in our lives, so it has to be used in a way that benefits society, not in a way that controls, isolates and limits people.

Looking ahead and in the best case scenario, the tools developed will be able to bring a bit of humanity to our society. Perhaps not directly, as it is not an exclusively social project, but at least it will enhance a reality in which people take a closer look at their surroundings, try to understand them and appreciate the senses with which we are endowed. To get to this point, first of all we would have to test each of the devices with the main actors: young people, students, children, people with sensory disabilities or functional diversity and collect feedback and ideas to improve them and see in which contexts they can be most useful. Everything should be documented and applied in real contexts such as exhibitions, museums, schools, workshops, etc. Finally, it would have to extend its scope and find ways for anyone who needs it to produce it in a nearby FabLab or in their own homes, in order to get the most out of it in an open source and non-profit way.

On the other hand, it could also be that things don't work out as expected. The worst case scenario would undoubtedly arise if these tools do not work well or if they fail to convey the message and values mentioned above. I also believe that the fact that the tools are produced digitally makes them less accessible in some underdeveloped countries, which would increase inequality if not managed correctly. In any case, I believe that even if the project does not work, it should not necessarily have repercussions for anyone in particular, given that, in the end, the power lies with the users at all times.

Finally, I think it is important to define future steps and questions that I would have to solve in case I continue working on this project, such as: How can I benefit a specific group by using the tools? Can tools with an artistic purpose contribute to the cause I am fighting for? Will they be necessary in the future? How will new generations receive this kind of devices? Will they be able to understand the reason for this project? Are these tools appropriate to fulfil my purpose or should they be designed in a different way?