What kind of sucker would say 'Thank You' to a vacuum cleaner?

SALLY CLOKE

MEET ROVA

In my PhD (design) research, I am creating a household robot vacuum that is motivated by thankfulness. Meet ROVA: the Ritually Optimised Vacuum Assistant (fig. 1). Each individual ROVA unit responds to its preferred 'thankfulness mode' based on insights from psychological research into human relationships.

Before you stop reading and move to the next poster, let me assure you there's method to this madness. I'm investigating whether thankfulness could help people recognise the important emotional roles their belongings play in their lives. Could expressing care for everyday things have implications for designing consumer goods that foster greater attachment and a longer lifespan?

In other words, could saying 'thank you' help combat our throw-away culture and help promote sustainability? As philosopher of design Cameron Tonkinwise argues:

> 'Things need to be designed that will and can be thanked; design them well... and then afford ways in which... users can say thanks, lending a hand to maintaining the designed'
>
> (Tonkinwise 2003).

BACKGROUND

I arrived at the idea of ROVA through research into a number of areas, including:

- The potential of interpersonal rituals, particularly those associated with gratitude, to provoke mindfulness, reflection and ultimately behaviour change (Myerhoff 1977).
- The overlap between ritual, thankfulness and the range of what's know as 'maintenance behaviours' that psychologists (e.g. Stafford 2010) have identified as essential to successful human relationships (fig. 2).
- Philosopher Martin Heidegger's concept of care as the basic human attitude to the world (1962) and more recent research into the way that care motivates humans in their interactions with each other and their environment (Coxon et. al. 2015).

Figure 1: A woman relaxes on the sofa with her ROVA unit.

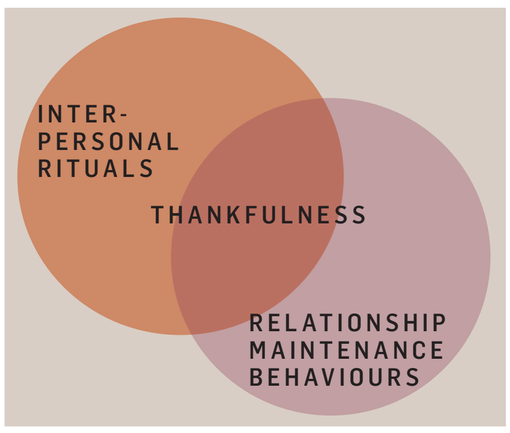

Figure 2: Thankfulness is both a widespread interpersonal ritual and a significant relationship maintenance behaviour in human interaction.

Figure 3: A ROVA unit in its packaging.

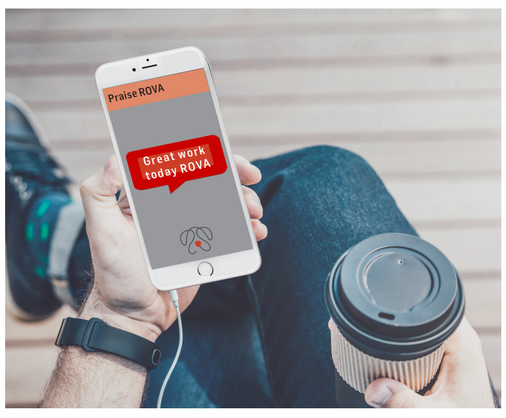

Figure 4: ROVA units can be thanked and interacted with via an app.

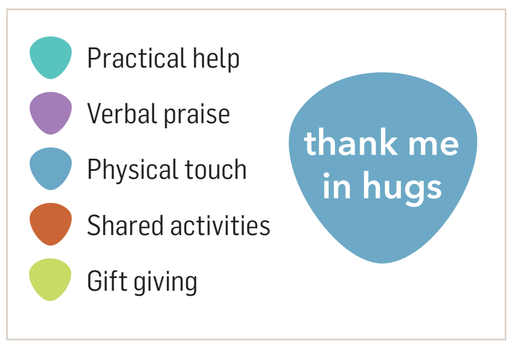

Figure 5: Exhibition visitors can take a quiz to identify their own thankfulness preferences (left). They will be given a badge (right) to wear to tell others how they prefer to be thanked.

METHODOLOGY

My main method is practice-based research (Candy 2006). I am using my own design work as the basis for enquiry, documenting, reflecting on and contextualising what I create and producing an exegesis.

My work exemplifies the field of 'speculative design'. This area was pioneered by British designers Dunne and Raby (2013) and could be described as the 'science fiction' of design. Speculative design is less about manufacturing products than asking questions. It involves imagining possible futures and making them concrete in the form of interactive artefacts in order to provoke debate and discussion.

CREATIVE OUTPUT

I am creating the components of an interactive exhibition, to be held in Watt Space gallery later this year, which aims to make ROVA's speculative world as real as possible. It will incorporate roaming ROVA models in various colours, product packaging and logo design (fig. 3), promotional and explanatory material (including posters, brochures and t-shirts), a website and an app (fig. 4).

Visitors will be able to take a quiz to help them gain insights into their own preferences when it comes to being thanked (fig. 5) as well as exploring the role of gratitude in their relationships with their own belongings.

SIGNIFICANCE

I envisage that the outcomes of this research will have implications for a number of fields including: human computer interaction, interface design, robotics, the internet of things, home appliance design, positive psychology, ritual studies, care studies and above all sustainable consumption. Hopefully ROVA will help identify ways in which:

> 'Caring for objects can be a way of caring for that larger object that is our planet'
>
> (Manzini 1992).

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