

Unuseless

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Have you ever encountered objects that stand on the border between useful and useless? To give you an idea, imagine a hollow plastic thumb for putting on your own thumb to protect your extremely fragile nail while peeling an orange. In other words, you could see these objects solving some kind of problem but at the same time, you could also imagine moving on with your life without them, and it may sound mean, they are more of a joke. But weird enough, I personally find these objects oddly intriguing. When I create objects, half intentionally, half spontaneously, I also tend to make objects that are not perfectly practical, and solve problems in an abnormal way. To make you also feel the charm of it, let me first take you to Japan, because we all know that it's there where bizarre things are created.

Back in the 1990s, Kenji Kawakami, former editor of the Japanese magazine Mail Order Life, had a few extra pages to fill in one issue and decided to do something different. He put together some pictures of a few bizarre prototypes for products he had created that his readers couldn't buy, including Eye Drop Funnel Glasses (which allows medicine to fall exactly into your eyes instead of your cheeks) and Solar-powered Flashlight (which probably wouldn't be used if you already have enough light to power it). The name he gave these gadgets that he created was "Chindogu" which literally means "weird tool" in Japanese.

The pictures turned out to be a hit, the readers demanded more. Since then, Kenji Kawakami has continued to create these weird tools, and the Chindogu section became the first thing that the readers would reach for once they got the magazine every month.

Kenji Kawakami became the world's first "Chindogist", and he won opportunities to display his work at art exhibitions. But it didn't stop there, Chindogu started to get popular outside of the magazine and even outside of Japan. People from all over the world started to create their own Chindogu and mailed the pictures to Kenji Kawakami. Eventually, he founded the International Chindogu Society.

It may seem seriously hilarious, or hilariously serious, that he created a community for these awkward tools and gave it a big name with a straight face, not to mention The Ten Tenets of Chindogu which is a set of stern design rules that he had formulated to constrain the Chindogu makers. Let's take a look:

"1. A Chindogu cannot be for real use

“It is fundamental to the spirit of Chindogu that inventions claiming Chindogu status must be, from a practical point of view, (almost)completely useless.

If you invent something which turns out to be so handy that you use it all the time, then you have failed to make a Chindogu.

Try the Patent Office.

“2. A Chindogu must exist

“You’re not allowed to use a Chindogu, but it must be made.

You have to be able to hold it in your hand and think ‘I can actually imagine someone using this. Almost.’

In order to be useless, it must first be.

“3. Inherent in every Chindogu is the spirit of anarchy

“Chindogu are man-made objects that have broken free from the chains of usefulness.

They represent freedom of thought and action:

The freedom to challenge the suffocating historical dominance of conservative utility;

The freedom to be (almost) useless.

“4. Chindogu are tools for everyday life

“Chindogu are a form of nonverbal communication understandable to everyone.

Everywhere.

Specialised or technical inventions, like a three-handled sprocket loosener for drainpipes centered between two under-the-sink cabinet doors (the uselessness of which will only be appreciated by plumbers), do not count.

“5. Chindogu are not for sale

“Chindogu are not tradable commodities.

If you accept money for one, you surrender your purity.

They must not even be sold.

Even as a joke.

“6. Humour must not be the sole reason for creating a Chindogu

“The creation of Chindogu is fundamentally a problem-solving activity.

Humor is simply the by-product of finding an elaborate or unconventional solution to a problem.

You try your best, you nearly succeed.

Then you realize, sardonically, that your problem may not have been all that pressing to begin with.

“7. Chindogu is not propaganda

“Chindogu are innocent.

They are made to be used, even though they cannot be used.

They should not be created as a perverse or ironic comment on the sorry state of mankind.

Make them instead with the best intentions.

“8. Chindogu are never taboo

“The International Chindogu Society has established certain standards of social decency.

Cheap sexual innuendo, humor of a vulgar nature, and sick or cruel jokes that debase the sanctity of living things are not allowed.

If you’re looking for baser humor, we have a feeling it can be found elsewhere on the internet.

Actually, we’re pretty sure.

“9. Chindogu cannot be patented

“Chindogu are offerings to the rest of the world.

They are not therefore ideas to be copyrighted, patented, collected and owned.

As they say in Spain:

‘Mi Chindogu es tu Chindogu.’

“10. Chindogu are without prejudice

“Chindogu must never favour one race or religion over another.

Young and old, male and female, rich and poor —

All should have a free and equal chance to enjoy each and every Chindogu.

Even Korean people.”*

Chindogu are often described as “unuseless”, that is, although they are invented to solve a particular problem, anyone actually attempting to use one would find what comes along is new problems or great social embarrassment. It ends up being just not really practical. Now you may want to ask, what’s the point of creating these objects then, if they are pretty much useless? This question had also circled in my head for quite a while. So let’s talk about useful and useless.

In general, an object is regarded as useful if it allows a user to accomplish a task or objection. For example, a toothbrush is definitely useful, because it helps you to clean your teeth. Is a

* International Chindogu Society. *The Ten Tenets of Chindogu*. Retrieved March 4, 2017 from http://www.chindogu.com/?page_id=336

pen useful? Of course, you can write with it. What about, a pen out of ink? Well, maybe not for writing, but you could use it to reach the remote control that's 5.8 centimetres away from the tip of your finger while you are too lazy to stand up and get it. If you apply this to all the objects around us, you would find almost nothing is completely useless.

On the other hand, whether something is useful or not is often very subjective. For instance, a pair of chopsticks would be completely useless for a westerner who struggles to handle them, while for east Asians, they are the best tool in the universe to eat with. A piece of art may be useful to someone who uses it to brighten up his office, while for someone who extremely hates this piece of art, he would prefer it to stay in the dusty storage.

The boundary between useful and useless is confusingly vague. So it's pretty much irrelevant while we are discussing if objects like Chindogu should be created. And according to Chindogu Tenet number one, they are not meant to be useful anyway.

So why exactly do they exist? The first time Kenji Kawakami made them and put them on the magazine, he knew exactly that they were not for sell, and the customers probably wouldn't have wanted to buy anyway, but might get a chuckle over it. And he had great fun building them. Chindogu celebrates the humour and awkwardness that comes from the unfulfilled promise; they content a good dose of rebellion, challenging the dominance of conservative utility; they are works of art that almost always bring a smile, and it's the smile that makes the art worth practicing. And the fact that you can almost never fail creating one (because failure is pretty much the most important property of Chindogu) allows everyone to create them despite your age, gender, race and occupation, plus everyone has the wackiness in them. It's a freedom and excuse to think of crazy and stupid things, and everybody needs to laugh a little bit for no reason. So, why not.

On the other side of the world, England, there's an artist and designer called Dominic Wilcox, who's not strictly a Chidogu inventor, but he has been strongly inspired and influenced by this art that's originated in Japan. "As a student, they really tickled me and seemed to fit in with my way of thinking", says Dominic Wilcox. "It was encouraging to see other people doing inventions based on everyday things, in a completely absurd way. I think there's a similarity between stereotypical British and Japanese culture in terms of our polite, understated, self-controlled nature. Japan and Britain are both islands so maybe we need a sense of humour to keep ourselves sane. It's the deadpan style that makes the photos great, acting like nothing strange is happening at all." *

Similar to Chidogu, Dominic Wilcox works within the territory of the "everyday".

To make breakfast more interesting, he invented a series of objects including Soggy-o-Meter (which allows you to set a timer precisely to your preferred cereal soggiess). Snap, Crackle and Pop Amplifier (which is a cereal bowl that amplifies the crispy sound using a microphone and volume control). Tummy Rumbling Amplification Device (which is a wearable device that amplifies your tummy rumble and announce your hunger) and Crane Head Cereal-Serving Device (which sits on your head and allows you to prepare cereal with a crane controlled by plungers in your hands).

He had a project called INVENTORS! where he asked children to draw their own invention ideas on paper. Children have a natural imagination that is free and unrestricted. He noticed how interesting and imaginative their concepts were. So instead of just putting the drawings on the fridge door as most adults would do with children's drawings, he decided to take the concepts seriously. He asked local makers and manufacturers to make a selection of them into real things, including a high five machine and a family scooter that allows 4 family members to travel together.

He also created a tea cup with inbuilt cooling fan, a xylophone bin that plays a tune when you open the lid, a stylus attached to your nose to free your hands while using smartphone, a pair of GPS shoes that bring you home... Besides all these, he also has tons of illustrations of bizarre ideas such as cloud catcher and propelling scarf.

Let's be honest, non of these ideas or products are life-changing or even practical, they are pretty much unnecessary in your life, but it always brings a smile and adds a new, alternative perspective on things we take for granted.

* *Maisie Skidmore. (2015, February 24). We speak to inventor Dominic Wilcox about his most inspiring books. Retrieved from <http://www.itstnicethat.com/articles/bookshelf-dominic-wilcox>*

Dominic Wilcox's work is very inspiring to me. Because I also tend to find inspirations and interests in everyday life. Instead of saving the world, I prefer solving little problems around myself and my daily life. Not only are they much easier to solve than world problems, they are also more likely to be solved with a personal emotion and attachment. And that makes it way more special and fun.

About a year and a half ago I got a hamster and she was an active one. When I took her out of her cage to play, she was just so curious that she needed to explore everything and everywhere. It became really difficult and nerve-wracking to keep an eye on this tiny creature. So I decided to make a play pen where she could run like a wild horse and we wouldn't have to worry that she goes into the gap between the fridge and kitchen counter to meet her cousins.

A fence is really easy to make but since a hamster is such a tiny fragile being, I wanted to be ultra careful with materials to make sure it's 200% safe and hamster friendly. I got some waste branches near school, asked wood experts which kind of wood it was, and did research to find out if this kind of wood is nontoxic. I boiled the wood to disinfect, and finally, put it together as a fence. During the process I also noticed that the city or individuals trim down branches every now and then either to clear the way or make the trees grow better. And altogether that is tons of waste wood. A nice way to give a new life to these waste branches is to collect them and make them into hamster friendly play pens. If you got the wood from all the areas in Amsterdam, you can build your hamster a Hamsterdam!

Often things can be so easily neglected, people sometimes tend to take things for granted. I think it's very important and necessary to keep an open eye on things around you, even if it's tiny like a hamster. Solving little problems in life can be fun and special, can be serious or silly. Sometimes I come up with overly silly ideas that scare myself. But Dominic Wilcox's illustrations of ideas always relax my nerves and remind me that there's no limit to the imagination - heck, he just curated an art exhibition for dogs* earlier this year! So you can be as free and silly as you want to be.

* Rūta Grašytė. (2016, August). *World's First Art Exhibition For Dogs*. Retrieved from <http://www.boredpanda.com/world-first-dog-art-exhibition-dominic-wilcox-london/>

It's widely accepted that when an object is made to serve a function, it has to work and be practical in order to make your life easier, otherwise it would be regarded as useless or a failure. In that case, Chindogu has certainly fallen out of the system. Even nowadays, it would be considered as useless and ridiculous in many countries. Why didn't the Chindogu movement die in the cradle in the ancient Japan (by ancient I mean the 1990s), instead, it won so much applause and became such a hype until today? I would like to decode this with the wabi-sabi spirituality in the Japanese culture.

The characters for wabi and sabi came from 9-10th century China where they had been used in poetry and art to imply feeling of despondence and isolation, leanness and deprivation. The words and concept took root in Japan but became associated with the tea ceremony. When Japanese are asked to define wabi-sabi, most of them simply cannot put it into words, or, sometimes they say "I know it when I see it". And when they see a cracked tea cup, an unevenly glazed vase, a few pieces of fallen leaves in the garden, they slap their lap and tell you: "that's wabi-sabi!"

While wabi-sabi is indeed associated with aesthetics, it goes far beyond that, in fact, most Japanese believe it to be the central spirit of their society. Wabi-sabi represents three simple realities: nothing lasts, nothing is finished, and nothing is perfect. That is, explained by Robyn Griggs Lawrence, "the willingness to accept things as they are without ornamentation. It depends on the ability to slow down, to shift the balance from doing and being, to appreciating rather than perfecting."* When it comes to Chindogu, its not about how it makes your life easier but the twist of uselessness that makes Chindogu interesting and special. And I think this wabi-sabi world view of Japanese makes a big part of the reason why Chindogu smoothly survived and grew in the 90s in this consumer world. They didn't complain and spit on the "uselessness" but instead they had a good laugh and carried it on.

Wabi-sabi can be applied to both nature and human-made. From a design point of view, it can be interpreted as the imperfect quality of any object, due to inevitable limitations in design and construction, the process may lead to unpredictable results, or results that way differ from what you have planned in your head. Instead of going crazy and smash it with a sledge hammer, respect and embrace the imperfect reliability of the object.

While writing this, I look back to the work I have created in the last few years. Things very often turned out differently from the perfect image in my head. It is sometimes very frustrating, the feeling of losing control of what you are doing is terrible. But one of the work

* Robyn Griggs Lawrence. (2001, September-October). *Wabi-Sabi: The Art Of Imperfection*.

gave me a punch in the heart, and made me start to learn that it's ok, or sometimes better, to fail.

2 years ago, my 15 year old dog passed away, while she was at home alone. I have been abroad for a few years and my parents are busy and often not at home. I couldn't bear the thoughts of her, at such an old age, with eyes that were almost blind, legs that could barely walk, being lonely at home and waiting for her owners' company. I felt guilty. Although it's too late already, I wanted to make it up for her somehow. I decided to make her (and other lonely pets) a machine. A machine that could replace my hand and stroke her for me while I'm not there. It was the first time for me to make a machine and I had no idea about mechanism. I stumbled all the way to the end until I ran out of time. On the presentation day, the gears were stuck, the hand barely moved, the glue didn't want to hold, the whole thing was falling apart. My expiatory machine failed, big time.

I was so angry and upset that I dumped it right into a cardboard box and didn't want to see it anymore. More than a year later, while photo-shooting some projects for my portfolio, I took it out of the dusty box, put it together with some paper tape. Under the spotlights, I started to see it differently. The clumsiness of the machine pictures an absent-minded owner trying to make it up for the pet. How sarcastic is it, when you make a machine to comfort your pets thinking that now it's okay to leave them alone, but you are supposed to be there and love them with your heart. You have so many things in your life, work, friends, family, shopping, traveling... Your pet only has you. I slap myself in the head: this machine should never work! Realising this, I started to embrace the imperfections and the failures of this machine. The wabi-sabi beauty of it tells so much more than if it would work perfectly. In fact, it has become one of my favourite among all the objects I have ever created. I learnt so much from it, not only the technical skills during the making process, but also what failure brings me.

Trying to make things perfect has always been a struggle for me in my art and design "career". A big part of me wants to be a perfectionist, while the other part sometimes can accept and appreciate the flaws that happen to be. It's hard to let go, especially for a maker, when you have in mind a perfect image of how the end result should be. The fact that it could turn out differently could be worrying. But sometimes it's better to lose some control, it can lead to more interesting results.

If you can't make straight lines, learn to love the wonkiness.

Having the idea of wabi-sabi in mind, let me introduce you to a Swedish girl called Simone Giertz a.k.a. “Queen of Shitty Robots, Breaker of Transistors, Mistress of Malfunction, Mother of Terrible Inventions”. From the glorious titles you could probably see what she’s about. Yes, she makes automatic contraptions that are meant to improve your life, and they are really really bad at it.

Simone Giertz started working with electronics in 2013 just for fun. One of her earliest invention was the toothbrush helmet (which sits on your head and brushes your teeth for you). She made it for a children’s show pilot episode on electronics, but it wasn't picked up, so she uploaded her silly creation to Youtube instead. Since then she’s continued to build robots and upload them for the internet to enjoy. Her Youtube channel had been quiet for the first few years until early 2016.

The one machine that started to bring her attention from the public is the Wake Up Machine. It has a rubber arm attached to it that continually rotates and slaps the user in the face when the alarm goes off. Some of her hair even got stuck in the machine while filming. But she says any lose hair or pain was worth it. “That was the first one that really took off, it was a very important milestone.”

One of her first robots I saw was the Breakfast Machine. It’s a robot arm with a suction cup. First, it kicks the cereal box that stands on the table, picks it up and pours cereal in the vague direction of the bowl, and tosses it onto the floor. Then it does the same with milk and adds a mess onto the existing mess. Finally, it picks up a plastic spoon and delicately attempts to scoop up a bit of cereal and delivers a spoon full of nothing into the user’s mouth. This 30-second demonstration video scratched the sweet spot of my weird humour and my fascination with pointless objects. I immediately went on her Youtube channel to see all her creations, and I fell in love with them completely.

“I found it way more fun to build useless stuff.” Says Simone Giertz. Just like the Wake Up Machine and the Breakfast Machine, all her robots are supposed to make your life easier but fail hilariously: the lipstick machine smears lipstick all over your face. The chopping machine chops food way too aggressively that no body part should be near it. The butt wiping machine relies on an electrical drill and consumes a whole roll of toilet paper each use...

Of course, the eternal question - “why?”. Simone Giertz also gets it a lot. “A lot of people just write off the projects that I do as stupid, but they obviously aren’t. The ideas aren’t the smartest but I think there definitely is a lot of thought behind it.” Sometimes she gets tired of

all the hateful comments and annoying questions, that's why she build a robot to argue for her on the internet - a mannequin head repeatedly rolling on the keyboard.

"I never set out to build something actually useful," she says, "Almost all of my projects start out with a thing I would want to automate in my life, and then I just go with the over-the-top solution." *

About a year ago we had a project, to design something for a 45-year-old single man. I decided to make my imaginary man a device to decide for him what to eat - because that's always a big question. When you place the device on the table, and hit the table with your fist, the device gives you an option of food. You can keep hitting the table until you are satisfied with the option or until your fist hurts. I chose to make the body of the device out of metal, and make it rusty, because he has been using this device for many years. During the presentation, the device all of a sudden started glitching - it shows food options not perfectly but with a few Mojibake in between. But this time I wasn't upset with it and dumped the device in a dusty box. In fact I gladly accepted the incident. He's been single for so long, he's even worn out the machine!

Simone Giertz doesn't have a degree, studied physics while she was in school for a year before dropping out. She learned how to make her contraptions by tinkering with an Arduino starter kit. With no background in robotics or engineering, she had to spend hours on Google to figure out how to build anything.

She doesn't see her creations as art, because she thinks she's "not cool enough to be an artist." The intention of her creating these machine is to let more people learn about science and technology. The wabi-sabi-ness makes it much funnier and thus easier for people outside of the professional circle to enjoy. "Combing science and comedy, it's like putting syrup in your medicine.", says Simone Giertz. "Everything just goes down easier if you add humour to it, and you reach a lot more people if you manage to do it in an entertaining way."

* Aviva Rutkin. (2016, March 22). *The many reasons why we love useless robots*. Retrieved from <https://www.newscientist.com/article/2082014-the-many-reasons-why-we-love-useless-robots/>

In general, I like to create things that solve or comment on little things in everyday life in a funny way. Not that I don't care about refugees and terrorist, it's just we already get tons of news about how the world is going down, so I want to keep my little sacred place agony-free. If I absolutely have to deal with heavy topics, I also try to handle them in a light way. It's in my nature, and I think I know where it comes from.

I was born and raised on a small island called Xiamen in the south of China. One of the most important activities there is drinking tea. It's almost the biggest part of people's daily life. When you get out of bed in the morning, drink tea to boost your energy and wake up nicely. When you get to the office, drink tea and discuss work related things. After lunch, drink tea to help digest and have a little chit-chat with your coworkers. After a siesta, drink tea to wake up again. Then go back to work with more tea. People on the island have a relaxed nature, and a lot of things are solved around the tea table.

Last September, Meranti, the biggest typhoon since decades, hit the island and caused tremendous damage, leaving more than US\$2.6 billion in economic losses. Many people's homes were destroyed, not to mention the 350,000 trees laying on the ground. I was really worried because it's the worst thing that's ever happened to this beautiful little island. The day after the typhoon passed, my mom sent a message in the family group chat saying: "Who's coming to our house to help us fix the garden and drink tea" with a tongue-out smiley. At that point, most part of the city were still out of water and electricity. My friends told me, people voluntarily went on streets to give soldiers food and drinks also to help them cleaning up and putting trees back to places. In the end of the day, people sat under trees and drank tea.

On the tea table, there's always some little figures, they are call "cha chong" in Chinese, literally means tea pet in English. They are made out of clay, unglazed. When people drink tea, they also pour tea over tea pet. Over the months or years, tea pet will absorb the tea, and it's appearance will get darker and glossier along with the aroma of the tea. Tea pet does magical things with water. For example, when you pour tea over it, a dragon shaped tea pet would spray water from the nose, and a frog shaped tea pet would bubble from the mouth. The most representative and popular figure is the "pee pee boy". First, you soak it in cold water, then shake it to make sure it's filled with water, after that, pour hot water over and the pee pee boy will make it "pee". The hotter the water, the further it pees. Tea pet obviously doesn't have any important function, but it definitely spices up the tea time which is an important part of people's daily life. And it was definitely one of my first experience with interactive-fun-"useless"-objects besides children's toys.

When I was 7, my uncle introduced me to video gaming, and I've fallen in love with it ever since - I know it sounds off topic, but I think it's one of the most important things that shaped my style. Video games always have a story or context, and requires interaction, even the simplest game needs a few clicks in order to progress. That's why I always make interactive objects that need to be used or triggered by either human or animal to be completed.

I've once tried to be a cool artist who makes funky paintings and deep sophisticated sculptures, until I realised that I really don't have it in me. I'm more comfortable making silly things. Nothing's better than people's smiles when they play with my work. Like many artists or designers, I have my own set of rules. I improve it from time to time, but making playful objects and starting with small things around me will always sit on top of the list.