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## Authors' Response

### Balancing Openness and Structure in Conference Design to Support a Burgeoning Research Community

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**> Upshot** • We focus on the following issues: our intentions behind establishing the new Research Through Design conference series; epistemological concerns around “research through design”; and how we might find a balance between openness and specificity for the conference series going forward.

« 1 » There appears to be agreement among the commentators about a need for a dissemination platform to support, galvanize and continue debate on research through design. Many of the commentators also highlighted the importance of doing this through an event that brings people together physically. We are appreciative of **Carl DiSalvo**'s point that the process of “composing” a conference such as this is rarely documented as comprehensively as we have endeavored to do, with empirical grounding (§3). In our response herein, we address some of the key issues raised by the commentators that we believe are important to foreground for developing the conference series – in both conceptual and practical terms. We will focus our response on three areas:

- 1 | our intentions behind establishing this new conference series;
- 2 | epistemological concerns around “research through design”; and
- 3 | how we might balance the openness and specificity of the conference series going forward.

For our purposes herein, we refer to the discourse on and practice of “research through design” as “RtD” to distinguish it from the conference name that takes the RTD acronym.

## Our intentions in establishing the Research Through Design (RTD) conference

« 2 » Several of the commentators offered ideas about what role the RTD conference could play in the academic research landscape. In many cases, this was based on personal experience of attending and presenting at RTD 2015. **Liz Edwards** described feeling a sense of community from being at the conference and that this grew as she tacitly “learned” her way in to the novel format (§3). It appears that the submission options communicated a sense of inclusivity and openness for **Jane Norris** (§5). **Nithikul Nimkulrat** (§3) appreciated the prominence of the oral presentation in the Rooms of Interest sessions, with chairs fostering the face-to-face dialogue and “discursive momentum” (so long as the session chair is “prepared” and “knowledgeable”). And **Jonas Löwgren** saw potential in the format to offer something new:

“[A] conference offering the kinds of innovative format improvements demonstrated by RTD has the potential to form a venue for situated production of knowledge that is significant to the whole research community, including the members who were not able to attend the conference.” (§10)

Such comments align with the organizers’ pragmatic intentions to create an inclusive, dialogical and experimental (alternative) platform for disseminating RtD that is conducted by or in collaboration with creative practitioners. These three key features of RTD describe a motivation to energize and extend debates about what this kind of research could look like and how it may be disseminated within and in relation to academic communities of practice. Significantly for our target article’s argument, the practical process of “making” (after **Peter Lloyd**) the conference and configuring a setting for it concretely to “take place” arguably extends the debate in a new way that is about situated, embodied interaction around people and things.

« 3 » It is very helpful to have the external perspectives of those who did not attend RTD 2015 (i.e., from **Rosang Chow**, **Wolfgang Jonas** and **Peter Lloyd**) to position these endeavors (for setting up the conference) further in the historical context of previous

conference design efforts and extant design research discourse. We appreciate **Lloyd’s** comment about the importance of physically communing at the conference – the experience of being present – for contributing to academic discourse and practice (§2). **Chow** also offers a valuable lens for approaching the conference design, in terms of developing a culture of “collective inquiry” (§2) that rigorously examines and builds on extant understanding.

## Epistemological concerns around disseminating research through design

« 4 » Many commentators pointed out that discourse on what RtD is and what forms of knowledge it engages remains underdeveloped, with implications for how efficacious RTD can be as a dissemination platform. To what extent the RTD conference series could actually advance understanding on that discourse, regardless of its organisers’ aspirations, remains an open question; RTD as a conference may well define its own concerns for representing design as a form of inquiry, connecting, to a lesser or greater extent, with existing discourses.

« 5 » In his commentary, **Jonas** expressed concern for how we (the organizers and the target article’s authors) may be inappropriately trying to mix a desire for disseminating RtD with epistemological concerns: “There is a fundamental difference between the problem of disseminating RTD outcomes and the issue of developing a consistent concept of RtD” (§2). Responding to this, we wish to emphasize that our primary intention with this article was to describe the exploratory, critical-reflexive process of “composing” the conference, in a way that deals with the practical reality of giving voice to RtD practitioners while being open to the potential for this experience to invite new articulations of what RtD could be. While we understand the position put forward by **Jonas**, we argue that practices of disseminating and articulating RtD are fundamentally epistemological concerns as well. Conference talks, their associated papers, journal articles and other modes of dissemination are the means through which knowledge within a community of academic practice is articulated, expressed and built

upon. Modes of dissemination explicitly and implicitly influence how we talk about our research; they have a tendency to reify specific modes of expression (e.g., the textual), influence the ways in which research is conducted (i.e., designing studies and writing them up in a manner to fit extant discourses rather than being responsive to a context or accurately portraying work) and can exclude specific community members from expressing their work. In composing RTD as we did, we attempted to support modes of communication and expression that were inclusive of a wide range of potential voices and contributions. As such, we purposely avoided precisely defining what RtD and its associated methodologies are, but rather invited further appreciation and scrutiny of its diversity and to find connections therein. We agree with **Jonas** (§16) that we need to raise the academic standard and reputation of RtD; however, it is important to ensure this is done in a manner that is accepted, recognized and understood by those designer-researchers practicing and undertaking RtD first. Thus, making this legible and attractive to other disciplines is a secondary concern, albeit still an important one, and (after **Löwgren** §13) we must be careful not to construct yet another disciplinary silo that is inaccessible to anyone other than design researchers.

« 6 » We should clarify how we conceive the role of artifacts, objects and outcomes at the RTD conference, and in RtD processes more generally (after **DiSalvo** §5). Several of the commentators noted how we appear to subscribe to a view that artifacts are carriers of knowledge (**Jonas** §15), the tacit knowledge gained from practice and how this is embodied in objects (**Chow** §4) or practice-based (**Lloyd** §8) orientations to RtD. We fully appreciate how our presentation of the RTD conference, with its emphasis on artifacts and materials to be exhibited and brought into Rooms of Interest, sets this expectation. However, its important to emphasize that we *do not* subscribe to a view that designed artifacts in-and-of-themselves are the representation of knowledge. At RTD, the role of exhibited artifacts is to act primarily as a ticket to talk, to promote conversations, discussion and connections between the work presented and to present opportunities for new forms of interaction with authors’ work

beyond the didactic modes of presentation that can often occur at academic conferences. **Lloyd** (§8) noted that theses and papers are objects too – and we completely agree, as we do with **Jonas's** claim (§15) that it is the process of RtD rather than the outcomes that are of most critical importance. Indeed, many of the artifacts brought to RTD were examples from experimentation during design processes, tools used to create artifacts or materials that documented methods of participant engagement, acting as ways into talking about the mode of enquiry rather than just its outcomes. However, what we acknowledged about the common dissemination landscape is that objects such as theses and papers *are* those that are most prevalent and that the wider, richer materiality of objects that have a life in all stages of the research process are much less commonly witnessed, let alone *handled* or physically experienced during RtD dissemination. It is this wider materiality that we wanted to welcome into the center of our conference format and what we saw to be a significant departure from a more scientific model of presentation and reliance on the spoken or written word.

« 7 » With this mindset, we remain open to the potential for RtD to be represented partially through presentations of artifacts, while acknowledging and being interested in the tensions this may bring, as noted by **Chow**, **DiSalvo**, **Nimkulrat** and even ourselves in our article. We emphasize that RTD dissemination requires a *presentational context* and that this necessitates an active engagement on the part of the designer-researcher(s) to consider the articulation and communication of knowledge between people and things. As such, we connect with **Jonas's** view of “conceiving the design process as a unique epistemological and methodological medium/device for knowledge generation, different from other disciplines’ instruments” (§15). We also greatly appreciate **Chow's** recommendation to consider a “much deeper critical review of other conference series focusing on ‘tacit knowledge’ and ‘embodied knowledge’” (§5), which may inform RTD endeavors going forward; this seems important for contextualizing the “culture of inquiry” that RTD may develop – inculcate, even – because, as **Löwgren** points out:

“[A]cademic knowledge production is nothing but an ongoing discourse in a research community, and it seems clear to me that the communicative infrastructures employed by a research community is going to have an impact on the nature and qualities of its discourse.” (§1)

### Going forward: Balancing openness and specificity

« 8 » A number of the commentators raised a key tension in “composing” the RTD conference: how its design draws on established academic criteria and traditions while trying to be experimental and inclusive in its format. The challenge in **Norris's** words is:

“how to maintain traditionally recognized and accepted academic standards, whilst also employing new formats of presentation and debate-recording that allow a wider range of less controlled actants to become involved in the network of the event.” (§2)

What **Norris** highlights here is not just a tension in how to connect with academic traditions, but how to, in a socio-political sense, create new means for people to self-identify with RTD, to participate and have influence. This leads us to consider the socio-political dimensions of composing the conference – as both a series of events and as a dialogical dissemination platform. **Amy Twigger Holroyd** viewed this as a “metadesign” challenge (after Jos de Mul) of how to promote openness in the dissemination platform while providing a helpful and supportive structure (§7). **Twigger Holroyd** suggested drawing upon the sensibilities and strategies of open design to advance thinking about how RTD develops and emphasizes democratic values for knowledge sharing; this approach could shape what is afforded by the conference format, starting to address **Di Salvo's** question of “how the structure of the conference might appropriately serve the needs of sharing research through design knowledge?” (§2). Here, we briefly reflect on this metadesign challenge for RTD in relation to other commentators’ views on specific features of the conference design for 2015.

« 9 » When referring to the submissions process, **Norris** (§5) identified this tension between structure and openness at play, with the “*authoritative academic voice* (quality)” of guidelines and review criteria juxtaposed

with the “*horizontal assemblage* (democratic)” of paper formatting and experimental forms of visual argumentation. She found the “*transparent rules of engagement*” fostered by the RTD peer review process encouraging, but recognized that, at a “granular level” (of paper formatting), the more open format was “confusing” (§5); a “clearer ... methodology” needs to be developed for future events, to guide the submissions process (§11). Commentators also noted how the tension between openness and structure was reproduced in the documentation of proceedings, with implications for who was given a voice. In considering the “scribing” practice at RTD 2015, some commentaries offered valuable ideas for “remedying” the “*authoritative voice of the scribe*,” for example by creating room in the programme for both delegates and scribes to reflect collectively on and highlight materials for further working (**Nimkulrat** §4). **Löwgren** suggested that new roles may be created for nominated conference goers to have responsibility for annotating and constructing a discursive layer related to specific sessions that are then archived within the proceedings (§11). He added:

“In effect, the co-constructed material would form part of the archival conference proceedings, connected directly to its conceptual point of origin, thus potentially becoming meaningful and generative to the research community after the conference.” (ibid)

« 10 » This was echoed by **Norris**, who advocated finding ways to keep the discussions at the conference “open” by “allowing *rings of content* to be assembled in an ongoing process after the event” (§8). **Norris** suggested we map out “transparent rules of assemblage” in such a way as to enable the knowledge being created and handled to be “re-constructed continually in a flexible *Dialogical Platform*” (§10). Our efforts to introduce scribes at RTD2015 was without doubt an experiment on our part to see if we could start to think how we could capture some of the dialogical richness from Rooms of Interest that had been highlighted by delegates at RTD 2013. From RTD’s inception, we have thought of the conference as an experimental forum for the trial of new ideas and we seek to maintain this ethos as the series progresses, rather than aiming to refine

a format that then becomes a set template for future RTDs. The scribe role was never conceived of as giving a set of people an authoritative voice, and indeed this undermines the dialogical potential of the activity. We most definitely welcome ideas on how delegates can be involved more dialogically in the scribe activity at RTD2017 and beyond. By publishing RTD 2015 proceedings online through creative commons options, and by introducing scribing in the Rooms of Interest sessions, we (the organizers) embraced ideas of openness with regards to documentation. However, we agree with these commentators that there is potential to go much further with this, and there is still much to be done to make the knowledge and discussions held within the conference event itself accessible to others unable to attend.

« 11 » Addressing the challenge to balance openness and structure in conference design is further challenged by the diversity of design practices that might participate in RTD and undertake RtD. While there is a great temptation for us to look to the community of researchers to start collectively developing criteria by which submissions may be judged and contributions made, this is challenging because, as **Edwards** points out, the community is “drawn from disparate research traditions” (§4). As such, finding common ground may be difficult; dwelling on “coalescence” rather than “divergence” may be more helpful but the differences are important to note because the conference design requires careful negotiation as a result (**Edwards** §6).

## Conclusion

« 12 » We thank all of the commentators for their constructive and critical comments on both our target article and, in the case of those who attended RTD, valuable reflections on their experience as well. In the analysis presented in the article, we endeavored to focus on the more critical and problematic aspects of the conference in order to avoid seeming somewhat self-congratulatory, and also to develop the series constructively with a “culture of inquiry” that is collective (**Chow** §2) going forward. In the spirit of the 2015 conference, we will take the reflections and commentaries into account when composing the next conference in Edinburgh, Scotland in early 2017.

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