Embracing "Change"

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Abstract

Suppose on January 1, 1999 eleven European nations adopted a single currency in hopes of creating a stable economic system to promote growth. Suppose the national currencies of these eleven nations stop fluctuating in value against one another, and are now fixed percentages of the new currency and everyone knows it. Capital markets change to the new currency, and the bank institutions communicate with each other in this new denomination. But the actual coins and bills won't be in the hands of the banks' customers until January 1, 2002.

Now suppose that on January 1, 2002 there will be 88 different coins (8 denominations times 11 countries) each with a national face (heads) and a European face (tails) circulating in these eleven countries. The new bills will have no national symbols on them. They will be identical. After January 2002 citizens will begin exchanging old currency for new. Imagine the transition period requires these eleven nations to abandon their traditional monetary systems for a completely new language of exchange. It may become a time of confusion and chaos, and at the least an inconvenience.

Now imagine a world in which a design studio was asked to examine this unfolding economic scenario which has historic, social, nationalistic, and global impact. Suppose the goal was to uncover design opportunities, which may exist in this bold restructuring. How will the world trade with, work with, communicate with, and value these eleven European nations? Imagine the challenge for designers, to ease the currency overlap through intuitive product, system, and educational designs.

This paper not only imagines this world but also examines the results of this real world exploration by a class of fifth year industrial design students at Syracuse University. The specific challenge came in the fall of 1998 as the deadline of January 1, 1999 approached, when the Euro became legal tender.

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Introduction

As design educators we craft problems and design curriculum for a diverse population of students. If all goes well, these students will emerge as insightful and skilled practitioners of the magic we call industrial design. Our goals should be to create designers not just for tomorrow, but designers who have the flexibility and vision to grow, change and be leaders as the future takes shape. Keeping this goal in mind, we often create projects (both realistic and hypothetical) which allow us to facilitate the learning process, not just to instruct or to simply impart skills. We must strive to create learners, those with the thirst for knowledge.

In crafting a project that meets these design criteria there is ample opportunity for success as well as failure. As with any truly creative endeavor there is great risk and the potential for great reward. I had the opportunity to walk this line with a class of 5th year industrial design students at Syracuse University. The specific challenge came in the fall of 1998, as the deadline of January 1, 1999 approached, when the Euro became legal tender. Our challenge in a six-week project was to uncover design opportunities by examining an unfolding economic scenario, which will have a historic, social, nationalistic, and global impact: the Euro.

Identifying and Defining the Problem

On January 1, 1999 eleven European nations (Austria, Finland, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Belgium, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, and Portugal) adopted a single currency in hopes of creating a stable economic system to promote growth. The goal is the unification of their economies, and if all goes as planned, a synergy should take place, insuring the participating countries' world market domination. The national currencies of these eleven nations have stopped fluctuating in value against one another, and are now fixed percentages of the Euro. Each country's current monetary units are now subdivisions of Euro. The capital markets have changed to the new currency, and the

bank institutions communicate with each other in this new denomination. But the actual coins and bills won't be in the hands of the real work a day people until January 1, 2002.

After January 2002, citizens will begin exchanging old currency for new. Imagine this transition period, in which these eleven nations abandon their traditional monetary systems for a completely new language of exchange. This time of dramatic change is filled with potential design possibilities. For the people of the EU this time of change may be confusing, chaotic, and at the very least inconvenient. So herein lay the opportunity for this group of designers.

The Design Statement: The European Central Bank has set the Euro changeover timetable. Provide solutions for the currency overlap through intuitive product, system, and educational designs.

I. Identification of the Problem (Research and Evaluate)
II. Develop a Specification Statement (Set Goals)
III. Design Process (Organize, Visualize, and Document)
IV. Synthesis (Present the Product of the Preceding Actions)

Fig. 001 Currency Poster - Chris Hosmer

From January 1, to July 1, 2002 there will be eighty-eight different coins (8 denominations times 11 countries) and seven Euro notes introduced, replacing the national currency in each of the participating eleven countries. Each coin will have a national face (heads) and a European face (tails) circulating in these eleven countries. The new bills will have no national symbols on them at all.

> There are 7 Euro notes. In different colors and sizes they are denominated in 500, 200, 100, 50, 20, 10 and 5 Euro. The designs are symbolic for Europe's architectural heritage. They do not represent any existing monuments. Windows and gateways dominate the front side of each banknote as symbols of the spirit of openness and cooperation in the EU. The reverse side of each banknote features a bridge from a particular age, a metaphor for communication among the people of Europe and between Europe and the rest of the world. Final designs were announced in December 1996 at the Dublin, European Council. All notes will carry advanced security features (© European Communities, 1995-1998).

Class Debate

The debate started with the discussions around the dizzying array of new currency and paper exchange which is to take place in the EU over a 7 month period in the year 2002. This revealed how the designs of these everyday objects are seen as givens, taken for granted; yet they have great impact on us. They influence the size of our pockets to the shape of our wallets, and if you alter one it will potentially impact the other. The discussions ranged from technology's impact on the trading of stocks and bonds to the use of credit cards, debit cards, ATM cards and the new smart cards with computer chips imbedded in them, and back again to a perceived desire to still possess tangible symbols of wealth. Money in the form of currency also provides a certain amount of anonymity. When buying a cup of coffee with cash for example, there is no statistical trail indicating what size and brand you personally just purchased. The class had a revelation, they actually knew very little about the change rattling around in their pockets, let alone the change that would take place with the conversion to the Euro. They all seemed to be adept at spending it (money), but knew little about where it came from. Questions started to emerge such as, what was the history of money, what did it develop from, how had it evolved over time, and what constitutes change?

Class Research

The research was broken into parts and one part was assigned to each student. This research was compiled into one resource book for everyone's use. The sections ranged from areas of history, anti-counterfeit measures, electronic marketplaces,

electronic currency, and The Federal Reserve System, to the facts behind the Euro, credit, debit, smart cards etc. Each student started an ongoing list of the pros and cons of the Euro. To the surprise of many in the class, the design opportunities began to reveal themselves, yet for some and one student in particular-this project was a concrete wall, an impenetrable force that was never to be overcome by him. Most began to see great opportunities and change was underway.

The research started to reveal a true need for the attentions of industrial designers to the Euro. It became clear that graphics and economic planning might not be enough to ease the eleven nations into their new currency.

The Projects

Through examining historical objects used to represent wealth, from rock coins, (which might take half a village to move) to the use of livestock, Rob Miller began rethinking the money forms. His elegant proposal was to design concentric coins which on one face would have a design that when stacked together would indicate the unity of the eleven countries, and on the other face, coins all from a single country placed together would display a national symbol. These coins would be a durable form of currency that could be standardized throughout Europe while retaining some individual national characteristics.

Fig. 002 Euro Project - Miller ©1998

Rowles Banning proposed a new system to ease the exchange of national currency to the Euro using a money exchanger/shredder. This device would shred old currency and relay the digital value to an electronic cash card.

Fig.003 Euro Project - Banning ©1998

This “smart card” could be read with “The Companion,” a clip-on reader. A version of the cash card reader also comes in the form of “The Whisperer,” which would discretely speak the amount of cash carried, quietly into your ear.

Phil Saulnier’s bill converter would take existing national currency and mark it with its new subdivision of the Euro. These marks could be printed, embossed or die-cut directly onto the national currency. These stamped bills would help in the transition by

Fig.004 Euro Project - Saulnier ©1998

addressing people’s understanding of their currency with the new form of exchange. People with an intrinsic understanding of “Liraness” or “Francness” could start to develop a sense of “Euroness” in relationship to the familiar currency.

In a similar vein Jon Pulhamus developed a system that also addressed taking national currencies out of circulation by first giving them a second life as converted Euro.

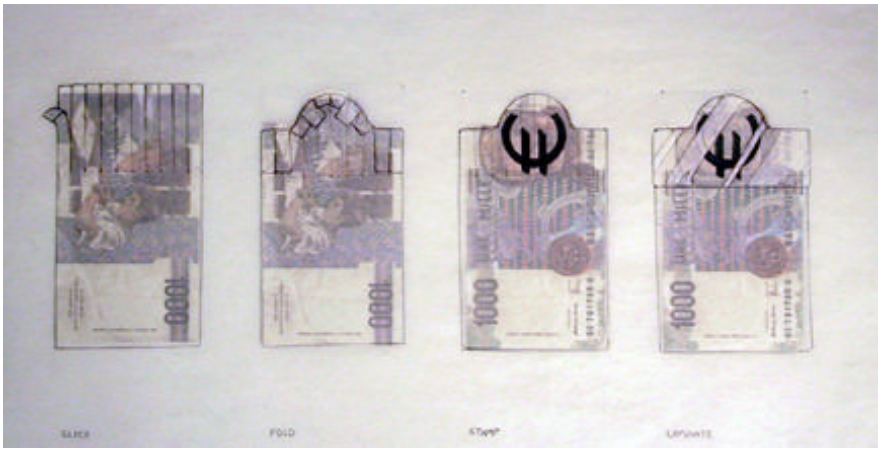

Fig.005 Euro Project - Pulhamus ©1998

By physically altering the bills and binding them together they can be converted to an intermediate currency. This intermediate currency would also reinforce people's understanding of the new currency, and embraced the true meaning of making change.

Concurrently I was running a graphic design class for 4th year industrial design students. One of the projects they were given was to design a currency poster. The goal was to attempt to influence the 5th year students' attitudes on the subject of money. Using marks and symbols, posters started to appear on the walls between their studios. This not so subtle tactic had positive effects, from inspiration to levity. In the spirit of true propaganda the 4th year class led a campaign, designed to question values.

One student for example, parodied a grocery store advertisement offering for sale a variety of exotic items, from tree frogs, to a two for one sale on canned dolphins. This marvelously executed graphic poster caused one to reflect on those things we value. As well, an ad campaign strategy reappeared in two of the most complex Euro Projects, the first being the "Raileuro" concept from Heather Reevey and second in Clint Cope's "Eurobration".

In Heather's "Raileuro" concept there were multiple components, the core of the project is based on the premise that over half of Europeans travel by rail daily. This makes the train the ideal vehicle to reach the public and inform them about the Euro transition.

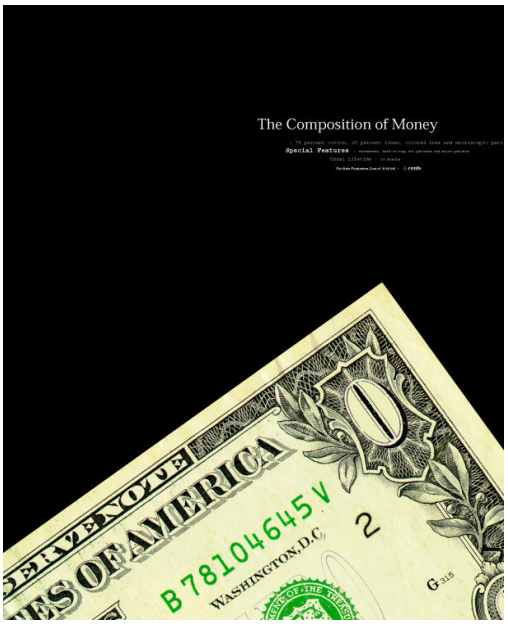

Fig.006 Money Poster - Parks ©1998

Fig.006 Money Poster - Amante ©1998

"Raileuro" would retrofit the existing rail system, introduce a "smart ticket", transforming the train into a bank for monetary exchange, a classroom and a vendor of food, drink, and products. The smart ticket creates a transitional third currency, which is integral for this concept. This Raileuro currency can be used for the purchase of train fare, dining, and additional "Raileuro" products on the train and at the stations.

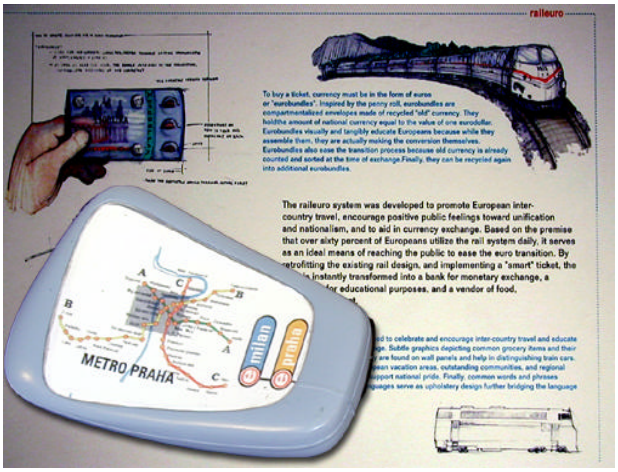

Fig.007 Euro Project "Raileuro" - Reevey ©1998

There is an educational component to "Raileuro" called the "Eurobundle". Inspired by the penny roll, Eurobundles are compartmentalized envelopes made of recycled old currency. They hold the amount of national currency to create the value of a Euro, and this would educate the public. There is also the "Raileuro" promotional campaign celebrating the unifying of currencies while traveling and educating passengers in the language of the new monetary system.

Fig.007 Euro Project "Eurobration" - Cope ©1998

The "Eurobration" embraces the need to include, empower and educate the population effected to help the Euro transition be successful. Using the seven-month transition period, Clint's proposal would stage events in each country corresponding to individual national needs and unifying the eleven nations thorough common timing and themes. By making the transition something to look forward to, the Eurobration would create positive anticipation.

Conclusion

Success did not come easily for these student designers. Being young designers and working on a project without any obvious product appeared at first to be incomprehensible. Faced with an unknown can be extremely overwhelming. However the Euro project was designed with an ambiguous outcome (the real world) and was coupled with a clear set of goals. This allowed most students to conceive and innovate thoughtful solutions, without ever being cognizant of the educational process.

Through this facilitative process of education, the students found the means to demonstrate just how skilled they have become in incorporating the human experience into abstract problems. They addressed societal needs as a part of the solution. They dealt with such subtle issues as how individual perceptions of value can be altered and manipulated. They tackled problems of how national sentiments may effect the course of business, and illustrated how design can bring real value to all human endeavors.

The students were initially unsure of putting this project into their portfolios. Then a couple of brave souls did and reported back to their classmates that to their delight, both the consulting world and in-house design groups were enthusiastically engaged in discussions over the project. The Euro project allowed these students an opening to demonstrate their ability to embrace “change”.

Biographical Sketch:

James Morley Read is an Assistant Professor at Syracuse University in the program of Industrial Design. He received his MFA from Rochester Institute of Technology 1993, in Industrial Design with a minor in Computer Graphics. He has been in professional practice since 1985 and his professional experience ranges from architectural design to lacrosse equipment. He is also currently Principal of Readesign Industrial Design Studio in Syracuse NY, providing consulting design services in sporting goods and furniture.

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