Bridging interpersonal installation art with tangible business modeling

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ABSTRACT
This position paper introduces an exploration of what deploying physical artefacts to enliven discussions about business innovation has in common with building room sized mechanical installations to provoke social interaction.

INTRODUCTION
The author’s current research is attempting to make constructive comparisons and build some bridges between two largely separate bodies of work concerned with different aspects of how physical artefacts can enable participation: "tangible business modeling" and "physical social contraptions". Tangible business modeling is an umbrella term for deploying a range of rich, physical artefacts for initiating conversations about how to innovate business in cross-disciplinary and cross-functional groups of participants. Physical social contraptions are interactive installations employed as designerly explorations of social relations. Although low-tech in themselves, both these strands of research have origins in response to digital developments. The former arose to offer a means to help cope with the rapid pace of change in business models required by high tech companies. The latter originated as artistic responses to the promises and fears of interaction in virtual reality and grew into a design research approach for understanding dynamic networked contexts.

BUSINESS MODELS & A NEED FOR PARTICIPATION
Business models attempt to capture in a formal and concise way what is often informal knowledge of how a company generates value. They typically describe not only the internal architecture of a business but also their key relationships with customer segments and their network of partners. These descriptions have become increasingly short lived. Rapid technological development, and increase in competition brought about by globalisation means a strong motivation for a business to continually question and innovate its business model. Drawing voices into discussion from a company’s internal and external networks appears as one promising route to develop and test new business models.

DYNAMIC AND TANGIBLE MODELS
Interaction design and Participatory Design has a rich history of using physical prototypes, other objects and/or figures of speech such as metaphor to explore understanding of design problems and proposals. The author has drawn upon this in exploring how to make discussion about business more accessible, engaging and creative. This has largely taken the form of gathering people around a table. For example, to participate in a shared sensemaking exercises (Fig. 1) (Heinneman et al 2010, Buur & Mitchell 2011) or to respond to an especially designed table top artefact labelled “tangible business model sketches” (Fig. 2) (Mitchell & Buur 2010).

SOCIAL CONTRAPCTIONS
The author has also previously developed a body of work experimenting how room sized physical mechanisms can function as interpersonal catalysts (Mitchell 2009). The aim of these so called social contraptions is to engage nontechnical or mixed audiences in a natural setting with...
an interactive intervention and their fellow participants, particularly those with whom they were previously unacquainted. Observing how people individually or collectively respond to, avoid or exploit such a dynamic situation is proposed to help with understanding the complex contexts that ensue from many new technologies (Donavon 2010, Mitchell 2011)

Figure 3 - Effecting direction of revolution required negotiation in this “Blender”

Figure 4 - contraption blades would pass over the legs of seated guests

What is a “contraption” and how are they “social”? The word contraption is used to refer to the interventions because it hints at complication and elaborateness rather than simple effectiveness. Something labeled contraption has the implication of being a slightly ungainly, but nevertheless effective contrivance, rather than an elegant device. A social contraption can be considered as positioned halfway along an imaginary continuum between social mechanism and facilitation. The social is both the ingredients of, and the aim behind the contraptions. An example of a social contraption is the propeller like “Blender” (Fig 3). This 4m wide turnstile was positioned at the centre of a fixed circle of chairs. The four revolving wooden panels or “blades” were shaped and sized so that they may pass closely over the knees of guests seated on the chairs (Figures 4).

BRIDGING CONTRAPTIONS AND BUSINESS One of the more engaging and provocative encounters observed in the business modelling research occurred with a non table top based artefact – the adjustable ceiling hung Sales Effort Balance (Figure 5). Here the actions of one participant could directly provoke the actions of another standing a few metres away. For example, a person at one end destabilising the structure could cause other participants to take evasive action.

Finding such apparent common ground between the artefacts intended for innovation workshops and the more sculptural like mechanical installations led to an ongoing review of overlaps between this different approaches to participation. Initial reflections include a need to articulate variations in degrees and types of agency for participants, an exploration of how to map the influences of senses beyond the normal five (e.g. to include senses of pain and balance) on co-participation and how to a participant encountering such work, their fellow users can become both a tool and a material in the situation. Completion of the analysis will shortly lead to prototyping new artefacts and installations both mechanical and digital.

REFERENCES
Mitchell, R. Physical social contraptions sparking inspiration for understanding interaction in and with dynamic contexts. CHI Sparks (2011). Arnhem, NL