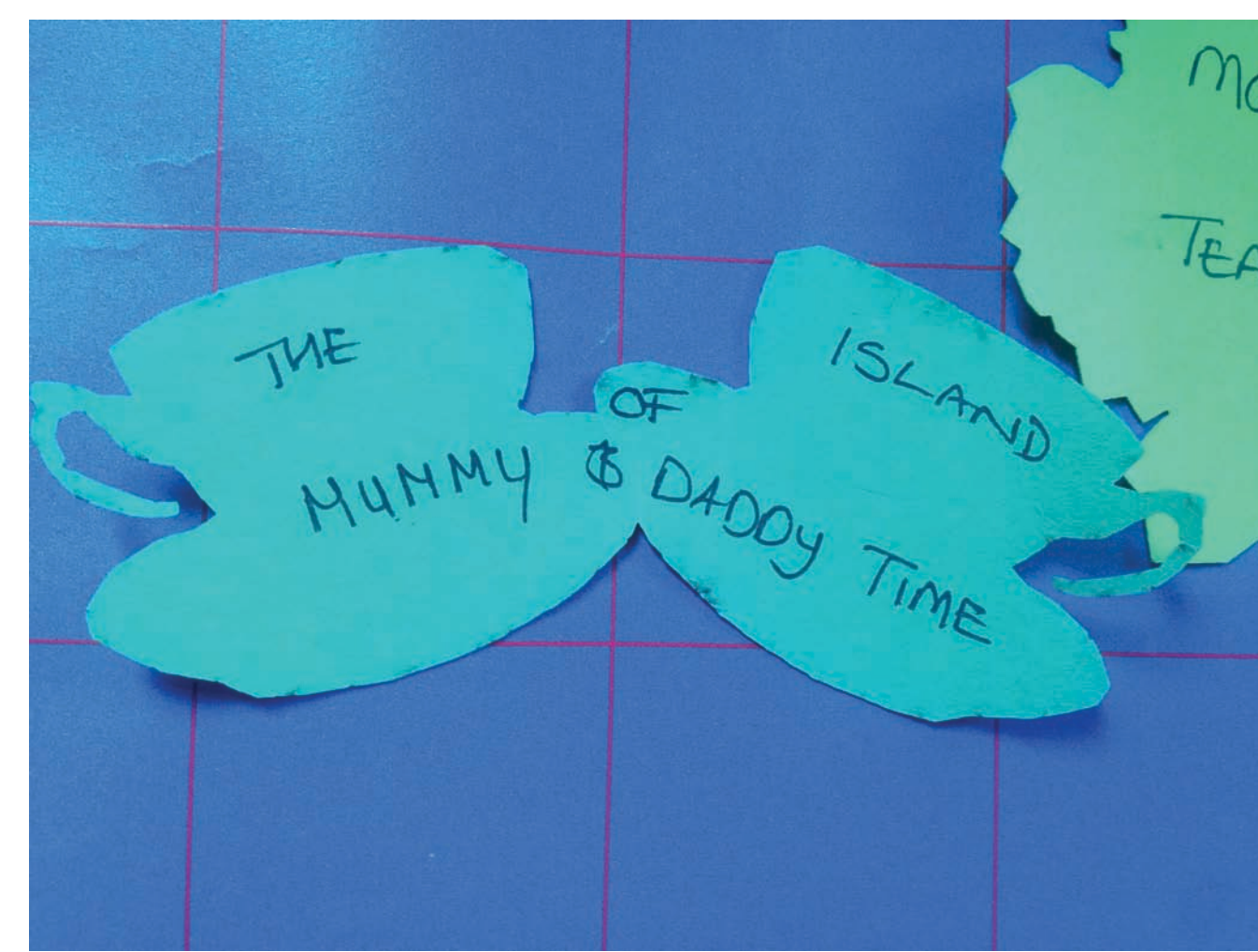


Ritual Machines

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Playful and provocative, each Ritual Machine was specifically designed to live with a family, identifying their specific domestic rituals and their attitudes towards home, work, separation and reunion. Rather than presenting a solution to 'the problem of separation', the machines aimed to create a conversation about the quotidian rituals we experience at home and within family life, and what it might mean for work/life balance to be separated from it.



Gathering information from five families who experience regular separation due to work travel

Ritual Machine 1: Drinking together whilst apart



This Ritual Machine comprises a beer bottle opener that is connected to the Internet. On opening a bottle of beer at a separate location, the Ritual Machine pours a glass of wine at home.

Our first family, a couple and their young son live in Edinburgh and are regularly separated by work travel. They have an active social life and their home was decorated with photos of themselves and friends at party's and events, both before and after their son's birth. The ethnographic probes revealed shared pleasures together and frustrations when separated. A shared pleasure was the couple's enjoyment of "having a drink" together, at the end of the day, when baby is finally asleep and they have done "all the serious stuff" and can share each other's company.

This Ritual Machine allows this couple to recreate their ritual by drinking together whilst being apart. It poses questions about activities people enjoy together and whether these rituals can be maintained when separated. Can the Ritual Machine maintain the spontaneous nature of this family custom? Or does the spatial distance mean we are really drinking alone?

Ritual Machine 2: Anticipation of time together



This machine counts down to a shared, significant event. The anticipation of this event is experienced while being together or when separated.

The couple in this family live together in London, but are regularly separated due to work trips. They often take a holiday together, travelling outside of the UK. Looking forward to these trips of reuniting, the anticipation of being together again and going on holiday, became the focus for the design of this Ritual Machine. This mechanical flip-dot display echoes a travel departure board. Our ethnographic interviews and probes revealed a specific aesthetic, and therefore the design of this Ritual Machine would need to meet the families design preferences. Inspired partly by the aesthetics and kinetic tension in flip boards from airport and train stations, where there is a build up of expectation induced by the mechanical movement of the letters, this Ritual Machine alludes to the sense of excitement associated with travel. The anticipation for the mechanical cascading of the dots is analogue to the anticipation of the next trip or time together.

Ritual Machine 3: Connecting through chores



A robot vacuum cleaner is set to begin chores but only when the counterpart device, carried by the absent family member, moves.

The father in this family spends blocks of between two or three months of the year separated from his wife and their teenage children. He feels he has two homes; one in the UK, where he works (his "work-home") and one in Sweden, (his "home-home").

The family use Skype on a daily basis to keep in touch but the children told us how they miss their father when he's away. They commented that when their father is home he does the domestic chores such as cleaning and vacuuming the home, and that they miss him when he is away as they have to help their mother more with these activities. The ritual of the father coming home and commencing cleaning, was the main impetus for this Ritual Machine.

This Ritual Machine transforms the father's movements when in the UK into the movements of the robot vacuum cleaner in Sweden. Through the activities of the robot; his family in Sweden can recognise some of his routines while he is away.

Ritual Machine 4: A message for the moment



This machine was created for a female lorry driver, her husband and their six children. When driving her lorry, she often finds cards and messages that one of the children has hidden in her bag. These are welcome little mementoes from home that she cherishes, as she is regularly on the road 5 days a week. Although she admits that she often misses home, she also really enjoys her work and travelling around the UK.

Given the male dominated workforce of the trucking industry, our mobile worker has found a way to express her femininity and has added homely touches to the cab of her truck, often in her favourite colour pink.

Like many drivers, her least favourite aspect of her work is being stuck in traffic jams. She often spends this time re-visiting the little notes left for her by the children as a way of remembering home and keeping positive about being delayed.

This Ritual Machine hangs inside the cab of her lorry, and has been specifically designed to resemble a handbag, reflecting her femininity in her male dominated work world as well as her love of the colour pink. The bag houses a speaker and works in conjunction with a jam jar left on the kitchen shelf at home, in which the family can leave voice messages by opening its lid and speaking directly to it. The messages are then played through the machine in the cab of her truck, which she can access and replay at her leisure.