

# Apple Design Project 1992 - 1997

Antonio Rizzo - University of Siena  
rizzo@unisi.it

I would like to share my memories about our participation in the Apple Design Project (ADP) in 1996 and 1997, which, by the way, was the last edition.

The ADP was ruled by the Advanced Technology Group of Apple with the aim to promote the User-Centered approach to the design of digital technologies. As stated by Harry Sessler, the coordinator of the ADP for Apple, the goal was: "to inculcate the philosophy of user-centered design into university-level design curricula, and immerse students in the practice of multidisciplinary, team based interaction design" (Sessler, 1996, p.45). Each year, for six consecutive years, from 1992 to 1997, Apple's ATG selected 10 universities around the world that had an interest in introducing into their university curricula educational activities aimed at fostering the new vision in digital technology design. The new vision presented by ATG saw interaction design at the heart of the design process, i.e. in designing the behavior emerging from the interaction between man and the artifacts that mediate his activity. Universities were assigned a Design Brief and one or two Liaisons. The liaisons were in charge of: 1) illustrate the user-centered design approach and its philosophy; 2) promote the establishment of interdisciplinary teams of students from different curricula, such as engineering, psychology, communication, computer science, anthropology, design, etc; 3) present and discuss the design brief, which changed from year to year; 4) support the design teams in their response process to the brief.

The Universities promoted the establishment of various teams of students and among them was selected the team that would go to Cupertino for the final week of the ADP. Here they would meet students from other universities to present and share their responses to the Design Brief. The final presentation was preceded by a session in which each team received comments and suggestions from members of both ATG and other Apple research and development groups (among them were Jon Ive, Don Norman, Terry Winograd, Tom Erickson, Mark Weiser, etc.).

Beyond the final event, which was a formidable experience in itself, each of the liaison's tasks at the universities had a profound influence on those who participated in the ADP during the 6 years. Below I would like to report the highlights of our experience.

## *1) Interaction Design*

In the activities conducted with our liaisons (Harry Sessler, Stephanie Houde, Charles Hill) the main theme to share with students and colleagues was that this type of design is profoundly different in nature from engineering or artistic design although it uses certain tools and principles. One issue that emerged strongly was that interaction had always been designed from the very first tools such as lithic axes. However, this aspect had received its theoretical foundation in Doug Engelbart's work and in particular in his "Augmenting the Human Intellect: A Conceptual Framework" (1962) .

## *2) Interdisciplinarity*

The second area of attention was the interdisciplinary team and the cooperation within the team. In years when the soft and hard sciences were still living a difficult relationship, seeing a strong promotion of interdisciplinary teams made up of students of computer science and anthropology, engineering and communication sciences, physics and psychology, and allowing these activities to be recognized

academically, was a tremendous boost for our university in the direction of creating joint activities between departments of hard and soft sciences. An important role in the discussion was played by John Brockman's book *The Third Culture: Beyond the Scientific Revolution* (1995).

### 3) *Design brief*

The Design Brief was oriented to design *amphibious* technologies, i.e. technological solutions that could move seamlessly between the analog and digital worlds. It was a forerunner vision of what would become the Internet of Things. In years when the sale of personal computers was experiencing an exponential growth, it was called for not designing interfaces for computer screens, but objects, artifacts that combined digital and analogical components in their interactions with humans. It was stressed the limited input and output modes of PCs and was asked to imagine solutions to the brief considering technologies that would be available in the next 5 years.

### 4) *Design process*

The design process was organized around what would later become known as the activities of Empathize, Define, Ideate, Prototyping and Testing of Design Thinking, but with the difference that testing was applied constantly to all stages of the process. From analysis of the activity, to making sure that the activities subject to the innovation process were actually understood; to problem definition, to being sufficiently sure that the area that would produce the greatest value for end users had been identified; to designing solutions, to explore with users the most promising avenues; to prototyping, to evaluate together the possible final effect and present it to those who had launched the brief. All these steps had to be properly documented in a report and summarized in a video presentation of about 10 minutes.

ADP had such an important influence on my group and the University of Siena that when it ended abruptly it was decided to give it a "try" as a follow-up. From 1999 to 2010, with more than one interruption, thanks to the collaboration with Harry Sandler, who in the meantime moved to NASA, we organized the Siena Design Project on the false line of the ADP. We did not pretend to replicate the vision and mission of the ADP, but rather the much more limited mission of allowing European universities that had participated in the ADP to compare the educational curricula dedicated to UCD by comparing the work produced by their students along the lines of the ADP. In addition to the University of Siena, took part in different years, Domus Academy, Milan (Claudio Moderini), Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm (Yngve Sundblad), University of Limerick (Liam Bannon), the Royal College of Art, London (Irene McWilliam) and the University of Aarhus (Susanne Bodker) took part in this event. The latest ADP-inspired event was held at the University of Aarhus (<https://itu.dk/~erig/aadp/index.html>).

Unfortunately most of the material produced for both the ADP and the SDP in our possession has been lost, some footage of the students' projects sent for the final presentation remains. Among the few still in my possession are the following published in youtube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mcHaMAB-KE0&t> ADP '97 Beat long version  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kgbh7FOSW68> ADP '97 Beat prototype description  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dRkftyQRPAE> ADP '96 Twin school prototype description  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GW8QMmK0lvg&t=1s> SDP '06 iFlow long prototype description

## **References**

Engelbart, D. C. (1962). *Augmenting human intellect: A conceptual framework*. Menlo Park, CA.  
Sandler, H. (1996). Seeing the light go on: the Apple design project. *interactions*, 3(3), 45-52.