Care/Community/Action!: Cards for alternative care paradigms

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As a curious, critical and hopeful designer, I believe that exploring current relationships between care and design is an important step in re-assessing designs impact on culture and community, and that by paying attention to where care currently exists, we as designers can grow our collective toolkits towards worlds which embrace decoloniality, empathy, and plurality.
With current circumstances such as Covid-19 restrictions and climate disasters drastically affecting the ways in which communities are able to connect and care for each other, being able to recognize and imagine alternate methods for enacting care in shared spaces has become even more pressing. By taking time to unpack one's current conception of what care is and collaboratively learning new practices for fostering communities of care, new worlds become possible. Care/Community/Action! is a jumping off point that aims to spark ongoing conversations around design and designers' roles in nurturing care throughout the spaces they are part of.

The framework and methodologies behind this card set was developed from a personal practice of place-based design ethnography and community engagement. I focused on exploring the mundane and everyday, using research methods adapted from Holmes and Hall 2020. During explorations of public spaces across downtown and suburban Vancouver B.C., I was able to seek out and catalogue local and vernacular acts of care. This involved photographic documentation of objects and beings interacting with public space, as well as physical collections of found materials relating to the acts of care. After several months of exploration and synthesis of these collections, I began iterating workshops that would allow this set of research and research practices to reach a diverse audience in a fun, creative, and accessible manner, which culminated in Care/Community/Action!

Care/Community/Action! is a generative card set that facilitates the examination and reimagining of material cultures and designed environments through a lens of care. These cards are intended as a systems change tool for designers, researchers, educators, and other curious minds to begin unpacking ideas of what care is and can look like through collections of images, questions and creative prompts.
Using applied design research practices, participants are able to link small actions and artifacts to larger systems and values that they are entangled in. Through the untangling of these relationships, new understandings of what care is, how it shapes and connects communities, and how it relates to justice, equity, and sustainability can be formed. Participants can then begin imagining new worlds and paradigms that can better foster communities and societies that centre and uplift care as a core value and philosophy. One goal of Care/Community/Action! is to create opportunities for designers to confront their own biases and blindspots in how they design for and with care, and what affects their own positionality has on their perception of care.

I designed the cards to be used in small groups in a non-hierarchical learning setting that emphasizes journey and tacit knowledge exchange over pre-defined learning outcomes. These design-led research practices allow participants to critically explore the contexts and relationships that ground everyday acts in a manner that centres notions of caring for and caring with.

Using ethnographic analysis techniques, participants study aesthetic and sensorial qualities to help make inferences about how the artifacts that comprise a given scenario embody and reflect care. While imagining the contexts for each act, participants engage in storymaking and world building exercises; creating new narratives and alternative worlds that embody more conscious approaches to care in relation to self, community and environment, and enable a greater degree of empathy to be held for the often anonymous people who help enact care in public spaces. Throughout, collaborative discourse supports group learning and engagement.

Figure 2 Several example Image cards
Care/Community/Action! employs three different card archetypes to help foster conversations and creation. Image cards depict ordinary, informal, acts of care that rely on designed artifacts and/or environments. These acts are vernacular to the environments they are found in, emerging organically as physical expressions of the ways that the space has been used and related to. Image card examples range from lost hats perched on fence posts to discarded grocery lists to community free libraries. To begin gameplay, groups choose one Image to discuss collectively; first by describing what they initially notice about the scene to each other, then questioning elements they are unsure of or would like to know more about. The instruction card for the image card set also asks groups to “Start to come up with stories of what this act is, why it exists, and who is involved in its existence. How does it relate to caring for someone, or something?” as a way to invite play through narratives and world building.

Figure 3 Three example Theme cards

Theme cards offer additional questions; relating to topics such as privacy, time, scale and ritual. These questions add a new dimension to the act of care being discussed, and encourage groups to break out of their current line of questioning and approach their inquiry from new angles and dive deeper into the conversations they were already engaged in.
Finally, Prompt cards provide creative activities that help participants engage in responding to these acts through generative practices such as drawing, journaling and improv. This final card set helps channel the more theoretical and speculative conversations held previously into tangible outcomes that ask the group to directly respond to their chosen act. This stage invites groups to critically examine how the tools and practices designers currently employ can be used to contribute to, uplift, honour or question current acts found within shared spaces. Examples from this set include creating a time capsule that can share the act to future generations, imagining a speculative future where the act has been banned, and planning a banquet that celebrates the act.

After engaging with each set of cards, groups will have been able to both confront their existing understanding of how care manifests in physical and temporal space, and begin imagining alternate worlds and ways of supporting and fostering communal acts of care in their own practices. If there are multiple groups playing simultaneously, there is also the opportunity for groups to share a synthesis of their conversations and outcomes to their peers. This process allows players to begin to reflect on how the session has altered their perception of the relationship between care, design, and community.

Due to ongoing Covid-19 social distancing, workshops involving the card sets have happened virtually. This has been accomplished through hosting workshops over zoom and with online whiteboard apps such as Miro. This mode of interaction has expanded many possibilities for community collaboration and research documentation. Without the need for physical proximity, groups can include people located in different geographical locations, who are able to share how their chosen act might differ in interpretation within their local context. Players are also able to use any materials they have access to within their personal physical space to ideate and respond to their act during the Prompt card section of the game.
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Figure 5  A screenshot of a used Miro board depicting several dozen sticky notes relating to a chosen Theme card
The note function on Miro also allows for easy and effective collection of ideas and interpretations of each card made by groups. These virtual sticky notes can then be re-ordered and combined to encourage new and surprising points of connection. Group members can also easily upload sketches or prototypes created during their discussions to share with the rest of their group. These notes and images can then be returned to by group members or by workshop hosts in order to get a glimpse into how connections were made during the workshop's run.

One limitation the current iteration of the cards has is the limited positionality and bias reflected within the Image cards. These cards depict images of acts that I photographed within the Downtown Vancouver area in 2020-21, and thus their framing, composition, and subject matter all reflect my own understandings and imaginations of what constitutes an act of care, which have been developed from my experience as a young white queer trans woman living in Canada. This selection of images may then influence interpretations of a given scenario; which if experienced first hand might elicit a different response. Conversations and critiques of these limitations and positional biases and blindspots are encouraged during the game through several Theme and Prompt cards, which directly invite players to ask what might be happening outside the frame of the image, and how their limited context influence and confine the responses they are able to create. Pete Fung's short essay “Everyday Design and Designed Everyday” has pushed me to continue critiquing the ways I position the notion of Everyday, and how it can better sit within a pluralistic framework.

Before a recent iteration of the workshop I hosted, I invited group members to take photos of acts of care they observed during group field trips, and share two that they were most interested in discussing back with me. I then incorporated these new images into custom Image cards that were then used during the live workshop. These site specific Image cards allowed the group to engage in more nuanced conversations, leveraging the shared understandings of their site's context. Several images shared back were of the same act, but were photographed by different participants in alternative ways that revealed different pieces of environmental information, offering divergent paths for unpacking the acts. In future workshops I hope to offer more opportunities for participants to engage in building their own decks that reflect their communities current care practices.

Bibliography

About the Author
Morgan Martino is an interdisciplinary designer, researcher and facilitator, whose work focuses on building and supporting communities that can foster caring relationships, critical learning, and informed social change. Her current research practice explores how everyday material culture and designed systems inform and reflect our complex relationships to care. Morgan graduated from Emily Carr University of Art + Design in 2021, studying Industrial Design and Social Practice + Community Engagement, and was valedictorian for her graduating class. Morgan currently works as a research assistant for Emily Carr’s Health Design Lab, and coordinates the Roving Designers; a collective she founded in fall 2020.