

# Digital Companionship: A Look into Anthropomorphic Objects for Social Isolation

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## SITUATION

Human beings create bonds with not only other humans, but also with the objects and artifacts around them. They get attached to things and imbue it with lifelike personalities. Things with a certain behavior can exhibit autonomy, intention, personality, inner life, and a soul. How might I use these anthropomorphic and animistic qualities of objects in the context of someone experiencing social isolation? What if personified objects compensate for the lack of social connection by providing comfort, support, or simply a presence?

## PROCESS

My research began with an exploration into the concept of agency in objects and how it gains agency when used for a specific means by humans. The literature review and exemplars helped me explore the current work done to attribute intelligence and intentionality to objects. I created early prototypes to motivate my research direction and I situated this in the context of social isolation. I examined people's relationship with objects by conducting contextual inquiry. I culminated by creating five design directions.

## PROCESS

### Literature Review and Exemplar Collection

Literature review guided me to the topics of networked products, social relationships between objects, movement & temporality of things and products as pals. With insights from literature, I collected exemplars under the themes of animism, personification, enchanted objects, self-awareness, technology with social grace & diplomacy, Smart Objects.

### Early Prototypes

I created prototypes to explore the space further and motivate my research direction. The prototypes included a digital prototype create personalized digital interaction with networked objects, a voice prototype where the user can choose the role of the home assistant attributing more personality, paper prototypes of microdevices that can be attached to objects to attribute a role and intelligence to it.

### Contextual Inquiry

Inspired by the research so far, I situated this in the context of social isolation. The participants welcomed me to their homes to observe their space and interactions with the artifacts around them. I explored what roles objects, artifacts, and devices play in their lives and how it can be used to compensate for the lack of social connection.

### Design Proposals

Based on my explorations and analysis, I came up with five design directions. All of my design concepts aim at employing objects of varying levels of agency and exhibiting certain behaviors to help people feel less isolated and facilitate more social connection with both humans and objects.



Early prototypes, deployment of them as toolkits and user testing.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

From my interviews, I learned that when people spend extended periods of alone time, they start to realize how lonely they are and are often in need of social support. To overcome this vulnerability I discovered what my participants do to be socially active.



Contextual Inquiry at participants house, data analysis and interim capstone feedback presentation.

### Sharing experiences with close ones

Participants like to share experiences with closed ones when they are lonely. They engage in messaging and calls with ones in the intimate circle as well as spend time on social media.

### Background sounds for distraction

Having sounds in the background such as music, podcast, nature sounds, news or even noise from someone in the house can act as a distraction and be comforting to know that they are not alone.

### Familiar objects providing comfort

When people are alone they want a sense of security. Transitional objects such as a fluffy blanket, toys, books, artwork, etc. can provide them with a sense of comfort, safety and familiarity.

### Ambiance of the space around

Ambiance creating objects such as a salt lamp, scented candles, music devices, etc. drastically improves peoples mood and vibe of the space around bringing calmness and positivity.

### Anthropomorphizing objects

Objects are anthropomorphized, named, ascribed humanlike features and cared for. E.g participants gave a name to their new Roomba.

## DESIGN CONCEPTS

### The Social Radio

The social radio is a set of connected objects that resemble the look and feel of radio and are dispatched across homes. If there are prolonged periods of inactivity the radio tunes into the homes where much activity is happening, thus creating a distraction, presence as well as shared experiences.



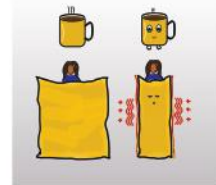
### Assistants with a Personality and Role

Inspired by ELIZA, the Rogerian psychotherapist, I speculated the next level of personification of voice assistants having specific roles and traits. This concept enables users to choose the personality of assistants and interact with them based on their specific needs at the time.



### Friendly Objects

The Sensitive Blanket- Sensing the emotional level, the blanket opens up providing warmth, welcomeness, and pressure around the body emulating a hug. The Caring Coffee Mug- The mug expresses care by moving closer to the person using it as the coffee gets colder.



### Empathy through historical backstories

An app that helps people explore artifact backstory. This concept aims at establishing meaningful connections with the artifacts around us and see the world from their perspective. Hearing their backstory and historical narrative creates more empathy and connection towards the objects.

