

**Preliminary ideas on pottering**  
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**Introduction**

The research we're currently involved in is not about waiting. It's about pottering. We'll say a little more about pottering in a moment. First, though, we make four perhaps tenuous links between waiting and pottering:

1. Like waiting, pottering is something that's difficult to research. Asking and having people talk about either doesn't quite reveal their contingent characters. It's not obvious, though, how one studies either *in situ*. Observing is monotonous and unrewarding, and it's not altogether clear where one starts and, more importantly, ends the observational exercise. A common problem then is how one successfully investigates one or the other.
2. The term pottering is a gloss. So is the term waiting. To wait can be done in all manner of ways and any one person can wait in their own way. Likewise, a potterer has an almost infinite variety of things to potter with and can do so in different ways. Each though has some features that make it a knowable class of thing. About both, then, one might ask what are these features and how can they be (re)discovered?
3. Something common between pottering and waiting is that they have distinctive spatial and temporal qualities (which isn't necessarily saying much – what doesn't?). One doesn't wait just anywhere and waiting has some definite bounds. Also, time passes differently while waiting. Pottering has these same characteristics. Thus, might we ask whether there is something persistent about either pottering or waiting with respect to time and space, so that we might have something more tractable to work with?
4. Most of all, waiting and pottering aren't things we imagine to be all that useful in our everyday ideas of the terms. We expect by examining both, however, we might find some qualities that could be instructive for a computing paradigm bent on efficiency, effectiveness and performance.

**Pottering**

Pottering is a peculiarly British term. Our interest in it as a research topic arose from a prolonged investigation into family life in the UK. Over the course of this research, one thing we found was that particular members of households had established routines in which they sought to seclude themselves from their families. Finding a sequestered place (and time) they would take pleasure in mundane, seemingly unessential activities: sorting and organising things in their homes, tinkering with tools or equipment, doing odds and ends on their personal computers, etc.

It struck us that, despite their apparent prevalence, these activities and their associated periods often go unmentioned in people's accounts of their home lives. Households so

often get discussed and characterised in terms of what is achieved or what is accomplished. The activities householders often seek solace in sit uneasily in these terms, however. It's not at all clear how the overall idea of home fits with one's doing of mere 'stuff': the often small and unplanned efforts to mend something, flick through old photo albums, rummage in clutter draws, etc.

In an effort to give these seemingly under represented activities and periods their due, we have just recently begun to study pottering. We chose pottering because we imagined it to be, possibly, an everyday catchall term for the sorts of activities we have talked about above. Although, as we have said, we believe pottering to be a peculiarly British term, the hope is that some of its features and qualities will be instructive in piecing together a more thorough understanding of what we do with our time.

### **Unaccountable action**

In thinking about pottering and the like, we're reminded of the beginning of a conversation most readers will probably pretty familiar with when answering the phone:

“...”  
“What are you up to?”  
“oh, nothing...”

What does the word “nothing” do here? Well, for one, it opens the respondent up to more talk. By saying “nothing”, one signals that they have no good reason to avoid being interrupted. It also, perhaps, lessens how accountable one is for what they are doing. What if one were to say “I'm on the train,” instead of saying “nothing”? Immediately, they are accountable for train riding. A subsequent question could well be: “Oh, where are you going?” Nothing therefore operates as a useful catchall for that which we might find awkward to account for.

It's this latter idea of nothing that's given us some food for thought on pottering. Could it be that one way in which to think about pottering is to think of it as part of a class of things we do where we're not easily held accountable, or at least where we don't wish to be. Below, we want to work from another angle and see if there's some way to unpack that idea a little. First though, let us say something on our method.

### **Method**

Given our interest in pottering and not understanding how the topic ought to be approached we decided to begin with a qualitative study. Initially, we asked various people to define pottering in order to get a general sense of how people use and understand the term. This was useful in shaping our interview protocol for the project's next phase. Next we more systematically interviewed people about pottering in their homes and on the telephone. We recruited (and are continuing to recruit) participants through colleagues and friends, postings on online bulletin boards, and by placing flyers throughout Cambridge. Interviews are semi-structured and typically lasted nor more than 30 minutes. Participants are asked to talk about pottering, why they do it, and how it makes them feel.

In addition to using interviews we borrowed aspects from Gaver et. al's cultural probes to help us better understand pottering's situated nature. Following interviews participants were given a disposable video camera and asked to record themselves pottering (see Figure 1). We are currently waiting for the cameras to be returned to us in the mail.



Fig. 1 CVS Disposable Camera

### **Some features of Pottering**

From our short foray into the field, so to speak, we've found that something that distinguishes pottering is that it's done in contrast to a lot of other things. One might say that it's defined, in large part, by what it isn't rather than what it is. Pottering is done in particular places, e.g., the garden shed, the attic, the basement, the clutter draw, etc. There are also right and wrong times to potter. Time might be marked out for it: weekends can be reserved for pottering, or some leeway might be given once the chores have been done, and so on. Whether it be defined by where or when it's done, repeatedly, the common feature is that pottering is found on the edges or margins. The shed, attic and basement are at the home's borders. Similarly, times for pottering are set in relational terms, with respect to other activities or set periods.

We want to be careful here not to suggest that pottering is some absolute. If our initial interviews have told us anything, pottering is not this one thing or that. Indeed, it appears to be a very individual practice. The garden shed can be where one potters, but it is also a place where plenty of other things are done that don't equate to pottering. Gardening too isn't exclusively pottering. One can potter in the garden, but as someone reported to us recently, once it becomes gardening, it's no longer pottering. So, we might make the case that pottering is something that operates as a counter-idea, an antithesis; we understand it as something that is cast outside of other classes of things that we do.

One way that people often characterise their pottering is to contrast it to the more meaningful, useful or even beneficial activities that they do.

I just get waylaid, say I am doing the laundry, and then I see a book, that I haven't looked at for a while and I'll sit and look at it and I should have done the laundry. Or, the other day, I was looking for a piece by Alan Bennett which is on a tape cassette to lend to someone who was coming by, but couldn't find it, because I was waylaid by other things and listening to other tapes thinking would she like this would she like that? And it wasn't

a waste of time because I was doing it with a purpose so I suppose that isn't as pottery as some other things are...

Above, Joanna expresses the way in which pottering is often disjointed and made up of short, unplanned actions. The term waylaid is wonderfully evocative in this regard. What I want to draw particular attention to in Joanna's quote is the way in which she aligns the idea of pottering, or being 'pottery', with time wasting. Notice how Joanna sets apart purposeful action from pottering. Actions done with a purpose—in this case the searching of music for a friend—are not a waste of time and so don't quite equate to pottering.

It's this idea of purpose that appears to be consistent with the terms meaningful, useful or beneficial. When we listen to people talking about pottering, each of these terms appears to be bound up with their distinctions between personal interests versus shared ones. What is common in explanations of pottering is how it is not presented as something done for others, at least in any immediate way. Indeed, the pleasure (and corresponding guilt) that is often associated with pottering is commonly described as resulting from self-absorption, self-interest, etc. Pottering is done at one's own pace, in one's own time and space, etc.

Mary, another of our informants, explains that nothing is expected from her when she ambles about at home. She contrasts this to the activities associated with paid-work, domestic chores and childcare, where there are the demands of a schedule. Now retired, Mary finds she has time to do things that please her. Key is the distinction she makes between the things done for herself versus for others.

We I do things according to what I feel like, to what I feel in the mood for and that is another great privilege of being retired. Except if someone is coming to stay and the house has got to be cleaned. There is no pressure again, there are plenty of things to do but there is no demanding schedule.

This, then, is what brings me back to the idea of accountability. Might we argue that pottering falls into a class of doings we perform in which we are largely unaccountable to others. The doing of dishes, home-cleaning, bed-making, routine dinner-making, etc. are rarely considered pottering because they are quite purposefully done for other people. The accountability is very much tied to the fact that these activities are procedurally preformed for others. It is their visibly routine and systematic accomplishment that give them, at least in part, their common value.

Following this argument, it is not merely what we do that constitutes our actions as pottering, but also, and possibly more importantly, how we go about it. Consequently, it is the ordering of our potterings that also sit somewhere on the margins. Routines, for example, can transgress into pottering when their assumed order is interrupted, when we come across music we stop to listen to in searching for Alan Bennett cassettes. The intermittent, sporadic, shuffling from one thing to another that characterises pottering, is understood to be distinctive—if not ineffectual—because it stands in contrast to the prolonged, concerted, engaged and purposeful manner in which we appear to measure ourselves by in other walks of life.

## **Conclusion**

At this early stage of our work, we have little more to say on the subject of pottering. We've tried, as far as we can, to say something about what pottering might be as a general class of activities. We have suggested that it is something that lies on the margins, that it is defined by its relations to other things and not absolute, and that its purpose is neither clear nor immediate. An attempt has also been made to demonstrate how pottering consists of activities that we don't normally account for or at least ones we might find awkward to be accountable for.

As we continue to pursue pottering as a topic, we'd like to give further thought to a number of its other characteristics. We want to look more closely at the pleasure that seems to be a part of pottering, a term informants have repeatedly used to describe it. Relatedly, we want to further investigate an apparent tension between pleasure and guilt, a point we hinted at earlier. Thought will also be given to how pleasure, or enjoyment, is gained from engaging in the process of tinkering with this or fiddling with that, over and above any imagined outcome. Our list of potential interests could continue, but we will stop here for the purposes of brevity.

Where this will take us with regards to technology and design, we are unsure. Our hope is that we'll see ideas arise as we develop the work. It seems unlikely now that we'll build or envisage some device to support pottering. Instead, we imagine designs that might provoke and question our common ideas of computing and give us the opportunity to think differently about designing for particular places and times.