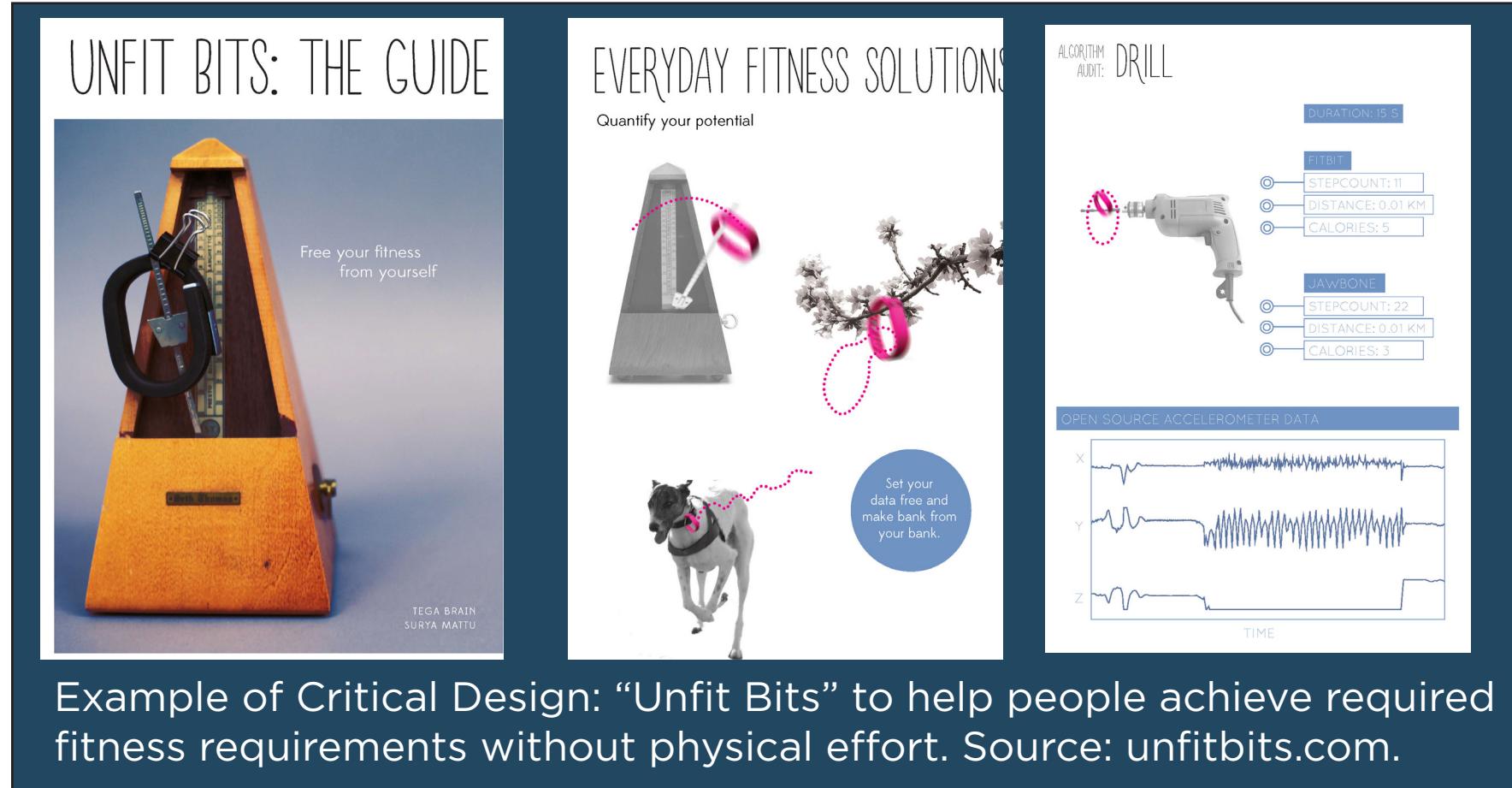


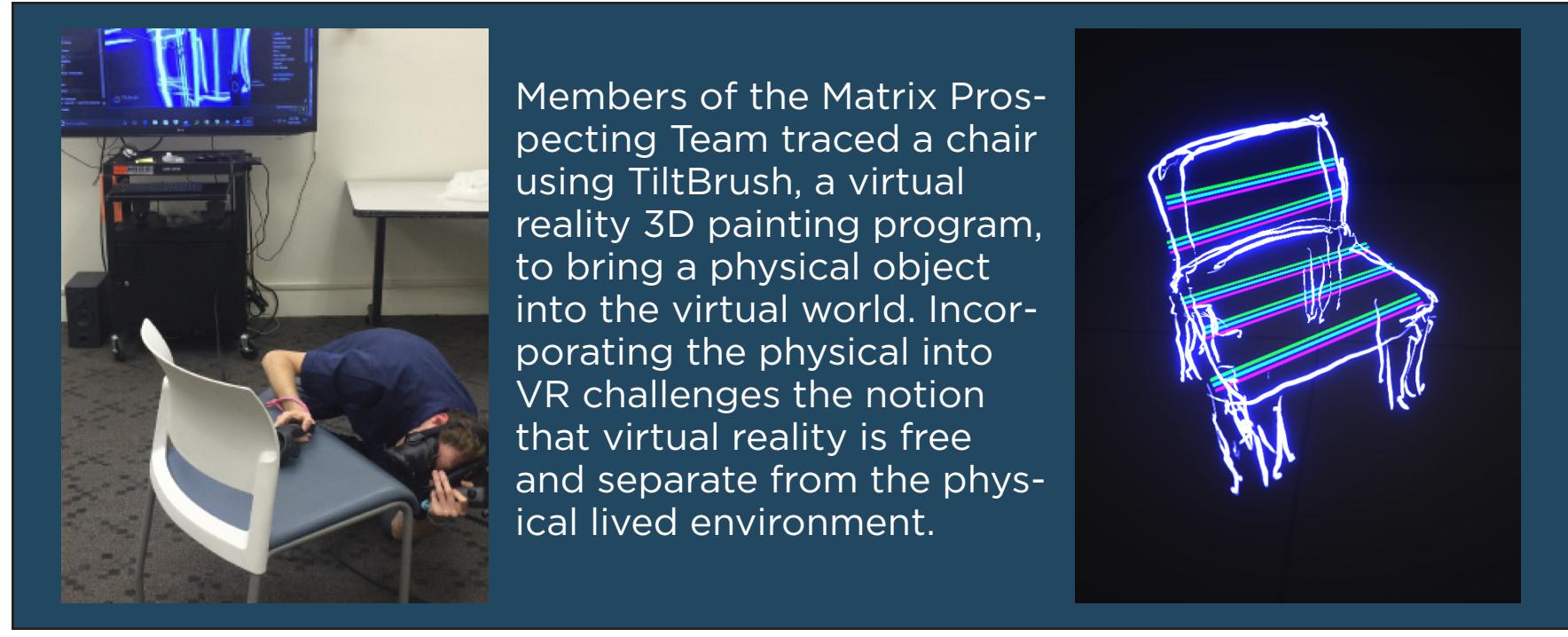
Assembling Critical Theory and Practices in Design and the Social Sciences



Example of Critical Design: "Unfit Bits" to help people achieve required fitness requirements without physical effort. Source: unfitbits.com.

The social sciences have long been interested in the processes and products of art, media, and design, exploring how material objects and media infrastructure are shaped by and give rise to cultural norms, historical values, and social systems. Social Science Matrix sponsored a semester-long Prospecting Team focused on critical and speculative design, which the organizers explained was to "understand the values, attitudes, and ways of looking at the world that are built into technologies; to present alternative reconfigurations of these factors; and to use the process of design as a way to gain knowledge about the world." Led by Richmond Wong and Anne Jonas, PhD students in the UC Berkeley School of Information, the team grew out of a prior course and reading group held at the UC Berkeley School of Information.

The fields of critical and speculative design are focused on provoking thought and dialogue, often presenting a "what



Members of the Matrix Prospecting Team traced a chair using TiltBrush, a virtual reality 3D painting program, to bring a physical object into the virtual world. Incorporating the physical into VR challenges the notion that virtual reality is free and separate from the physical lived environment.

if?" version of products, institutions, or other systems. One example can be seen in "UnFitbits," a collection of methods to help people "track steps" without actually walking, thus contesting surveillance of employees by employers or insurance companies. Another example, geared toward trans-border migrants, provides a "hack" for low-cost cell phones that provides poetry, as well as information on where to find food, water, and safer routes. A third example is a browser plug-in that renders the numbers on a Facebook page invisible, to mitigate people's fixation on "likes".

Exploring the connection between design and social concerns like inequality, pedagogy, and politics, the Matrix team considers such questions as: what are critical design and the social sciences doing similarly and differently in terms of their analyses, theories, and views on modes of action and creation? What gets lost when design, art, and the social sciences neglect to engage with one another, or remain ignorant of their parallel trajectories? Can these diverse disciplinary perspectives on criticality be combined in service of social justice and the public good?

A critical practice carried out by team members involved considering and exploring alternate social practices associated with virtual reality (VR), inspired by feminist theories of Karen Barad. While VR systems are built for one individual and attempt to separate the virtual from the physical, team members intentionally used one system for three people (giving one person the headset and two people the



Researchers and new media artists Ricardo Dominguez and Brett Stalbaum, together with a team of poets and professors, devised the Transborder Immigrant Tool (TBT) to improve the odds of a safe crossing of the Mexico-U.S. border. The TBT consists of a GPS ("Geo Poetic System") with 24 hours of experimental poetry to provide inspiration for survival, along with information on food/water caches, security activities, and directions to potentially safer routes. Learn more at <http://www.arte-util.org/projects/transborder-immigrant-tool>.

hand controllers), and tried to mix the physical and virtual by using physical objects like chairs while using the VR system. They found new ways of experiencing VR that felt more connected socially and with the physical environment.

The team is integrating the perspectives of scholars from diverse fields—including sociology, information science, communications, design, human-computer interaction, gender studies, education, philosophy, history, cognitive science, and science & technology studies—and discussing readings from a diverse set of authors including Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, Walter Benjamin, Stuart Hall, Micha Cárdenas, Zeus Leonardo, Nikolas Rose, and Achille Mbembe. As the researchers explained in their proposal, "over the past two decades, theoretical analysis and practices under the broad rubric of 'critical' and 'speculative' design have proliferated, aiming to question utilitarian norms and take on social questions about technology, media, communities, and institutions. We seek to explore how critical and social theory, cultural studies, and art practice have informed these new approaches and to what extent they have diverged."

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RESEARCH GOALS

- Develop an agenda of critique and design to address pressing social issues, including policy, pedagogy, and activism.
- Articulate a new Berkeley-based viewpoint on integrating theory from design and social science.
- Explore these ideas through a combination of creating design ideas, writing, or engaging in critical practices.
- Support thoughtful reading and discussion across disparate fields for PhD students, postdoctoral scholars, and faculty, to help each researcher's practice become more transdisciplinary and critically engaged.