

Student Name: Yizhuo Tan 譚一卓 Student Number: 35953209

Tutors Name: Danny Aldred

Web Links : <https://2025.macd.work/yt4n24>

FINAL PROJECT REPORT

This report reviews and reflects on the research and practice of Almost, a micro-exercise app designed for individuals with perfectionist tendencies. The project provides a space where users can gradually accept imperfection through short exercises. Using the DIEP framework, the report analyses the project's description, theoretical grounding, strengths, limitations, and future directions. It also reflects on how design thinking has shifted, in line with the A/B Manifesto, from problem-solving towards problem-finding and critical exploration.

Describe

Almost uses "coral bleaching" as its core metaphor: when we over-control and over-polish, our inner state seems to enter a bleaching phase, and the app provides a safe, non-judgmental space for self-experimentation, encouraging users to "move forward without being perfect".

The core process consists of the user completing five tests to generate an exclusive "Coral Personality" report, followed by a 3-4 minute exercise: 60 seconds of breathing to cool down, leaving imperfections on purpose, and 90 seconds of non-corrective observation. 90 seconds of uncorrected observation. Upon completion, the coral on the screen changes from Bleached to Pale and finally back to Healthy, gradually returning to colour, replacing the score with a visualisation of the process. Almost is not a medical or diagnostic tool, but rather a small, visible and repeatable exercise to help the user learn to 'let go a little bit' in a low-risk situation.

The research methodology was based on questionnaires, empathy maps, PACT analysis and prototype testing. The results show that 64% of respondents find "visual change" soothing and motivating, 70% prefer to let go gradually through small tasks, and 60% enjoy interacting with anthropomorphic "coral personalities". The empathy map further reveals that many people are calm on the outside but tense on the inside; that they often suppress or avoid reactions under stress; and that a small, clear action is the most effective way to relieve tension and bring a sense of control.

Interpret

The metaphor of "coral bleaching" views perfectionism as a stress-prone system that "fades" when stressed and gradually "returns" to colour in a gentle rhythm. This shifts the design goal from 'zero flaws' to 'relax and move on' (Norman, 2004). A simple and

repeatable process helps to reduce anxiety at entry. The colour return mechanism replaces scores and communicates progress with intuitive visual changes: avoiding the pressure to compare (Barnard, 2013) and facilitating comprehension (Baldwin & Roberts, 2006). In terms of the structure of the experience, it echoes Garrett's (2011) five levels: from 'safety and non-judgmental' at the target level to 'soft colour schemes and kinetic effects' at the surface level, all of which are kept simple and emotionally safe (Marshall & Meachem, 2010). In terms of methodology, I used an iterative path of 'sketching to prototyping to testing to fine-tuning' (Dubberly, 2005), exposing and correcting points of friction in a timely manner (Barnard, 2013).

Finally, the brand's core identity is an inverted A, transforming the obsession with 'A+' into an acceptance of 'almost', which is reflected in the interface as a gradual return of coral colours to signal the progress of the exercise. almost doesn't commit. Almost does not promise to "cure perfectionism", but rather uses metaphors and exercises as a gentle container to help users gradually accept that "almost is okay" (Dunne & Raby, 2013; Norman, 2004).

Evaluate

The metaphor and micro-duration of the project fit the user's preference for 'short, light, visible change', which can motivate the engine at a low burden. The coral's colour warmth serves as non-judgmental feedback with low cost of understanding and low emotional stress (Norman, 2004; Barnard, 2013). In terms of process, the path from '60 seconds to breathe to leave a defect to 90 seconds to not fix it' is clear and reusable, and the No-fix lock externalises the promise of 'not fixing it' as a mechanism (Garrett, 2011). The interface and the brand maintain a gentle tone and harmonise the tone of 'emotional safety' (Marshall & Meachem, 2010). The research methodology combined questionnaires, empathy maps and prototype testing to provide a quantitative/qualitative basis, and iteratively optimised key interactions (Baldwin & Roberts, 2006; Dubberly, 2005). In terms of design posture, the project emphasised 'progress rather than perfection', echoing the reflective value of speculative design (Dunne & Raby, 2013).

Aspects requiring enhancement include: longitudinal studies such as 4-week diaries and interviews to verify that 'allowing for imperfections' can be transferred to real-life scenarios (Dubberly, 2005); reinforcing the metaphorical ethical boundaries and non-medical positioning to provide local support (Barnard, 2013); and continually evaluating the interface accessibility and clarity, e.g. low-stimulus modes. clarity, e.g., low-stimulus modes, contrast adjustment, information layering (Marshall & Meachem, 2010); and expanding the diversity of samples to test the adaptability of practice rituals in different cultural and stressful contexts (Baldwin & Roberts, 2006).

In conclusion, the project has established the foundation of "low burden, perceivable, and reusable", and the next step is to strengthen the validation and extension to better implement "almost OK" in real-life scenarios.

A/B Manifesto

One of the key dimensions of this project is to shift my design thinking from the "A-side" to the "B-side" in four directions, based on the A/B Manifesto. 1.

1. From Problem Solving → to Problem Finding

The original concept could have been another "anti-procrastination tool", defined as improving efficiency. Through the metaphor of 'coral bleaching', I have redefined perfectionism as a stress-prone system that fades under high pressure and gradually recovers at a gentler pace (Norman, 2004). This shift changes the focus from 'providing an antidote' to 'constructing reflection'. Each micro-exercise, leaving imperfections behind, guides the user to examine their relationship with control rather than providing the ultimate answer. This is in line with Dunne and Raby's view that the value of design is to ask questions, not to close them (Dunne & Raby, 2013).

2. From Fictional Functions → to Functional Fictions

Rather than creating a speculative device that operates only in the virtual world, the project transforms the 'fiction' itself into an active mechanism in reality. The fading coral and No-fix locks on the screen are not scientific simulations of oceanography, but functional fictions whose value lies not in technical accuracy, but in prompting the user to pause, reflect and accept incompleteness. The significance lies less in technical precision than in its capacity to prompt users to pause, reflect, and accept imperfection.

Fiction is transformed into function.

3. From Fun → to Satire

Almost maintains a gentle tone, but also incorporates a slight irony. The inverted "A" logo is an ironic reference to the obsession with "having to be A+", while the "90% submission" mechanism is an ironic reference to the obsession with efficiency and perfection. This is not mere entertainment, but rather humour as a critical tool to magnify and mirror the daily "anxiety of not being able to stop polishing".

4. From Makes us Buy → to Makes us Think

Finally, the project directs attention to the reframing of thought and emotion. Progress in the process is not measured by points or medals, but by three gentle cues: the pause for breath, the imperfections retained, and the return of colour to the coral. By replacing points with colours, the project does not use the market logic of the cult of accumulation, but rather leads users to reflect on "how to let go a little bit". The goal is not to convert the user into a loyal consumer, but to prompt a subtle change in viewpoint (Barnard, 2013).

Plan

The future development of this project will encompass research validation, ethical refinement, and methodological extension. First, I plan to recruit 20–30 participants for a four-week diary study, recording daily practice engagement, the intensity of urges to correct (on a 0–3 scale), and voice reflections, in order to examine whether the mindset of "almost enough" can gradually transfer into learning and workplace contexts. At the

application level, a “Help and Boundaries” page will be introduced to clarify the project’s non-therapeutic positioning, provide local help resources, and refine the privacy strategy, thereby ensuring transparency and user safety (Dunne & Raby, 2013).

In the longer term, I aim to deepen critical and speculative design practice, positioning design outcomes as triggers for reflection rather than solely as functional tools (Dunne & Raby, 2013). Beyond this, cross-disciplinary cooperation with psychology, education, and data visualisation will be pursued to explore the broader value of combining “emotional metaphors with micro-exercises.” Finally, on a personal level, Almost has made me recognise that gentle and sustainable interventions are more meaningful than forced or immediate fixes. Consequently, in future practice I will adhere to a design ethos of “low burden, perceptible, and reflective,” placing emotional safety at the core of design decisions.

Overall, Almost is not only an emotional support tool but also a design experiment on how to live with imperfection. Through metaphor and micro-exercises, it translates the tensions of perfectionism into tangible interactions and creates space for reflection through gentle feedback. The project shows how design can balance emotional safety with critical inquiry, demonstrating that its value lies not only in solving problems but also in creating conditions for thought. Looking ahead, the significance of Almost lies in interdisciplinary expansion and methodological refinement. As a designer, I will continue to explore how gentle, low-burden approaches can provide both emotional support and cognitive provocation.

Words: 1536

Reference:

1. Baldwin, J. & Roberts, L., 2006. *Visual Communication: From Theory to Practice*. Publisher: AVA Publishing.
2. Barnard, M., 2013. *Graphic Design as Communication*. Publisher: Routledge.
3. Dubberly, H., 2005. *How Do You Design?* Dubberly Design Office.
4. Dunne, A. & Raby, F., 2013. *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming*. Publisher: The MIT Press
5. Garrett, J.J., 2011. *The Elements of User Experience: User-Centered Design for the Web and Beyond*. 2nd ed. Publisher: Pearson Education.
6. Marshall, L. & Meachem, L., 2010. *How to Use Images*. Publisher: Laurence King Publishing.
7. Norman, D., 2004. *Emotional Design: Why We Love (or Hate) Everyday Things*. New

York: Basic Books.