



# A suitcase as a PhD? Exploring the potential of travelling containers to articulate the multiple facets of a research thesis

Daria Loi

RMIT University, Australia  
<Daria.Loi@ems.rmit.edu.au>

volume 3 content  
journal home pag  
conference home pag  
copyright

[abstract ° full page](#)

## to cite this journal article

Loi, D. (2004) A suitcase as a PhD

Exploring the potential of travelling  
containers to articulate the multiple facet  
of a research thesis. *Working Papers in  
Art and Design* :

Retrieved <date> from URI

[http://sitem.herts.ac.uk/artdes\\_research  
papers/wpades  
vol3/dlfull.htm](http://sitem.herts.ac.uk/artdes_research_papers/wpades_vol3/dlfull.htm)  
ISSN 1466-491'

What happens if a PhD Thesis cannot be articulated in a conventional format? What if some notions require other senses to be fully accessed, appreciated, and expressed? What if words alone tell only one portion of the story? Can a suitcase and its complex content be a research thesis?

This paper examines these questions via a recent experience where a PhD thesis was designed and developed by the author as a series of travelling containers that include written text and a range of interactive artefacts.<sup>1</sup> More than supporting material, these artefacts are embodied conceptual arguments that transfer ideas and sensations when physically handled.

This suitcase system was designed for five main reasons:

- to experiment with and display in-action some of the propositions the thesis argues,
- to allow readers interpret and construct extra layers of meaning alongside those discussed by the author,
- to enable the creation of an asynchronous dialogue with both author and future readers,
- to allow readers appreciate some of the tools described in the thesis by touching and playing with them besides reading about them, and
- to expand the thesis content beyond what words can describe/define.

The author argues that in some circumstances ideas should be expressed and accessed in multiple ways and that anomalous formats can enable researchers to convey concepts on sensorial, emotional, and intellectual levels that traditional formats cannot always reach. The thesis this paper discusses uses metaphors on several levels, beyond doing so within its written sections. As a matter of fact, the author has explored the opportunity for a thesis as an artefact to become a metaphorical space. In addition, the thesis/artefact is not only a platform for expressing ideas and reflections, but also a place where content can be experienced in the act of unfolding.

This paper is divided into three main sections. In the first part a background to the case study is discussed, including research questions, rationale and methodological underpinnings. The second section offers an analysis of the case study, including an overview of the thesis/suitcase structure and the ways in which readers can interact with it. In the third part the author discusses the key implications of such an approach to research and some possible future developments. This paper argues that the suitcase-format offered the author a chance to be consistent with what the research advocates on a methodological level and to express and make accessible notions that a conventional thesis would have not facilitated.

To conclude, this paper argues that the boundaries of what constitutes a PhD Thesis should be 'stretched' to enable new ways of addressing, demonstrating and accessing content and to allow different individuals to embark on research that is sympathetic to their potential research capabilities and methodological beliefs. Such propositions impact on the nature of postgraduate research and on the competencies necessary to supervise

such research.

1 The travel containers include printed text, images, found objects, custom-designed artefacts, sound recordings, and mixed visual media: elements which belong to, explicate and unfold specific notions and ideas which could not be expressed or experienced through words.