

# Ecofriends, reflection with technology

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## ABSTRACT

The Ecofriends application is designed to engage people in environmental dilemmas when consuming grocery. Ecofriends show different socially constructed dimensions of what it means that a fruit or a vegetable is “in season”. It tell unexpected information about the area, the politics, news and weather where the fruit or vegetable was grown. It also connects the user to other friends using the application. The goal is to support reflection upon ones’ choices when buying groceries by building a space where users can operate their own idea about what season means to them and put it in a broader context. As an attendant of the theme season we also got involved in the dilemma of the western standardized organization of time in minutes hours weeks where nature’s different seasons and rhythms are invisible. We use an aesthetic approach to handle a complex set of information

## Author Keywords

Seasons, social, reflection, design, aesthetics, rhythms

## UNFOLDING ENVIRONMENTAL DILEMMAS

In large parts of the western culture people go shopping for groceries with little knowledge of, for example season, quality, ecology and social justice in grocery consumption. We explore ways to reflect users behavior patterns related to their everyday grocery shopping choices both from an individual and a social perspective. In our first prototype we explore the meaning of seasons. Environmental applications and services to support environmental thinking and behavior when shopping for food is typically providing information and teaching users about what is ecological, what is season, (e.g. Green Guide Naturskyddsforeningen) and seasonal/ ecological recipes. These are easily acquired and communicated, but they leave little room for subjectivity and reflection and it is often not entirely clear who provides this the “truth” of this information. In our approach the aesthetics of the technologies we produce play an important role in providing people with an open-ended design [1] that supports them in reflecting upon their acting rather than telling them what is a correct behavior.

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## THE ECOFRIENDS APPLICATION

Ecofriends is a mobile application that connects you to other friends using the application. It is designed to work as a scanning device used when grocery shopping at the supermarket. A user’s ‘Ecofriends’ are simply other users that use the application and are connected using e.g. existing social networks such as Facebook. The application has three visualization views; the scanning of groceries, the seasonal changes [fig.1] and the product-related visualization [fig.2]. The application visualizes the seasonal rhythms of vegetables and fruits by continuously constructing and characterizing three social voices of what products are in season; the voices of your friends, food experts, and “ordinary people” [fig3].

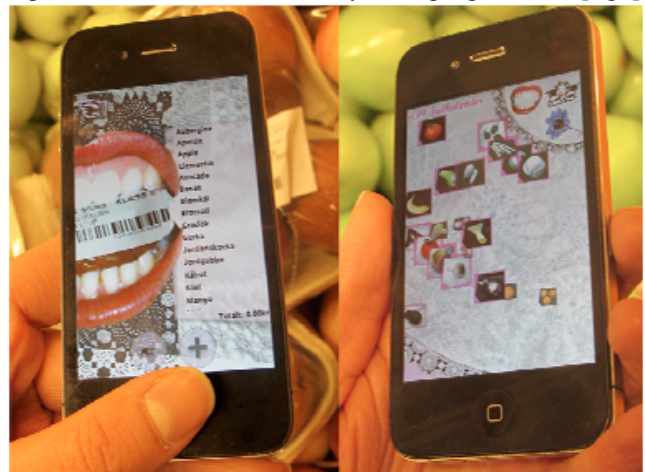


Figure 1. Scanning –and seasonal view

It also dynamically gathers information about the geographical origin of the different products the users are buying. Local news, weather, together with a tweet and a blog relating to the product is used to support users in making a place-related interpretation of the product and its origin. All these voices represent different “truths” and the goal is to support a deeper reflection upon ones’ choices when buying groceries by building a space where users can operate their own idea about what season means and put it into a broader context.

## Form giving for reflection and embodiment

To create a design for reflection we needed to find a balance of ambiguity where users can navigate [2]. The form qualities presented below have been crucial to keeping together the concept throughout the process. In Ecofriends,

we decided to balance qualities of surprise, playfulness and provocation together with the feeling of embodiment to assemble the concept of the application. We carefully sculptured the forms and interactions of the different information sources and we also cared about having an embodied process, where we playfully collected material in real nature to build a library of elements and expressions. [fig.3]



**Figure 2.** Product related information brought by an angel (left), as a collage (right)



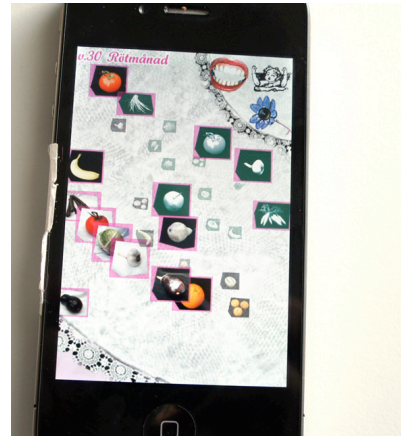
**Figure 3.** Working embodied to get an embodied expression

The central view in the application is the season's view [fig.1] where the user can see the three different voices represented. To express a notion of a room where groceries are grown, rather than a linear timeline showing seasons tied to a year, we have chosen to build the fruits and vegetables stories as a zigzag in time [fig.4] [3]: The fruits and vegetables are each moving inwards- and outwards in a space where the bottom is out of season and the top is in season. To move between different points in time the user scrolls on the fruits' background as if turning a round table and the fruits and vegetables will appear/disappear fluently.

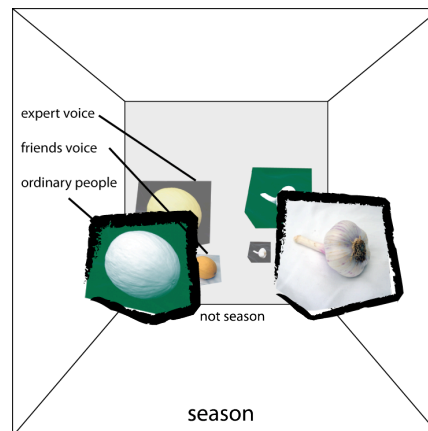
## DISCUSSION

In Ecofriends we want to reconnect people to nature's seasons and time cycles through the channels of social media. One main issue during our process has been to use a mobile application for facilitating reflections around complex dilemmas rather than teaching and preaching. Ecofriends focus lay on the consumption of groceries (fruit and vegetables) but there are many areas that could be

visualized socially and temporally in a way that clearly uncover the plotlines and stories of our behavior. In Ecofriends we try to create a space for reflection and meaning where we keep complexity in the relation between ourselves and complex sets of information.



**Figure 4.** Fruits and vegetables appearing in different depths of the seasonal space.



**Figure 5.** The temporal season space where fruits and vegetables move outwards or inwards depending upon season

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