APPROPRIATING TO SHARE BETTER

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LICENCE
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PUBLICATION DATE
23 May 2023

Many Hands Make Light Work

Back in 2011, Andrew Blauvelt, a graphic designer and design theorist, concluded that the relationship between graphic design and technology has reached a new phase of maturity, redefining design that encompasses the creation of new tools that enable others to practice design. [1] This evolution has been built through gradual adoption of the power of computers, more specifically of programming: "We have to learn how to create tools ourselves. After all, that's what computers are about: a tool for creating tools." [2] The ability of designers to produce their own tools has enhanced a transformation of practices that takes the form of a seemingly paradoxical double movement: appropriating to share better.

For designers, taking ownership of their tool production is a way of liberating themselves and asserting their independence against the monopolistic position that Adobe holds over the tools of the design profession. This claim sometimes even goes as far as advocating for a level of autonomy close to self-sufficiency or even autarchy, which requires a deep understanding and complete mastery of the technical chain, usually necessitating the acquisition of programming skills.

However, this autarkic approach to appropriation is accompanied by a strong desire for sharing, openness, collaboration and versatility, whether between designers, with clients or with the public. This fruitful duality is well summarized by Anthony Masure when he speaks about the work of the collective OSP: "Many hands make light work [3]," and it is frequently affirmed and displayed in the discourse of designers themselves. But what tools are we talking about? And what kind of collaborations? What are their effects on design practices and outputs?

Redefining The Profession : How Collaborative Tools Revolutionize Design By Shifting From The Creation Of Unique, Finalized Forms To An Endless Factory Of Possibilities To Be Explored Through Collaboration

The act of developing collaborative tools for production in design shifts the focus from creating final objects or forms to creating tools that are inherently collaborative in nature. Beyond digital realms, we observe the same inclination among designers to produce tools, sometimes even on paper, that will be used by others to create the final forms. Why is there such an enthusiasm among designers for tool production? I believe it's a matter of designers reappropriating a technical expertise that distinguishes them from those who can "only use" traditional digital tools, which have become accessible and usable by everyone. "At the end of the day, if what you produce can be done by anyone with a computer, why would we need a designer? In other words, we adopt the business language and ask: as a designer, what is your added value? [4]"

Today, the true power lies less in the production of forms, which has become widely accessible to everyone, and more in the creation of tools that will then structure the production of these forms. Thus, while the designer seemingly relinquishes their prerogatives over forms, they actually retain the right to define their outlines and conditions, the realm of latent possibilities. Incidentally, developing tools shifts designer's work by requiring additional skills and prompting new questions: How can this tool be made usable by non-programmers? How can it be easily reappropriated/readopted by those who know how to program? How can the tool be maintained, nurtured and evolved? These are new areas of expertise that disrupt the fundamentals of the profession.

In terms of the produced forms, the development of tools promotes engendering of multiples responses to each problem. Unique and definitive forms are no longer the sole focus, as developing tools implies their repeated use by multiple individuals. Collaborative tools usually enable the creation of a multitude of forms, serving as a series of variations around a single theme. This possibility aligns well with the nature of the digital technology. It doesn't cost more to produce and display an infinite number of different forms online. On the contrary, the attention economy demands a constant abundance of content to be shared on social networks.

Open-Closed : How Do Collaborative Tools Bring Into Play Limits That Promote Diversity Of Forms

Historically, the digitization of design tools has led to their universalization. Global monopolies have emerged around a few companies that produce software with a universal and all-encompassing purpose. Whether in Japan, South Africa, or Europe, we now design using the same tools. Regardless of the project, context or designer, we can always use the same software because they promise - theoretically- to enable the creation of all possible forms.

On the contrary, many digital tools produced by designers are small, highly distinctive tools, often custom-made or derived from an existing base and adapted to a new context. These tools are distinctive not only because they may become irrelevant and unusable outside of their context, but also because they typically have a much narrower range of formal capabilities. Very often, collaborative digital tools introduce a certain number of constraints and provide a limited number of parameters that can then be varied. By offering a narrow infinity of possibilities to explore, the tools created by designers defy the infinite potential of universalist software, which has often fueled the homogenization of productions. This is precisely because the restriction or explicit channeling of possibilities enables the production of a multitude of different proposals while ensuring a certain graphic coherence. It is also this closure that allows for the production of unique forms that are always contextualized and, therefore, constantly renewed. Taken individually, these tools often have a recognizable aesthetic, a sense of déjà vu, but it is through their multiplication that closed tools can claim a certain formal openness in the form of contextual diversity.

The interest in producing closed tools is not solely limited to the formal aspect. The more tools have a universal purpose and a large, permanent user base, the more attention, maintenance, bugfix, progress, and feature additions will be required in order to meet new emerging needs. Restricting the possibilities and staying within the context allows designer to free themselves from these maintenance issues and align the tool production with a more traditional process of creation: one project equals one tool, just as we used to have one project equals one form or a series of forms. Once the project is completed, it can be archived, and one can move on to the next. The traditional lifecycle of tools, especially digital ones, is often different, and if we wish for the renewal of a tool, limiting it also allows a necessary end of cycle. Even though they are formally closed, each tool retains an inherent openness that allows those with programming skills to modify them, enabling potential adaptations to different contexts. This process reopens a new realm of possibilities that is simultaneously infinite and constrained. However, the open nature of coding, should not hide the fact that it is rarely sufficient for genuine sharing and true appropriation to happen.

Different Nuances Of Collaboration : In What Ways Do Various Forms Of Collaboration Manifest Themselves In Tools?

Creating tools only makes sense if others use them [or if they serve a personnal recurring need] [5]. Considering tools from a collaborative perspective is therefore evident, and this relationship has notably emerged in design thanks to the ethics of open-source software, which is based on sharing. Participation has been a part of art and design for a long time, dating back to historically marginalized and activist practices such as Scandinavian participatory design. This approach advocated for a political stance in designing digital tools, involving collaboration with workers and challenging employers [6]. Nowadays, the demand for collaboration with the public has become ubiquitous in design [7] and is advocated as a mode of action by many designers. Relying on collaboration helps to avoid definitive proposals, which are sometimes perceived as too assertive, undemocratic, and therefore lacking legitimacy. It also allows designers to free themselves from the responsibility of form, because for designers who produce tools or collaboration protocols, "forms are not the subject of their concerns and discourse [8]."

But what kind of collaboration are we talking about? There are several ways to collaborate, ranging from contribution to cooperation, sharing, participation and perhaps even exploitation. The development of digital tools in design today presents at least two distinct aspects, as the collaboration between designers and developers differs significantly from the collaboration aimed at the general public.

We'll begin with collaboration between designers. Within the ecosystem of designer-tool producers, many collectives can be found where collaborative tools are used to facilitate collaborative work. Either designers collaborate in the creation process of tools, or some develop them for others to utilize. More widely, for some tools with greater ambitions, such as paged.js library, communities of designers are formed, who are often both users and contributors. Collaboration between designers can also take the form of variation or forking. In this case, the designer leaves open the possibility for others to take up, develop, or adapt their work. Also in this case, we're talking about adapting practices from programming culture, even though, when it comes to variation based on existing work, one can draw a connection with older practices such as remakes and variations that are widely used in typography, for example [9]. What is also new perhaps is that designers today explicitly call for an appropriation of their work and often seek to facilitate it through documentation. However, these forms of collaboration are only accessible to a small elite of designers as they require programming skills that are far from being democratized.

The second type of collaboration is the participation of the "public" in the creation process. Rather than true collaboration, the term commonly used in this case is participation, which extends far beyond the sphere of digital tools in the field of design. Yann Aucompte observes this phenomenon in certain forms of exhibition, for example: "Attending to exhibitions is an active contribution by the public, as they, along with the graphic designer, seek to sharpen a critical culture [...] The exhibition is seen as a space for the public's engagement and participation. The spectator of this kind of exhibition is not passive; they contribute to the creation of a collective critical culture [10]." When we talk about participation, we refer to inclusion in a process of creation, but we immediately grasp the asymmetry that exists between stakeholders. In this context, the designer becomes "a producer or orchestrator of frameworks, systems and actions that allow design to exist. They have lost their traditional role as the sole creator of the work; this role has been usurped by "contributors," sometimes numbering in the thousands [11]. This type of participation is sometimes aimed at the tool's client and offers them a certain level of autonomy, for example, by allowing them to create variations of visuals by manipulating the parameter(s) provided in the software. Compared to the active and egalitarian collaboration between designer-programmers, public participation generally takes the form of a more limited involvement, utilizing the tool through a few predetermined actions that enable the exploration of the space of possible formal variations. The different proposals created are usually placed and presented at the same level because it is their abundance that makes sense, rather than each individual

contribution being taken separately. This participation is also time-limited, taking the form of workshops or guided performances. This form of collaboration mediated by the tool has its own logic because an audience confronted with a new creative tool cannot be instantly trained in design practice or spend hours mastering a tool that they will often only use once. Supervising and supporting usage through workshops also alleviate some of the tedious work involved in designing a long-term digital tool, which requires meticulous fine-tuning of every ergonomic detail to facilitate independent learning and eliminate bugs.

However, it is necessary to question what this participation represents. According to Duhem, demanding to participate, even with the best intentions, can lead to control and exploitation of the participants rather than emancipation [12], including in what he refers to as alternative design. What agency is given to the users of these tools? Are they encouraged to "participate" in the same way as click workers, who can only operate within a limited set of choices and remain anonymous behind the tool's designer? Creating a framework, a set of graphical constraints utilized by others to generate final forms, is not a novel concept. Indeed, it is even the principle behind graphic charters. However, the creation and use of these systems were not introduced as collaborative.

Speaking of collaborative creation tools implies considering this dichotomy and delving into the mechanics of collaboration, which indicates different ways of getting involved. Collaborative creation tools are accompanied by a new divide between those who know how to create or manipulate tools, and those who can only use them. I believe there is still a need to explore ways to bridge this divide.

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2. Jonathan Puckey quoted by Andrew Blauvelt, op. cit. ↩
3. Anthony Masure, «Visual Culture. Open Source Publishing, Git et le design graphique», Strabic.fr, 2014. ↩
4. Andrew Blauvelt, op. cit. ↩
5. Thanks to Yann Trividic, Julien Bidoret and Raphaël Bastide for drawing my attention to these practices, that will be interesting to document. ↩
6. Pelle Ehn, « Scandinavian design: On participation and skill », Participatory design. CRC Press, 2017. p. 41-77. ↩
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RESSOURCES

Des Mondes-ateliers : Les Lieux Et Les Milieux De La Fabrique Du Design Graphique

AUTHOR
Yann Aucompte

EDITOR
Revue Design Arts Medias

DATE
2021

LINK
journal.dampress.org/issues/les-arts-de-faire-acte1-les-modes-dexistence-de-latelier-en-arts-et-en-design/des-mondes-ateliers-les-lieux-et-les-milieux-de-la-fabrique-du-design-graphique

MEDIA
Article

No-one Starts From Scratch: Type Design And The Logic Of The Fork

AUTHOR
Eric Schrijver

EDITOR
i.liketightpants.net

DATE
2013

LINK
i.liketightpants.net/and/no-one-starts-from-scratch-type-design-and-the-logic-of-the-fork

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Strabic.fr

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MEDIA
Article

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AUTHOR
Yann Aucompte

DATE
2021

SUBTITLE
Design Graphique ? Manières de faire de la recherche

MEDIA
Article

Outil (Ou Le Designer Graphique Face À La Post-production)

AUTHOR
Andrew Blauvelt

EDITOR
ÉSADSE/Cité du Design

DATE
2017

SUBTITLE
Azimuts, n° 47, Travail, 2017, ÉSADSE/Cité du Design

LINK
revue-azimuts.fr/numeros/47/outil-ou-le-designer-graphique-face-a-la-post-production

MEDIA
Article

Scandinavian Design: On Participation And Skill

AUTHOR
Pelle Ehn

EDITOR
CRC Press

DATE
2017

SUBTITLE
Participatory design. CRC Press, 2017. p. 41-77

MEDIA
Book