

The power of designers

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ABSTRACT

A big and largely unexamined question in PD is how and to which extent users can possibly collaborate in the design of the design artifact itself. The aim of this workshop is to arrive at a better understanding of the ‘power of making’ by asking: how can we understand this power and its limitations? Inspired by Schön’s notion of ‘design moves’ and based on PD projects or empirical (ethnographic) studies of design work participants are invited to analyze and discuss how the design material as well as the kinds of ‘seeing’ required in different phases of a design project influence the process of ‘making’; how some design decisions become irreversible; and how by including users’ ‘seeing’ and their choices designers may put themselves in a potentially vulnerable position. A central issue underlying these inquiries will be for participatory designers how to find ways of making the process of ‘making’ more open and accessible to the participating users. Connected with this is the question of how to identify important sources of creativity and novelty in a PD project.

THE WORKSHOP THEME

Participatory Design (PD) as an approach to the design of computer-based systems and artifacts aims at involving prospective users in the design process. In order to collaborate with users as co-designers, designers need to share their power with them and acknowledge their different and equally valuable expertise. Such a principled commitment does not make power issues disappear.

Schön’s notion of design moves is helpful for analyzing power issues in PD. Design is a process, in which problems are set and solutions are found and evaluated (Schön 1983). Schön looks at design work as sequences of ‘seeing-moving-seeing’ (e.g. Schön and Wiggins 1992). A move experiment includes the designer’s evaluation of a situation, a move to change it, and an evaluation of the move. The moves should bring the design process forward, closer to the goal or vision (Bratteteig & Stolterman 1997). Each

design move closes some choices whilst opening others. Understanding this dynamic is important for recognizing what users actually participate in: creating choices, selecting a choice, concretizing a choice, ‘seeing’/evaluating the result of a choice (Bratteteig and Wagner 2014).

While users may contribute substantially to opening up choices for design through various techniques of collaboratively imagining potential futures, the (technical) implementation of design ideas seems much more difficult for users to contribute to. A big and largely unexamined question in PD is how and to which extent users can possibly collaborate in the design of the artifact itself.

PD approaches this problem by enabling designers and users to communicate without the formal language of specifications, by for example using exemplars and prototypes as means for exploring the problem space and possible solutions during design (Bratteteig et al. 2010). In a PD project the running prototype tested ‘in the wild’ by users in a real use context may replace a specification document. Also, key to the practice of PD is that the analysis of an application area or problem space and the construction of the solution are inseparable (Schön 1995). Building a prototype is an intricate part of doing the analysis (Bratteteig et al. 2010). However, the building itself is mostly in the hands of professional designers.

While there is no systematic discussion of ‘the power of the designer’ in the literature, we find some related statements and ideas. Bucciarelli has addressed this point in the notion of ‘object world’: ‘worlds of technical specializations, with their own dialects, systems of symbols, metaphors and models, instruments and craft sensitivities’ (1988, p. 162). A position statement at TU Delft (van Ranst et al. 2012) localizes the power of the designer in the ‘making’ part: ‘The designer has the ability to go beyond consulting, conceptualizing and tinkering, and can make what is need to be done, happen. This power is what makes the designers stand out and qualify as a strategic decision maker and leader. With respect to game design O’Connor (2012) points to the ‘power of choices’, arguing: ‘It’s been suggested that true games give the player rather than the designer power over emotion. But I don’t believe that’s true. It’s how much choice we give players, what that choice affects, and how the choice is resolved that gives us as designers power over a player. We present choices, and the manner in which we do so determines how they will emotionally respond’. The three statements point to

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important aspects, which we will address in this workshop: the role of object worlds and the specialized skills associated with them, the ‘power of making’ and the notion of choice.

THE WORKSHOP FORMAT

The aim of this workshop is to arrive at a better understanding of the ‘power of making’ by asking: how can we understand this power and its limitations? We think this is a highly relevant question since it may help participatory designers find ways of making the process of making more open and accessible to the participating users.

The format of the workshop will be participatory. We aim at having a real working session: that means no formal presentations except a brief introduction to the workshop theme at the very beginning. The discussion will be structured along the six sets of questions that are described in the next section, with each of these questions being introduced by an example from participants’ own research. Participants are expected to make their position papers available at least three weeks before the workshop.

HOW TO PARTICIPATE

The workshop is planned for one full day. We think 10-12 participants will be a good number. They will be invited to present position papers of 1000-2000 words based on PD projects or empirical (ethnographic) studies of design work aiming at addressing one or more of the following questions:

- What kinds of ‘seeing’ are required in different phases of a design project and how does this influence the ‘making’? Schön has argued that design moves involve different kinds of seeing: seeing ‘what is there’ (what has been drawn, built) as well as seeing and judging (‘is this how it should be’, ‘does it work?’), before taking the next move.
- How does the ‘design material’ shape the process of ‘making’? Different aspects of a design (e.g. user interface, interaction design, technical system) require different kinds and combinations of specialized skills.
- How does the ‘making’ make some design decisions irreversible; how are other design decisions ‘invisible’, hence not open to scrutiny and debate?
- How can we understand the potential vulnerability of designers? By including users, their ‘seeing’ and choices, designers put themselves in a potentially vulnerable situation; the design material may be difficult to master.
- What can we learn from examples of emphasizing and facilitating non-technical ways of ‘making’, which may strengthen users’ influence on the technical implementation?
- What are important sources of creativity and novelty in a PD project? What does this tell about the power of the designer?

We will use the description above of the workshop theme and format (including ‘how to participate’) as our call-for-participation.

RECRUITMENT STRATEGY

The issue of power in PD has recently drawn some interest visible in recent papers and workshops (e.g., at PDC’2014). Our workshop builds on this interest, expanding the power discussion to designers and not only users and relationships between designers-and-users.

The workshop will be announced on the conference webpage and distributed to a variety of mailing lists (CHI, PDworld, EUSSET, ECSCW, IRIS). The organizers will set up a workshop website through which advertising, submission, distribution of reading material and organization will be handled.

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SHORT BIOGRAPHIES OF THE ORGANIZERS

Tone Bratteteig is professor at the Department of Informatics at the University of Oslo, and leads an interdisciplinary research group in the fields of Participatory Design (PD) and Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW). Her research focuses on understanding the processes of design and use of IT and how they affect each other, both empirically and theoretically. Her interest in PD started in the early 1980s, and her current research continues this PD research changing the focus from work practices to work that goes on in the home. During the last years her research has focused on design and use of 'welfare technology': digital public services aimed at all citizens in their homes.

Ina Wagner is a leading European academic in the field of work and technology, with strong anchors in CSCW (Computer Supported Cooperative Work) and PD (Participatory Design). Ina Wagner's scientific career has been based on interdisciplinarity from the outset. Her major intellectual project is to achieve a deeper understanding of (collaborative) work practices and technology use in fields as varied as health care, architecture and urban planning,

and other professional contexts. Much of her research within the last ten years has been embedded in the context of EU funded technology development projects. This allowed her to immerse herself in experimental, creative, and participatory practices. She also engaged early on in analyzing ethical and political aspects of ICT, with a focus on medical technologies, as member of the European Group on Ethics in Science and New Technologies, European Commission (1998-2001), and as member of the National Austrian Bioethics Committee (since 2001). In much of her work she is also applying a gender perspective. Having retired from her position as Head of the Institute for Technology Assessment and Design, Vienna University of Technology she currently holds an Adjunct Professor position at the University of Oslo and an Associate position at Sydney University of Technology. In 2011 she was awarded the Woman's Prize of the City of Vienna and in 2012 the 'Gabriele Possanner Staatspreis 2011'.