E-PARTICIPATION - ENGAGED PARTICIPATION

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At the "Collaborative media Lab" participants with a background in academia, design and in art, strated a lab to work with design of new technology and its application with a user-centered perspective in both real, virtual and mixed media settings. We point out the need for a more profound relationship when and where to use digital materials and tools and how to recognize and support participants in different kind of collaborations.

Three design environments - non 3d, michael johansson

At Kristianstad University the informatics group have founded the "Collaborative media Lab" including participants with a background in academia, design and in art. The aim of the lab is to work with design of new technology and its application with a user-centered perspective in both real, virtual and mixed media settings. Having worked with participatory design and 3D/virtual realities in several design/research project, we have seen the strength of collaborative design tools that allow newcomers to design and work with 3D. They were able to engage in designing in relation to rather complex scenarios and spaces, and in that way explore the design challenges that are offered in a particular context. This has typically been done in groups located and working together in the same room. But now with the social web including distributed and shared collaborative environments these setting can be used for engaging participants in a dialogue of future urban design challenges in new ways.

In our former research we gained a lot of knowledge and experience of how to use computers and software as tools when directing and conceptualize traditional productions, but we still have a lot to learn when it comes to seeing digital material as a design or artistic material in itself, especially in the area of collaboration. However it is not so strange, as digital design is not yet as mature as traditional design. Digital material have characteristics that differ a great deal from those with which most people are accustomed. Digital materials are usually more complex and flexible, less transparent and tangible. We have to point out the need for a more profound relationship when and where to use digital materials

and tools. We believe that increased complexity in creative development calls for both disciplinary depth and integrative skills.

E-participation is a way of letting the public into planing and decision processes. The keyword here is "processes". Rather than e-democracy, e-participation is about creating dialogues, and being able to contribute with new suggestions and ideas. Working in the research field of design, we stress the importance to give the co-creators a common and grounded point of departure, as well as a common surface for interaction, communication and feedback.

We therefore use a mix of fiction and facts in our planning and writing process, to provide relevant and engaging background information. This is later are handed over as scenarios to the invited participants. The scenarios provide detailed and specific data, which then the co-creator can use as reference material for their future action. The scenarios acts very much as constraints, but also as a first generator in a chain of associative design work that follows, producing a shared proposals. Based on scenarios our model of exploration starts in a believably territory, were all of the co-creators put forward, experiment and establishing iterations between the themselves and the scenarios in a collaborative 3d setting. The scenarios. provide knowledge to the different stakeholders and influence their development using this shared 3d environment as the surface for exploring concepts and communicate them amongst the participants in an constant dialogue. A Collaborative 3d environment can be an effective environment for expanding ideas and gain a better understanding of the design task. Totally untrained persons are able to build rather complex spaces within short time limits. It is playful, fun and stimulating to use, promoted innovative thinking and in that way activating the design process. We have worked with similar question in many different projects. In an ongoing art and research project, the city of Abadyl we made these observations, that was descibed in an earlier Paper called Fieldasy.

The role of scenarios in design has been that of writing narrative descriptions of use. Other cultural domains have generated more speculative methods for collaboration. Originating from the idea of autonomous writing the surrealists borrowed methods from academic disciplines such as sociology, anthropology and psychology to elaborate methods in the form of games for exploring the mechanism of imagination and intensifying collaborative experience. They subverted academic modes of inquiry to undermine rationality and invented playful procedures to release collaborative creativity. The role of procedures and systematic strategies, while still being playful makes a creative constraint. Research on creativity points to processes, which not stems from a vacuum in the individual mind, but that they are a result of serious and known strategies. This applies to many aspects of artistic work. Changing a constraint might be at the core of creative thinking. Other researchers stress the process of association, how one item by acts of creative association creates a new item.

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We use written scenarios. These are handed over to the invited temporary citizens and co-creators. They can then act out the scenario, in and by themselves chosen environment that in the end helped them produce the artifacts. Our scenarios tries to bring field studies and fantasy together, to slowly create a discreet dynamic tension and/or displacement between persons, things, times, places, and events that are not usually - if ever – associated into new and surprising conjunctions. By using scenarios we are able to provide detailed and specific data, which the co-creator can use as background material for their action. Hopefully the co-creator themselves imports qualities into the world, which do not and cannot stem from the City of Abadyl itself.

Example: An interview with one of the participators revealed that; "Imagination was tickled by the knowledge of being part of a networked mapping I didn't know in detail. The scenario got me going, but I felt no repressing obligation towards it and also felt more liberated that in the situations of my own work where I'm the responsible and potential object for critique"

By placing "hard-to-answer questions" in a scenario, where the respondent is not fully in control of or responsible for his or her actions, he or she can eventually take on responsibility for such questions and find ways and means to act out the given problem in a shared enviroment.

When we are involving participants in complex and/or controversial questions, in a shared dialogues about future issues, it is important not to forget to clearly state what level of influence their participation will have, and process wise, what kind of output, feedback and final result they can expect. Otherwise we will have people playing around with future emerging possibilities with no idea how it will be used or communicated.

Our conclusion is that this is due to the fact that E-participation and the actual design of virtual spaces can support participants and stakeholders to combine different ideas, negotiate and prioritize. In this way the shared environment deepened the understanding of designing in the context of future and complex urban spaces.

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References and Notes:

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