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PROJECT PLAN

Introduction

With my project I would like to test and experiment an approach to graphic design strongly based on collaboration.

- *Can we apply the principles of peer-to-peer practices to graphic design?*
- *Can this kind of approach be alternative to the traditional design process?*
- *Which kind of advantages this kind of approach would give?*

I want to show how using a peer-to-peer collaboration in a design group is not only possible but would also be significant in order to develop a wider range of alternatives result and it would give a better outcome since it satisfies the needs of a critical group of persons and not only an individual.

More in detail I'll start analyzing the traditional graphic design process, looking at each phase to understand how collaborative they are. Then I'll try to introduce a new kind of collaboration based on a peer-to-peer approach. Later I'll develop a methodology and a toolkit based on it in order to maximize the effect of this new kind of collaboration. This methodology and the toolkit will be tested in a series of workshops to see how effective they are and what kind of influence they have on the final outcome in real practice.

The final result of the workshop together with the related documentation will be my final project.

Collaboration

*When two or more people work together to create or to achieve the same result
(Cambridge's dictionary)*

There are a lot of different kinds of collaboration, the one I want to analyze with my project and with my research is collaboration in a creative process, more precisely collaboration within a graphic design process. Traditionally with collaboration we mean "working together" (from the Latin *cum* -together and *laborare* -working) in order to get the same result. In this particular case I will try to work with a peer-to-peer collaboration within a small group of people without any hierarchical structure: a model where each individual has the same rights in the decision making and the same amount of practical work to do.

With this project I want to analyze how this kind of collaboration happens. I want to find a way to increase the collaboration, making it easier and maximizing the result of the interaction between the participants and eventually I want to show in a practical way if this kind of collaboration can work, which are the limitations and the advantages, and what kind of result can be achieved.

I DO want:

- work with a small and defined group of professionals
- work with a peer-to-peer model
- an unique final result

I DON'T want

- work with an open community
- work with a hierarchical model
- a multiple final output

Collaboration in Graphic Design.

What is the actual state of collaboration in graphic design?

What kind of collaboration exist in graphic design?

If we look at the contemporary firms in graphic design it's almost impossible to find a name that refers only to one person. The strong individualities that characterized the graphic design world until the year 2000 have been replaced with studio names. This can be seen as an answer at the capitalistic question of producing more in order to earn more, an application in graphic design of a classical industrial model.

From my experience working in some graphic design studios I can tell they are still based on hierarchical structures and the necessity of working in group is still in order to produce more in less time. The group is structured in order to work *more* and not *better*. Is important is to be able to manage a lot of different projects at the same

time, nobody is taking advantages of the creative potential of the group.

Normally the boss gives the idea and he has the last word on the practical result which is done by a so-called junior designer. What could happen is that the “executor”, the junior designer, gives a different interpretation of the given guidelines. At this point the result can be judged as wrong or bring an alternative: a result that wasn't expected from the boss but that can be seen as correct. In this case a primitive kind of collaboration starts: the boss gives feedback based on the new solution and the designer will work on a solution that is a new one.

In these days two more methods are taking position in graphic design: *Collaborative Design* and *Participatory Design*.

Both of them refer to a really specific case of design.

The first one (*As defined in the Essay “The Dynamics of Collaborative Design: Insights From Complex Systems and Negotiation Research” - Mark Klein, Peyman Faratin, Hiroki Sayama and Yaneer Bar-Yam*) refer to a methodology used to solve complex problem. In this case the collaboration is in between individuals, or small groups, that work independently on different aspects of the same problem.

The second one (*Explained in “Design studies: Theory and research in graphic design” - Chapter XII - Audrey Bannet*) refer to a methodology used to solve cross-cultural communication issue. In this case the collaboration happen in between the designer and his costumer in order to understand better the customer's needs. We define it in this case as participation since the customer is participating, and not collaborating, to the process. The final result is always done by the designers considering the customers' intervention/suggestion.

What emerge at this point is that doesn't exist a kind of graphic design based on collaboration in between individuals that have the same right on the same aspects of the project. The usual application of collaboration is in order to split the problem in smaller tasks.

In my personal practice as a graphic designer, a part from the studios' experiences, I've been working for the past 5 years in a strict kind of collaboration with no task divisions and I've seen that could bring really interesting results. The decision to work with this method was natural and unconscious in the first place, coming from a reciprocal trust in each other skills. The conscious of an approach based on peer-to-peer collaboration came after, comparing projects done individually with the ones done in pair. For a certain while we even thought of a tasks division, then looking to a wide enough range of projects we realize that, on a long term, the projects that were able to satisfy the two of us were the ones we liked better. They were more various on a visual level, less related to our individual taste, and they were more correct on a technical level.

After a while we realize that an effective peer-to-peer collaboration allows a more objectively correct result with no significant waste of time and also a range of

solutions that are truly alternative to each other and not only a bigger amount of solutions.

The risk of working individually is to communicate only one point of view on an issue while adding more points of view means adding possible solutions. Not only that, since more solutions normally come from the interaction of two different points of view, once that you reach a solution that is shared by more than one you can be sure that this solution will work better than the one you could find by yourself.

As Bruno Munari said an idea is never an enlightenment, but the final result of a research, an idea won't arrive suddenly but only if you look for it, following several steps that will bring you to the final solutions passing by changes and rethinking. A single individual has a limited range of possible solutions, in a group the number of alternatives is not only the sum of the single alternatives but even the ones coming from the interaction in between all of them. The practice of brainstorming has already demonstrated how starting from someone else's idea you could point out aspects that the original author would never see as relevant, or even think about something completely different starting from that point. If it's working for conceptualization why it should not work for every aspect, from the research to the practical realization?

This kind of approach has been used for years now in certain kind of open source project. As described in "The Cathedral and the Bazaar" having a project done by a group of people working together means having a better result.

From what I've seen in my personal experience there are two issues that still make it hard to work in a peer-to-peer environment

First of all the absence of theoretical methods that could be applied. Having some methodologies to use as a starting point would help people working in a certain way. What I've seen in my experience is that once you decide to work in a peer-to-peer environment you need to find how to do that. This is in fact the first aspect I want to consider with my final project and with my research: what kind of methodologies can be applied to make collaboration easier and to maximize the results

Secondly the lack of graphic design softwares that can be used in a collaborative environment. In graphic design it is not easy to share resources. Sharing an Illustrator's or a Photoshop's file is not an easy task. You need to consider the extensions readable from different softwares, the different versions of the same software, imported images, fonts used and all these small aspects that make the same file look different in different cases. In the best case you will waste some time, but more often sharing a file means losing a lot of work.

Some of the new features introduced with the latest versions of this software seem to address the issue of collaboration. This kind of tools seems to aim more to show the new technological possibilities instead of satisfying real needs. That's why the second aspect I want to consider with my project and my research is what kind of tools could help graphic designers that want to collaborate, independently from the

tools they use in their everyday practice, but strongly based on the methodologies mentioned before.

Project Description

The final result

The final project I will realize should be able to show an alternative approach to the traditional design process.

With this project I want to show an alternative approach to graphic design, based on my personal ideas and experience about collaboration. I want to help people that want to collaborate but don't have a well defined methodology or a suitable toolkit. I don't want to find the ultimate solution to the issue of collaboration in graphic design. Neither I want to twist or negate completely the traditional methodology

It will consist of two the main parts: a graphic design artifact and the documentation of the process necessary to realize it.

the artifact

The graphic design artifact needs to be the result of a collaborative process, in order to show the potential of this methodology. It should come as a result of a workshop or of a series of workshops, in this last case I could even produce a different artifact for each workshop.

It needs to be a relatively simple graphic design product, such as *a book, a poster, a flyer* or *a magazine*, nothing as complex as *a brand identity* or *a font*. Something simpler, that can be done quickly and redone if necessary will allow to try out different methodologies during the realization in order to find the best solution possible. Being a project addressed to graphic designers this will show them something that they are familiar with.

It's not possible at this point to define it in detail since, as I said, needs to be the result of a teamwork but I can say it will be about one particular result that can be achieved by a team working within a structure based on peer-to-peer collaboration: the absence of a predefined style. The product will be on its own a critique of predefined styles, such for example as the Helvetica's overuse common in the pseudo-underground communication or the glossiness of the 2.0 graphic design.

The main role of this product will be to show WHAT is possible to do with a certain approach.

the documentation

The documentation will show the process necessary to realize the product and it will be the main part of my final project. It will consist of an installation where will

be possible to see the evolution of the product, from the concept to the final realization, through the collaboration of the designers involved in the process.

Technically it will consist of a webpage running locally. An inspiration can be for example the network graphs used in Github (http://github.com/images/modules/home/medium_screens/network.png), in my idea I would like to show, together with the branches, the outputs of the interactions in a model that would improve the navigability of the graph.

The documentation should also include a brief description of the methodologies and of the tools used.

The main role of the documentation will be to show HOW is possible to realize a certain product.

graduation show

The artifact and the documentation will be shown in the final exhibition, next to the final artifact will be possible to navigate the process to see how the product has been developed. In this way the visitor will be able to see immediately what is possible to produce and how is possible to produce it. I'm thinking about leaving some sort of open interpretation. As I already said I'm not aiming to give a definitive solution and I wouldn't mind leaving to the visitors the chance to interpret the results.

While the final artifact will probably be an analog product that can be placed on a wall or on a pedestal the documentation will need a computer and ideally a beamer in order to show the process right next to the product.

How to realize the final project

In order to realize the project as described above I need to develop three additional parts:

- An alternative design methodology.
- A toolkit based on this methodology.
- A graphic design workshop to test the methodology and to realize the product that will be the first part of my final project.

the methodology

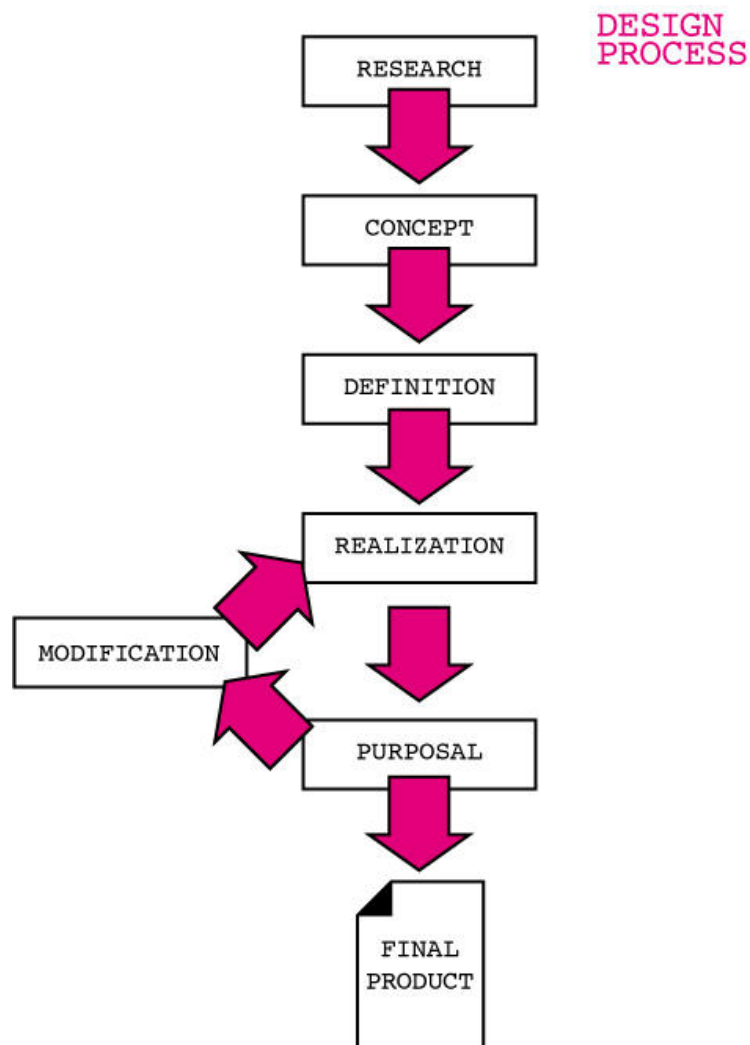
The methodology will be the first part of my final project. It is the way the final product will be realized and what the documentation will describe.

This methodology will be initially defined on the base of my personal experience and on existing practices, not only from the graphic design field but also from

other disciplines such as open source development or forecast methods. Then the methodology will be tested and reviewed on the base of real life experiments such as workshops. At this regard I'm interested not only in how people will react to the methodology proposed but also in how they would normally collaborate and how they would organize themselves in a collaborative environment. I think this would be useful not only to review my proposals but even to think about new ones.

It will be applied to the traditional design process where I'll try to figure out in which steps a certain kind of collaboration already exist aiming to include a new kind of collaboration (peer-to-peer, as described before) in every steps.

The design process I'll take in exam is defined as follow:



This methodology should work both for traditional and experimental design processes, in a sense it would be an experimental approach to a traditional issue. It should be able to produce only one result, as already happens with a traditional practice.

The methodology aims to make easier the interaction in between the participants;

maximize the collaboration; build the identity of the group as a whole; help the development of a peer-to-peer collaboration on the level of conceptualization, creation and decision making.

This methodology should:

- Allow a wider range of alternative solutions during the process, as previously explained, based on the iteration of the idea in between two or more participants;
- Help to take a decision that will satisfy everyone expectations and needs. This means in a first place keeping people motivate to work together on the same project. Secondly a final result that satisfy more people since the release should have more possibilities to be understood by more people
- Gives equal opportunities to all the participants, independently from their previous experience or background. Any idea or solutions will be judged only for itself.

At the moment I'm mainly referring to three collaborative methodologies as inspirations:

- The *Delphi Method*, a systematic, interactive forecasting method. I'm particularly interested in the iterative development of the forecast within the experts' panel and in the role of the facilitator as a center of control. The common point of this method whit the case I'm taking in exam is that both refer to problems that doesn't have only one objective solution.
- The *Bazaar Model*, the methodology theorized by Eric S. Raymond as a model for the open source development. In this case I'm particularly interested in the role of the project leader in the decision making process.
- The *Extreme Programming*, a kind of agile software development method. From all the aspects of this methodology I'm mainly focused on the idea of a collective ownership of the "products" and on the Pair Programming, at this regard I'll be interested in finding an equivalent to this method in the graphic design field.

the toolkit

The toolkit will be an extra layers of tools I'll apply on top of the traditional tools used in graphic design. I won't design alternative tools since designers should be able to apply them with tools they are already comfortable with. I don't want to design something to be used INSTEAD of the Adobe Creative Suite but something that could be used WITH it.

The toolkit will help the graphic designers that want to work in a peer-to-peer environment.

The toolkit should make easier to work with an alternative methodology and make easier to document the process. It can include existing tools; new tools inspired to existing tools used in other practices or completely new tools.

The tools included in the toolkit will be focused on sharing ideas and resources, keep track of the changes, work on each other materials and take collaborative decisions. It has to be closely related to a methodology since nowadays happens too often that certain tools are developed without a real need for them or without a real awareness of their potential. There already few tools claiming to help collaboration, think for example at the new “share my screen” features, introduced in the cs4 version of photoshop. How many designers are aware of it? Is it really useful in order to collaborate? Is it useful to see what someone is doing while he’s doing it instead of waiting for a final result? Can be used in an alternative way? Can it for example be used for something inspired from the pair programming method? In this regard, from a research point of view, would be useful for example to investigate on how these new features are introduced in the Creative Suite, Is there a real request for that? Or is just about showing new possibilities without really knowing if someone will use them? Who’s deciding what needs to be introduced in the software? On which basis?

At this moment the tools I’m taking in exams are:

- Wikis, that can be used to define the project on a conceptual level
- Version Control System, already used in open source development can be useful to keep track of the evolution of a certain files, of the changes applied and of the different directions taken. A tool inspired by Version Control Systems should keep track of the evolution in time of a project, showing the different version in time and how they relate to each other, in order to keep track of the changes and of the different directions taken by the project. This tool will help designer sharing their materials and would give an overview of the project development that can be useful for the documentation.
- I will need to implement something that will help sharing the files, I believe that could be included in a hypothetical version control system for graphic design files. This tool should help solving the issue on compatibility on different platform, even just making designers aware of the aspects they need to consider before sharing a file or even making designers able to upload not only to upload their file but also the resources used in it such as images or fonts.

What I’ve already implemented at this regard is a little piece of software called “pickpic”. This tool should be used in the RESEARCH phase of the process helping the participants sharing their inspirational resources found on the internet (all the info regarding pickpic can be found at <http://www.pickpic.timoklok.com/>).

Since the project is about collaborative methods I’ll take a collaborative approach for the development of the toolkit. I’ll run all the development as an open source project, the documentation and the research will be open and communicate trough

a mailing list and a wiki.

The software will be shared using mercurial where external people could try out the latest releases and subscribe changes and new features. Running the project in this way should give me a better understanding of the issue from a different perspective and it could be an inspiration for further implementations or new ideas.

the workshop

From the workshop will come out the final product described above as a part of my final project. The workshop will be used as a playground to test the methodology and the relative toolkit implemented before in order to study how they are used by the participants and subsequently improve them. If the methodology and the toolkit are developed in order to help a group the workshop would be the place to see if they are actually working or how they are working.

The result of the workshop will be a simple graphic design product, for example a poster or a book. It will express the idea of absence of personal style as a characteristics of a good design product, how avoiding a personal style would help communicating an idea instead of its author. The absence of personal style should come from the contemporary presence of different points of view.

The participants will be ask to reflect on the existence of a personal style in their own practice together with the presence of predefined styles in contemporary graphic design, such as the overuse of Helvetica and the swiss grid, vintage or web 2.0 graphics.

Collaboration should happen on the level of conceptualization and practical realization, if possible, later on, even on the decision making process. They will ask to try out different methodologies of team work moving from an individual approach to a more collective one. In this way they will have the chance to try different methods testing weakness and advantages of collaboration.

The participants will be asked to work on two different levels, firstly trying to produce as more variations as possible and then trying to reduce them to the unique final result.

The workshop will give me the opportunity to study how the individuals organize themselves in a group and certain group dynamics as for example who collaborate and how and the necessity or not of a moderator.

The workshop will take place from February to March 2010, in parallel to the first class of the Crosslab course at the Willem De Kooning Academie, in four meeting of four hours each, but it could take place in a different format in other occasions.

The workshop is addressed to a group of 4-12 graphic designers, graphic design students or to anyone involved in graphic design with a particular interest in alter-

native forms of collaboration.

At this moment the workshop at the WdKA still needs to be confirmed, in case this option won't work I'll find other opportunities to test the methodology and the toolkit, I'm thinking about few one-day workshops which can be open to the public or self organized using my personal connections.

In case the workshop won't give productive results I'm still open to use those results in order to highlight the problems emerging in a collaborative environment. At this point most of my thesis need to be demonstrate. I'm aware of the fact that they can fail but this would be an interesting starting point to change my perspective. That would give me anyway the chance to understand better the problem and see on a practical base if some of the issues are simply unsolvable.

Technical Details

The toolkit is going to be a layer over the normal tools used by designers, they are not going to be an alternative to the Adobe's Creative Suite but something that can be used independently from the tools normally used to design. Because of that they need to be cross platform and the idea is to have them running in the Firefox browser, since it allows a strong personalization and can run on all the most common operative systems used by designers.

The technical skills I need to gain or improve are:

Regarding the tools implementation:

- Better knowledge of Greasemonkey
- How to implement a non-Greasemonkey add-on in order to change the browser itself and not only the webpages.
 - Improve my knowledge about PHP and MySQL, especially to realize an application installable on a different server for each group of people instead of hosting everything on the same server.
 - Go deeper into database theory

Regarding the visualization:

- Improve my knowledge about Javascript, dig more into the possibility of using jQuery or Scriptaculous to visualize the steps.
- Learn how to keep track of the changes in order to visualize them.

Relevant projects

Since I have to deal with a workshop the main referring point in this case are the workshops done by Luna Maurer, Edo Paulus, Jonathan Puckey and Roel Wouters for their conditional design manifesto (www.conditionaldesign.org). I'm particular-

ly interested in their way of dealing with collaboration in between the four of them and with other participants, hence I will arrange an interview with them.

On a theoretical point of view I'm interested in looking at the experience of burda-style.com. In this web platform the open source mentality is applied to sewing. I'm interested in seeing how the users interact with each other and how the exchange of resources work in this case.

On a more practical level I find particularly interested the shiftspace.org project. Shiftspace is aiming to create a peer-to-peer layer of modifications to the world wide web. This project is not interesting only for the theory behind that but also because some of the technology used can be useful for my toolkit as well.

Github.com is a really valid inspiration for the second tool I want to implement, something that would allow participants to share their resources keeping track of changes, versions and users interactions. It can be also a good inspiration for the final documentation since all this aspects need to be documented and shown in order to make the final result significant

Timeline

December

Release a first version of pickpic, a platform for a collaborative research.
(now available at <http://www.pickpic.timoklok.com/>)

January

Define the workshop program in detail:

Draft the methodologies

Read and research for the thesis about existing collaborative methods

Refine pickpic:

Realize the XPI version

Set users profile

Implement the possibility of having a different shared board for different projects

Research on existing technology, how to fill the gap if they exist.

Implement a platform for sharing files and keep track of the changes

Research on existing technologies (version control system)

February

First Half:

Define the methodologies in details

Read and research for the thesis about issues of collaboration

Interview with Lafkon

Test and release a platform for sharing files

Second Half:

Workshop @ WdKA

March

First Half:

Workshop @ WdKA

Second Half:

Build the workshop's documentation

Refine methodologies and tools based on the workshop results

Start build the visualization of the workshop's results

Write the thesis

Review the chapter written in the first trimester - The decision making process

Detail outline of the others chapters

Write a chapter - The egos issue in collaboration

Design how to present and test the results @ Pixelache (to be confirmed)

April

Deal with the feedback from Pixelache

Small changes to the tools, to the methodologies and to the thesis

Make the documentation presentable for the mockshow

Write the thesis

Write a chapter - Consensus in collaborative methods

Apr 20th-23rd

Build up mock graduation show fro the PZI Open House

Apr 24th

Open House and mock final show

Apr 26th

Exam committee assesment of graduation project prototypes

Write the thesis

Put everything together and write conclusions

May

Deliver the thesis

May 7th

Recommended deadline Master's thesis submission

Fix the thesis

May 16th

Ultimate deadline Master's thesis submission

Work on the results visualization

June

First week

Last minute modifications

Jun 11th-13th

Build up graduation project installation

Jun 14th

Master exam

Jun 28th

Build up graduation show

July

Jul 3rd

Graduation show