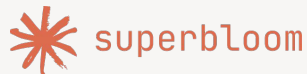


WELCOME

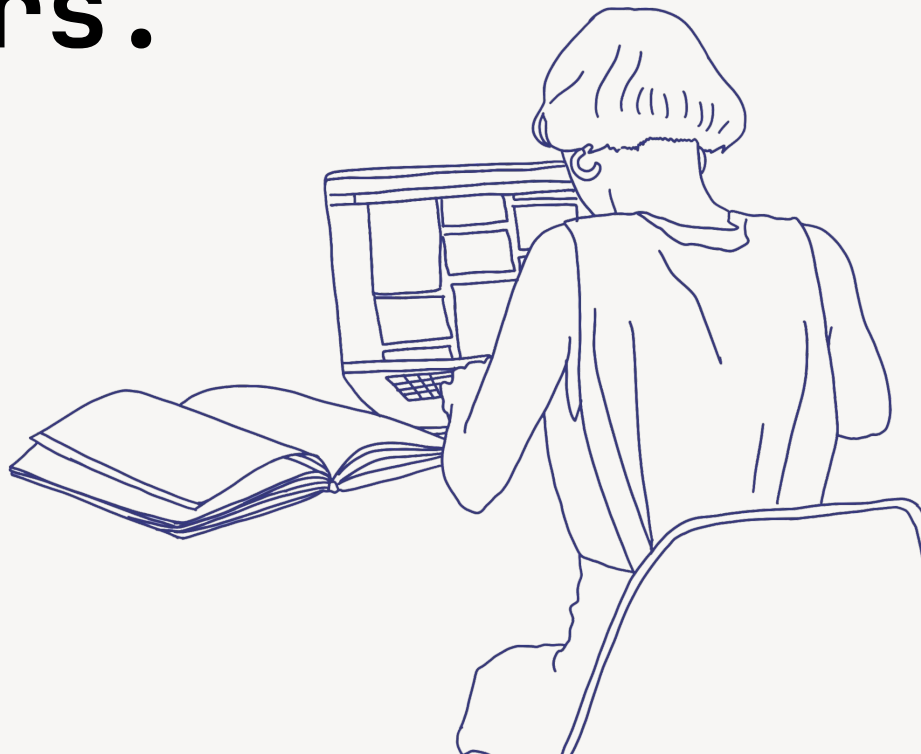
# The secret lives of Open Source Designers.

Summary of diary studies of designers contributing to OSS

Eriol Fox they/them



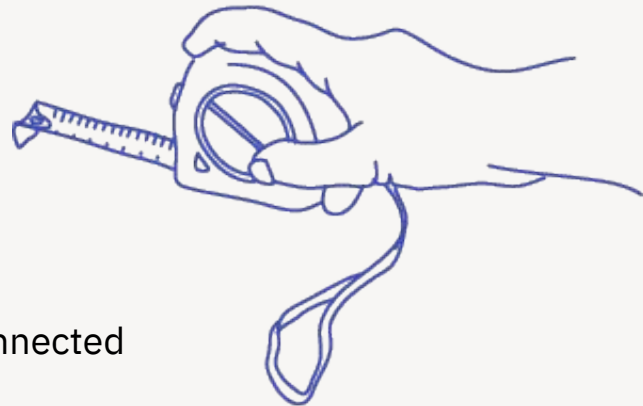
<https://github.com/simplysecure/Diary-Studies-Designers-in-OSS>



Superbloom is committed to changing who technology serves by leveraging design to shift power.

You may know us as Simply Secure, our former name.

# We design for...



... high-risk communities in remote, hard-to-reach, poorly connected regions to safely give user feedback.



... funders to best support sustainable critical digital infrastructure.



... open design and open source design to become normalised in tool creation, improvement and growth.

# Some of our projects



Deceptive Design: Moving Towards Trusted Design Patterns -

<https://techlab.webfoundation.org/deceptive-design/overview>



“User Testing can Be Fun” - a set of visual and interactive resources on user testing for open source developers - <https://simplysecure.github.io/devs-guide-to/>



USER - Sloan Foundation grant to study usability practices in open source scientific software projects - <https://user-project.superbloom.design/>



Building Blocks - a toolkit for funders to better understand and support critical infrastructure projects - <https://buildingblocks.simplysecure.org/>



senior designer and researcher

**eriol fox**

@erioldoesdesign

eriol@superbloom.design

# Hi, I'm Eriol. (Ehh-roll).

## They/Them pronouns.

12+ years in digital product design and UX.

5-6 years in open source software (OSS).

1.5 years at Superbloom.

PhD (@Newcastle) researching how design is done and how designers are involved in Humanitarian & Human Rights OSS.

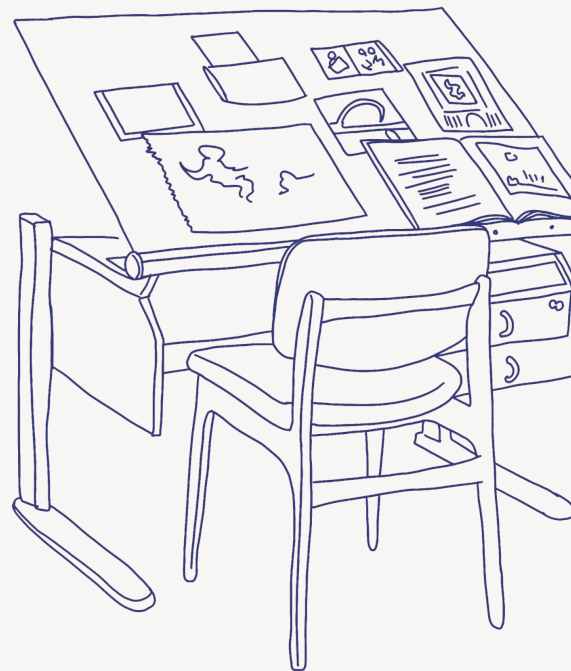
In 2022, **Vermont Complex Systems** Center at The **University of Vermont** awarded **Superbloom** an OCEAN grant (Open-Source Ecosystems and Networks Research Awards program) to **investigate** and **give designers** (who are currently contributing to OSS) an opportunity to **describe their experiences** in a safe environment and through **anonymous, privacy respecting** means.



# Research aims

This short research project aimed to investigate some key questions related to design in OSS and fill some of the larger systemic "gaps" of information from non-code contributors' experiences in OSS.

Design is sometimes done by developers and sometimes by those with design skills. It's difficult to understand where these roles and boundaries lie and with whom, and what are optimal conditions for success.



# Research questions

-  What are the experiences that designers contributing to OSS commonly have?
-  What are the conditions that can set designers up for success within OSS projects, specifically regarding "contributions of design"?
-  What conditions create a sense of inclusion, both at the project and community scales, for designers in OSS?
-  What is a design contribution and how is human centered design understood within OSS communities?
-  How do designers and OSS project developers/maintainers/communities describe "successful" design contributions?
-  How do designers describe a "successful" relationship with OSS project developers/maintainers/communities around their OSS project?



# Study Structure

We started off the study with a series of semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 45 minutes. Here we asked critical background questions such as:



How did you start in OSS?



How did you start in Design?



What OSS do you contribute to and participate in?



How do you decide on a project that they'd like to work on/contribute to?



Do you contribute to OSS as part of a paid role, volunteer (free) or both? In what ratio? How does paid/volunteer OSS work feel to you?  
etc...



# Who we studied and what OSS they contributed to

We published an open call for designers to participate in a diary study and selected as many globally distributed people as possible.

Our participants were from and reside in: Canada, USA, Nigeria, Brazil and the Netherlands.

Our participants were sixty percent women identifying and forty percent man identifying.

Sixty per cent of participants were early in their design (and OSS) careers, forty percent were postgraduate students.

All of our study participants had been contributing to OSS for at least one year.

Participant ID	Part Time / Full Time	Employment Status (Contract, Staff, Self-employed , etc)	Student (postgraduate)	OSS Projects contributed to
Grey	FT	Self-employed	No	2-3
Pink	PT	Contract	Yes	3
Yellow	FT	Staff	No	3-5
Green	FT	Self-Employed Contracts	No	4-6
Blue	FT	Staff	Yes	2-3



## Find out about:

1. How these designers first become involved in OSS.
2. How designers decide to contribute to an OSS project.
3. What tools designers use when contributing to OSS.
4. What artifacts were shared across the sixteen weeks.

In the longer findings document:

[github.com/simplysecure/Diary-Studies-Designers-in-OSS](https://github.com/simplysecure/Diary-Studies-Designers-in-OSS)



# Designer-developer collaboration

Designer and developer involvement and collaboration was a recurring theme in the diary study.

At some point, all designers used GitHub or GitLab - traditionally seen as tools for developers - for communication and collaboration with developers. However, the participants also mentioned struggling with the tools.



“

*“(I’m) not sure the best way to use GitLab for design tickets.” “*

*“I hate GitLab, it is confusing and the team did not put me as (a) developer yet.”*

”





# Designer-developer collaboration

Conversely, developers were more involved in the design process, with designers *“Getting responses from developers about design proposals”*.

*All designer participants mentioned getting feedback from the developers as a crucial step in their process.*



“

*“(I) made a user-flow diagram to make my designs more comprehensible”.*

*“A developer found my organized Figma files useful”.*

”







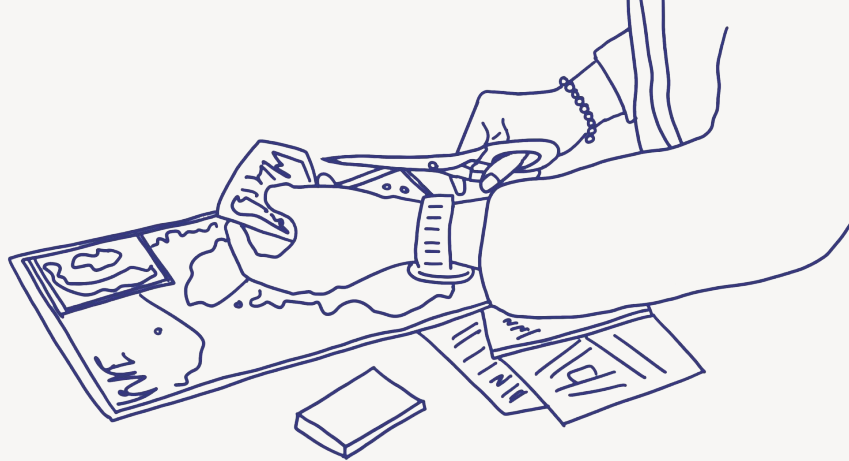
# Openness practices

Designer participants share assets and resources with their community and other stakeholders in an effort to be more open.

One participant mentioned migrating to an open source tool to be more open, and they also reported having issues with the previous, not OSS design tool.

*“I’m on the way! Using Penpot and not Figma, maybe?”*

*“Penpot can not navigate between pages yet”.*



“I heard back from someone I shared open design resources with that it was helpful and that they will be using our contributions”.



# Openness practices

The motivations for being open seem to follow some general themes. Designer participants who share their assets and resources do so for easier collaboration with stakeholders.

Another motivation for sharing assets was to have more involvement from the community, as one participant “*shared the doc with the team at (OSS community organization) for other designers to make inputs*”.



“

*“Apart from my design contributions, I also had conversations with other open source designers and project owners on the future of design in OSS for 2023.”*

”





# Designers speaking about success

1. **Success via feedback**
2. Success via completion of design and/or "live release"
3. Success via knowing what is a priority for the OSS
4. Success via attracting more designers to the OSS
5. Success via acknowledgement, inclusion and collaboration
6. Success via accessibility and usability

# Success via feedback

The designers saw their work as **successful** when the **feedback** they **received** as **relevant** and **useful**.

Designers tend to assume “they’ve got it right” (i.e. are successful) if there are no questions or feedback on their design work. This was less so if the designer did not seem particularly confident about their proposed design.

Participants also viewed “slow” feedback negatively – the lack of communication was seen as a progress blocker.





“

*“When I get feedback on what's wrong in my design and get next steps that are actionable”.*

*“There was a delay in feedback from my prior conversations with the maintainer, and I was unable to kick off immediately”*

”





# Designers speaking about success

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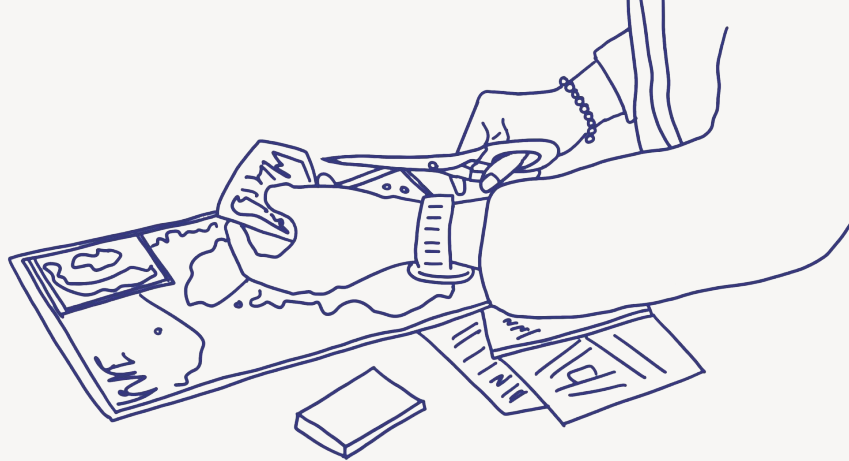
# Success via completion of design and/or "live release"

All designers **universally celebrated** contributions that went "live" in a "finished" way such as **websites** being **accessed** by the **public/people outside of the project**.

However, most designers were unsure when something would go live if they were unable to control the process and actually publish the work themselves.

Designers also expressed frustration around design that, in their opinion, was ready to go live but instead was held up by rounds of approval or at worst, by developers or maintainers requesting design changes.





“Not sure which designs will be implemented when, since we're not using product management strategies”



# Designers speaking about success

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# Success via knowing what is a priority for the OSS

**Measuring progress** on priorities was **difficult** and one designer spoke consistently of the need for a **product** or **project manager** to guide them to the **highest priority** task.

Designers employed a lot of tactics in order to better understand priorities in the absence of a documented roadmap or plan for the OSS, or when the OSS plan exists in a single mind or collective of OSS community members' minds.

Designers commented that there were “no clear roadmaps for implementation” of the OSS and that while issues and meetings presented a pathway, these were not always coherent or indicative of any wider objectives.





“

*“Not much of a hack, but I've started to get important stakeholders (often project leads) to sketch out their ideas more so that I know what they're thinking”.*

”





# Designers speaking about success

1. Success via feedback
2. Success via completion of design and/or "live release"
3. Success via knowing what is a priority for the OSS
4. **Success via attracting more designers to the OSS**
5. Success via acknowledgement, inclusion and collaboration
6. Success via accessibility and usability

# Success via attracting more designers to the OSS

Designers expressed **joy** when they **got to work** with other **designers** and other **contributors** on **design tasks** in the OSS projects that they contributed to.

When gathering collaborators in OSS for design tasks there is an awareness from designers already in OSS that most designers are newer and looking to gain certain types of experience with their contributions.

Future hopes for a specific OSS project in this study, is that increasing designers working on OSS design tasks would *“Reduce the pressure on me and the other active contributors”*.





“

*This is a challenge because most designers looking to contribute are new designers and are contributing to open source to gain experience”.*

*“(I) want to do actual design work”*

”





# Designers speaking about success

1. Success via feedback
2. Success via completion of design and/or "live release"
3. Success via knowing what is a priority for the OSS
4. Success via attracting more designers to the OSS
5. **Success via acknowledgement, inclusion and collaboration**
6. Success via accessibility and usability

# Success via acknowledgement, inclusion and collaboration

**Positive comments** were **given** to all **designers** across the duration of the diary study. Comments were **specific** to **designs**, and some were **directly from users** who were excited about **improvements to the OSS** as a result of involvement in usability testing and design.

To compound the difficulty with inclusion and collaboration in OSS, designers often struggle to assert themselves in collaboration situations where developers, maintainers and users speak at length about particular issues or topics, and the designer doesn't always feel empowered to steer back to what they need to make their design contribution successful.





“

*“I received a very positive response on the logo designs I've worked on for the OSS project and dates are planned for the launch of new logos”.*

*“I noticed if you are not part of a community it is difficult to contribute as a designer”.*

”





# Designers speaking about success

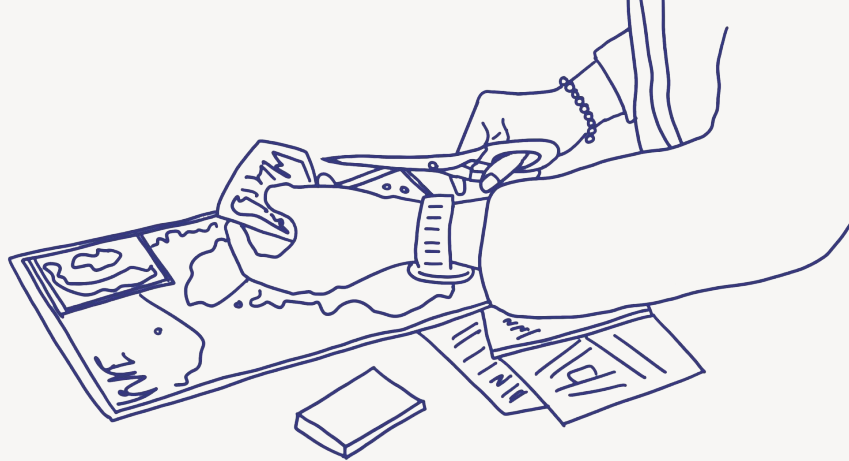
1. Success via feedback
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3. Success via knowing what is a priority for the OSS
4. Success via attracting more designers to the OSS
5. Success via acknowledgement, inclusion and collaboration
6. **Success via accessibility and usability**

# Success via accessibility and usability

Comments made by designers were about their **approach** to **practicing design** and **noticing** these moments when **accessibility and usability** were missing.

In a general sense, designers try to encapsulate the voices of the users, which is inclusive of their accessibility and usability struggles. *“I generally try to be the voice of the user”.*





“We have set accessibility goals for the project, once we meet all of them, we can say the project was successful”.



## Find out about:

1. The long cycle of communication in OSS
2. Processes: who makes decisions and how are they made?
3. Who are the "users"?
4. Dealing with an overwhelming amount of design work
5. Being paid for OSS contributions
6. Designers in OSS and their busy lives

In the longer findings document:

[github.com/simplysecure/Diary-Studies-Designers-in-OSS](https://github.com/simplysecure/Diary-Studies-Designers-in-OSS)







# What might make designers leave an OSS project?

The designers of the diary study had many challenges, mostly centering around communications, delegation, project/product management and the value of their work compared to time invested by them.




Designers often expressed disappointment when all of their time was spent on annotating specific details of a design artifact or document (e.g. This button in a UI does X, this usability study means that we know X about users etc.) or justifying why design should be done in the OSS.



# Designers want seven things to be present before they leave an OSS project:

-  The design work is done and continues to be done in open design software (so not proprietary closed software such as Adobe). However, these open source design tools are stated as "not as good as closed tools."
-  The design is left in a way that other people can pick up and understand.
-  To leave the OSS in "a better place" in terms of design (this would be unique and specific to each OSS).
-  To ensure that the OSS maintainers know how and what was done and the project is handed over slowly and carefully. Do not "ghost" and help knowledge be sustained

# Designers want seven things to be present before they leave an OSS project:

-  To know the design will change after you've gone. OSS is about sharing and being willing to accept changes
-  To plan the structure for the OSS to not just recognise design contributions but document them well too
-  To inspire designers to get involved in the OSS

Most designers expressed a desire to never fully leave an OSS project and they would ideally stay on in an advisor role and be able to answer questions when needed. For many, participation in OSS was an ethical or socially motivated reason.

# Scaling up and continuing this work

This study was one of the first to capture OSS designers' experiences across multiple weeks and see what patterns and insights we could learn about designers' participation in OSS. There are however, many missing components to this study and many aspects that would benefit the OSS community widely.

1

Inviting more OSS projects and community members to interviews, including those who collaborate with designers

2

Better understanding the ways in which different roles view design and designers alongside the purpose of the OSS

3

Including different types of OSS projects (e.g. OSS with an academic research focus vs OSS that is a developer tool etc)



# Emergent Recommendations

As an OSS project interested in receiving design contributions, review and take note of the ways in which designers decide whether to offer design to an OSS project. Some of these indicators for designers include 'Is the project clear what problems they want solved by the designer?' and 'Is this OSS a one-person project and is it still active?'

[See 'How do designers decide whether they'd like to contribute to or work on an OSS project?' section.](#)

See more recommendations in the findings document:

[github.com/simplysecure/Diary-Studies-Designers-in-OSS](https://github.com/simplysecure/Diary-Studies-Designers-in-OSS)



# Emergent Recommendations

Designers measure success in many ways but common these are through healthy feedback cycles with usable suggestions for design, having designs implemented, understanding priorities and who/how decides them, growing the design community sustainably and being acknowledged positively for their contributions.

[See 'Designers speaking about success' section.](#)

See more recommendations in the findings document:

[github.com/simplysecure/Diary-Studies-Designers-in-OSS](https://github.com/simplysecure/Diary-Studies-Designers-in-OSS)

# Thank you!

[github.com/simplysecure/Diary-Studies-Designers-in-OSS](https://github.com/simplysecure/Diary-Studies-Designers-in-OSS)

We're looking to fund this research again and invite more designers to participate.

If you'd like to participate please get in contact.

Get in touch

@superbloom

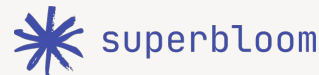
contact@superbloom.design

superbloom.design

<https://github.com/simplysecure/Diary-Studies-Designers-in-OSS>



Presentation made in google slides  
Illustrations made using procreate on ipad  
and adobe illustrator saving as .svg.  
Open Fonts used: JetBrains & IBM Plex Mono



This is a  
Take-home idea!