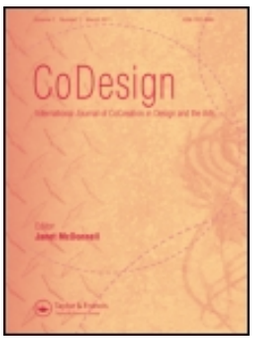

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CoDesign

International Journal of CoCreation in Design and the Arts

ISSN: 1571-0882 (Print) 1745-3755 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ncdn20

Participation, the camel and the elephant of design: an introduction

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To cite this article: Joan Greenbaum & Daria Loi (2012) Participation, the camel and the elephant of design: an introduction, CoDesign, 8:2-3, 81-85, DOI: 10.1080/15710882.2012.690232

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/15710882.2012.690232

CoDesign
Vol. 8, Nos. 2–3, June–September 2012, 81–85

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Probably many people reading this special issue have worked with participatory design, or know someone who has tried to inject participatory practices into their work. Others might have heard about it and thought "this is something I would like to know more about, or even try out". Still others, often in the digital field, get it mixed up with user-centred design, or some form of usability studies. This issue is for all of you, as we think that even those who know participatory design well will come away with new insights.

Participatory Design (PD) is a hybrid of many sorts. There is an old parable about a camel (or an elephant). In the Western world's tradition, the story claims that one or the other animal was designed by a committee, resulting in a hybrid that is neither one thing nor another – a rather funny looking and awkward animal. On the other hand, to people from the Middle East, Africa or Asia, a camel (and indeed an elephant) is an elegant animal with many useful purposes. We know that participatory design is the latter: an elegant animal with many useful purposes. However, it is often cumbersome and awkward to design a project and ride it to completion using a participatory approach, as participation is complex, messy and can be slower moving.

Those who are familiar with the research traditions of Participatory Research (PR) and its more active sibling, Participatory Action Research (PAR), know that there is a spectrum where research can be by, for and with, people who will benefit from it (Whyte 1991; Greenwood & Levin 1998). Participatory Action Research (called Action Research in some countries) bends more toward outcomes, starting out with the needs of the participants, with researchers engaging and supporting them in participant-defined goals. Participatory Design practices fall within these research traditions, but with the added twist that it is design-oriented work, where the design may be anything from a digital application to a complex urban environment. Both the *process* and the *product* are shaped. In the digital realm, PD shares some theories and methods with user-centred design and interaction design, but the main thrust is on democratic and emancipatory practice. In short, it has an agenda for social justice.

In the traditions we discuss here, most of what gets called Participatory Design is done *by, for* and *with* people who are using some kind of digital technologies – from traditional computer systems to interactive hand-held multimedia devices. But PD can also be applied, as we shall illustrate in this volume, for designing: situations that can confront dominant groups; designing tapestries and weavings; designing parks, bridges and train stations; designing digital storytelling; and designing teaching and learning environments.

ISSN 1571-0882 print/ISSN 1745-3755 online

http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15710882.2012.690232
http://www.tandfonline.com

The articles in this issue are developed from the 10th bi-annual Participatory Design Conference, held in November 2010 in Sydney, Australia (Bødker *et al.*, 2010). These conferences, in turn, grew out of twenty prior years of research that applied participatory and cooperative approaches to workplace centred information systems design. Several of the articles will discuss some of this early history, as it is important to keep in mind the principles that inspired this movement in both participation and design. Born in worker struggles in the 1970s, primarily in Scandinavia, the guiding principles underpinning participatory design still stand. These include:

- equalising power relations – finding ways to give voice to those who may be invisible or weaker in organisational or community power structures (Mulder & Wilke, 1970), which is embedded in;
- situation based actions – working directly with people and their representatives in their workplace or homes or public areas to understand actions and technologies in actual settings, rather than through formal abstractions, which in part can give rise to;
- mutual learning – encouraging and enhancing the understanding of different participants, by finding common ground and ways of working, which hopefully is fostered by;
- tools and techniques – that actually, in practical, specific situations, help different participants express their needs and visions, which does require;
- alternative visions about technology–whether it be in the workplace, at home, in public or elsewhere; ideas that can generate expressions of equality and;
- democratic practices – putting into play the practices and role models for equality among those who represent others (Greenbaum & Kensing, 2012).

It is, of course, not easy to steer a research and design project with all of these ideas in mind, but the intent of PD clearly marks it as going beyond user-centred interaction design as well as its nearest cousin in the computer field, Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW). The differences stem both from its worker-oriented and community roots, as well as its history in the academic computer field.

In the mid-1980s, when graphical user interfaces were beginning to become important (remember the first Macintosh computer?), American Computing Machinery (ACM) conferences in Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) were an exciting place to be because they were finally looking at human action. However, these conferences (and the research they supported) looked at individual users sitting at isolated computers and the ideas behind HCI design were driven by cognitive psychology, using a model where user intentions were captured and systematically used to build interfaces that reflected rational, procedure-oriented actions. Lucy Suchman's 1987 book[1], *Plans and Situated Actions*, drove a truck through the hole in this rationalistic thinking. In essence, her arguments brought life to the guiding principles of early PD practitioners, as she exposed the fallacy of cognitive models and called for understanding human action in the context of how we act within the less predictable trials of daily life. CSCW was born in 1986 with a focus on understanding the cooperative, and therefore social, interactions of work-oriented computer systems. This was an important step forward. However, researchers and practitioners of more action-based involvement needed another venue to exchange

ideas, and the first Participatory Design Conference (PDC) was held in Seattle in 1990 with sponsorship from the U.S. based Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility (CPSR).

The 1991 publication *Design at Work: Cooperative Design of Computer Systems* (Greenbaum and Kyng) grew out of participatory workshops among the authors and illustrated emerging guiding PD principles through examples from prior projects. In 1993, Schuler and Namioka (1993) edited a volume from the first PD conferences entitled *Participatory Design-Principles and Practices* and a number of articles started appearing in international journals, establishing this burgeoning field. This year the publication of the *International Handbook of Participatory Design*, edited by Simonsen and Robertson, will mark a most recent Participatory Design milestone.

While spreading out from workplace centred projects, participatory design has intensified its focus on the interconnectedness of design and use. And while most PD articles and books have examined some form of design of digital artefacts, PD has increasingly borrowed from other design fields and begun to branch out into all aspects of how people can be actively involved in the design and use of the many tools we encounter in daily life. This is a tall order – it requires juggling an active commitment to social justice with research principles and practices that put people who will use these tools in the driver's seat. Much of the PD work to date has grown out of university research and in that context it requires finding funding sources that respect more than product-driven approaches. This is another aspect of doing participatory work that takes PD beyond the mainstream.

Readers will find different versions of the briefly mentioned guiding principles in the exemplary articles included in this CoDesign special issue. The blurring of boundaries between public and private actions and the challenges for rekindling democratic values in real life social contexts are also addressed in different ways.

Ole Iversen, Kim Halskov and Tuck Leong, in their article on *Values-led participatory design*, ask us to dig deeply into an understanding of the basic values and assumptions that underlie our participation as designers and researchers, as well as the often unarticulated values of the participants. They do so through examples of Danish projects that focus on enhancing place-based learning, drawing on the importance of experiential and kinesthetic learning environments. Their approach draws on methods that allow the values of the participants to emerge as the project evolves.

The thorny concepts of creativity and innovation are taken up in *Agonistic participatory design – working with marginalised social movements*, by Erling Björgvinsson, Pelle Ehn and Per-Anders Hillgren. Their use of the term 'agonistic' places emphasis on understanding that when we reach out to diverse groups in the broader society – particularly those who have been marginalised – we need to go beyond basic ideas of participatory democracy that involve consensus or majority decision making. Using examples of working with under-privileged groups of youth and women in Malmö, Sweden, they show ways to help participants confront dominant ideologies and power relations in Swedish society.

Tone Bratteteig and Ina Wagner bring us into the area of urban planning through the use of an intriguing three-dimensional tool, called a 'colour table'. Their article, entitled *Spaces for participatory creativity*, details how workshops conducted in three countries were used to enhance participation of diverse groups of citizens and open spaces for bringing creative ideas alive.

In *Making private matters public in temporary assemblies*, Kristine Lindström and Åsa Ståhl tell us about informal sewing and embroidery circles in Sweden where participants meet, talk, and 'do their handwork', while also sending text messages to a machine that can embroider them. This interesting assemblage of human, machine and social interaction, which indeed could be taking place almost anywhere, reminds us that digital technology and social relations are clearly interwoven.

We next go to Africa, where Helke Winschiers-Theophlius, Nicola Bidwell and Edwin Blake bring us to a small community in Namibia. In their article on *Altering participation through interactions and reflections in design*, they show how it takes patience and understanding to wait until elders and community evolve their decision-making practices.

Last but not least, in their *Three roles for textiles as tangible working materials in co-design processes*, Elisabeth Heimdal and Tanja Rosenqvist discuss the potential and need for engaging different stakeholders in the co-design of textiles and textiles products, while highlighting the inspirational and innovation roles that 'tangible working materials' can play in such processes.

The collection in this edition reminds us that the more traditional tools of design – particularly in the Information Technology field – do not stretch enough to capture, understand and unfold the multiple ways in which designs are used, appropriated and recreated by people in their daily lives. Whether participants in design are called stakeholders, actors, users or citizens, in PD they are actively engaged in issues that arise around them. While the practices of Participatory Research and Action Research are called upon to enhance the processes of design, these methods also need to expand to become vehicles for designers, as the authors here illustrate.

This special collection is for designers, as researchers and practitioners, who want to engage participants in, by and for choosing their own outcomes. In doing Participatory Design we are not designing (by committee or workshop) a new elephant or camel, but rather stretching ourselves to do what is practical in certain situations and necessary in others. Yes, participatory design can be larger and messier than traditional forms of design and research, but it engages people in practicalities – and it can ultimately get us to where we need to go.

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