

Report – Group 2

IN5510 Experimental participatory design

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1. Introduction

Participatory Design (PD) is fundamentally concerned with the conditions under which people gain influence over the situations they inhabit. While contemporary PD projects are often associated with technological outcomes, the Scandinavian tradition positions democratic participation, power-sharing and mutual learning as the primary results of design. This perspective forms the basis of our collaboration with Paragone, a student-run art history journal, where the central challenges were organisational rather than technical. We want to note that informed consent was given to each participant and that they collectively gave us permission to use their name in this report.

Our initial attempt to work with design peers revealed how shared disciplinary backgrounds can reproduce designer authority rather than challenge it. This recognition prompted a systematic search for a participant group with different practices, values and power structures, ultimately leading us to Paragone. Their organisational complexity, role distribution and communication practices provided a rich context for exploring how PD can support collective reflection and organisational development in voluntary settings.

Anchored in the structure of future workshops and in material practices such as collaging and low-fidelity prototyping, our process invited participants to articulate concerns, express values and imagine alternative futures. Through these activities, matters of concern around communication, responsibility and belonging became tangible and negotiable, enabling participants to shape the direction of the design work.

In this report, we analyse our collaboration through core PD concepts: power, mutual learning, participation, prototyping and design after design. By examining how these dimensions unfolded across the workshops, we show how PD can strengthen organisational capability even when no technological artefact is produced. The report also reflects critically on our own position as designers, and on how institutional expectations, disciplinary assumptions and facilitation choices influenced what became possible for participants.

2 Case and context

2.1 Establishing the Design Space

Our project began with an open exploration of themes such as urban mobility, public space, and possible participant groups. Rather than defining a problem from the outset, we aimed to identify a participant group suited for a rich Participatory Design process. This approach aligns with Löwgren and Stolterman's view of thoughtful interaction design as a reflective practice grounded in understanding the design situation, the designer's role, and the implications of design decisions (2004, p. 2). Their emphasis on examining purposes, outcomes, and methods, informed how we approached the early process. With this orientation, we gradually situated the project within the Scandinavian PD tradition, emphasising democratization, collaboration on equal terms, and ensuring that all participants were genuinely given a voice.

2.2 Early Participant Exploration

With these principles in mind, we explored several potential participant groups, including children, elderly people, and commuters. However, we soon encountered challenges similar to those described by Verne and Braaten (2014), who note that many potential participants have limited time, motivation, or perceived relevance for engaging in design activities (p. 1).

Given these constraints, student organisations at the University of Oslo (UiO) emerged as a realistic next step. These groups typically consist of active and resourceful students who are accustomed to collaborative work and willing to set aside time for extracurricular activities. At the same time, our limited experience with how student organisations operate internally made them an interesting context for exploration. Their proximity and accessibility also made them practical candidates for a PD process.

2.3 Limitations of Working with Design Peers

Our first collaboration attempt was with DEFI, a design student organisation at the Department of Informatics (IFI). Their familiarity with creative workshops initially made them a promising candidate. However, as the collaboration progressed, we discovered that the similarity between our disciplinary backgrounds limited opportunities for genuine mutual learning. This was also emphasised in the feedback we received on our initial project plan.

Bratteteig and Wagner's analysis of power related to the decision-makers highlight that participation alone does not ensure influence, as decision-making is shaped by expertise, authority, and role structures (2014, pp. 47-48). Working with design peers risked reinforcing our own expert authority, since we shared methods, tools, and assumptions. Rather than challenging our perspectives, the collaboration risked maintaining our position of power and narrowing possibilities for participants to meaningfully shape the design.

2.4 Systematic Search for a New Participant Group

Recognising this limitation, we initiated a systematic search for a new participant group across UiO. We reached out to over one hundred organisations, excluding those connected to the Department of Informatics to avoid overlapping disciplinary contexts. Around ten organisations responded, and only two expressed genuine interest.

Among these, Paragone, a student-run art history journal, stood out as the most promising collaboration partner. Their willingness to participate, combined with the relevance of their organisational structure and the accessibility of their members, made them well suited for a participatory design process. This marked a turning point in our project, shifting us from exploring possible participant groups, to establishing a concrete collaboration.

2.5 Encountering Paragone: A New Disciplinary Landscape

Engaging with Paragone introduced us to a disciplinary context we were unfamiliar with. Through early meetings and workshops, we learned about their communication practices, role distribution, and organisational culture. The group included editors, writers, and new members, offering a wide range of perspectives.

To analyse these dynamics, we drew on Bratteteig and Wagner's (2014) discussion of how decision-making in PD is shaped by expertise, authority, and role structures (pp. 43-44). Editorial responsibilities, experience levels, and control over communication channels influenced who could shape organisational decisions. In contrast to our experience with DEFI, the disciplinary distance between our group and Paragone opened opportunities for more genuine mutual learning, since our design expertise did not dominate the collaboration in the same way.

2.6 Connecting Course Themes to Our Project Direction

We chose a thematic direction based on the lecture *Project Topics*, where one suggested theme concerned *Arbeidsmiljø i det nye arbeidslivet* (the working environment in the new world of work). Although student organisations are not formal workplaces, we identified parallels in their distribution of roles, responsibilities, and collaboration practices. These similarities made the theme relevant to our project and offered a useful lens for examining organisational dynamics within Paragone.

2.7 Situating Paragone within the Scandinavian PD tradition

Building on this thematic orientation, we situated our collaboration with Paragone within the Scandinavian Participatory Design tradition, which emphasises democratic collaboration and shared influence throughout the design process. Bratteteig et al. describe three core perspectives that structure PD: *having a say*, *mutual learning* and *co-realisation* (Simonsen & Robertson, 2013). Having a say highlights the need for participants to be informed, given opportunities to form opinions, and enabled to influence design decisions in meaningful ways (p.129). Mutual learning emphasises that designers and participants must learn about each other's practices and logics to build trust, respect and a shared basis for decision-making (p.132). Co-realisation concerns involvement through concrete materials and prototypes, which help participants imagine, evaluate and shape possible solutions based on their own expertise and experience (p.133). These perspectives guided how we designed and facilitated our workshops, ensuring that Paragone's members could contribute actively, learn across disciplinary boundaries, and participate meaningfully in shaping emerging ideas.

3 The design process and prototypes

3.1 Methodological Orientation: Material Practices

As mentioned, our design process was grounded in core principles of Scandinavian Participatory Design (PD). The primary aim is not the production of polished technological artefacts but the creation of conditions for mutual learning, democratic participation and shared reflection. Simonsen and Robertson describe PD as a process driven by collective "reflection-in-action," in which designers and participants explore and shape future possibilities together through hands-on engagement (Simonsen & Robertson, 2013, pp. 2-3). This understanding guided how we structured our workshop series and how we facilitated participant involvement.

Simonsen and Robertson (2013) describe that PD “is defined by a perspective that always looks forward to the shaping of future situations” (2013, p. 2). We structured our workshop process inspired by Jungk and Müllert’s (1987) future workshop as a way of introducing “change perspectives that cast new light on the well-known” (Simonsen & Robertson, 2013, p. 152). The critique–fantasy(utopia)–realisation structure helps participants suspend constraints and imagine alternatives by creating a moment of estrangement, a “what-if” space where everyday practices can be re-seen and re-interpreted. This helped participants articulate underlying values before moving toward more concrete design proposals.

We chose collaging, tangible materials and low-fidelity prototyping as our primary material practices. These choices align with PD’s long-standing emphasis on design-by-doing. Simonsen and Robertson (2013) note that mock-ups, prototypes and material artefacts enable participants to bring their practical experience into the design process, strengthening communication and shared understanding (2013, pp. 5-6). As our participants are art students, we assumed that visually oriented forms of making would feel accessible and meaningful. Collaging and simple model-making served as accessible means for participants to articulate both challenges and aspirations without requiring technical expertise.

We shaped the workshop format informed by Löwgren and Stolterman’s (2004) concept of the thoughtful designer. They argue that designers must intentionally craft the design process itself, since early framing decisions fundamentally influence what becomes possible later (Löwgren & Stolterman, 2004, pp. 1-14). Their perspective supported our decisions on structuring activities, sequencing time, and selecting materials to ensure that participation remained meaningful and generative.

In *Designing in Groups – and All That Jazz*, Bratteteig and Stolterman (1997) describe group design as an improvisational and collaborative process. They emphasise that effective facilitation requires sensitivity to emerging dynamics, including knowing when to guide and when to step back (Bratteteig & Stolterman, 1997). This was central to our own facilitation approach. Paragone could not estimate participant numbers in advance. Therefore, we designed activities that were flexible, scalable, and robust to shifting group sizes. Moreover, consistent with PD principles, we did not require anyone to attend or pressure members to participate. Instead, we aimed for voluntary, low-threshold engagement to support genuine involvement rather than compliance. This flexibility helped maintain an open, inviting atmosphere and ensured that those who did choose to participate could do so on their own terms.

We also grounded our approach in Simonsen and Robertson’s (2013) account of the three modes of PD engagement: telling, making and enacting (2013, p. 149). These modes allow participants to exchange experiences, construct ideas materially and test possible futures. In our project, we relied primarily on telling and making, as our goal was to build shared understanding rather than simulate or enact future practices. The deliberate interplay between these two modes provided a coherent structure for the workshops.

Finally, to support meaningful participation, we attended carefully to power relations within the workshop setting. Bratteteig et al. emphasise that genuine participation hinges on who defines the problem, whose interpretations shape the design space, and how decisions are made. Building on PD’s critique of “model monopoly” and the associated mechanisms of agenda control, scope, participant selection, and resource allocation, we structured the process in ways

that redistributed design authority. While we, as designers, maintained responsibility for organising and facilitating the process, participants retained control over the content: the issues raised, how problems were understood, and which directions were meaningful to pursue. By deliberately widening the “universe of discourse” and creating space for perspectives that are often marginalised or silenced, we aimed to ensure that participants meaningfully shaped both the purpose and form of the emerging design - essentially having a say (Simonsen & Robertson, 2013, pp. 129-132).

Adhering to Paragone’s schedule, each workshop lasted only 1.5 hours. We therefore distributed the critique, fantasy and realisation phases across multiple sessions. Rather than following a linear sequence, we structured our workshop process aligning with Brandt et al.’s description of participatory design as an iterative flow between making and telling depending on participant needs (Simonsen & Robertson, 2013, p. 176).

3.2 Workshop 1: Collaging the present (Critique Phase)

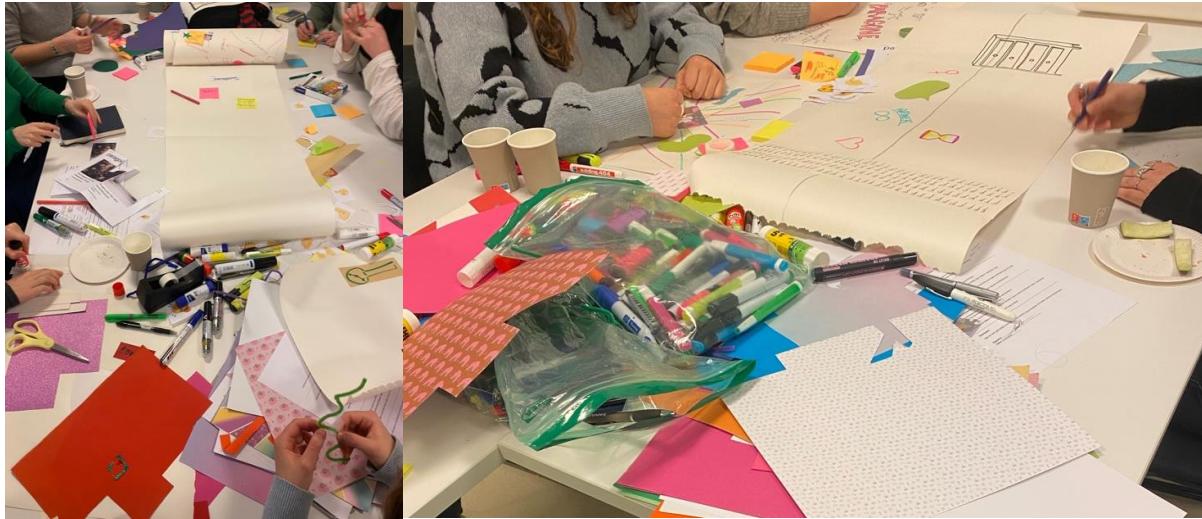
Workshop 1 constituted the critique phase of our PD process. The purpose was to give Paragone members a space to articulate their experiences with communication, expectations and organisational roles. During the course, we had worked with collaging and experienced it as a low-threshold, accessible way for participants to express experiences through images, associations and embodied meaning-making. Based on this, we selected collaging as the first workshop activity. It functioned both as an introduction to participatory material practices and as a way for us and the participants to become acquainted through shared making.

The workshop began with a make phase where the participants individually created collages, allowing each participant to establish their own perspective before entering group discussions. This was followed by the first tell phase with presentations in groups of five and six, where participants explained the meanings behind their collages. The combination of visual expression and verbal reflection surfaced both concrete workflow issues such as unclear information channels and uneven workloads. Emotional themes such as pressure, uncertainty and the desire for a stronger sense of community also emerged.

In the second make phase, participants were asked to create shared collages in the same small groups. This encouraged them to identify overlapping experiences and develop a collective understanding of recurring challenges in Paragone. The shared collages highlighted themes such as the complexity of information flow, unclear expectations, and tensions between artistic ambitions and organisational responsibilities.

Our role as facilitators were to structure the activity and keep discussions flowing, while ensuring that participants decided the content. We deliberately avoided suggesting interpretations or solutions, instead asking clarifying questions and supporting balanced turn-taking to maintain participant ownership.

The workshop concluded with a plenary make and tell session, where the participants first collaborated on making one shared, final collage and then reflected on common insights. This produced a clear set of themes that would guide the following fantasy and realisation phases: information flow, responsibilities, belonging, and organisational clarity.



3.3 Workshop 2: Future Models and Value Exploration (Fantasy Phase)

Workshop 2 marked the transition into the fantasy (utopia) phase. We opened the session with a structured recap of Workshop 1, inviting participants to refine, nuance or correct our interpretations of the themes that had emerged. This practice aligns with Suchman's (2002) concept of located accountability, which emphasises that analyses and design directions must remain accountable to those who live the practice (Suchman, 2002). It was therefore essential to ensure that participants recognised themselves in the themes we had identified and confirm that these were still relevant concerns to pursue.

During our preparation, a closer reading of our notes revealed that “social dynamics” had been mentioned frequently in Workshop 1. Rather than introducing this as an analytical insight, we brought it back to participants and asked whether this was an area they wished to explore further. Their response was decisive: they preferred to replace “social dynamics” with “structures and frameworks.” This moment signalled that participants felt genuinely able to redirect the focus of the design process, consistent with Bratteteig et al.’s argument that meaningful participation requires influence over what the design work is about. (Simonsen & Robertson, 2013, pp. 129-132).

Participants also expressed appreciation to the collaging materials from Workshop 1, describing them as “a nice way to talk about issues in an easy and airy environment.” Based

on this feedback, we continued using similar tactile materials and expanded expressive possibilities by adding LEGO and abstract forms.



We repeated the iterative make-tell process, now focusing on envisioning ideal futures: “What would the situation look like if everything was exactly how you wanted it?” Participants consistently imagined futures grounded in clarity, fairness, communication and belonging. Notably, none of their proposals involved digital technology. This absence challenged our own implicit technocentric assumptions as informatics students, and rather than steering them toward technical ideas, we followed Iversen et al.’s (2012) values-led approach by allowing values to emerge from participants’ concerns.

The models revealed that participants saw their core challenges as social and organisational rather than technical. They sought clearer communication, better understanding of roles and stronger cohesion. Through making and sharing these future models, participants articulated underlying values such as fairness, transparency and belonging, values that would later guide concept development. These insights provided picture of Paragone’s priorities and established a bridge between critique and realisation: participants were no longer only describing their current experiences but actively imagining what an improved organisational future might look like.

3.4 Workshop 3: From Themes to Concepts (Realisation phase, Part 1)

Workshop 3 initiated the realisation phase by narrowing broad themes into more concrete design concepts. We invited participants to revisit insights from earlier workshops and identify potential directions for change. Löwgren and Stolterman’s notion of the *operative image* is useful here: a preliminary idea or shared mental picture that helps guide design without

prematurely fixing its form (Löwgren & Stolterman, 2004, pp. 17-19). Through cycles of telling and making, participants developed such operative images collaboratively.

Several conceptual directions emerged. Some participants proposed visualising organisational roles or information flows, while others explored onboarding structures or materials that could support clarity and continuity. Gradually, two ideas gained collective momentum: a game that could help members get to know each other, and a role-and-task overview tool to increase clarity of responsibilities. The iterative interplay between telling and making helped the group develop these ideas into coherent directions suitable for prototyping.



3.5 Workshop 4: Prototyping the Paragone Game (Realisation Phase, Part 2)

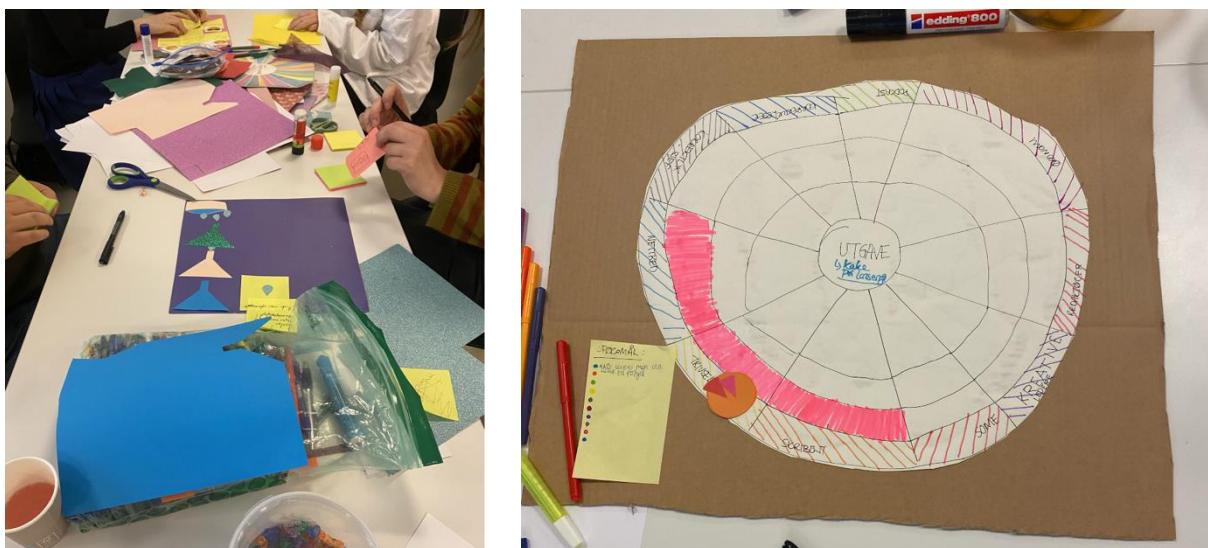
The final workshop focused on prototyping the game concept selected by the participants. We started the workshop by discussing the ideas from workshop 2 and voting on which idea to move forward with: the role-and-task overview tool or the Paragone game. Before starting the vote, one participant suggested a combination of the two concepts, an idea that was unanimously supported and became the basis for the final prototype.

To guide the next stage of the workshop, we drew on the PD principle of co-realisation, where tangible prototypes function as shared objects for jointly exploring and shaping possible solutions. Because prototyping enables participants to evaluate and modify form, functionality and purpose through concrete experience rather than abstract discussion, participants themselves defined the game mechanics, roles, question types and contexts of use (Simonsen & Robertson, 2013, p. 133).

During the first make phase, participants collaboratively sketched a complete board game inspired by games such as Trivial Pursuit and Catan. Roles in the game were mapped directly onto roles in Paragone, enabling members to gain insight into each other's responsibilities in a playful, low-pressure environment. Our facilitation primarily involved asking clarifying questions to support intentionality.

We introduced the possibility of incorporating a light technological layer, such as interactive lights or simple sensors. The participants responded positively. They noted that light-based feedback could make the game “more responsive, allow players to visualise progression and potentially increase engagement and motivation”. Their interest centred not on adding complexity, but on how subtle technological elements could support clarity and shared awareness during play. At the same time, participants emphasised a desire to maintain the game as a predominantly offline and co-present experience, suggesting that any technological augmentation should remain lightweight and avoid shifting the game toward screen-based or digitally mediated interaction.

As time ran out, we only introduced a conceptual direction for potential technological augmentation, while the broader implications of technology are addressed in the discussion section. We will further discuss the decision to introduce technological augmentations in section 4. Participants completed the workshop with written reflections noting strengthened insight into each other's experiences, greater awareness of Paragone's organisational complexity and an appreciation for structured spaces for sharing expectations. The game functions both as a prototype and as a "design thing" (Simonsen & Robertson, 2013, pp. 55-58), that could continue supporting reflection, learning and democratic practice beyond the project.



4 Analysis and discussion

Our collaboration with Paragone revealed a clear trajectory: the design process shifted away from technology and toward organisational reflection, democratic involvement, and increased collective capability. This shift mirrors the historical foundations of Scandinavian PD, where the primary aim was not technological innovation but strengthening participants' influence, autonomy and organisational practices (Simonsen & Robertson, 2013, pp. 21–36). By analysing our project through this lens, we show how themes of power, prototypes, engagement and design after design intertwined to support Paragone's organisational development.

4.1 Historical and theoretical framework: The Scandinavian PD Tradition

PD originated in the Scandinavian labour movement of the 1970s, where participation was understood as a political right tied to power, autonomy and influence over one's own work. Early PD projects therefore centred on organisational democracy and the right to have a say, rather than on developing technology (Simonsen & Robertson, 2013, pp. 21–36).

This foundation resonates strongly with our collaboration with Paragone, where organisational roles, decision-making structures and internal power dynamics emerged as the core challenges. Much like in early PD projects, technology only became relevant after these organisational concerns were explored, reflecting the historical insight that technological needs often surface as symptoms of deeper structural issues.

This perspective aligns with Löwgren and Stolterman's notion of the thoughtful designer, which emphasises first understanding whether technology is appropriate or whether non-technological interventions better support participants' needs (2004, p. 169). For us, this meant postponing technological discussions to allow participants to articulate values, frustrations and aspirations before considering technological alternatives.

The Scandinavian PD tradition, centred on power-sharing and organisational change, thus became the analytical backbone of our project. In the following sections, we examine how themes such as power, mutual learning, participation and design after design unfolded in our workshops with Paragone, and how the process supported democratic reflection and sustainable organisational development.

4.2 Power and Democracy

A crucial dimension of this analysis concerns power relations, which are central in Scandinavian PD. Verne and Bratteteig argue that participation is always shaped by “who gets to define the problem, whose interpretations count, and who has the power to decide” (2018). In our project, we observed three layered power relations that influenced both participation and outcomes: power relations between us as students and the course lecturers, power relations between us and Paragone, and power relations within Paragone themselves.

4.2.1 External Hierarchies and Design Decisions

One of the clearest expressions of external power in our project was the institutional and pedagogical structure in which the design process unfolded. As students, we entered the course with a predominantly user-centred design (UCD) background, while our lecturers - experts in Participatory Design - held the authority to define what “good PD” should look like. Although we designed the process ourselves, the lecturers ultimately had the final say in evaluating our choices, which created an inherent asymmetry. Wanting to do well academically meant that their expectations implicitly shaped what we perceived as legitimate design work. This raised a key question that followed us throughout the project: *how do academic expectations shape what futures become possible in a PD process?*

This contributed to an internalised pressure to produce a technological outcome. As Informatics students, we not only recognised this expectation but absorbed it: delivering a strong, technologically grounded result felt like the safest way to meet academic standards. This tension followed us throughout the project and shaped how we interpreted what the final outcome “should” become. In PD terms, this dynamic illustrates agenda control: when external structures and expert authority influence designers’ sensemaking before the design process even begins.

This tension became visible in how technology entered (and did not enter) the workshops. We briefly mentioned technological possibilities in Workshop 3, but participants consistently framed their challenges as organisational rather than technical. Introducing technology at this stage would have imposed an agenda rooted in academic expectations rather than participant needs. Following Löwgren and Stolterman’s notion of the thoughtful designer, we deliberately held back, even when doing so felt counterintuitive to our own goals and ambitions.

We reintroduced simple technological possibilities in Workshop 4, after the participants had already developed the structure of their game, as a way to broaden imagination rather than redirect it. This mirrors Maartmann-Moe et al. (2022), who show that concrete examples can expand participants’ decision-making competence. Participants reacted positively to light augmentations such as sensors or integrated lights, yet it remained clear that technology would not have emerged naturally without our intervention.

This episode illustrates how both external and internal hierarchies shaped the design trajectory. We navigated a double tension: between academic expectations and participants’ values, and between our desire to produce a strong technological outcome and our responsibility to facilitate democratically. These dynamics highlight how institutional structures and expert authority subtly influence what futures are considered possible, long before participants enter the room.

4.2.2 Our Position of Power as Facilitators

Starting with our immediate involvement, our first experience with a participatory design workshop made the question of power unavoidable. We quickly recognised the significant influence we held, not only through our implicit control over the agenda and the distribution of speaking turns, which Simonsen and Robertson describe as agenda control (Simonsen & Robertson, 2013, p. 130), but also through our ability to shape both problem-setting and solution-finding. This became evident as early as Workshop 1, when we struggled to determine when to intervene as designers and when to step back to avoid dominating the process.

To mitigate this imbalance, we consciously avoided offering direct solutions, especially given the academic expectations for a technological outcome. Instead, we externalised our thinking, shared our reasoning transparently, and encouraged participants to identify problems and potential directions themselves. This approach was grounded in the principle of mutual learning and the view that participants are the “ultimate experts of the work context” (Simonsen & Robertson, 2013, p. 98). By guiding participants toward reflection, rather than providing conclusions, we attempted to foster two-way learning, support ownership, and enable participants to articulate their perspectives on their own terms.

Even so, balancing when to intervene and when to withdraw remained challenging. At several points, we had potential solutions in mind but chose to guide rather than direct, prioritising empowerment through participants' own discoveries. This approach proved effective over time: by the final workshop, participants demonstrated notable self-sufficiency in conceptualising and constructing the Paragone game prototype.

Throughout the project, values shaped not only the participants' contributions but also our role as facilitators. We remained attentive to the influence we exercised, practicing what Iversen et al. (2012) describe as appreciative judgement of values: continuously assessing when to introduce structure, when to hold back, and how to support participant agency without imposing our own priorities. These moments highlight that facilitator power in PD is never neutral; it is enacted continuously through micro-decisions that shape the trajectory of participation.

A central dimension of this facilitator power is that facilitation is never neutral. Recent PD research shows that facilitators actively shape who is able to influence the process, not only through formal decisions but through subtle acts such as listening, responding, pacing discussions, and deciding which contributions are pursued. Dahl, Sharma and Svanæs (2025) identify six facilitation skills – openness, patience, empathy, attentiveness, responsiveness and adaptiveness – that directly affect whose perspectives are amplified or silenced during participatory activities. Their argument helped us understand our own influence more clearly: moments where we asked follow-up questions, reformulated participant statements, or redirected discussions were not just organisational choices but interventions that shaped participants' opportunities to "have a say." Recognising this allowed us to analyse our facilitation not as background work but as an active power practice that materially shaped the design outcome.

4.2.3 Internal Power Relations in Paragone

While external and facilitator-driven power shaped the broader design trajectory, internal hierarchies within Paragone constituted a third layer of influence. These dynamics became visible even before the workshops began. In our initial meeting, which was meant only to introduce ourselves and present the course, the two organisational leads immediately articulated specific "matters of concern" and suggested that we work on their podcast or website. This early steering risked narrowing the problem-setting according to existing organisational hierarchies and could have constrained PD's democratic intentions by limiting participants' "decision-making power" (Simonsen & Robertson, 2013, p. 129).

To counteract this, we designed the early workshops to distribute influence more evenly and give all members an opportunity to contribute to problem-setting. The collage workshop played a central role in this strategy. By using generative materials, participants expressed concerns metaphorically and visually, allowing tacit and emotional knowledge to surface (Iversen et al., 2012). Themes such as uneven work distribution, unclear expectations, lack of transparency, and desires for better communication emerged. Notably none of the issues proposed by the organisational leads in the initial meeting. This reaffirmed that when all participants were granted equal space to contribute, the concerns reflected broader organisational values rather than those of leadership.

These early discussions also revealed values such as fairness, inclusion, shared responsibility, clarity, and collective identity. The absence of technological solutions during this stage further underscored the centrality of values over functionality, aligning with Iversen et al.'s (2012) argument that PD often prioritises *value-based judgement* before technical considerations. To maintain distributed ownership, we structured group work so that smaller groups shared outcomes and were instructed to integrate "one aspect of the other group's design," ensuring that no single individual or subgroup dominated the direction.

Through iterative prototyping and discussion, participants externalised and negotiated issues related to fairness, clarity and collaboration. This process contributed to the development of a shared language for challenges, clearer expectations around responsibilities, and greater recognition of internal power dynamics. Ultimately, distributing influence through generative methods and structured collaboration not only surfaced the diversity of concerns within Paragone but also enabled participants to co-create outcomes that reflected collective, rather than hierarchical, priorities.

4.2.4 Technology and Alternative Perspectives

An important dimension of mutual learning in our project involved rethinking what technology could mean, particularly because several participants initially expressed reservations. During the fantasy phase, some described technology as synonymous with screen-based tools, like social media, which they associated with pressure, distraction and a breakdown of personal communication. Their narrow and negative framing posed an immediate challenge: should we accept this definition, or introduce alternative technological perspectives?

We chose to expand, rather than override their imagination. By presenting simple tangible examples, such as buttons, lights and physical signalling tools, we demonstrated that technology is not limited to screens or digital platforms. These examples helped participants reconsider how technology might support, rather than obstruct, communication and collaboration within Paragone. This approach maintained participants' ownership while gently widening the conceptual space.

Korsgaard et al.'s (2016) concept of computational alternatives contrasts with our process. They argue that PD should foreground technological provocations: material artefacts that make "the computational" visible and help participants reflect on the political implications of technical choices. In our project, participants generated no technological ideas during the fantasy phase, which made us question whether we were failing to introduce such computational perspectives. From Korsgaard et al.'s standpoint, this could be seen as a missed opportunity to broaden Paragone's socio-technical imagination.

However, we ultimately decided not to introduce technological alternatives, and this decision was grounded in PD values rather than omission. Paragone's expressed challenges were organisational and relational, not technological. Introducing computational alternatives would have imposed a technological agenda that did not reflect participants interests or values. In this sense our choice can be seen as a counter-position to Korsgaard et al.: restraint, rather than technological provocation, was the more democratically appropriate choice.

This restraint is analytically significant. Our restraint reflected Löwgren and Stolterman's (2004, pp. 1-14) idea of the thoughtful designer, Iversen et al.'s (2012) values-led design perspective, and Verne & Bratteteig's (2018) caution against designers' dominance. Choosing not to introduce certain materials thus became an ethical design decision, one that respected Paragone's identity, their articulated needs, and their limited familiarity with digital tools. In this context, prioritising organisational alternatives over computational ones was the most appropriate, value-aligned and politically responsible design outcome.

4.2.5 Non-material Outcome and Shifts in Organisational Practice

The continuous navigation of power dynamics, external pressures and participant-driven values ultimately resulted in outcomes that were largely non-material. These manifested as shifts in organisational practice; participants began sitting in a circle to support more equal participation, engaged in more open and value-oriented dialogue, and articulated expectations and responsibilities more transparently. The value of the project therefore extended beyond the physical game prototype to include these democratic changes emerging through mutual learning.

This development aligns with Iversen et al.'s account of value development, where values are not simply identified but stretched, challenged and refined through dialogue (Iversen et al., 2012). For Paragone, concepts such as fairness and communication evolved from vague concerns into concrete understandings of workflow, tone, expectations and shared responsibility. During the realisation phase, these values became embedded in practices and artefacts, corresponding to Iversen et al.'s notion of grounding, where values take material or procedural form (Iversen et al., 2012).

The project demonstrates that values are not an addition to PD but emerge through it. A values-led design approach supported Paragone in articulating who they are, what they stand for and how they want to collaborate moving forward. Consistent with Bratteteig & Wagner (2014) and Iversen et al. (2012), this underscores that non-material outcomes, such as reflection, alignment, strengthened awareness and improved organisational practices, are legitimate and often central results in PD work.

4.3 The Role of the Prototype

Having discussed democratic and organisational dimensions, we now turn to prototypes as analytical, communicative, and transformative tools within the project.

4.3.1 What do Prototypes Prototype

Houde and Hill's model clarifies that prototypes serve different purposes: *role prototypes* explore what an artefact does, *look-and-feel prototypes* show what it is like to experience, and *implementation prototypes* demonstrate how it technically works; *integration prototypes* combine all three (Houde & Hill, 1997). Their framework highlights that prototypes should be chosen according to the design questions at hand, rather than attempting to address all dimensions at once.

In our project, the workshop prototypes functioned primarily as role prototypes. Because the design space concerned organisational practices rather than technological development, the prototypes helped participants explore what alternative structures or communication tools *could do* for Paragone. Models of communication flow or role distribution enabled participants to reason about organisational futures without needing to specify appearance or technical implementation.

A shift occurred in the final workshop with the development of the *Paragone Game*, which acted as a look-and-feel prototype. It allowed participants to experience how the game structured interaction and supported shared understanding, while still lacking technological implementation.

Across the process, prototypes thus served not only as design artefacts but also as communicative tools that supported collective reflection and alignment around potential organisational change.

4.2.2 Prototyping as a Language

Building on this understanding of what prototypes prototype, the workshops revealed that prototyping also functioned as a new, shared language for Paragone. Rather than merely representing ideas, prototypes became expressive tools that enabled reflection, dialogue and democratic engagement. Our initial assumption that collaging, creative work and DIY materials would resonate with participants' backgrounds in art and art history, proved accurate. Their strong visual literacy made material expression a natural medium for articulating organisational concerns, resulting in prototypes rich in symbolism and metaphor. This aligns with Dearden's (2022) notion of artful material utterances, where material expressions deepen understanding of intent and support reflective dialogue (Dearden, 2022). Through these familiar expressive forms, participants expanded both their communicative repertoire and their capacity for organisational insight.

Participants repeatedly expressed that this visual and material mode of communication helped them address serious issues without the emotional heaviness such discussions normally entail. The combination of artistic methods, disciplinary familiarity and concrete organisational challenges created a comfortable bridge between personal interest and collective problem-setting. Several noted that making concerns tangible made difficult topics easier to discuss and that they would not have arrived at these insights without being introduced to such methods.

Importantly, participants reported an intention to continue using prototyping as a communicative and reflective practice beyond the project. This indicates that the process not only surfaced organisational insights but also expanded Paragone's long-term organisational toolkit, reinforcing prototyping as a sustainable language for collaboration and decision-making.

4.3.3 Reflection-in-action and Estrangement of the Familiar

Building on prototypes as an expressive language, the workshops also revealed how prototyping supported reflection-in-action. Participants frequently generated new insights while creating or discussing prototypes, embodying Schön's description of designers thinking

through making (Schön & Wiggins, 1992). Several participants initially claimed they “did not know what they had made,” yet clear interpretations emerged as they explained their artefacts to others. These moments demonstrated how material tools can surface tacit knowledge and enable democratic expression of concerns that might otherwise remain unspoken.

A related phenomenon, *estrangement of the familiar*, occurred when participants used unfamiliar materials to model their everyday organisational practices. In the futures workshop, for example, a participant represented a typical Paragone meeting using Lego figures. This material distancing allowed her to articulate an issue she struggled to verbalise directly. Similarly, instructions to “create the problem” with abstract shapes, pipe-cleaner hierarchies or fragmented symbolic forms encouraged participants to step outside habitual frames of reference. By defamiliarising their routines, these tools enabled fresh perspectives, richer dialogue and more nuanced organisational insight.

4.3.4 The Paragone Game as a Design Thing

In the final workshop, participants developed the Paragone board game, which extended the space for reflection and collective inquiry while also carrying participatory design practices into Paragone’s future organisational activities. Unlike a conventional trivia game, it combined open questions with prompts about members’ roles, responsibilities and everyday challenges. These role-oriented questions made implicit work visible, enabled participants to understand one another’s perspectives and surfaced issues that were rarely articulated in ordinary meetings. Because progression in the game required collective discussion and shared decision-making, it created a setting where all voices could be heard, supporting democratic exploration of organisational alternatives.

In this sense, the game operates as a contemporary *design thing*: a socio-material assembly that gathers people around matters of concern and sustains the “side effects” of design, such as shared understanding and collective problem-framing (Simonsen & Robertson, 2013, p. 12). Rather than ending with the workshop, the game becomes a device participants can continue using to articulate concerns, negotiate responsibilities and maintain value-oriented dialogue. Through creating the Paragone Game, participants effectively crafted their own design thing; one that embodies democratic values and echoes foundational principles of Scandinavian Participatory Design.

4.4 Engagement and Participation

Engagement is a central concern in Participatory Design, especially in voluntary organisations where motivation, roles and time commitments vary. Paragone, a student-run art history journal, exemplifies these challenges: members balanced academic demands with unclear responsibilities and differing levels of investment. Fostering meaningful participation therefore required intentional effort rather than assuming it would emerge naturally.

This section examines how engagement and participation were shaped by materials, rhythms, group dynamics and facilitation choices throughout the project.

4.4.1 Tackling Engagement in Paragone

One of the first challenges we encountered was the uneven level of engagement within Paragone. Editors described uncertainty around responsibilities and decision-making structures, which made some members hesitant to speak up, while others dominated discussions. Such discrepancies hinder the ability for everyone to “have a say,” a core PD concern (Simonsen & Robertson, 2013, p. 33).

Participation could not be taken for granted: it had to be invited, supported and sustained. Drawing on Verne & Braaten’s *Participation for the Unengaged*, we understood unengaged participants not as unwilling but as lacking relevance, safety or accessible entry points (2014). Engagement is shaped by the invitations people receive, the clarity of expectations and the emotional climate of the design situation. With this in mind, we focused on reducing uncertainty, building trust and using low-barrier materials that made participation feel safe and doable.

Our initial efforts centred on creating an inviting atmosphere: informal introductions, snacks and drinks, and a clear message that the project was not about delivering a predetermined solution but about co-exploring their values and challenges. This helped communicate that their perspectives, not ours, would guide the project, supporting participants in taking ownership and acknowledging their identity as an editorial collective (Bratteteig & Wagner, 2016). Although we initially worried that they might feel exploited or sceptical of the project’s value, this concern dissipated after the first workshop, where participants expressed both enjoyment and a sense of personal benefit.

Consistent with Verne & Braaten (2014), we used low-threshold materials to create a playful environment that encouraged expression regardless of confidence or expertise. These materials lowered the stakes of participation and made subsequent discussions more accessible.

Kanstrup & Bertelsen (2018) highlight that participation unfolds through “rhythms” influenced by time, motivation, energy and social dynamics. Throughout the workshops, we had to adapt our pace to these rhythms: slowing down when participants seemed overwhelmed, shifting activities when energy dipped, or simplifying tasks when time was limited. Rather than interpreting hesitation or silence as failure, we treated them as natural fluctuations in participatory tempo. By aligning our facilitation with these rhythms, we supported more sustainable, meaningful and inclusive engagement.

4.4.2 Improvisation and Participant-led Direction

Improvisation also became central to our facilitation, aligning with Bratteteig and Stolterman’s (1997) jazz metaphor, which frames PD as an improvised, co-produced practice rather than a predefined sequence of steps. In their account, effective participatory design requires attunement to the different “voices” in the room, responsiveness to emerging ideas and the ability to adjust the process as situations unfold. This perspective closely reflected our experience in the workshops.

Throughout the process, we continuously adapted our facilitation to participant dynamics, allowing the group to influence both the pace and direction of activities. For instance, we

retained the collaging format across sessions because participants engaged deeply with it, and when technological ideas failed to surface, we respected this trajectory instead of redirecting the group toward digital solutions. These improvisational choices were not signs of uncertainty but deliberate efforts to uphold PD values, ensuring that participants shaped the rhythm and direction of the design rather than designers imposing structure. In this way, improvisation acted as a method for protecting democratic participation and supporting participant-led inquiry.

4.4.3 Toolkits and Materiality as Drivers for Participation

Our workshop design drew on Sanders and Stappers' (2014) concept of *toolkits*, where generative materials act as mediators that enable participants to express concerns that may be difficult to verbalise. This was evident from the first workshop, where collaging allowed participants to reflect on identity, interests and tensions in a tangible and emotionally safe way. As toolkits, these materials created a layer of abstraction that supported expression and facilitated discussion (Sanders & Stappers, 2014).

In the second workshop, participants used abstract shapes, Lego and sketching materials to construct future organisational models. These visualisations helped them articulate values and explore alternative ways of working without needing to commit to specific solutions (Sanders & Stappers, 2014). The materials enabled participants to externalise organisational challenges, making them easier to examine, rearrange and negotiate collectively.

In the third workshop, prototypes functioned as thinking tools rather than final artefacts. By externalising insights and discussing them with the group, participants developed a shared language for engaging with organisational structures, communication patterns and values. This process strengthened collective understanding and supported further alignment.

Overall, the material-centric approach played a crucial role in supporting engagement. Tangible artefacts gave every participant something to manipulate, interpret and discuss, lowering the threshold for contribution and enabling mutual learning, both among participants, and between participants and us. Materiality thus acted not merely as a design medium, but as a driver for democratic participation and organisational reflection.

4.4.4 Evaluating Participation

Bratteteig and Wagner's (2016) article, *Unpacking the Notion of Participation in Participatory Design*, provides a robust analytical framework for evaluating participation by focusing on the political and technical contributions participants make to the design process. Central to their view is that participation is not merely about being present, but about how power is shared and how participants contribute to the creation and selection of design choices.

Applying the framework from Bratteteig and Wagner (2016) allows for a focused analysis of the strengths and limitations within the Paragone project, specifically by examining design as a sequence of choices. The initial phase, *creating choices* (phantasying/projecting), was strongly supported, enabling participants to engage fully in the creative process. By providing low-barrier materials and actively encouraging expression through techniques like collaging and prototyping, we facilitated the necessary "phantasying" required to generate a wide

multiplicity of alternative organisational concepts and address complex issues that the collective had previously struggled to articulate.

This work transitioned into the next phase, *concretising and selecting Choices* (design moves). Here, the use of prototyping served as the central mechanism for the *concretisation of choices* (design moves). Participants utilised these models to select and stabilize which ideas to carry forward, thereby ensuring that their core values and challenges decisively guided the problem-framing process.

This reciprocal action successfully fostered mutual learning and the development of a shared language for discussing internal organisational issues. Finally, in the *evaluation and influence* phase, participants continually discussed the prototypes, and these findings directly influenced subsequent internal discussions within Paragone. Nevertheless, the scope of their direct influence and decision-making remained partial, as we as designers retained control over structuring the overall process, selecting the specific methods, and determining the project duration.

The distinction between "Power to" (agency) and "Power over" is particularly relevant here. Participants maximised their "power to" by shaping the content and focus of the work. However, they lacked full "power over" the project's structural constraints, such as timelines, assessment expectations, and methodological design, decisions that remained largely within the designers' purview. As Bratteteig and Wagner (2016) note, such structural constraints reflect the inherent limitations in power sharing and illustrate how participation often depends on designer-defined boundaries.

4.4.5 How participatory was the project?

Based on Bratteteig and Wagner's (2014) conceptualisation of PD as the sharing of power and influence over design choices, our project achieved strong content-based participation and limited structural decision-making power.

This outcome is not a failure but reflects the inherent challenge of redistributing power in academic PD projects, where external constraints (like assessment expectations) necessarily limit the scope of full power-sharing. What made participation meaningful despite these constraints was that participants were central to shaping the content of the work. Their values and challenges guided the problem-framing, and the process strengthened internal understanding and democratic practices within Paragone, core aims of Scandinavian Participatory Design (Simonsen & Robertson, 2013, pp. 21–36).

This indicates that the ideal of "full participation" should not be the sole measure of success. Bratteteig and Wagner emphasise the importance of examining the space for participation, asking: "Whose voices are heard? Who created the space? For what purpose is the participation being promoted? Whose power is affected by it?" (Gaventa, 2006, p. 12, cited in Bratteteig & Wagner, 2014, p. 96).

By directing attention to the characteristics of the participatory space, its purpose, and the resulting organisational reflections, the project's success is defined by the creation of a participatory result. The result strengthened Paragone's agency and long-term capacity for

change, rather than the attainment of full democratic control over the process. Evaluated through these dimensions, the project was participatory in a meaningful and democratically grounded way.

4.5 Design After Design

Design did not end with the final workshop. In line with contemporary PD thinking, many of the outcomes of this project continued to evolve within Paragone after our formal involvement ended.

4.5.1 Theoretical Frame: Infrastructuring and PD Results

A central concept in contemporary Participatory Design is *design after design*: the idea that design continues long after the formal PD project has finished (Simonsen & Robertson, 2013, p. 138). PD outcomes often take the form of practices, relationships and infrastructures that enable participants to keep designing in their own context.

This notion is crucial for understanding our collaboration with Paragone. Much of our work was not aimed at producing a finalised solution, but at enabling the group to continue shaping their own organisational practices, discussions and decision-making structures after the workshops ended. Our design interventions therefore functioned as *infrastructuring*: establishing conditions, tools and shared understandings that support ongoing design work by the participants themselves (Bratteteig & Wagner, 2016).

4.5.2 Design After Design in Paragone

Throughout the project, participants developed prototypes that acted less as finished artefacts and more as structural anchors; representations of values, workflows and communication practices that could guide future internal work. Participants frequently described how these prototypes helped clarify expectations, articulate tensions and address organisational issues they had struggled to discuss in ordinary meetings.

These prototypes functioned as materials that do not provide complete solutions but support reflection, negotiation and coordination across different perspectives. Rather than closing the design space, we kept it open, enabling Paragone to continue exploring and adjusting their organisational structures independently.

In this sense, the PD process produced foundations for ongoing organisational design rather than standalone outcomes. The prototypes, shared vocabulary and strengthened practices that emerged through the workshops became part of Paragone's organisational infrastructure; supporting *design after design* and sustaining democratic engagement beyond our facilitation.

4.5.3 The Life and Death of Design Ideas

Bratteteig et al.'s *The Life and Death of Design Ideas* (2016) offer an analytical lens for understanding the political and social mechanisms that determine which ideas survive in participatory processes. Their analysis emphasises that PD is not merely about generating ideas

but about examining the power-laden dynamics through which ideas gain support, become materialised, are strategically blocked, or gradually disappear (Bratteteig et al., 2016, p. 256).

According to their framework, the fate of ideas is influenced by three interrelated mechanisms. First, concretisation and visualisation are essential for idea survival: ideas gain traction when they are articulated, visualised or prototyped, therefore becoming objects that can be discussed and negotiated (Bratteteig et al., 2016, p. 269). ‘

Second, strategic action and power/knowledge shape the social dynamics of idea development. Some participants mobilise expertise or authority to promote certain ideas or block others; professionals may cite regulations, feasibility or “common sense” to pre-empt alternatives (Bratteteig et al., 2016, p. 267).

Third, their use of Decision Linkages shows how decisions influence one another through sequential (recurring, snowballing) or precursive (enabling, pre-empting, cascading) effects. Certain decisions open some futures and close others, effectively “killing” ideas by making them irrelevant in the emerging design space (Bratteteig et al., p. 271).

Ideas tend to disappear when they lack value anchoring, when they fail to be concretised or when they challenge established norms or are actively blocked. Conversely, ideas survive when they are strongly value-anchored, supported by alliances and materialised through prototypes that stabilise them as shared reference points (Bratteteig et al., 2016, pp. 260-274).

4.5.3.1 Applying the framework to our project

This framework helps illuminate the dynamics observed in Paragone’s workshops. Ideas related to abstract or technologically oriented solutions faded quickly because they were not value-anchored and did not align with Paragone’s identity as an editorial collective. As in Bratteteig et al.’s account, ideas disconnected from core practice naturally “died.” During the fantasy phase, technologically detached ideas disappeared quickly, whereas value-grounded organisational ideas were sustained and carried forward through prototyping. Materialisation extended the life of these organisational ideas by turning them into objects that supported collective deliberation.

4.5.3.2 Power to / Power over

The dynamics of idea survival also relate to Bratteteig et al.’s distinction between “power to” (agency to act and create) and “power over” (the ability to dominate or direct outcomes) (Bratteteig et al., 2016, p. 269). Our “power to” primarily involved providing the infrastructural conditions for organisational reflection: facilitation, materials and prototyping methods. Unlike professional experts in Bratteteig et al.’s urban planning case, we aimed not to use our expertise to dominate but to transfer “power to” the participants.

Absence of “power over” was a conscious choice. We did not enforce a technological direction when such ideas lacked value anchoring, even though our technical expertise could have allowed us to push the process that way. This restraint avoided agenda control and ensured that organisationally meaningful ideas, not designer-driven ideas, guided the work.

4.5.3.3 Idea survival, participation and design after design

Seen through Bratteteig et al. (2016) and Bratteteig & Wagner (2016), the success of the project lies not in producing final artefacts but in enabling long-term organisational capacity for change. The ideas that survived: shared values, clarified roles, communication structures and the *Paragone Game* were those deeply rooted in participants lived experience. These ideas became embedded in their ongoing practices, shaping design after design.

Paragone left the workshops with a strengthened ability to articulate and negotiate organisational challenges, a clearer internal structure and the confidence to continue evolving independently. In this sense, the PD process became the generative starting point for ongoing organisational development, exemplifying the long-term outcomes envisioned in PD (Bratteteig & Wagner, 2016).

4.5.4 PD Outcomes as ‘Power To’

Seen through the Scandinavian PD tradition, these outcomes are not secondary or less successful, they represent the core purpose of Participatory Design. Scandinavian PD has always prioritised strengthening participants’ *power to*: their capacity to influence their own work practices, articulate concerns and collectively shape organisational change, rather than merely producing technological artefacts.

In our project, the most significant result was therefore not the creation of a system, but the strengthening of Paragone’s ability to continue designing their own organisational practices. Participants left the workshops with increased competence, shared language, confidence and collective agency. In effect, they gained greater “power to” act, reflect and negotiate their internal structures, while maintaining “power over” the decisions that matter to them.

The life and death of design ideas in our workshops thus illustrate a central insight of the Scandinavian PD tradition: participatory design succeeds not when designers deliver solutions, but when participants acquire the voice, capacity and confidence to carry forward the ideas that are meaningful to them, long after the formal project has ended.

5. Conclusion

Our collaboration with Paragone shows that participatory design can create meaningful change even when technology is not at the centre of the design space. Through critique, fantasy and realisation, participants used material practices to surface tacit concerns, negotiate internal power relations and imagine alternative ways of organising their work. These practices redistributed influence, strengthened mutual understanding and enabled participants to articulate the values that matter in their everyday collaboration.

The prototypes that emerged served as socio-material mediators rather than final solutions. They helped participants explore roles, expectations and organisational dynamics, and supported democratic reflection in ways ordinary meetings had not. In terms of participation, the project achieved strong access, expression and understanding, while influence and decision-making were inevitably shaped by the academic framing of the work.

What endured beyond the workshops were non-material outcomes: clearer expectations, a shared organisational vocabulary and an increased capacity for collective reflection. These developments exemplify design after design, as participants continued shaping their organisational practices independent of our facilitation.

In the end, the project answers our key question: a participatory design process is successful not when it produces technology, but when it expands participants' "power to" shape their own futures.

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Appendix 1 – Consent Form

Formål

Du inviteres til å delta i en designworkshop som en del av et prosjekt for å utvikle noe i samarbeid med dere i **Paragone**.

Hva deltakelsen innebærer

- Deltakelsen er frivillig og du kan når som helst trekke deg uten å måtte oppgi grunn, og uten konsekvenser.
- Du deltar i gruppeaktiviteter (for eksempel collage-øvelser og videre workshoper).
- Dine refleksjoner og ideer vil bli dokumentert gjennom notater og bilder.
- Informasjonen brukes kun til prosjektets formål.

Behandling av data

- All informasjon behandles konfidensielt og anonymt.
- Navn og personopplysninger kobles ikke til sitater eller bilder i rapporter eller presentasjoner.
- Ingen sensitive personopplysninger (jf. Personvernforordningens artikkel 9 og 10) vil bli innsamlet.
- Samtykke kan trekkes når som helst, uten grunn og uten konsekvenser.

Foto og dokumentasjon

Vi ønsker å dokumentere workshopen med bilder av aktivitetene.
Du kan velge om du ønsker å være med på bilder:

Jeg samtykker til at bilder som viser meg kan brukes i intern dokumentasjon (f.eks. rapporter, presentasjoner).
 Jeg samtykker **ikke** til at bilder som viser meg brukes.

Samtykke

Jeg har lest og forstått informasjonen ovenfor, og samtykker til å delta i denne workshopen.

Signatur: _____
Dato: _____

Appendix 2 Individual Reflections

Appendix 2.1 Smilla Stadshaug (smstadsh)

Introduction

Looking back at the project and the semester, I feel that this course offered a rare opportunity to work academically and personally in ways that opened space for learning far beyond the technical. My background is mainly in informatics, combined with user-centered design courses and a 40-credit group in media studies. This combination made Experimental Participatory Design particularly engaging, as the course places human processes, power structures, and design methodology on the same level as conventional design outcomes.

I enjoy group work, and early in the project, we established a set of shared expectations after experiencing some initial communication challenges. We distributed tasks based on capacity and interest, deliberately avoiding a strict hierarchy. At first, this flat structure worked extremely well: we collaborated as equals, held open discussions, and built a supportive and stable working environment. Toward the end, however, the same flatness became a weakness, as the workload shifted more unevenly than intended.

My role in the project was therefore not tied to a single position, but to sustained and active engagement. I initiated tasks when needed, contributed to all discussions, documented the process, and continuously tried to offer room for reflection. The equality within the group made it possible to work creatively and collaboratively, both as a team and in our interactions with participants.

Main Reflections

A Practical and Transformative Course

The course was highly practical, which made the learning concrete and meaningful. I was able to draw on experience from previous courses, particularly regarding group work, expectation management, and communication. One of the most valuable learnings was the effort required to “turn off my UCD-brain” and work *truly* participatorily. It took conscious work not to jump quickly to problem-solving or technological solutions, but instead to focus on process, relationships, and letting the participants take the lead. The fact that we consistently used the term *user* in our early project plan shows how ingrained UCD thinking is, and how necessary the shift in perspective offered by the course truly was.

Choosing a Topic

We began broadly, using Miro to collect and structure ideas. Not having a predefined problem felt a little unfamiliar, but the openness enabled more genuine exploration. My prior experience with Transformative Design (IN3010) was helpful here, as the process of constructing a problem understanding through exploration felt recognizable.

Finding Participants and Framing a Problem

One of the most challenging phases was recruiting participants who actually had time and capacity. Early on, I worried about participants feeling exploited and that we were taking their time without giving anything substantial in return. Ensuring that they experienced real value felt important to me, especially since course projects like this rarely have the time needed to produce a polished final solution.

Selecting Methods

The readings and seminars provided a strong grounding for our methodological choices. After trying both the future workshop and the collaging workshop in class, it felt natural to extend these techniques into our own project. We wanted methods that were accessible, engaging, and safe for participants, and that respected the variety of communication styles in our target group. I found it especially interesting seeing how differently the participants, without design experiences, interpreted the collaging differently from us when we tried it out

Workshops as a Learning Core

The workshops became the center of my learning. We worked through notes, photos, prototypes, and participants' visual expressions. Collages, LEGO, and other low-threshold materials lowered the barrier for discussing difficult topics and made it easier for participants to express experiences they might otherwise struggle to articulate.

This is where I felt power and responsibility most strongly: our job was to facilitate, not steer. It was challenging, especially in the first workshop, where I often felt unsure of myself as a facilitator. At the same time, it was incredibly motivating to see participants genuinely benefit from the process. We also tried to create a welcoming atmosphere, bringing snacks and drinks to every session, which felt small but meaningful.

Curriculum: What Inspired and Challenged Me

The readings that inspired me the most were those that addressed power, democracy, and participation. In particular chapter 2 (p. 21– 36) in, *Routledge International Handbook of Participatory Design* edited by Jesper Simonsen and Toni Robertson (2013) gave me a deeper understanding of PD's political and historical roots. We saw clear connections between our own work with Paragone and the origins of PD, where participation was framed as a democratic right and not simply a methodological choice. These historical perspectives made it easier to recognise how our participants' concerns about communication, responsibility, and organisational structure echoed long-standing themes in the PD tradition. I was also strongly influenced by Jonas Löwgren and Erik Stolterman's *Thoughtful Interaction Design: A Design Perspective on Information Technology* (2004). Their argument that designers must reflect carefully on the design situation, the goals of an intervention, and the consequences of early framing decisions was especially relevant to our process. Their concept of the "thoughtful designer" helped me understand why we needed to hold back on proposing technology and instead prioritise participants' values, frustrations, and aspirations before considering any technical alternatives.

I also appreciated the text *Facilitation Skills in Participatory Design* by Yngve Dahl, Kshitij Sharma and Dag Svanæs (2025), which Jasmin shared with us in the final stretch of report writing. We recognised many of our own uncertainties in it, especially the tension between process and outcome. Since we did not have time to reflect deeply on that piece before submission, it is something we hope to return to before the oral exam.

Some readings were admittedly difficult, occasionally contradictory, and conceptually dense. But that forced me to actively reflect and make analytical choices rather than simply follow a prescribed approach, which I see as a strength of the course.

Personal Reflections and Key Takeaways

Discussions With Jasmin

Our conversation with Jasmin was one of the most valuable learning moments of the entire project. Having a full hour with her before beginning the report was invaluable. She pushed us to question our own positions of power, clarify our intentions, and ask better questions, making me aware of how much influence lies in small details: who gets the floor, how we phrase prompts, and how we present ourselves.

Group Dynamics and Collective Learning

My group was a major source of safety and learning. Several of us shared the same level of dedication, which enabled us to be honest, critical, and creative throughout the writing process. We scrutinized every part of the report, challenged each other on theory and methods, and collaboratively reflected on the workshops. This was one of the steepest learning curves I have experienced in project work.

A Professional Note on Group Challenges

Toward the end of the project, we did encounter a challenge in the group dynamic. One group member participated less actively during the final, intensive phase of report writing. Although he expressed that he was “finished” with his contribution, he was less present for collective review and we received limited communication in the days before submission. This resulted in more pressure on the rest of us.

While the situation was difficult, it provided an important lesson: a flat structure requires ongoing expectation management, especially near deadlines. In hindsight, we could have addressed the imbalance earlier, but time and energy were limited during the final days. I believe we handled the situation professionally and maintained the quality of the final report through close collaboration among those who had capacity. This experience made me more aware of responsibility, communication, and the importance of structure in group work.

Personal Development

Through the project, I learned more about democracy in design than in any theoretical lecture. I learned to talk about things that are often avoided, particularly power and responsibility. I saw how participants gained something meaningful from the process, which gave me insight into how to involve people in

design in a respectful and empowering way, regardless of method. The course made me more aware of my role as a designer, and of the ethical responsibilities that come with facilitating participatory processes.

Conclusion

This course has taught me that participatory design is not primarily about creating systems or producing efficient solutions. It is about people, power, democracy, and creating spaces where everyone can contribute safely and meaningfully. The project has made me more patient, more reflective, and more attuned to the interpersonal aspects of design work.

The value of the project lies not only in what we produced, but in how we worked, in the relationships we built, the questions we raised, and the reflections the participants carried with them afterward. I leave the course with a deeper understanding of what it means to *design with* people rather than *for* them, and this is an insight I will carry with me both academically and personally.

Appendix 2.2 Emily Omholt Myhre (emilyom)

Individual reflection

Introduction

I have a background in informatics at University of Oslo, where I have previously worked in group projects. However, in this course I have really enjoyed working more practically and more directly in a design project. I was motivated by the opportunity to work hands-on with real participants and to challenge my existing assumptions about design processes.

Throughout the Paragone project, I primarily took on the roles of facilitator and main point of contact with participants. These responsibilities shaped much of my experience, as I repeatedly had to navigate communication, power relations and group dynamics, both within Paragone and within my own design team. Fortunately, our internal collaboration was mostly strong. We worked as equals, communicated openly, and quickly established shared ambitions. This foundation made it easier to handle the uncertainties and improvisations inherent in participatory design.

Learning Participatory Design in Practice

The course has been one of the most practically oriented I have taken at IFI. I was able to apply the group-work skills I already had, yet I also needed to “turn off” my deeply internalised user-centred design (UCD) mindset we have learned about in previous courses. Much of my earlier design education focused on problem-solving, efficiency, and user needs, whereas Participatory Design (PD) emphasises power, democracy, mutual learning and the right to have a say (Simonsen & Robertson, 2013, p. 35). This required a conceptual shift: rather than asking “How do we design a good system?”, I increasingly needed to ask, “Who gets to define the problem, and under what conditions?”.

The curriculum helped me see how designers inevitably hold power, through agenda setting, control of tools, or simply by being perceived as experts. Bratteteig and Wagner’s (2014) work on power and decision-making resonated strongly with my facilitator role. Their framing made me more aware of how even subtle interventions such as, clarifying questions, time management, or summarising discussions, shape participants’ opportunities to influence the design. Recognising these dynamics helped me approach facilitation more deliberately, with sensitivity to when to step back and when to provide structure.

Project Phases and Reflections

Our project began with a broad topic exploration using Miro, where we mapped possible participant groups and themes. Early on, we learned how difficult it can be to find participants who both have time and recognise relevance in taking part, something Verne and Braaten

(2014) describe well. Student organisations emerged as a natural fit because of their accessibility, clear roles and built-in motivational structures.

Once we partnered with Paragone, the methods we chose were guided heavily by course literature. Future workshops, collaging and low-fidelity prototypes were selected because they aligned with PD's material practices and because we believed they would resonate with art students. Throughout the workshops, we documented extensively through notes and photos to analyse participant contributions afterwards.

One of my personal concerns, especially in the first two workshops, was the fear of exploiting participants. I asked myself repeatedly: *Are they really gaining something from this?* I was relieved when participants expressed that the workshops felt meaningful, even "refreshing," and that they valued the structured space to discuss internal difficulties. Seeing the benefit for them helped me understand PD's political dimension: sometimes the value of a design process lies not in outcomes but in the conversations it makes possible.

Engaging With Course Literature

The curriculum influenced my understanding of the project in several ways. I was especially inspired by the power and democracy literature. Bratteteig and Wagner's (2016) distinction between "power to" and "power over" helped me reflect on my own role as facilitator. I could see how our workshop structure gave Paragone members "power to" express values and concerns, while we as designers still held "power over" decisions about methods and timelines.

The texts about technology in PD were thought provoking. Korsgaard et al. (2016) argue for introducing computational alternatives early to broaden participants' socio-technical imagination. However, our project unfolded in the opposite direction: participants actively avoided technology, identifying their challenges as social and organisational. This tension helped me appreciate Löwgren and Stolterman's (2004) idea of the thoughtful designer, not imposing technology simply because it is expected but listening carefully to what participants actually need.

Not all texts were clear to me. Some felt abstract, contradictory or theoretically dense. At times I struggled to reconcile different approaches within PD, which sometimes appear to disagree on issues. Despite this, the diversity of perspectives made me realise that PD is not a single method but a field where disagreements themselves reveal underlying opinions and commitments.

Interpersonal and Group Reflections

This project also taught me much about group dynamics. One particularly meaningful moment was our one-hour conversation with Jasmin, where we discussed many different topics such as the power structures that applies to academic PD projects and how leadership manifests in volunteer contexts. This discussion deepened my understanding of internal power relations and helped prepare us to facilitate more sensitively within Paragone.

Working with my group was overall a very positive experience. We communicated openly, had equal dedication and developed a genuine friendship throughout the semester. This made the process enjoyable even when the academic workload was heavy.

However, toward the end of the project we experienced a challenge in our group dynamics. One group member participated less actively during the final, intensive phase of writing the report. He expressed that he had “finished” his part, and although we tried to adjust to his schedule to make collaboration easier, he still participated minimally in our shared reviews. He also did not attend our joint meetings in the days leading up to the submission, and communication from him during this period was limited. As a result, the workload became heavier for the rest of us, and it was more challenging to structure the report and ensure a coherent flow.

The situation was difficult, but also an important learning experience. I now see that a group structure requires continuous clarification of expectations, especially in the final phase of a large project. Although we handled the situation as professionally as we could, I realise in hindsight that we could have addressed the imbalance earlier. The experience has made me more aware of how responsibility, communication and structure shape effective collaboration.

Personal Development

Personally, I feel I have grown significantly during this course. I have learned how democracy and power truly shape design processes, how to talk openly about topics that often remain unspoken, such as authority, expectations and conflict, and how participants can benefit deeply from being included in generative, reflective processes, even without producing technological outcomes. Most importantly, I learned that PD is fundamentally about creating conditions for others to express themselves, reflect and act, not about the designer’s creativity or technical skill. This realisation will influence how I approach future design work, whether in academic projects or real-world contexts.

Conclusion

This project has reshaped my understanding of what design can be. Working with Paragone taught me that participatory design succeeds not when we deliver polished artefacts, but when participants gain greater capacity to reflect, discuss and shape their own practices. Through facilitation, collaboration and careful attention to power, I learned how to support such processes in ways that are democratic, meaningful and grounded in participants’ values. The most important takeaway is that PD is less about designing *for* people, and more about designing *with* them, and sometimes even stepping aside so they can design *after* us.

Appendix 2.3 Maria M. Andersen (marmand)

Reflections on Participatory Design

Throughout this project, I developed a deeper understanding of how power, participation and design practices shape one another within participatory design processes. Working with Paragone made many of the theoretical principles from the curriculum concrete, particularly the Scandinavian commitment to democratic collaboration, mutual learning and the careful negotiation of influence throughout the design process. What began as a structured assignment became an encounter with real organisational dynamics and the politics of participation.

Power Relations and Having a Say

A central learning outcome emerged from observing how power relations were distributed and enacted. Simonsen and Robertson (2013) describe meaningful participation as dependent on “having a say,” which requires that participants are informed, able to form opinions and enabled to influence decisions (pp. 129–130). This framing helped me articulate the different kinds of power at play in our workshops. As student facilitators, we held structural power because we organised the process, designed the workshop format and selected the materials. Paragone members held experiential power because they possessed the knowledge that defined the content of the discussions. Within Paragone itself, additional power distinctions existed between editors and writers, and between more experienced and newer members. Becoming aware of these layers helped me understand that facilitating participation involves creating conditions where different forms of knowledge can be expressed and where several perspectives can influence the direction of the design work.

Mutual Learning and the Role of Facilitation

My own role as a facilitator also made the dynamics of mutual learning visible. Simonsen and Robertson (2013) emphasise that participatory design is based on mutual learning, where designers and participants learn about each other’s practices and concerns (p. 132). However, facilitating these learning processes also means shaping the situations in which learning becomes possible. I noticed how our summarisation and interpretation of Workshop 1 became the starting point for Workshop 2. This made me aware of how easily facilitators can unintentionally fix meaning or steer the direction of the work. To counter this, we deliberately invited participants to challenge or revise our interpretations. This experience made me more attentive to how facilitation involves continuous reflection on how design choices amplify or constrain participants’ opportunities to have a genuine say.

PD as a Democratic Practice

A second major insight concerns how participatory design can operate as a democratic practice rather than as a pathway toward a technological artefact. Simonsen and Robertson (2013) highlight that the early Scandinavian PD projects were primarily concerned with organisational conditions, influence and democracy (pp. 21–36). Working with Paragone brought these historical roots into focus. Participants' concerns were not technological but organisational: unclear expectations, uneven distribution of responsibilities and a need for stronger communication practices. Before any technology could be meaningfully considered, participants needed time and space to articulate their experiences, frustrations and values. This made me realise that PD is not simply a methodological approach to generating design outcomes but a practice of supporting people in reflecting on and negotiating their shared work.

Material Practices and Prototyping as Thinking

Working with materials offered another important learning experience. Simonsen and Roberson (2013) demonstrates how tangible mock-ups can help participants articulate ideas that are otherwise difficult to express verbally and make the design situation concrete enough to support negotiation and shared understanding (pp. 5–6). I witnessed this directly when Paragone members described collaging as “a nice way to talk about issues in an easy and airy environment.” Tangible materials lowered the threshold for participation and created a safer atmosphere for expressing concerns. This changed my understanding of prototyping: I had previously viewed it as a means of testing solutions, but I now understand it as a tool for thinking, expressing tacit knowledge and supporting democratic participation. This was particularly evident in how the make–tell cycles enabled participants to reinterpret earlier insights and redirect the trajectory of the project.

Rethinking the Role of Technology

The process also reminded me of Löwgren and Stolterman’s (2004) argument that thoughtful design requires judgment about when technology is appropriate and when it is not (pp. 1–14). Coming from an informatics background, I initially felt pressure to push toward a technological outcome. However, in the first three workshops, participants did not introduce technology at all. Their concerns were relational, organisational and communicative. When technology did appear in Workshop 4, it emerged as a minor component that participants themselves introduced after the board game concept already existed. Their interest focused on subtle, supportive elements such as lights or sensors that could make the game clearer and more engaging. This reinforced Löwgren and Stolterman’s point: responsible design requires resisting the impulse to “force” technology into situations where it is not central.

Non-material Outcomes and “Design After Design”

Finally, I gained insight into the value of non-material outcomes. Simonsen and Robertson (2013) discuss the concept of design after design, where participants continue to appropriate, reinterpret and redesign outcomes after the formal project ends (p. 138-139). This was visible when Paragone members imagined how the board game could support onboarding, social cohesion and brainstorming in future editorial cycles. More importantly, the workshops also led to small but significant changes in organisational practice. Participants began sitting in a circle during meetings to support equality in participation and started engaging in more open conversations about expectations. These shifts illustrate that the value of participatory design lies not only in artefacts but in the ways it reshapes relationships, practices and shared understandings.

In conclusion, this project strengthened my understanding of participatory design as a democratic, reflective and relational practice. I learned that supporting meaningful participation requires humility, attentiveness to power dynamics and a willingness to delay the introduction of technology when it does not align with participants' concerns. I also developed a deeper appreciation for the role of material practices in enabling expression, negotiation and shared understanding. Most importantly, I saw how participatory processes can create spaces where people feel heard, respected and able to influence the conditions of their own work. These are practices that many organisations need, regardless of whether the outcome is a technological artefact.

Reflections on Guidance and Feedback from Lecturers

At the beginning of the semester, I found participatory design difficult to grasp. Our group repeatedly slipped into user centred design thinking, where the goal is often to identify user needs and produce solutions for them. This conflicted with the Scandinavian PD tradition, which emphasises democratic collaboration, shared influence and mutual learning rather than solution delivery. Early in the project, we struggled to understand how to embody these principles in practice. Conversations with our lecturers were therefore crucial. They helped us recognise when our approach was drifting toward user centred design and guided us back to PD's core commitments. Their questions encouraged us to consider how to give participants influence over the direction of the project, not only over the outcomes. They also helped us see the value of focusing on organisational conditions, which became a turning point in our process. These dialogues supported our understanding of PD as more than a set of methods. They taught us to treat PD as a democratic practice that requires ongoing reflection on power, participation and the shaping of design situations.

Reflection on group dynamics

Collaboration, Commitment and Shared Ambition

An important part of my learning in this project came from the internal group dynamics. Early in the semester, we discussed expectations openly and agreed on a shared ambition level and a commitment to working collaboratively throughout the process. This created a stable foundation for most of the project. However, during the final and most intensive phase of report writing, we experienced a significant imbalance in participation. Several of us worked long days and late evenings to finalise the analysis, integrate theory and refine the arguments. One group member, however, became largely absent during this phase and did not take part in the collective review that the exam requires. This was particularly challenging because the written report determines half of the course grade, and the grade is shared among all group members.

Democratic Participation and “Having a Say” in the Report

From a participatory design perspective, this experience made visible how democratic collaboration can weaken when participation becomes unequal. Simonsen and Robertson (2013) argue that meaningful participation depends on “having a say,” which requires access to information, opportunities to contribute and influence over decisions (pp. 129–130). When one member did not join the collective review, this person’s say in the final design and in the academic argumentation was reduced. At the same time, this absence produced additional pressure on the rest of the group, who effectively shaped the final report without shared decision-making from all members.

This raised an ethical concern for me regarding equity. Since the report determines a shared grade, contributing to it is not optional. The written report is part of the exam, and participating in its creation is a requirement for being able to influence its direction. While the absent group member contributed well during earlier phases of the design process, the lack of participation during the exam writing meant that the person had limited involvement in shaping the arguments, interpretations and theoretical grounding of the report. In a course built on the values of participatory design, where equality and shared influence are core principles, this imbalance became particularly visible and felt unfair.

What This Taught Me About Responsibility and Collaboration

Despite this difficulty, the situation provided a valuable learning experience. Bratteteig and Stolterman (1997) note that group design requires interdependence and responsiveness, and that the quality of outcomes relies on the group’s ability to work together. For the members who remained present, this required taking on additional responsibility, coordinating decisions and ensuring the quality of the final submission. It taught me how essential expectation management, communication and reliability are when working in democratic teams, especially when approaching deadlines. At the same time, it strengthened my appreciation of the commitment shown by the group members who were consistently present. Together, we maintained the agreed ambition level and delivered a report we are proud of.

