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Service design as a practice of freedom in collaborative cultural producers

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Abstract

Service design is strongly linked to practices that maintain workers' dependency on management. Social movements in Brazil eschew hierarchical management, instead seeking self-management based on solidarity, equality, and democracy. In recent years, social movements appropriated digital infrastructures to design and deliver collaborative services. This paper hypothesizes that this could be considered designing services as a practice of freedom. The hypothesis is explored through a descriptive study of the self-management practices of a particular collective associated with the Brazilian Digital Culture movement.

Keywords: design, collaboration, freedom

Introduction

Service design has historically developed as a practice of oppression that emphasizes asymmetry between provider and recipient (Tonkinwise & Penin, 2009) and hierarchical work management (Kim, 2018). Social movements that question the capitalist mode of production eschew this kind of hetero-management and seek self-management (*autogestão*) based on the practice of freedom (Freire, 2018), which includes solidarity, equality, and democracy (Singer, 2002). In addition to organizing to demand public policy, social movements also offer collaborative services to address the urgent needs of their communities.

Configuring the service infrastructure (Van der Bijl-Brouwer, 2017) is a crucial part of designing these services as social movements often use the public and private infrastructures already available, even if precarious. In recent years, social movements appropriated digital infrastructures, particularly social media, and project management applications, to design and deliver collaborative services. Can these

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practices of infrastructure appropriation be considered service design practices? What can service design learn from this practice of freedom?

This paper explores these research questions while analyzing the case of the Brazilian Digital Culture Movement and its appropriation of the Corais Platform, a digital infrastructure for self-management (Gonzatto, Van Amstel, and Jatobá, 2021). The movement was struggling with organizing without governmental support, which was plenty during Gilberto Gil's lead of Brazil's Ministry of Culture (2003-2008). Gilberto Gil, who is also a pioneer in using Creative Commons to license artistic works (Garcia-Solek, 2015), envisioned a network of organized producers working with free software, but not every group pursued this vision. Once his term was over and governmental support ran out, these groups did not have money to pay for the technological and spatial costs of organizing in that way.

Corais was seen by the movement as a digital space to keep the open cultural production model. Soon after the drastic budget cuts of the Ministry of Culture, several cultural production collectives began using the infrastructure to support their nomadic meetings, keep up with each other's work, divide tasks, write together funding proposals, and other activities. Since then, Corais has hosted more than 600 cultural production projects spread over Brazil. These collectives sought in self-management an alternative way to make their projects viable despite the lack of money and leadership (Gonzatto, Van Amstel, and Jatobá, 2021). Since these projects explore designing collaborative services, we hypothesize that their practice of freedom can also be considered service design practices. The present research explores this hypothesis through a descriptive study of the self-management practices of a particular collective.

Research method

The empirical study included in this research focuses on the digital traces left by a particular collective (Colaborativa.PE) in Corais Platform. This collective was chosen because it was the first to implement the collaborative cultural producer technology, which combines free software and solidarity economy principles (explained in the next chapter). A combination of literature review and trace ethnography was used for both data gathering and interpretation. The literature consulted includes previous works on collaborative cultural producers' practices, as well as the theorization, development, and use of the Corais platform. The literature assisted in interpreting the data gathered through trace ethnography (Geiger & Ribes, 2011), a method centered on reconstituting human action through their traces left in digital

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infrastructures: documents, databases, exchanged messages, feeds, and so on. Such traces were also used by the participants themselves to coordinate and attribute their activities, as it is usual in digitally-mediated self-management (Geiger & Ribes, 2011). The analysis of such data — made possible by the mandatory Creative Commons license for Corais Platform's content — provided insights regarding the supposed service design practices of Colaborativa.PE.

Collaborative cultural producer

During the 2004 World Social Forum[1], an event held in the city of Porto Alegre, a collective of producers engaged with alternative media realized that corporate media lacked interest in covering the forum. They decided to create their own coverage through a new production structure — the collaborative cultural producer technology, which is based on two concepts: solidarity economy and free software (Jatobá & Vilutis, 2010).

The economic concept states that equality should predominate over competition, therefore participants of an economic activity should cooperate to produce common goods (Singer, 2002). Whereas the capitalist mode of production relies on private ownership, this alternative mode of production is, in turn, based on collective ownership (Singer, 2002).

Another key difference between the capitalist mode of production and the solidarity economy is the management style. Whilst the first operates through hetero-management, that is, management of the other, solidarity economy operates through democratic self-management (Singer, 2002). It challenges the verticalized hegemonic management system that covers up work exploitation, opening up the possibility to approach human and environmental relations through an egalitarian practice of resource exchange (Luna, 2017).

The free software concept states that people should be free to use, modify, and redistribute the software they need (Stallman, 2002). Using free software enables technological appropriation due to the source code being open, allowing modifications and personalizations that impact the producers' design processes (Luna, 2017). It is also a political choice: free software, in this regard, constitutes also a possible alternative to the competitive technology production relations, operating through hacker ethics, whose premises are shared knowledge, collaborative work, and freedom (Gama, Cunha & Jatobá, 2014).

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[1] Since 2001, the World Social Forum gathers social movements and non-profit organizations to discuss their matters, in opposition to the World Economic Forum which was taking place at the same time in Davos, Switzerland (World Social Forum, 2019).

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The combination of alternative media, solidarity economy, and free software lies at the core of the collaborative cultural producers, which can be considered:

> (...) A Social Technology[2] aimed at the local development of certain communities and cultural groups, whose objectives are to promote the sharing of free technological knowledge, the self-management of projects and collective ventures, the sustainability of the groups involved, and the production of community communication through popular and digital media. (Gama, Cunha & Jatobá, 2014, p.10)

Following the first implementations of the collaborative cultural producer technology at the beginning of the 2000s, the organizers of the EXPOIDEA, an event held in 2010 in the city of Recife, systematically applied this social technology as an integral part of the event's communication (Luna, 2017). The event hired cultural collectives from the state network of cultural points (*pontos de cultura*) — organizations named after local groups, that have since been encouraged by the Ministry of Culture to avoid purchasing or cracking proprietary software and instead appropriate of free software for cultural production (Jatobá, 2014; Gama, Cunha & Jatobá, 2014).

After EXPOIDEA was over, the cultural producers decided to keep working in that way and founded Colaborativa.PE, the first established collaborative cultural producer in Brazil (Jatobá, 2014). The producer worked mainly in the fields of video, audio, graphic design, community radio, and free media, with the overarching goal of reproducing its social technology. Soon, other cultural producers in Pernambuco appropriated their technology (Luna, 2017). Pernambuco cultural producers used to rely on government funding but that dropped between 2010 and 2011 (Jatobá, 2014). The social technology developed by Colaborativa.PE was seen as a way of overcoming financial shortcomings (Jatobá, 2014).

Colaborativa.PE managed to provide the same cultural services to other events, eventually inviting producers from other collectives (Jatobá, 2014). Despite helping the producer's continuity, the dependence on ephemerous events took the focus away from investing in local actions (Jatobá, 2014). For that matter, in 2012 the participants of Colaborativa.PE chose to adopt the physical space of one of the network's participants, the culture point CUCA Recife, which was located in a

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[2] The concept of Social Technology is defined by various authors. Studying the case of the collaborative cultural producer, Luna (2017) primarily uses Moacir Gadotti's definition, with which we agree in the present research: "Social Technology is a broad concept and can comprise both products and techniques with replicable methodologies, developed with community interaction and that represents effective proposals for social transformation." (Gadotti, 2009, p.56, as cited in Luna, 2017).

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deactivated space at the Federal University of Pernambuco (UFPE) called Concha Acústica (acoustic shell) (Jatobá, 2014).

By occupying this space, the Conch@tiva movement was born, aiming for the revitalization of the space (Jatobá, 2014). Under the lead of Colaborativa.PE, a telecentre would be installed, and from then on, free software training and cultural events would be held on-site, as well as the project serving as an incubator for cultural points or others interested in the field of culture, thus broadening the activities of the collective (Luna, 2020).

The expansion of the collective's services was initially rather chaotic but gradually evolved into a more conscious design. Colaborativa.PE realized that using several unintegrated digital media platforms, document sharing, and management applications was preventing them from scaling up their self-management practices. Furthermore, despite being free at that time, these were mainly proprietary software that could jeopardize their future freedom anytime (Jatobá, 2014). When they realized this fact, the network adopted Corais Platform as an environment for self-managing their activities (Jatobá, 2014).

Corais Platform

Corais Platform is a web system that supports remote collaborative work, enabling horizontal project management without the need for a leader or other hierarchical structures (Satyan et al., 2015). The platform is based on the Drupal free software framework, which enabled the bundling of several modules together as collaborative tools (Jatobá, 2014). With tools like collaborative text-editing, task management, blog, and more, Corais is capable of helping people organize themselves with few resources (Satyan et al., 2015). In that sense, the platform fulfills the collaborative cultural producer's need for a low-cost, self-managed, free software-based approach to their organizational processes.

Opened in 2011 by the Faber-Ludens Institute of Interaction Design, Corais was conceived to promote design livre[3] projects, an ideology that attempts to rethink interaction design from a Brazilian cultural perspective (Amstel, Vassão & Ferraz, 2011). A theoretical systematization of Design Livre was later found in the work of Caio Vassão around the limits of Metadesign (Vassão, 2017).

In short, metadesign is an abstraction mechanism for formalization, reimagined by Vassão (2008) in the context of ubiquitous computing as a means to design entities

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[3] "The name is kept in Portuguese for historical reasons. "Livre" could be translated into English as "free", but this word has double meaning: the quality of freedom and no cost" (Amstel, Vassão & Ferraz, 2011, p.451).

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that are not explicitly laid out — such as procedures, connections, and combinations (Vassão, 2008). Worried that metadesign could turn into a totalitarian approach, Vassão developed *arquitetura livre*, a theory loosely based on free software that provides ethical means to deal with metadesign, through the perspective that informality precedes formality, unveiling emergence and alterity (Amstel, Vassão & Ferraz, 2011; Vassão, 2008). Similar to arquitetura livre, *design livre* appropriates as well as surpasses free software principles, by not only sharing source code but also the metadesign level — the underlying processes of design, left open for further appropriation (Amstel, Vassão & Ferraz, 2011). That differs from the open design definitions, which leaves out the ethical debate that the term open source skipped (Amstel, Vassão & Ferraz, 2011).

As a practical implication of this ideology, Corais was chosen by the collaborative cultural producers to provide more transparency to their self-management, fostering greater work autonomy, as well as allowing other collectives to make use of their experience-made knowledge (Freire, 2018). Corais was originally designed to support collaborative design projects. The collaborative cultural producers did not fit entirely within this frame of reference but they found their way to the Corais Metadesign project[4], where they could participate in the platform's design (Jatobá, 2014). The platform capability of meeting the daily functioning of self-managed collectives emerged directly from this participation (Jatobá, 2014). In this way, the collaborative cultural producers designed their services while redesigning the infrastructure that partially supported those services.

Social currency

With both the need for new tools to support the self-management of the services offered by Colaborativa.PE, and the need to restructure their physical headquarters, a social currency named *conchas* (shells) was created (Luna, 2017). Inspired by solidarity economy, social currencies are mutual credit systems that circulate in a community, generating local work and income (Luna, 2017). In this sense, Corais pioneered the use of digital money to mitigate the budget cuts in government funding which severely affected the Digital Culture movement since 2010.

Initially, Colaborativ@.PE was trying to use Corais' spreadsheet tool to organize a Local Exchange Trading System (LETS) based on social currencies. The limitation of the spreadsheets led them to suggest a new tool in the platform for LETS, which they designed together with Corais' developers based on the customization of available

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[4] https://www.corais.org/metadesign/

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Drupal modules[5]. The social currency module was created not with the goal of capital accumulation, but for facilitating local relations and having a tool for direct exchanges, also enabling greater access to the services offered by the acoustic shell space.

The acoustic shell's maintenance tasks were mapped and valued in *conchas*, meaning anyone engaged in those activities would receive a certain amount of social credit in return.[6] The social currency, thereafter, could be used to hire services offered by Colaborativa.PE, such as audiovisual production, events planning, or training courses.[7] After a task was performed, the credit was transferred to the personal account of the person responsible for the task within 24 hours. All exchanges are openly visible in the Conch@tiva project in Corais, as shown in the image below.[8]
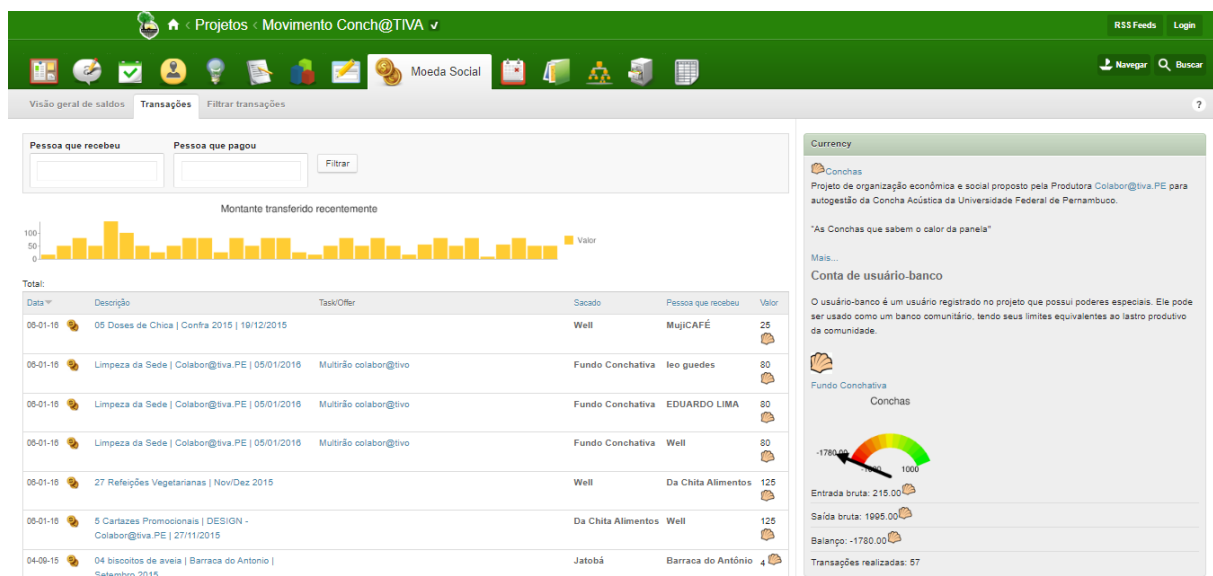

Figure 1. Exchanges in conchas social currency: Screenshot by the authors (2022)

Due to this LETS, Conch@tiva movement hosted several events in the acoustic shell space like concerts and music festivals, as well as educational courses that could be paid for in social currency, and even trades with local businesses around the university, such as restaurants and repair shops, that would accept payment in

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[5] The initial documentation regarding the creation of the social currency can be found at Colaborativa.PE's project in Corais: https://www.corais.org/colaborativape/node/54223

[6] Maintenance tasks spreadsheet: https://corais.org/conchativa/node/76663

[7] Colaborativa.PE's services spreadsheet: https://corais.org/conchativa/node/76660

[8] Social currency exchanges: https://corais.org/conchativa/exchanges

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Conchas in exchange for advertising services (Gonzatto, Van Amstel, and Jatobá, 2021; Luna, 2017).

Discussion

This study described the practice of freedom by the collaborative cultural producer Colaborativa.PE, and the deriving Conch@tiva movement. Through these practices, several cultural services were designed and delivered. Since its inception, Colaborativa.PE challenged the hegemonic system of cultural production, prioritizing collaboration over hierarchical structures, knowledge sharing over private licenses, and technological appropriation over technology adoption, following solidarity economy and free software principles.

Relating these practices to service design is challenging, as the field is currently strongly linked to hetero-management. We think that this description might help the field de-link from hierarchical and expert design, and embrace self-management and its liberating design style. If it is possible to do service design as a practice of freedom — like in other design fields (Serpa et al., 2022), self-management is surely a requirement. In the case of the collaborative cultural producers, self-management underscores the design of the main service servicescapes (Bitner, 1992): the physical space of the acoustic shell and the digital space configured in Corais Platform. In the first servicescape, the producers prioritized self-cleaning, flexible space occupation, work spot rotation, and making visible any physical actions performed there. Whereas in the second servicescape, the digital infrastructure was configured and used to emphasize mutual trade, responsibility, free software, design livre, and other approaches.

Democratizing service design, as well as facilitating appropriation in a non-deterministic approach, resulted in the emergence of the digital social currency. Thus, through a hands-on approach, the very participants of the collective designed their service processes not depending on expert knowledge, blurring the line between service users and designers. LETS required users to become producers to get credits to become users again. The most engaged producers were also designers of the services, participating in online and face-to-face participatory design workshops.

These service design practices differ drastically from expert-led service design practices of blueprinting, co-creation, codesign, and prototyping (Kimbell, 2011). In this case, all design processes were horizontal, therefore the role of professional design — at least the role played by the platform designers — occurred more of as

metadesign, as in the co-creation of the social currency digital tool. Such service design practices demonstrated to be successful in producing the freedom desired by collaborative and shared cultural services, positively impacting the local development of the state of Pernambuco and other self-managed collectives around them. Free software — not just open source —, and design livre — not just open design — were key superstructures to enable such kind of management. Above all, this study draws attention to self-management as a foundation for designing services as a practice of freedom.

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