Designing for collaborative crossmedia creation

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INTRODUCTION

In the Fall of 2004, Swedish producer and DJ Eric Prydz released the song Call On Me featuring Steve Winwood re-recording a sample from his 1982 hit Valerie. The song made it to the top of the charts throughout Europe, partly thanks to the video that Huse Monfaradi directed to go with the song.

The video features an aerobics class of women performing more or less pornographic gym routines in 80s-inspired and more or less pornographic outfits. There is a hint of a storyline in the video, suggesting a romance between the gym instructor and the sole man in the group. (In order to get the most out of this introduction, it might be worthwhile to watch the video before reading further. At the time of writing, a search for »Call On Me Eric Prydz« on Youtube produces the desired result.)

The video was exceptionally successful in terms of public demand – it was the most downloaded music video of all time in Australia, it won the mobile equivalent of a gold record in 2005, and it formed the basis for a
feature-length DVD called *Pump It Up* where the dancers from Call On Me performed aerobics routines to popular dance music songs.

It was also highly controversial due to its sexually explicit content – which lead to the production of a censored version for daytime screenings – and its pornographic, somewhat Neanderthal gender perspective.

Like more or less everybody else in the Western world, people involved in various forms of amateur crossmedia production noticed the controversy around the Call On Me video and some of them decided to take a stand in the ensuing debate. What is interesting for our purposes here is that they did so in the form of mashups: satirical audio-video montages using references to the original video but subverting it in various ways.

There were literally hundreds of Call On Me ripoffs, parodies and mashups published on video sites such as Youtube and Google Video from 2005 and onwards. Some were sophisticated, others crude; some were pure audio/video remixes, others featured new recorded material. The majority of them were designed as disapproving comments on the sexism and antiquated gender perspective of the original video.

For instance, there are several examples of gender swap where a group of men and a lone woman perform the aerobics routine from the original video in order to highlight the mono-gendered nature of the sexually suggestive motions and outfits in the original (see Figure 1).

A more refined twist is illustrated in the Call On Me/Brokeback Mountain mashup credited to »Director: Dan Colon« where the storyline is subverted into a lesbian romance between the gym instructor and one of the girls in the group.
And the list goes on, ranging from scatological audio additions to high-school performance remakes. A more exhaustive case study on the Call On Me mashups can be found in (Löwgren, 2007).

Choosing the Call On Me example to introduce this chapter was quite arbitrary – there are numerous examples of satirical mashups circulating on the Internet – but the choice of satirical mashups was highly deliberate. As many observers have noted, we live in a time where the means for media production are more evenly distributed than ever before. Everybody with a personal computer and an Internet connection have the necessary tools to create and communicate expressions of their ideas, also in media channels that only a decade ago were reserved for corporations and institutions.

What we are talking about is the phenomenon of debating a sexist music video by creating a mashed-up video and distributing it in the very forum where the original video has its main circulation. The debate grows when more people add comments and their own mashups, forming a social structure that is transient in its current topical focus but reasonably persistent in its underlying values. We may call it a structure of collaborative crossmedia creation.

The phenomenon of collaborative crossmedia creation are arguably growing in importance, both as meaningful social practices engaging millions of people and as topics that deserve analytical treatment because they can teach us things about the new media in society. For this author, being a designer of digital products and services, collaborative crossmedia creation represents an emerging social practice to design for. Can my fellow designers and myself contribute positively to collaborative crossmedia creation and how it is practiced? Can we facilitate its introduction into new contexts? And how do we have to design to approach those goals?

The rest of this chapter is devoted to such questions. After a discussion of the key differences between designing for collaborative crossmedia creation and more conventional design situations, I introduce three examples of designing for collaborative crossmedia creation. They address situations that are quite different in demographic as well as sociocultural terms, yet the designer-experiences are reasonably coherent and certainly relevant beyond the individual cases. After a brief excursion into the more general question of what motivates people to participate in participatory media, the chapter closes with a summary of the key elements in a strategy of designing for collaborative crossmedia creation.

**WHAT CAN A DESIGNER DO?**

This paper is written by an interaction designer who wants to design good digital products and services. This task is challenging enough in traditional interaction design, yet somewhat manageable; we have explorative and empirical techniques to create a fairly reliable near-future image
of our intended users, their wants and their needs, and the near-future use situations.

Designing for collaborative crossmedia creation is a completely different beast; the main difference is captured in the concept of creative appropriation.

It is certainly true in principle that no designer can control what happens to a product once it is released into actual use (Henderson & Kyng, 1991). Even products designed for highly specific uses end up being used in completely unanticipated ways – the texting (sms) function of mobile phones is an obvious example. (As most of the readers undoubtedly know, the Short Message Service was originally conceived of as a protocol for the telecom network to send notifications to cellphone users, e.g., to indicate a waiting voicemail message.)

Some designers and design theorists see this as a problem to be attacked with new methodology, whereas for others it is merely a reflection of the nature of design, which is always about envisioning possible futures that can never be accurately predicted, only nudged in different directions. »[T]he effect of designing is to initiate change in man-made things,« as Jones (1972/1992) puts it in his seminal tome on design methodology.

The domain of collaborative crossmedia creation, however, is particularly challenging in this respect. The existing creative culture is more or less based on an ethos of taking existing tools and infrastructures, as well as »content«, and combining them in new ways for new communicative purposes. There are strong historical connections to hacker cultures and open-source values, as seen in contemporary examples such as the Creative Commons movement as well as in older expressive practices such as machinima.

The practice of creating machinima draws upon the emergence of first-person shooter (fps) computer games, and has been around for as long as the games themselves. Simply put, the idea is to use the software created by the game producers for a completely different purpose, namely to produce animated film. The first examples of machinima film were created by people of high technical skill – since the first game engines had to be hacked in quite complicated ways in order to produce film – and generally drew on the aesthetic contrast between the hard-coded features of the game engine (character appearance and motions, props, settings, etc.) and the stories of the created films (see Figure 2).

Game producers noted the creative energy of the machinima communities and responded by gradually opening their engines and providing tools more geared towards machinima production, culminating in the »game« The Movies by Lionhead Studios from 2005 which is, strictly speaking, not a game but rather a machinima production environment. The technical skill threshold was lowered accordingly and, quite predictably, the first machinima production to reach worldwide attention and prime media coverage was The French Democracy, a political piece on the socio-economical situation of immigrants and refugees in Paris. It was produced by Alex Chan (a.k.a. Koulamata) as a comment on the 2005
civil unrest of France, only a few weeks after The Movies was released. It is regarded by mainstream culture critics as an important step for machinima from computer-game in-jokes to contemporary issues, and compared by one critic to Mathieu Kassovitz’s 1995 film *La Haine* rather than to previous machinima classics such as *Red vs. Blue* (Lee, 2006). The most important critical remarks, however, concern the obvious dissonance between the message of The French Democracy and the affordances of the production tool, which was clearly designed for a lighter style of filmmaking (see Figure 3).

What the practice of machinima illustrates so well, from making a lumberjack knock on a door by attacking it with his axe to making a wooden shack in the forest stand in for a power station in suburban Paris where two immigrant boys are killed, is how existing tools, technologies and infrastructures are appropriated for communicative and expressive purposes way beyond what their designers might have envisioned. This kind of creative appropriation is the rule rather than the exception when it comes to the cultures of collaborative crossmedia creation.
EXPERIMENTING WITH THE MECHANISMS OF PARTICIPATORY MEDIA

The »new media« with its increasingly even distribution of means for production and distribution, and hence a decreasingly clear boundary between producers and consumers, may be called participatory media. We have pointed out above that the cultures of the participatory media are marked strongly by creative appropriation; it is also straightforward to establish that people’s engagement in the participatory media is fundamentally social in its nature.

These two factors together suggest that the task of designing products and services for collaborative crossmedia creation must be understood as an ongoing process, a continuous interplay between »designers« and »users«. In such processes, users contribute by acting out their insider knowledge of the practices constituting the creative communities they belong to. By participating in the design processes, they gain inspiration and means for new directions of collaborative crossmedia creation. Designers, on the other hand, contribute knowledge of participatory media tools and infrastructures and their social outcomes. What they can take away from the process, if they are looking carefully for it, is insights into the mechanisms of participatory media in actual use.

My colleagues and I have engaged in a number of such design projects, intended to initiate change in real participatory-media settings and, at the same time, help us learn more about the relations between new media products and services and their creative appropriation and use. In this section, I will summarize a few of those experiments with a focus on our insights into the mechanisms of participatory media.

**Avatopia:**
*Building a community for societal change*

The *Avatopia* project (Gislén & Löwgren, 2002; Gislén, Löwgren, & Myrestam, 2008) was initiated in 2001 as a collaboration between Animationens Hus, the Interactive Institute, the Swedish public-service TV broadcaster Svt, and a few other partners. The aim of the project was to create a voice in the public debate for young teenagers with the urge to change society for the better.

The project had two starting points. First, we realized that in order to approach the aim and build the discussion of what »changing society for the better« really means into the project itself, we would have to employ a deeply participatory design process. Secondly, we decided that the main media channels would be broadcast TV and interactive web. The overall crossmedia concept was a spiral, where a small community would do things together on the web and their actions would be disseminated to a much larger audience through broadcast TV, thus motivating new web
community members to join as well as providing a channel to the public debate on societal change.

Throughout 2002, several task forces of hand-picked young teenagers worked with researchers and designers to develop a web-based avatar world for creative and communicative collaboration, the TV format, and the norms and practices of the Avatopia community. Here are some of the key decisions.

- The web forum would have to be highly visual in order to provide material for TV broadcast; the direction of a 3D avatar world was chosen.
- The avatar architecture would allow for collaborative animation tools even at the phone-modem bandwidths prevalent in domestic Internet connections at the time.
• The community would run crossmedia events to guide the use of the animation tools in the direction of, e.g., societal satire and commentary.

• The Avatopia community would be built from a seed of four mentor characters: people who had participated in the whole design process and who would be introduced to the TV audience through a series of trailers before launch, where the mentors would act as change agents together with other young people across Sweden. After launch, the mentors would be highly visible and active in the community, instilling Avatopia values by example rather than by rules.

• The connection from the web forum to broadcast TV would be performed by a staff editor at SvT, using the web forum as the field of journalistic inquiry and coverage (including reports, avatar interviews, live hearings, animation festivals, etc.) It would also be the responsibility of the staff editor to report in broadcast TV on real-world outcomes of Avatopia-initiated actions.

Avatopia was built in 2002–03 and launched on the web and broadcast television in September 2003 (refer to Figure 4). It developed according to plan during the Fall of 2003, and approached a point of maturity where formal longitudinal evaluations were planned to start. Unfortunately, the operation of Avatopia was linked to a small running cost for web hosting and a part-time SvT staff member. When SvT decided on a previously unanticipated budget cut by the end of 2003, Avatopia was closed since it could not be defended as a core business activity.

In spite of the premature termination of the project, we had enough informal data to draw two conclusions. First, the notion of a crossmedia spiral was a workable way to conceptualize the relation between narrow and broad media channels. Secondly, we concluded that it is possible, albeit quite costly, to seed a collaborative community through a participatory design process.

**Kliv: Nurturing the management of professional knowledge in healthcare**

The Kliv project (Björgvinsson & Hillgren, 2004), which ran 2001–03, can be understood as an exercise in knowledge management in practice. Intensive care units in hospitals rely heavily on the staff members’ ability to operate various forms of healthcare equipment. This ability is not evenly distributed, which may cause problems if, say, there is nobody on duty who knows how to use a certain kind of machine when a patient comes in who needs that particular machine. Moreover, the knowledge in question is experiential rather than formal, which means that there needs to be an ongoing dialogue among staff members on new insights into better ways of using the equipment. The pace and organization of work is such that the dialogue necessary for maintaining and developing the shared knowledge is sometimes hampered.
Designers and PhD students Erling Björgvinsson and Per-Anders Hillgren entered into a participatory design process with the staff of the intensive care unit at Malmö University Hospital, examining the nature of professional knowledge in intensive care and exploring new ways of maintaining it. The tangible outcome of the project was a system where knowledgeable staff members could record short instructional videos on the use of certain equipment and those videos would be tied to the equipment by barcode printouts and accessed later through PDAs extended with barcode readers (refer to Figure 5). Other aspects of the system included organizational routines for reviewing and approving new instruction videos.

The relevance of Kliv as an example of collaborative crossmedia creation does not lie in its technical or organizational design, however. What makes it interesting for our purposes here is how it came to be used, and what happened when variations of the idea were tested at other hospitals. By the formal end of the project, the system was in place and a number of instruction videos had been produced. In subsequent years, it turned out that the system continued to be used – instruction videos were referred to as needed, their contents were debated among the staff, new videos were made and old videos were revised as the shared knowledge of the staff grew. In short, it worked the way every knowledge management system is supposed to work (but not many do). In 2004, the system was nominated by the intensive-care unit staff to the national UsersAward competition and won first prize. The written nomination and the jury motivation for the prize did not even mention the designers, which indicates to which degree ownership of the system and the practices related to it were taken over by the medical staff.

The success of Kliv attracted the attention of healthcare administrations in counties outside Malmö. Unfortunately, in some cases it seemed that the system description attracted the most interest. In one hospital, a system was built with a video database and PDAs with barcode readers. It was decided that the instruction videos should be produced by the hospital’s information office, which commissioned doctors to write medically correct scripts and actors to record the instructions in pedagogically correct ways. Needless to say, the resulting system was never used much.
For our present purposes, what the experiences from Kliv show is the possibility to form a persistent community around collaborative crossmedia creation, even dealing with matters as grave as life and death, provided that it is built on a foundation of shared meaning and autenticity.

**Malmö New Media Living Lab and RGRA: Cross-media strategies**

The final example in this section is an ongoing project, structured as a collaborative process mainly involving researchers, designers, media producers and amateur creators.

In late 2007, Malmö New Media Living Lab was inaugurated with the mission of doing design-oriented research in collaboration with lead users and lead practices in new media. The lab is hosted by Inkonst, a center for young people’s cultural activities in Malmö, together with Malmö University. Partners in the lab include companies in media and telecom as well as RGRA (The Voice and Face of the Streets), a movement aiming at involving young people in democratic processes and societal change through music, street art and other urban-cultural forms of expression.

The work of the Living Lab started with concept development work for new kinds of new-media products and services related to Inkonst and its activities, including its club hosting. One of the concepts emerging from the creative work was the idea to offer music produced by RGRA members to passengers on city buses using Bluetooth transmission to cellphones. The idea was tested and found technically feasible, but it was also found that an unknown source pushing media onto your cellphone could be perceived as threatening.

At the Malmö City Festival in August 2008, the Living Lab organized live webcasting from five cellphone cameras. RGRA people used the opportunity for local exposure in acting as reporters for the webcast.

A national public-service TV show is currently being planned, with RGRA spokesman Behrang Miri as the host and drawing on several innovative new-media concepts from the Living Lab to illuminate issues of segregation and urban culture in contemporary Sweden.

Finally, a project is underway in which the bus-music concept is deployed on Malmö city buses as a fully functional demonstrator, used by RGRA as a way to reach a larger audience. It is expected that the City Festival activities and broadcast TV presence will increase RGRA recognition to the level that their creative production will not be perceived as unknown by bus passengers, but rather as credible and desirable material.

To understand the point of this example, consider the Living Lab management as the designers and RGRA as the collaborative crossmedia creators. What the performed and planned activities above show is how several media channels are synchronized in order to approach RGRA’s communicative goals. Specifically, the work of the Living Lab and RGRA so far has combined avantgarde live performances (clubs at Inkonst), mainstream public events and webcasting (Malmö City Festival), TV broadcasting and placecasting (the planned bus-music service).
WHY DO PEOPLE PARTICIPATE IN PARTICIPATORY MEDIA?

Before concluding with a discussion of how designers can in fact support collaborative crossmedia creation, it might be worthwhile to touch upon the more general question of why people participate in participatory media.

Why do people upload their music to MySpace and their pictures to Flickr?

Why do they share BitTorrents of hand-ripped TV sitcoms?

Why do they contribute news reports to Current TV?

Scrawl a message on the palm of their hand, film it and upload it to Youtube in response to MadV’s initial »One world« video?

Create dozens of machinima episodes?

Talk for hours on Facebook with people they have never met?

Micro-blog on Twitter during the trainride to work?

Not all kinds of participatory media participation fall within the realm of collaborative crossmedia creation, but a significant part does – as indicated by the examples above. Our experiments, together with the growing literature on online communication (Bolter & Grusin, 1999; Jenkins, 2006; Lunenfeld, 1999; Mayer, 1999; Porter, 2008; Wellman, 1999), form the basis for a number of insights which can be summarized as follows:

People participate in participatory media because of their urges to belong, to express themselves creatively, to establish identity and status, and to influence others and society.

There is also a (highly legitimate) role in the participatory media which we might call the spectator – including lurkers in online fora as well as leeches in filesharing networks – which is driven primarily by individual motives and by the pleasure of gawking at strangers. This role, however, represents less active participation and I will leave it out of the further discussion as its significance for collaborative crossmedia creation is of a more indirect nature.

Belonging (in the sense of sharing information, meaning and values) has always been the main factor driving massmedia consumption, but the participatory media add another dimension since the communication around the shared matter takes place in the medium itself. The way that belonging plays out in the participatory media is generally that a communication platform such as Facebook serves as the substrate for thousands of social constellations, larger and smaller, with various degrees of cohesion and persistence. Facebook and similar services are sometimes called communities, which is largely incorrect. More accurately, they are infrastructures hosting a large number of communities or tribes, in the words of Maffesoli’s (1996) sociological analysis of the breakup of mass culture.
(see also Godin, 2008, for a more contemporary discussion of emergent tribal structures and, specifically, their implications for consumerism and participatory media).

As the Kliv example and its failed ripoffs showed, a high degree of shared meaning and shared experience was required for sustainable management of professional knowledge in the workplace. Similarly, Avatopia and Living Lab/rgra are clear examples of tribal structures where members are prepared to commit themselves and their time for the benefit of other tribe members, fueled by a sense of shared concerns and goals.

Creative expression is in one sense a self-indulgent activity, but when the results are shared through participatory media it is clear that there are social motives at play. However, we must not jump to the conclusion that creative expression is done only for the eyes of others. The blogosphere is an interesting example here. A calculation of the number of blog posts published per day divided by the number of blog posts read per day would surely yield a ratio showing that average blog authors write for their own sake more than for their audiences. Knowing that the blog post can theoretically be seen by a billion people may be part of the attraction; the reality of the blogosphere anatomy is rather that it consists of millions of little tribes tied together by blog rings and rss feeds, plus a few »mass-media blogs« read by large audiences. We should not forget that blogs started as web diaries, which are ultimately self-indulgent, and they remain diaries for many blog authors. For further consideration of the individual/social dimension of expression, a particularly illuminating analysis is offered by Gibbins and Reimer (1999) who maintain that expressivism is one of the key traits of postmodern life in relation to belonging as well as identity and influence.

Our own work demonstrates the significance of creative expression quite clearly: rgra members engage in music-making, street art and creative writing rather than in local political organizations and letters to newspaper editors; Avatopia members created animation, art and public interventions rather than writing petitions; in the Kliv project it was found that videomaking was seen as something more creative and inspirational than traditional knowledge-transfer activities such as internal training, and that the videos were assessed by peers not only on factual veracity but also as communicative media products (Hillgren, 2006).

The need to work on our identity, how we are perceived by others, is a main force behind our engagement in fashion, public behavior, play and many other activities. The participatory media are no exception in this regard. What makes them stand out is that they make it relatively easy to develop experimental identities unlike the one invoked by our physical appearance and demeanor (Turkle, 1995). Being judged by what you think and do, not by what you look like, has been a foundational value of the
hacker cultures for many years (Blankenship, 1986) and this is no coincidence. The relation to belonging is quite clear, as one of the functions of an identity is to identify one’s own community affinities.

The openness of identity in the participatory media also has strong implications for status and the possibility to reach positions of power in particular tribes without being typecast by physical and material status conditions. Many tribes in the participatory media are meritocracies, which means that your position is determined by how good you are at performing what the tribe finds to be core activities. This holds equally for collaborative crossmedia creation, where your status in a particular tribe can be based on the quality of your creations.

A final reason for participating in participatory media, as well as for any type of public discourse, is the urge to influence others and to influence society. Having a trustworthy identity and adequate status are key preconditions for exerting influence within your tribe; external influence sometimes requires other strategies as well.

In our work, the social dynamics of identity and status in relation to influence are prevalent. For instance, the way that the Avatopia design and launch process was set up – where key members of the design teams were introduced to larger audiences through the TV trailers and then assumed roles as mentors in the web community – was all about establishing the identity and status of the mentors in the community to the point where they could impart community values upon newcomers. A similar strategy is illustrated in the way that RGRA uses multiple coordinated channels for their work. The Kliv project demonstrated quite clearly the differences between a video made by a well-known colleague talking to her peers, and a video written by an authority and recorded by an actor. To paraphrase Argyris and Schön (1974), espoused-status and status-in-use are quite different things in any tribe.

HOW CAN WE DESIGN FOR PEOPLE TO COLLABORATE AND CREATE?

The work reported here suggests that there are three areas through which the designer has the power to facilitate people’s collaborative crossmedia creation: crossmedia infrastructures, expressive tools, and tribe values.

Designing a crossmedia infrastructure for collaborative creation entails stringing multiple media channels together over time, technically as well as organizationally. The two main channels of Avatopia was the avatar world and broadcast TV; stringing them together involved organizational work such as appointing a staff editor doing journalistic work in the avatar world and reporting it on TV, as well as production-related issues such as finding workable practices for broadcasting watchable TV from
an avatar world. The ongoing Living Lab/rgra work illustrates how the channel mix changes over time as the crossmedia infrastructure evolves organically, from avantgarde live performances to mainstream public events to webcasting to tv broadcasting to placecasting.

Expressive tools sometimes includes designing custom means to make collaborative creation possible, such as the animation tools of the Avatopia avatar world. In other situations, expressive tools are already available and the task for the designer is to identify them and make them work with the infrastructure. For example, the whole Kliv project was built from off-the-shelf components (consumer camcorders, standard barcode readers, PDA computers) and what the designers did was to find a way to put them into play within a specific process and infrastructure.

When it comes to tribe values, it would be pretentious to use the word »design.« Here, the designer is rather a provider of initial directions and a facilitator of tribal processes being executed by the participants. In Avatopia, the act of design was to formulate the public-service intention of giving young teenagers a voice in societal change and to find the people to seed the community. What happened after that may have been facilitated by the designers, but it certainly wasn’t designed in the conventional sense of the word. Similarly, the key design decision of the ongoing Living Lab/rgra work was to initiate collaboration with rgra and other partners based on shared values and goals for societal change, thus laying out an initial direction in which to channel subsequent efforts and resources.

A useful metaphor for understanding this conclusion might be to think of designing for collaborative crossmedia creation as the production of an improvisation performance. The producer sets the stage, provides the props and hires the actors. Due to their affordances, the set and the props make it easier for the actors to do certain things and harder to do other things. They guide the actors’ actions and suggest initial directions. Selecting the actors to hire is based on what the producers knows about the actors, their personalities and their capabilities. The whole tone of the performance is influenced by the casting. But when the lights come on at the opening night, the producer can only sit back with the rest of the audience and see how the performance comes out.

It should also be noted for completeness that some recent work in interaction design theory is starting to propose similar perspectives also in design fields other than collaborative crossmedia creation. See, for example, the notion of emergent interaction formulated by Matthews, Stienstra and Djadjiningrat (2008) in connection with their work on design for children’s play.

A summary of our insights would be as follows: In order to facilitate collaborative crossmedia creation, a designer can create infrastructures and tools, and seed a tribe based on certain values. But the outcomes can never be »designed.« In fact, it seems to make most sense not to think of outcomes at all, but rather think of ongoing processes which the designer
can influence through small interventions in the form of infrastructural features, tool capabilities, and directional values.

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REFERENCES


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**Web sites for organizations mentioned in the chapter**


