

## Design livre: designing locally, cannibalizing globally

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Design livre is a conversation among Brazilian people interested in recognizing the design made by everybody with the intention of scaling up scattered design efforts. Design livre approaches the matter from a cultural standpoint, positioning design as key activity for resisting the globalization of culture in Brazil. The globalized as much as the localized design knowledge are cannibalized, digested, catalyzed, and brought to action. This conversation recovers topics raised by the century-old Brazilian modernism [1], which contended radical appropriation of foreign ideas, inspired by the Brazilian native people who ate the first colonizers [2].

This article tells the story of how this conversation started, where is it going now, and what is the relevance of its underlying topics to XRDS readers. Design livre rose in Brazil with the feeling of detachment from the hegemonic agendas in Interaction Design and the desire to create new practices from our situated knowledge. However, we believe the discourse produced and the design projects might serve as inspiration for others outside of Brazil who are also resisting neo-colonialist practices. We reject from the beginning the possibility of globalizing design livre, hence its name in Brazilian Portuguese.

The term “Design livre” is a complementary alternative to “software livre”, which means “free software”. In divergence with Anglophone countries, Brazil did not adopt the term “open source” to describe what was previously called “free software”. Hence, we also did not want to adopt “open design” when similar conversations rose in Anglophone countries. We like to keep the distinction between a design which emphasizes openness and a design which emphasizes freedom.

Since its inception, we stumbled upon five topics in the design livre conversation: technological appropriation, designing in the public, designed by everybody, metadesign, and the expansion of the design object. The story behind these topics will be told, together with a brief discussion. At the end, we expect to avail the relevance of these topics to Computer Science students.

### Technological appropriation and the birth of design livre

The story of design livre begins with the foundation of Faber-Ludens Interaction Design Institute by a group of teachers and professionals from different backgrounds in 2007. The first author was involved with co-founding the institute and the second with research and teaching. The non-profit organization aimed at producing and disseminating knowledge about interaction design in Brazil. Faber-Ludens used its website, email group and social media to share its educational resources, student projects, and findings from its associated researchers. The strategy was to advertise the institute’s relevance through releasing knowledge in the public. This worked quite well in attracting students and business partners as much as feeding disparate projects across the country.

The institute was born in the context of a national turn to localized digital technological development. The Brazilian government chooses at that time to prioritize free software over proprietary solutions with the goal of strengthening national sovereignty and saving money. The institute followed this turn, yet raising the flag of design as a means to attune free software to local needs. Despite our engagement with free software, we did not want to restrict ourselves to this object.

We had a broad vision and an alternative way of dealing with the global. Looking at the unequal trade relationships Brazil has with foreign countries, we came to the conclusion that, at the moment, we can't compete in the same level with the production of artifacts such as software or hardware. That does not mean we are waiting for the development of our own industrial power. We think we can excel at the production of interactions. For that, we don't need advanced artifacts, high technology or advanced expertise. With simple props, Brazilians can be very creative in creating interactions among people. We like to turn the alleged state of technology dependence from foreign countries into a state of constant technological appropriation. Hence our design object becomes not the technology per se, but the interactions mediated by technology in society.

### **Designing in the public for FLOSS projects**

In the beginning, we wanted to contribute with designing interactions to the Free Libre and Open Source Software (FLOSS) projects adopted in Brazil, but we soon learn this to be very difficult. The FLOSS projects did not have a role for us and most of the people we spoke to did not understand what else we could contribute other than just code. They expected designers to contribute by reporting bugs and mistakes in the same way programmers do, such as using a bug tracking system. These systems do not lend an overview for the design strategy behind the software development. Hence, we found it difficult to develop a holistic understanding of the user in such fragmented vision.

Being aware of this limitation, the BrOffice.org community leader asked us for help with their website redesign in 2008. They wanted to make it user-centered, instead of developer-centered as done before. We did together a participatory design project which included almost everyone in the community, even those who did not code for the software. However, the redesign was never implemented due to the developers' disengagement with the proposal. Despite producing extensive documentation of a design process that could be adapted by other projects, the BrOffice.org website project did not sustain.

Our first attempt to work with FLOSS projects failed to produce sustainable results, but we did not give up. Later on, we engaged our students with two design challenges proposed by the Mozilla foundation. The first was about the future of browsing the Internet, for which we proposed Cubozilla, a 3D metaphor for grouping tabs that won one of the design challenge's award, the People's Choice Award. The second was about creating and synchronizing subtitles for internet videos. Some design ideas created for this challenge were incorporated into Amara video editor by the Participatory Culture Foundation.

The publicity gained from joining the challenges helped us to spread our vision of designing interactions. Even if the ideas developed were not all implemented, many people got

inspired by the approach and hopefully applied the ideas elsewhere. We learn that participatory design processes are more sustainable when held in the public.

### **Designed by everybody**

After these initial projects, we noticed the main problem of FLOSS being not the absence of designers, but the lack of proper tools for collaborating on design issues. Github was getting popular as a means to collaborate in FLOSS projects, but we thought it to be inadequate for designing interactions because the type of design we do cannot be coded like a programming language. Hence, we decided in 2010 to create the “Github of design”, which became known as Corais Platform. Corais offered blog, collaborative text-editing, task management, mind map and other tools integrated from a design perspective. The strategy was to stimulate people to discuss the design using these tools and leave the collaboration's trace in the public.

The first users of Corais were our own design students and professional peers in the same field. They compared Corais to OpenIDEO, a similar platform for collaborating with socially oriented design projects. The main difference to ours was that we did not embed a specific design methodology in our tools. We preferred, instead, to let people develop their own methodologies. To assist them, we incorporated a database of design methods in Corais, linked to physical cards. These cards could be used to plan a project together with the participants in a collaborative fashion. UXCards, as it became known, was entirely designed using the very same platform Corais. More than 30 people in the User Experience field participated in designing the cards and 20 more in the beta program. Currently, UXCards is used by many professionals in Brazil who downloaded the files and printed them.

At this point, the design livre conversation spread out of Faber-Ludens Institute and we were invited to speak in design student conferences, social network gatherings, and other events. In 2012 we decided to write down our conversation as a manifesto, the Design Livre book [3]. We wrote that in one week with the participation of 12 people collaboratively writing the entire book. The book writing was transmitted online and the whole process was documented. Later on, a group of collectives from El Salvador (Red de Colectivos Maniobras Colectivas) volunteered to translate the book to Spanish using the same collaborative writing approach but adding their personal examples and vision to the book.

The main insight gained from writing this book was that design livre was not an approach for designers, but for everybody. Everybody designs something even if not consciously and everybody can get the benefits from leaking design knowledge into the public, as we were doing. Despite rising in a specific design field, design livre was meant to be free from disciplinary boundaries and the cult of professionalism.

### **Metadesign for cultural producers**

We realized the vision of design livre when Brazilian cultural producers found the platform and started using it to organize events. The platform was designed to connect designers with

software developers in the context of FLOSS projects, but we really wanted to see unexpected usages of it. The cultural producers brought projects such as a technology workshop in an indigenous tribe, collaborative management of a handful of theaters, film society organizing and so forth. Despite being favorable of using FLOSS, the cultural producers did not produce code or software. Yet, they were able to design a lot of things.

We closely observed their interactions through the platform, in particular, the interactions they designed themselves by adding rules and custom items. The concept of metadesign developed by Caio Vassão [4], a Brazilian architect, became very illuminating to deal with this situation. Metadesign means that one can design the design process by looking at infrastructure, tools, rules and so on. In our case, we were designing the design processes of cultural producers through the platform. By using the platform, we speculated that they would design better whatever were they designing.

In order to avoid over structuring the design processes and restricting the users, we created an open project in Corais called Metadesign. Over there, anyone could propose changes to the platform and react on the others' proposals. One proposal sent to this project became a major innovation of the platform: the social currency app. With this app, cultural producers created their own currencies and protected their local economies. This production arrangement increased their independence from governmental funding and increased the community bonds.

Cultural producers became advocates for the platform, advertising it in national events and the media. In 2014, they organized a collaborative book writing effort to document their insights on using the platform for the creative economy. 17 people wrote Coralizando book from remote parts of the country and abroad (like people from El Salvador collectives which translated the Design Livre book before).

### **The expansion of the design object**

Another group of users which attracted attention in Corais Platform was the social participation movement. These people worked to promote sensible means to participate in governmental decisions. They designed with the help of Corais Platform a social participation ontology with 64 people across Latin-America. One of these participants worked at the Presidential Secretary of Social Participation and brought the design livre conversation to his work. Some years later, he invited us to apply some of the design livre ideas in the project of a national social participation app, Dialoga Brasil. This app was designed in a very open way at the presidency, using agile development and design thinking methods. A prominent room was occupied for 10 days and the fuss attracted the attention of other secretaries. Soon after the period, other secretaries reported drawing on some of these methods in their own collaborative work experiences.

With this project, we realized the affective relationship developed through collaboration in person. Previously, we fostered design livre online but it became more contagious when it was offline. After working with the Presidency in 2015, we did a couple of similar projects at the Clinics Hospital of Paraná and Curitiba City Hall. In both of them, the point was to emphasize peoples' capacity to design their own way of working. This focus on design

tactics is very different from what is typically associated with the design thinking concept abroad: design strategies.

These recent projects cannibalized foreign concepts and turn them into localized knowledge after debates and try-outs — design thinking and agile development are just some of the work methodologies currently being imported with little criticism. Beyond such critical import, we also create our own concepts such as vibe design, vernacular interaction design, brat usability, desdesign and others that have their own story, but these do not have the same currency as imported concepts. We prefer to hijack the current structure for concept importation and redefine them once they land over here rather than rejecting them. Because of that mediational role, the design livre conversation never settles upon a definition.

This is a characteristic of a design object in constant expansion. At the beginning, we were concerned with software and hardware, but soon we focused on people's interactions. Then, we came to amateur design and the mitigated metadesign approach, which is to design infrastructure for amateur design. Currently, we are pursuing design as a way of interacting with the world to produce our own existence.

### **Final remarks**

We would like to think that design livre is an ever expanding conversation, hence, we avoid to end any debate with clear cut definitions and recommendations. For those who are joining the conversation (yes, design livre is not restricted to Brazilians), we can merely offer some reflections from our historical learning process:

- Design is neither the appearance of something nor a stage (initial or final) of a development process. Design is an activity that create things in the world, things that connect people with different skill levels. If carried out by a collective, design activity entails a great potential for social innovation.
- Negotiation is an inherent part of design activity. It is possible to make it invisible, as if it did not exist, but it is impossible to work collaboratively without dialogue. Monologues hide the different voices and different interests in a project. Stimulating conversations with design implications in public spaces is a powerful way to produce what people want for themselves.
- Having multiple spaces for dialogue is a requirement to enable diversity among participants. Not everyone feels comfortable in participating if there is only one way to contribute. Some people do not have formal knowledge in computation, while having practical experience with using systems in everyday life. They may not be able to contribute with code, but in a friendly environment, they can contribute with quick and unimagined solutions to difficult problems, social functions, and keeping the excitement of working with the project.
- The motivation for making things does not fade away when things are ready to use. Projects like the ones we made free by design do not begin or end with things. The thing is just a means to achieve what the project is all about: to transform life. In design livre, we transform life by letting people learn design as they participate in our projects and also by letting anyone cannibalize our open products and processes.

Redefining foreign concepts has been our recurring tactics to deal with the overwhelming force of globalization in our country. This might be useful for people in other developing countries and maybe also for people in developed countries. After all, globalization eliminates diversity and difference everywhere, even in the developed countries that champion globalization. We think the problem of user alienation and the corollary division of labor among designers and users are consequences of too much globalization in Design and Computer Science. We know it is unavoidable, but we resist through cultural cannibalism. Isolation was never an option for us, since we wanted to create things that connect rather than disconnect people. By making our own flesh more tasteful everyday, we invite people to cannibalize our ideas as much as we do to them. We design in the public, we make it accessible to everyone and there is even a touch of metadesign. These tactics of dealing with globalization cannot be grasped by compliant mottos such as "thinking globally and acting locally". We prefer to think that design livre means "designing locally, cannibalizing globally".

### **Biographies**

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