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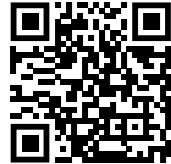
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Attending [to] Futures

Matters of Politics  
in Design Education,  
Research, Practice

Edited by  
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# WICKED RITUALS OF CONTEMPORARY DESIGN THINKING

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“When a social code does not correspond to the needs and desires of the people addressed by it or when people must perform or not certain acts that do or do not correspond to their desires, we can say that the social code has become a ritual. Thus, a ritual is a code that imprisons, that constrains, that is authoritarian, that is useless or, at worst, that is necessary to convey some form of oppression.”

— Augusto Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed*, 2002.

For *Attending [to] Futures* conference held in 2021, we, the authors, a group of non-actors and complicators who coalesce in the Design & Oppression network (Van Amstel et al. 2021), proposed a stage play to explore the theme of oppression. In this insurgence, we were interested in problematizing the wicked problem concept (Buchanan 1992) behind contemporary design thinking practice (Kimbell 2011). The intention was to attest to and denounce its complicity with large systems of oppression such as patriarchy, colonization, and capitalism.

With this in mind, we held a Forum Theater, one of the many methods that Brazilian playwright Augusto Boal introduces in his classic *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Boal 2000). Forum Theater is similar to conventional play but works mainly as a political tool to test and rehearse social emancipation. After every act, theater becomes a forum so the audience can discuss whether what they have seen has anything to do with their reality or just with pure imagination. Breaking the fourth wall, the theater troupe sometimes invites the audience to join the play and improvise alternative courses of action to discover the possibilities of liberating from oppression. Since we could not attend the conference in person due to COVID-19 restrictions, we had to adapt the method for remote interaction (described in detail in Saito et al. 2022).

The play was named *Wicked Problems, Wicked Designs* (2021) after the famous musical *Wicked* (2003), a prequel to the events in the classic story of *The Wizard of Oz* (Baum 1900). The musical tells the story of the young green-skinned Elphaba and how she later became known as the Wicked Witch of the West. We drew heavily from the musical to construct allegories representing design thinking agents involved in tackling the so-called wicked problems.

In the play, there are three main and one supporting character. The story follows Doris, a Brazilian female designer who is a single mother working on solutions for period poverty. Her character combines the naive girl Dorothy and the Good Witch of the South, Glinda, a well-intentioned character who brushes off her internal ethical conflicts in favor of self-gain and her career goals in Oz.

In the plot, Doris seeks investment from Tom White, a foreign investor who set up a startup accelerator program to support Global-South women in tackling society's wicked problems. Tom is roughly based on the Wizard of Oz, a self-proclaimed all-powerful, knowledgeable, and influential figure that is nothing more than an ordinary man with patriarchal privileges. Thanks to these privileges, Tom White rose as an industry leader and design thinking guru, despite relying on inauthentic magic skills (Kolko 2011) and deceptive coolness.

The third main character is Doris's friend Helena, a feminist activist connected to different social movements who is currently working with awareness raising for period dignity. In the story, Helena is involved in organizing one of seven large demonstrations that protest against the patriarchal policies of the Brazilian government against women. Like Elphaba, she has assumed a wicked position due to her disposition to break social norms and insurgence against oppression (Van Amstel et al. 2021). The fourth supporting character is a news anchor named Crystal, who reports on the demonstrations on TV. She does not interact directly with any other characters but provides background information for understanding the basic premises of the second act. We enacted these characters with augmented virtual customs (Figure 1) to explore the aesthetics of the oppressed in the remote forum setup (Saito et al. 2022).



Fig. 1. *Wicked Problems, Wicked Designs* Theatre Forum, Characters Doris (top left), Tom White (top right), Crystal (bottom left), Helena (bottom right), 2021.

There were many diversions from the *Wicked* (2003) plot, the main one being that Helena and Tom White never really meet, which does not afford him to accuse her of being wicked like in the musical. What remains implicit in our story is that Helena embodies authentic design wickedness; in other words, she acts wickedly to fight society's inauthentic wickedness. This intention comes from our critical readings of design thinking discourse that came to the conclusion that design wickedness could be considered a relational quality instead of a system property (Saito et al. 2022).

In this chapter, we wish to perform an interaction analysis (Jordan and Henderson 1995) focused on the rituals and gestures that structure oppression in everyday life and reproduce design wickedness, following the Theatre of the Oppressed hermeneutics of action (Boal 2000; 2005). Augusto Boal claims that Theatre of the Oppressed can depict everyday rituals and gestures that codify oppression, thereby exposing how they become naturalized and normalized. Similarly to how Paulo Freire (1970) codified oppressive situations in picture slides, Theatre of the Oppressed asks the audience to read

a theater scene and decodify its underlying oppression. In line with that, we invited the audience to discuss our play at *Attending [to] Futures*, we published the recorded play on YouTube for public discussions,<sup>1</sup> and we performed an interaction analysis on the recordings.

In order to verify and validate how we portrayed the oppressive situation, we triangulated the recordings with the comments left by the audience in the chatbox, our personal experiences with everyday oppression, and the experiences described by other complicators in the Design & Oppression network (Serpa et al. 2022). Through this hermeneutic process, we expected to reveal the social context (Santos 2016) in which the depicted rituals and gestures emerge.

We found eight oppressive situations in our play that could spark further debate on the social context of design thinking—what Freire (1970) would call a generative theme. The themes are: 1) sexism in the design workplace, 2) balancing motherhood and a design career, 3) venture businesses exploiting social gaps in weak states, 4) designers staying apart from social movements, 5) naive problem-solving in design approaches, 6) bamboozling through visual thinking, 7) the colonizing effects of design thinking and 8) the folly of design wickedness. The following sessions describe how these themes appeared in the play, their social context, and how the audience reacted to seeing them expressed this way.

### Sexism in the Design Workplace

Sexism is a praxis sustained on beliefs around the fundamental nature of women and men, including their roles in society. Sexist rituals and gestures take the shape of insidious comments, unfounded assumptions, and unequal division of labor. Despite recent legal frameworks set up to prevent discrimination and promote equality, women are still under-represented in decision-making roles, left out of certain sectors of the economy, paid less than men, and disproportionately subject to gender-based violence (EIGE 2020).

The design field is no exception to that. According a report published by the Design Council about the UK design labor market, paid positions are occupied by 77% of people who identify as men and 23% of people who identify as women<sup>2</sup> (Hay, Todd, and Dewfield 2022). Although sexism cannot be determined by such distribution, it is fair to admit that in a male-dominated field, women are more likely to face sexist practices that benefit men.

In our play, we tried to convene this workplace context through several ways. The main character, Doris, is a Latin American woman looking for a great chance to boost her design career. She opens the first act waiting for the arrival of Tom White, a white man from the Global North, in an online meeting room. Doris is anxious but excited about this meeting as she believes she has earned this opportunity. This initial positive feeling about the meeting quickly dissolves due to Tom White's unpleasant behavior. Doris is constantly interrupted by Tom White during her presentation, and he makes various sexist and xenophobic comments and inappropriate jokes. The conversation is interrupted as Doris's baby starts to cry, which immediately puts off Tom White, shocked to find that Doris is a single mother. He doubts her capacity to work in such a fast-paced project (Figure 2) and tells her that he will call her another time.

As the act unfolds, the audience used the conference text chat tool to interact with others and react to the play. Many in the audience recognize

<sup>1</sup> The recording is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GbAfjbgONyk>

<sup>2</sup> This research lacks information on non-binary people working in the design field.

Fig. 2. Tom White is angry at Doris because she subscribed to the women's acceleration program, not the mother's. He asks her to be more professional next time and points the finger at her while she appeases her child.



Tom White as an archetype of an unpleasant colleague that they have already worked with in the past. Spectators urge Doris to get angry and not let Tom White interrupt her, suggesting she should just give up on the interview because she would never be respected in that organization anyway. The audience chat was populated by sentences like: "Don't let him interrupt you," "Stop this interview," "Don't be so nice," and "Get angry grrrrl."

The oppressive situation was easily recognized by the audience. Doris was unable to present her ideas and suffered recurrent embarrassment throughout the act. However, the oppressor put himself in a position that he cannot be easily avoided. Doris knew that the man who acts abusively towards her is the same who makes the decisions about the investment she needs. Even if Doris felt embarrassed and helpless from Tom White's sudden hang up, she still wanted to take the opportunity.

### Motherhood in the Design Career

Doris's situation is not uncommon. Women still shoulder the largest share of care responsibilities towards children and the elderly, having to cope with flexible or inflexible work arrangements (EIGE 2020). As a result, women with children are generally perceived as less competent than women without children, also compared to themselves before becoming a mother (Cikara et al. 2009). Because they are not seen as competent as men to shine in the public sphere, women are pushed to work in the private sphere, where paid and unpaid work accumulates, in larger shares for racialized and working-class women.

Design historian Cheryl Buckley addresses the erasure of the contributions of women in the public sphere of design, pointing to the "selection, classification, and prioritization of types of design, categories of designers, distinct styles and movements, and different modes of production" (Buckley 1986, 3) in which men are at the forefront. Not only are women designers marginalized, but so are design practices associated with feminine affairs reduced to making: crafts, sewing, or knitting, for example—and the associated services of homely routines such as planning meals or organizing care work and parenting duties carried out by women (Buckley 1986; 2020; Scotford 1994). These practices are not recognized as design even if they are based on the same kind of design thinking that male designers employ in the public sphere to empathize, ideate, test, and implement design concepts.

In the play, Doris is a single mother deep into design hustle culture (Julier 2013). She needs the money and will go above and beyond to succeed. Doris's

baby starts crying in the middle of their meeting, and Tom White criticizes Doris for being unprofessional while leaving the call to reach out to her crying baby. He adds that the program she applied for was a women's investment fund and not a mother's investment fund, so she should have considered applying for the more fitting program. He feels deceived as she did not disclose that information before and says he does not know how to deal with a caring mother.

Mothers in the audience could relate to the scene where Doris' baby starts crying in the middle of her important call with Tom White. While some shared positive experiences in which they received support from people they were working with, one mother said she went through a similar violent situation while breastfeeding her child in a public space.

### Businesses that Exploit the Withdrawal of the State

At the time we performed the play, in October 2021, period poverty was a highly commented topic in Brazil. Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro had just issued a veto of a bill to distribute free sanitary pads and tampons to people in situations of impoverishment. Instead of framing period poverty and dignity as the result of political choices, we framed it as a wicked problem to examine how design thinking depoliticizes issues and bodies.

Even though Tom White shows little respect for Doris as a woman, he sees feminism and period poverty as great business opportunities. With this, we wanted to bring up a reflection on the design projects taking place where government infrastructure systems are weak or non-existent. While neoliberal ideology praises the benefits of limited government, many nations in the Global South suffer from a withdrawal of the state, lacking the structure, power, and resources to properly regulate a nation-state to deal with several social inequalities and political challenges. Institutions such as venture businesses, NGOs, start-ups, and volunteer organizations exploit these particular dynamics by occupying spaces and taking roles that lack state oversight. This distorted gaze assumes and disseminates the image of countries as weak and needing international help. A neocolonial interventionist approach unfolds, under the guise of development and innovation, like any other design thinking bullshit cover-up strategy (Hernández-Ramírez 2018).

In the play, Tom White is very explicit about the fact that he is funding projects in Brazil because it is a cheap investment that will look good in his portfolio. He frames the many social issues in the country as an excellent opportunity for Doris to apply her design skills and make money. In the hopes of taking the opportunity, Doris pitches her idea by putting together a slide presentation she refers to as "visual poetry." She uses images from Russian artist Maria Luneva (a.k.a. Supinatra) and the Chinese-American painter Fong Min Liao. Doris does not really go in-depth on their work during the presentation, implying a lack of care for artists and the appropriation of their work. Yet, she believes the images fit with the aesthetics she wanted—the use of pink and red tones, flowers on clean underwear, and abstract shapes representing menstrual blood.

Even though Doris toned down her visual presentation, Tom White is still shocked and disgusted by the period imagery, saying it is tough for him to stare at such imagery. He terminates her slide presentation before she is finished. Later in the conversation, he remarks about art being something for the elites

and elaborates that he knows the reality of Brazilian women living in poverty, claiming Doris's project lacks empathy for them in an awkward attempt at calling out her class privilege. Indeed, third-world girls are one of the typical features of white savior humanitarian imagery, so he pushes Doris to "go and find these people" and connect with them through "empathy" (Figure 3). The audience frames the recommendation as guilt-management: "Seems like empathy in design process is more about reducing a sense of guilt rather than a principle of common good."

The general sense of guilt for the withdrawal of the state normalizes the exploitation of wicked problems as business opportunities. In contrast, feminist movements frame the same issue as period dignity instead of period poverty to emphasize the political opportunity to rethink the social structures that normalize the absence of rights for certain historically vulnerable groups (UNFPA 2022).



x  
└  
Fig. 3. Tom White's gestures for an emphatic attitude point at himself twice.

### Designers Staying Apart from Social Movements

Innovation and development programs typically portray target communities as victimized subjects, showing just enough hardship while invisibilizing the structural oppressive relations that give rise to them. They construct users as victims of bad design and designers as heroes of good design (Spinuzzi 2003). Designers who come out of these programs are supposed to master disruption, intervention, and systemic change.

In the play, Doris feel the need to be edgier in her imagery for the second attempt with Tom White. She receives a call from her friend Helena, who tells her she is involved with a social movement organization fighting for period dignity. Helena describes the experiences of people facing period poverty and a community-run project to manufacture reusable pads. She then invites Doris to join them in their next demonstration, suggesting her friend could learn from them (Figure 4). Doris declines the suggestion, assuming she knows enough to represent the movement. The audience reacts with vigor: "Very common behavior from the girl on the left [Doris]... she has not heard anything. She is using feminism for her own interest."



x  
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Fig. 4. Helena tries to draw Doris' attention to social movements already working on her issues, but she refuses to join them.

Some days later, after watching TV anchor Crystal reporting on the demonstration, Doris changes her mind. She adds a community-led solution to her project pitch in the next meeting with Tom White; however, the man is unimpressed by it. He is again horrified by her choice of imagery, deemed too political, and he does not even listen to the whole idea. Tom White says that the program is targeted at leveraging women entrepreneurs, not communities. This scene is yet another example of designers committing to a method or a technical solution (Ansari 2019) instead of committing to overcoming oppression by joining social movements and communities that design for themselves (Escobar 2018).

### Naive Problem-solving in Design Approaches

Throughout the play, the character Tom White claims his methods are capable of tackling any wicked problems, a typical design thinking bullshit (Hernández-Ramírez 2018). Similar to his archetype Wizard of Oz, Tom White cultivates the magic of design thinking (Kolko 2011), a generic process that can come up with solutions to any wicked problem of the world. It is no coincidence that Wizard of Oz is an actual design method in which a person fakes an interaction with a not-yet functional system (Maulsby et al. 1993).

The problem with magic is that it hides what is going on. In this case, anthropocentrism, capitalism, colonialism, sexism, and whiteness—what Audre Lorde (2021) calls the mythical norm, the universal humans positioned at the centers of power. By hiding what is going on behind wicked problems, design thinking smoothens the reproduction of structural oppression (Saito et al. 2022). Designers aptly learn to use the tools of the oppressors while engraving the discourse of freedom, effectively reproducing the contradictions of society (Van Amstel et al. 2016).

The contradictory aspect of design work is revealed in two acts. In the first time that Doris and Tom White interact, it seems like she is the oppressed and he is the oppressor. However, in the second act, Doris positions herself at the oppressors' side by trying to co-opt social movements for profit. The ethical basis for solving wicked problems becomes then a problem in itself. In the text chat, a spect-actor proposes that solidarity pushes for the need to be part of the struggle, while empathy implies distance from it (a perspective elaborated on Serpa and Batista 2021). The audience also commented that wicked problems are a tiny part of a larger system of structural oppression, which cannot be tackled by isolated individuals.

### Bamboozling through Visual Thinking

Throughout the play, visual thinking appears as the most popular form of design magic. Doris presents her ideas in polished graphic slides to construct a professional image of someone who puts a lot of effort into her work, with the exception of understanding its social context. Doris does not credit the works of artists she adds to her slides and appropriates images from social movements that she doesn't belong to or even support.

In contrast, Tom White's favorite mode of visual thinking is doodling. Unlike Doris, he does not feel the need to present himself professionally. As the Wizard of Oz archetype, he is an almighty free thinker, and conveys his

knowledge and power through simple ideas that can fit the back of a napkin. Tom White wants to convey that anyone can draw and think like a designer, or better put, that Doris can think like him if she follows his methods. He plays out pre-recorded doodle videos to mansplain several concepts, including wicked problems, empathy, and mansplaining itself(!). In this way, he bamboozles her with visual thinking several times (Figure 5).

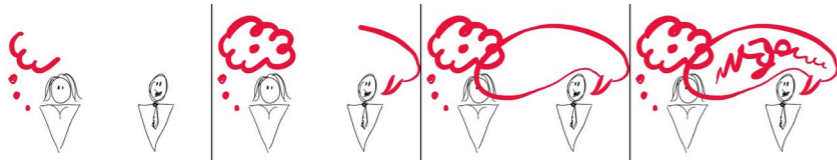


Fig. 5. Mansplaining doodle made by character Tom White (a Global North man) to instruct Doris (a Global South woman) on how it works, as if she did not know it.

### Colonizing Effects of Design Thinking

There is a dominating notion of design as a method that can be relevant and useful to people across different genders, races, and nationalities (Ansari 2019). Such a notion presumes a universality which is based on a cis-male, white, Western subject. Despite the criticism of this lack of positionality (Berry et al. 2022; Constanza-Schok 2020; Kimbell 2011), the canon of design thinking and its methodologies are still widely accepted as universal methods that apply to every context and place (Hanington and Martin 2019).

The fact that the character Tom White is a foreign Global Northern designer sheds light on the colonial and imperialist ways he brings design methods to a project in the Global South, for example, by conducting ethnographic studies in exoticized communities. With a keen eye on that, the audience turned the magic back at its magician: “What if we would come over to his place to do an ethnography of his life? Would he agree to that?” Tom White character embodies the colonialist system of knowledge production that prevails in the Brazilian design academic discourse and industry practices (Angelon and Van Amstel 2021); hence, Doris is always kind enough to take Tom White’s demands.

While reflecting on this unequal international relation through Forum Theater, we challenge the notion of the South as inferior and incapable of producing design practice and theory to address our issues on our terms (Gutiérrez Borrero 2015). Decolonizing design remains a critical issue for our work (Angelon and van Amstel 2021; Schultz et al. 2018) as it opens up the possibility of recognizing the designs of the oppressed. The audience comments follows keenly: “Sometimes the solution is partially already lying within people, the oppressed ones. You give them an opportunity to speak; possible solutions might arise from this.”

### The Folly of Design Wickedness

In design research, a wicked problem refers to complex and ill-defined problems, impossible to solve. The term was coined by Horst Rittel at a conference and later published as a paper (Rittel & Webber 1973). According to the German author, wicked problems have no definitive formula, no stopping rule, no immediate solutions, and far-reaching consequences. This type of problem stands in

opposition to tame problems—those that can be solved through established objective inquiry and decision-making. This way of thinking is similar to how sexist men believe that they can tame transgressive women or like colonizers believed that they can tame Indigenous people. The choice of the term wicked is related to the malignant, vicious, tricky, or aggressive properties of these problems and the people that originate them.

According to Buchanan (1992), the concept of wicked problems was well accepted by the design community because it formed a “connection between their remarkably diverse and seemingly incommensurate applications of design.” Designers working in seemingly unrelated areas and tackling different issues found a point of reference of applicability of their skill set within the concept of wicked problems and that meant they could form a common way of wrapping their heads around them, e.g. design thinking (Brown 2009).

However, by wrapping heads in this way, designers get used to depoliticizing issues, like when Tom White sees period poverty as a business opportunity rather than as a structural social challenge. “If a problem cannot be well defined, it is because it may not even be a problem at all, but rather a person or a group of people who do not admit to being solved” (van Amstel et al. 2022). While framing people as social problems, there is a tendency to ignore the reproduction of anthropocentric, capitalist, colonialist, sexist, and racist tropes that put them into the problematic situation.

To advance the understanding of wickedness in design, we advise seeing how this concept evolved in contemporary culture (Saito et al. 2022). The way wickedness has been dealt with by fantastic literature (*Wizard of Oz*) or by theater (*Wicked*, the musical) might refresh how design research frames this aspect of human reality. After reflecting on this generative theme, an audience member writes in the chat that “designers hide behind the term wicked way too often.”

### Concluding Remarks

The interaction analysis performed on the *Wicked Problems, Wicked Designs* (2021) recorded play has shown how design thinking rituals and gestures reproduce oppressive relations through fake magic and other discursive devices. The analysis turns the magic back upon the magician, asking whether design thinking practice is as wicked as the societal problems it claims to solve.

Through the archetype of the *Wizard of Oz*, we unveiled a White, cis-male designer from the Global North, who, as a supposedly powerful being, evokes an image of salvation, heroism, and divination (Tom White). As for the Good Witch of the South archetype, we expressed the well-intentioned designer who believes in her capability to do good but lacks critical consciousness to analyze her position in the correlation of power embedded in design practices and the geopolitics of knowledge (Doris). In the musical, the *Wizard of Oz* persuades the Good Witch of the South to believe in his fake magic. Although she eventually finds out the truth, she chooses to remain in Oz working for the Wizard. Unlike the musical, Doris never questions Tom White’s power, and is left inconsolable when he ends their working relationship, blaming herself instead.

With these characters, we aim to acknowledge the complexity of oppressor–oppressed dialectic relation (Freire 1970). In the first act, the audience

can relate to Doris and the violence she is suffering as an oppressed woman. In contrast, in the second act, she appears to have a selfish and critical attitude like an oppressor designer (Gonzatto and van Amstel 2022). The activist character Helena is the counterpoint to the establishment as she engages in radical practices, like Elhaba does in the musical, promoting collective engagement as an alternative wicked power (or magic). The forum raised the contradictions that typically emerges in design thinking environments, emphasizing differences in culture, nationality, gender, political view, and readiness for action.

This chapter introduces several generative themes for further design research. The prevalence of sexism in micro-gestures and preparation rituals in the design workplace, the challenge of affording motherhood in a design career, the capitalist exploitation of the social gaps left by weak states, the distance between designers and social movements, the naivete of design problem-solving, the deceptive character of visual thinking gestures, the colonizing effects of design thinking and lastly, but not the least, the folly of design wickedness. We expect these are further explored by design research and artistic practice.

Beyond that, we explored the theme of magic in design thinking and wickedness as a dispute for power. We again denounce that taming wickedness reinforces normativity and reproduces the systems that created these so-called wicked problems in the first place (Saito et al. 2022). We believe that by reframing wickedness as relational quality, we can reclaim it and affirm it authentically. In this way, we recognize the transdisciplinary and transgressive qualities of design wickedness as possibilities for underscoring alternative design practices that explicitly disclose and harness the political nature of design work.

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## IMAGES AND ILLUSTRATIONS

All images are screenshots from the Theatre Forum at the *Attending [to] Futures* conference in November 2021 provided by the authors.