

The development of a visual design tool: VisionPool

Collectively creating a visual aesthetic product (e.g. a TV-programme) requires all involved to share same visions about content and its audiovisual expression in order to achieve a common understanding and a successful product.

Today's development of e.g. TV-programmes is subject to the influence of many stakeholders and can therefore be regarded as a classic collective design process, although the typical TV-development process currently is based on words as primary means of expression.

The tool "VisionPool" facilitates the visual aspects of the collectively design process as a visual physical design tool. This tool has been developed during a number of 'use-centred' workshops.

In this paper the emerging use of the tool is being analyzed and evaluated, discussing the tool's qualities as a 'Concept Design Game'.

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INTRODUCTION

In the early stages of the creative process of conceiving a TV-production the participants – journalists, producers, production people – must reach a shared understanding not only of the verbal content of the production, but also of the main visual concept. This shared understanding has to be communicated not only to the chief editorial board but also to all staff who later will be involved in the production.

National Danish TV-production has until now used mainly words (like references to related examples e.g. other TV-programmes) to describe visual appearance, but as visual appearance becomes an increasingly more important factor in the competition between the TV-broadcasters, the need for a precise and shared conceptual understanding grow. Also the demand of a more controlled design process is growing.

This basic problem – using words for visual communication – applies also on many other creative industries and to design processes in general.

THE VISIONPOOL PROJECT

Together with Production Designer Villads Keiding (VK) I, an interaction designer, have since 2003 addressed this problem. With Danish Broadcasting Union (DR) as development partner, we have developed a tool and a workshop format to facilitate the collective creative process: "The VisionPool". It has been developed through six workshops.

One part of VisionPool consists of a large number of so-called 'visual samples'; more than 450 cardboard slices each with their unique visual appearance. The motif of each sample can seldom be interpreted in only one way; it is rather abstract extracts of contemporary visual culture.



Figure 1: VisionPool samples

The other part consists of a workshop format where participants during a workshop select among the 450 VisionPool samples and gradually reduce the number of

samples to a few representing the final idea. As the participants present samples to each other they verbally motivate their selection. They are instructed to use the samples with whatever interpretation they find valid; there is no fixed meaning to a sample.

This essentially makes VisionPool a tool for the verbal and the visual conversation. This paper will try to analyze some of the typical ways and words of using the samples emerging from the six workshops.

RELATED PROJECTS

Silent Game – and other ‘Concept Design Games’

The VisionPool project is inspired of a project at MIT in mid-1980’ies: N. John Habraken et al. (1987) “Concept Design Games” [1]. The aim of the research project was to research into the complex and divergent acts occurring during the architectural design process. The architectural design process is seen as social activity and as a transformational process. The objects being designed, in this case houses, has to have the ability to be changed constantly during their life-time. The designers (the architects) do not design for a ‘frozen’ configuration but for a morphologic change.

In order to study elements of this complex process, the research group at MIT, Department of Architecture, developed nine “Concept Design Games”. These are not ‘games’ in a classic game design sense [2, p. 83], as there are no quantifiable outcome and no clear winning condition; they are more a kind of ‘language games’ in a Wittgenstein sense [3]. One of the games – The Silent Game – deals specific with examining the design communication between the participants; they are not allowed to verbally express their conceptual idea but are forced to show it through design material like LEGO™ bricks.

Silent Games in educational settings

At design educations, ‘Concept Design Games’ is being used as a pedagogical tool illustrating the multi-dimensional problem of the many stakeholders in design processes. Jacob Buur and Ole Sejer discusses in the paper “Design is a Game: Developing Design Competence in a Game Setting” [4] student’s development of several concept design games facilitating the collective development and negation of ideas and values in industrial product design and improving both student’s and professional’s design praxis.

Examples as means of creative communication

Another source of inspiration for the VisionPool project is the praxis shared by many graphic designers, production designers and film / theatre directors of bringing visual examples (print, photos, objects, film clips etc.) into the collective creative process; the communication between director, set designer, light designer, actors and actresses. These examples are often used to communicate a possible or desired atmosphere, architecture, light, ‘feeling’ etc. both in the initial part of the creative process and later if the creative process has come to a halt. Often one detail is verbally pointed out but surprisingly other details emerge as take-off for the further creative work. [5]

DEVELOPING VISIONPOOL: A ‘USE-CENTRED’ PROCESS

The development of the VisionPool has been an iterative ‘user-centred’ process where rules, samples and workshop format have shaped and customized through six workshops. But as the users and the use context for the VisionPool varies through the six workshops and our goal is to develop a general method, the process has truly been a ‘use-centred’ process where we have tried to analyze the actual emerging uses of the VisionPool samples across the different use contexts; what kind of use would emerge given a certain task and certain rules? Which

emergent uses could be transformed to constitutional rules for the VisionPool ‘game’? In this respect the development of rules and format has many similarities with traditional game design where shaping the constitutional rules and calibrating the game ecology is a crucial design task as the game’s true identity lies in these matters [2 pp. 150 - 172].

DEFINING RULES

Searching and presenting samples

Essential to the creative experience is how VisionPool samples are searched, found and presented to the group; should this be a totally open and continuous process or a constrained, rule-based process? We have tested out different variations. Our findings indicate that an open process, as conducted with Danish Radio in January 2004 and LearningLab Denmark August 2004 leads to a very animated truly explorative idea generating process which can have difficulties in reaching a conclusion. On the other hand a strictly governed process with fixed phases and rules of searching and presenting samples leads to a much more reflective process where the subject of the workshop – e.g. the conceptual idea of a TV-series – is being scrutinized by the participants and an interventionist workshop leader. This type has been conducted at DR twice, at Swedish Television and at the ‘FilmTrain’ project in autumn 2004. This kind of workshop typically generates less new ideas but examines the ideas and concepts participants have considered during their previous creative work.

To some extent the use of the samples can be described as ‘translating’ the existing ideas into a new media, thus understanding the ideas in a new way.

Reducing numbers of samples

Another aspect of the game is: ‘How is the number of samples in the game reduced during the process?’ The ‘game’ is essentially about selecting those samples which expresses the idea best, so how and through which process of reduction are these samples selected? Should the workshop leader force participants to select a certain number of samples in different phases of the workshop or should it be an emerging social process between participants only? Here our experiences show the importance of participants themselves being responsible for the creative progress.

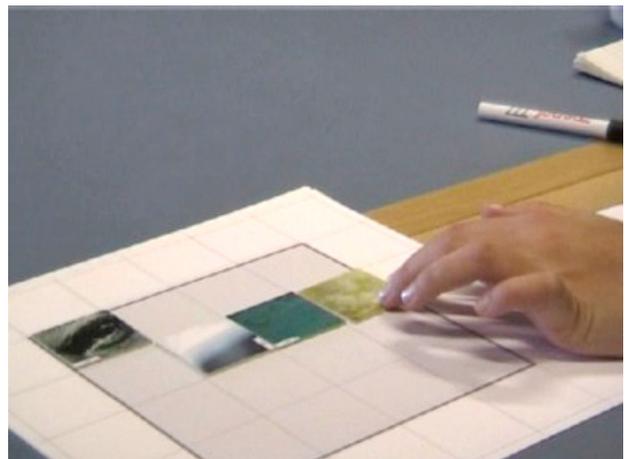


Figure 2: A 4x4 grid being used at the FilmTrain workshop

The size of the game board

In the six workshops being held creative freedom was partly governed by the size of the ‘Stage’; the central shared area at the workshop table where participants place the chosen samples. Shaped as a grid, the Stage we produced for the first VisionPool workshop (DR-January) had the size of 7x7 rows leaving 49 possible spaces for samples and allowing several

clusters of samples to be present simultaneously. On later workshops we reduced the area to 4x4. Finally on the LearningLab workshop we used no Stage at all; several A3 sheets served as both common and individual Stages.

The size of the Stage directly influences the creative process. A large Stage enables several alternative ideas and expressions to be represented simultaneously as clusters of samples. Representations of several different ideas are at hand and only the social emerging need for conclusions – stated in the group as a: “Let us clean up a little!” is reducing the number of samples – and ideas.

On a small Stage participants are forced to relate to each other’s samples thus making the process more reflective and compromise seeking. Instead of ‘creating’ the solution, the creative task tends more to be about ‘finding’ the solution [6]; the given samples has to be combined in relation to each other. Participants are being forced to take reflected decisions.

On a Stage with no grid – like on the Learning Lab Denmark workshop - the participants challenge the geometric structure of the Stage, e.g. creating patterns like a fountain from the samples.

ATTACHING WORDS TO SAMPLES

No sample has one exact meaning; it is the words being used about a sample which is essential to the workshop process. There is no ‘correct answer’. Participant’s verbal motivation for bringing in a certain sample is fuelling the creative discussion. Our initial idea was that participant would assign certain keywords to the samples being presented. But as we conducted the first workshop in January 2004 with almost no workshop leader intervention a quite different use of words and samples emerged. This is our findings:

Samples as Placeholders of ideas and statements

Essentially the samples or clusters of samples served as physical and shared place-holders of ideas. Once put on the stage the sample would – as any other board game piece – signify the will and intention of a person; in this case a reference to an idea, a metaphor, a statement or opinion. As the number of samples at the stage crowds, the group realizes the need to reach unified conclusions.

Metaphoric use

The typical usage of the samples was the metaphoric use. Only people with a distinct (professional) visual design approach would spontaneously use the samples to express aesthetic visual qualities.

The metaphoric use could e.g. be that an electronic LED display of numbers (sample #120) means ‘Fast time’ – in relation to a human lifetime (DR-januar) or a smiling child (sample #171) means “*Mother tongue, black and white, a kid since it long time since we learned our mother tongue*” (FilmTrain).

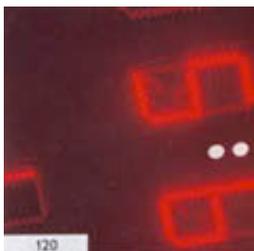


Figure 3: Sample #120



Figure 4: Sample #171

Journalistic metaphors; relating to media stories:

Some participant took the motifs very literally e.g.: a beer label signifies an alcoholic person or: in another case sample #214 came to represent a whole Danish media debate about blasphemy as it depicted the object of the scandal; sandals with a printed image of Jesus for sale at a Danish supermarket 2003. These direct connotations were not our original intentions with the samples.



Figure 4: Sample #409



Figure 5: Sample #214

Rebus use:

Metaphoric use was further developed by some participant into presenting small narratives consisting of rows of 4-6 samples. In one case the ‘rebus’ explained the mental development of the main character and the progress of the TV-series.

Change of meaning:

One typical emerging use was the shift of meaning; a sample was presented to the group with one interpretation but the other participants would point to other details of the sample and thus a new – or several co-existing – meanings would be assigned to the sample or the cluster of samples.

Signifying shared abstract values:

The samples were in some cases also used to signify abstract organisational values shared by the participants.

CONCLUSION: DEVELOPING AN OPEN TOOL

A social board game

The VisionPool game is no game in a traditional sense; there is no winning condition. However a social game emerges from the use of the samples. The limited size of the Stage forces participants to negotiations which reflect not only the concrete problem of space but also the ‘real’ discussion about the idea, the expression, the audience, the resources etc. of the project.

Also the physical quality of the samples as board game pieces triggers some associations of the participants. Thus we never used the word ‘game’ about the “VisionPool”, participants however refer to it as a ‘game’. Finally; the fact that each motif only exists at one sample (of each set of the game) forces occasionally participants to ‘fight’ about one certain sample. Clear game qualities emerged from the material as we applied the simple rules of the constrained area of Stage and the general reduction of samples during the workshop to the VisionPool workshop format.

A conversion tool

The collective creative process shows to be a conversation about the unknown, yet non-existing product where different mental frameworks are being developed and assessed by the participants. The samples serve as physical representation of these concepts, ideas and statements.

In the cases where the subject of the workshop was creating ideas and concepts from scratch, the samples served as a metaphoric tool for association. As the samples does not depict specific recognizable objects, the room for participants’ interpretation gets bigger.

In other workshops where the creative process had come to a halt – an impasse stage [6] – the samples serves as an analytical tool forcing participants to reformulate their idea with the limited number of samples as constrain. In this case defining visual qualities can be a short-cut to the original intention; recreating the idea with new means.

Generally we expected to facilitate the discussion of ‘content vs. expression’ but the emerging use showed VisionPool as a tool for developing content – ideas - as the yet dominating use. To some extent they are also used to express visual qualities of the project but to a much less extent than our initially intention.

Design Intention vs. Emergent Use: Incorporating ideas and maintaining identity.

As this project has shown, the importance of incorporating the actual emerging use of a tool is an essential part of the product development / design process. In this case furthermore the VisionPool samples are being used as a tool for many different purposes and in many use contexts. Therefore creating an open tool must be an important goal. On the over hand; some distinct directions of use (e.g. workshop rules) must be offered to potential users; otherwise the VisionPool will loose some identity.

DOES VISIONPOOL WORK?

Assessing quality of creative processes is a difficult field of science. One measurement method could be the engagement participants’ show when using a certain tool or method. Another method could be assessing the final results of the creative processes as we normally assess creative results; as subjective evaluations. Qualitative interviews with users could be a third option.

Yet none of the ideas / projects developed at the VisionPool workshops have been realized. Therefore it is too early to asses the impact of VisionPool on the long time creative process. However workshop participants and observers have expressed themselves positive about VisionPool both as a tool for creativity and as tool for communicating visual expression.

In the scope of the single workshop, the success of VisionPool seems to be depending on calibrating the task, the rules and the role of the workshop leader to the participants; their creative problem, the state of the problem (new project or impasse of a current project) and the social relations between participants.

When the “FilmTrain” project is finished by end December 2005 one VisionPool workshop can be finally assessed for long time impact on creativity and product.

Popular samples

One aspect of the quality of the VisionPool samples lies in how popular different samples are. After the six workshops conducted in 2004 an interesting pattern shows up: Certain samples are being used much frequently than others. What causes this it so far unclear; is the visual properties of the samples themselves or is ‘popularity’ closely connected to the subjects of the workshops – an inner common connection. Six workshops is statistically a very small basis of examination so the pattern can eventually be accidentally. However we – as publishers of the VisionPool pieces – are confronted with the question: “What is a good VisionPool sample?” when issuing new sets of samples as it happened by end of 2004.

A forthcoming digital internet / intranet version of VisionPool will probably show interesting emerging properties as the

usage of different samples; popular samples etc and general qualities of computer based collaborative work / computer mediated social activities.



Figure 6: VisionPool workshop at Learning Lab Denmark. No grid, A3 sheets determine the ‘Stage’

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INFORMATION AND QUESTIONS

The website <http://www.visionpool.dk> offers a thorough description of the VisionPool project. Currently the VisionPool project is being launched as commercial available tool. The author or Villads Keiding can be contacted for further information.

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