Adapting Service Design Tools for the Media Industries

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Abstract. The paper raises questions concerning how Service Design tools and methodologies might be adapted to the particular needs of industry, enabling their autonomous use by non-designers. The potential for incorporating Service Design thinking into the creative media industries through the development of tools tailored to the industry needs and aspirations is here narrated through the experience gathered by the Moving Targets project, which has been developing a series of tools that merge basic design tools with the development of 'props' specific to the field of creative media and audience involvement. Reflecting on the project's work embedded in industry and design-led research processes used in the development of those tools, this paper offers a critical analysis of the value and challenges of this type of work, where the transformational role of design can be at odds with the traditions and cultures of industrial processes.

Keywords: Service Design, Tools, Media Industries, Knowledge Exchange

1   Introduction

This essay reflects on some of the work developed by Moving Targets - a three year Knowledge Exchange project based in Scotland and funded by the Scottish Funding Council through the Horizon Fund. The project partners are University of Abertay and University of Edinburgh in liaison with industry, agencies and audiences.

This research project was triggered by the increasing pervasiveness of digital devices and the expansion of broadband internet which are changing the ways in which media content is consumed and produced. Moving Targets takes a cross-sector approach to these transformations in industry and explores the development of innovative models for audience engagement in the digital era.

The project was conceived with a 'fuzzy front end' approach (1) (2), placing the emphasis on the framework –a multi-disciplinary team and a series of knowledge exchange methods – leaving the outcomes undefined. This demand-led approach ensures the continuous adaptation of the project to current and relevant issues in the rapidly shifting technological and social contexts faced by the creative industries. Moving Targets' research – mainly of a qualitative character – includes literature review, semi-structured interviews with practitioners in the creative industries and the analysis of case studies. Participatory observation and 'design-led research' (3) was undertaken in collaboration with Scottish media partners through placements, design

and strategy consultancy, the development of prototypes and workshops where discussions and collaboration between participants are driven by tailored activities.

The scope and impact of the research are limited to the companies engaged in the activities proposed. Working across diverse industrial and cultural sectors – from videogames to theatre and poetry to film – enabled us to identify common gaps and challenges. However, the Scottish media industries are largely comprised of micro-companies, often with very small numbers of permanent staff. Therefore, the development of autonomous tools is sought with the transformational aspiration of building "organisational capacity for on-going innovation" on audience and content strategy employing a user-centred and holistic approach to the media experience (4).

This paper responds to Daniela Sangiorgi's call for reflection and evaluation of the contexts in which design acquires a transformative role (5). Thus the focus of this essay is not to describe the tools developed, presented elsewhere, but discussing the value and challenges of applying a Service Design approach to media production and the potential for adapting its tools to the needs and inspirations of the industry.

2   Steep Learning Curve

Knowledge Exchange projects begin by placing participants out of their main domain of expertise so as to identify issues within actual commercial contexts and explore how their skills can serve to support industrial activities. This is a challenging approach and has an implicit steep learning curve, demanding an adaptive researcher who can rapidly acquire knowledge of the methodologies, languages and tools used by a specific industry. In this case, Moving Targets has taken a cross-sector approach, multiplying the need for understanding the processes followed in different sectors and communicating effectively across them. Unless the appropriate knowledge is acquired and relationships built any transformational aspirations are worthless as they will not be inspired by truthful insights and thus not be supported by the stakeholders.

In order to engage companies, academics need to be able to offer concrete services that demonstrate the value of that collaboration in advance. However, in the early stages of a project that potential value is the object of research and what is being explored. During this learning or adaptation period there is little else but good will and uncertainty. Researchers are familiar with dealing with uncertainty and the academic environment embraces exploration and is adept at managing failure. The difference is that in industrial contexts such uncertainty can represent an unacceptable risk. We must therefore reflect on the ethics and repercussions of this kind of work. Academics are exempt of many types of liability, beyond their individual reputation – though to be fair so are industry consultants. But there is also a collective academic reputation. Companies may become reticent to engage with academia if previous experiences did not satisfy their expectations. The practice-led approach offers a solution through learning by doing, but that entails risks that not every company is willing or able to take. At this point of the argument we have reached the 'knowledge exchange paradox': What came first, knowledge or practice?

Looking at our experience, the resolution of that paradox seems an inevitably iterative process in which the degree of exploration is gradually increased. It is only when an essential understanding and knowledge of the industry is constructed that the researcher can gain the trust required for a successful embedding. In order to build that basic understanding, together with reading and training in specific areas of media production, our initial effort was invested in exploring and becoming knowledgeable around the trending topics in the different industries, being up-to-date with the latest developments. This enabled the researchers to integrate themselves in a variety of media and creative communities, achieving insight through informal conversations at networking events. Furthermore, the tension between exploration and instant tangible value was resolved through two knowledge exchange mechanisms.

On the one hand, the participation of industry partners in shaping the project brief aided giving focus and establishing collaborations in advance. The researchers were embedded within companies through placements. Businesses benefit from having an extra pair of hands working on their projects, while the researchers can experience the industry dynamics from within. However, prior to this embedment some preparation is required so as to avoid any negative impact on the company's work flow.

On the other hand, 'unobtrusive consultancy' was provided early on – meaning that the work was undertaken outside the company. After a few meetings with the company, to identify their needs and the potential value of the researcher's contribution, work could be developed independently and reported back. This type of work enabled us to identify the value of certain Service Design tools, such as the development of stakeholder-maps, personas or user-journeys, which proved useful for gaining insight for content development and audience strategy. Further 'hands-on consultancy', in the form of workshops tailored to the companies' needs, could be undertaken once these benefits became clearer. Note that it was only after eight months of researching media initiatives and working with industry that the potential value of adapting Service Design tools arose. Thus the initial focus on learning moved towards more exploratory and collaborative models of design-led-research.
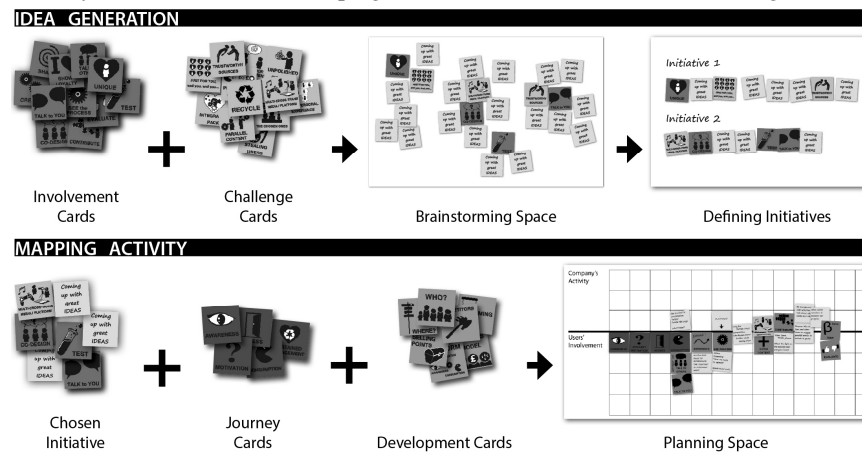
3   The Trigger for Change

Audiences are taking a more active role in the production and consumption of media. The development of new technologies have offered the public access to user-friendly production tools, networked communications, collaboration and distribution platforms (6) (7). This has blurred the boundaries between consumers and producers, giving rise to terms such as "prosumers" (8). The proliferation of user-generated content through the internet, spontaneous creative communities, crowd-sourcing and public interactions through social media, have triggered a desire within media companies to incorporate these new forms of participation into their traditional models.
Businesses and creators now have the chance to
- engage users in more meaningful and direct relationships,
- learn from them in order to provide better experiences

- and sustain their engagement beyond a specific media project.

The consumption of media is no longer a one off event, as these relationships become extended in time. Our understanding of media moves from product to experience. This longitudinal dimension and the new interest in using participation as a means of enhancing engagement have provided our project with the context to explore the incorporation of Service Design thinking. The development of a visual taxonomy for audience involvement led to the generation of a card-based tool (Fig. 1) to explore alternative approaches to audiences and mapping the users' relationships with content. This tool is a first step to introduce the user-centred and holistic approaches into the industry, but we continue developing similar work focused on understanding users.

Fig. 1. In order to provide some context on the kind of tools developed by the project, the image above represents the props and activities designed for the Audience Engagement Tool.

4 Value and Frustrations of the Service Design Perspective

Some of what we consider to be the most relevant applications of Service Design methodologies to the production of media are also some of the most frustrating when it comes to their actual incorporation into existing industrial processes. Some of these contributions imply a change of culture and therefore their integration takes more than just the development of suitable tools. In this section we will comprehensively reveal industry needs identified through our research, the value in applying a Service Design approach and the challenges of their integration with existing systems.

4.1 Users at the Core of any Activity

Traditional media companies are concerned with re-engaging the 'missing audience' that migrated to the internet and never returned to traditional media. Media analysts

speak of the fragmentation of audiences and the increasing challenge of engaging audiences who are willing to contribute to the costs of production in a digital environment. These media debates are primarily concerned with the development of audiences, their engagement with media content and monetisation.

However, our experience within the media industries suggests that the creative processes of media production rarely start out focused on users but, more often, begin with an idea for a piece of content that the creators find of interest. Consideration of the audience doesn't tend to materialise during the design and development stages but is left to later stages concerned with product placement and marketing. The key question in this context is: To whom and how can we sell our existing content? However, a Service Design approach might ask earlier in the process: How can we implement our idea to satisfy the motivations and expectations of our potential users?

Aiming at exploring the value of this approach, two different tactics have been employed. Initially, externally developed reports were delivered which included qualitative research on users and competitors, user-personas and journeys as well as design insights drawn from the research. Further integration of this approach is sought through facilitated sessions were the tools are used by the creators. In both cases the knowledge generated has proven to be useful for content and strategy development.

However, a key frustration for the Service Design approach is in arguing against the preconception that user research and understanding only has a role in developing marketing strategies and is not required for the generation of content. The only established 'early' involvement of users we have observed is that of testing digital interfaces, but this is usually focused on testing the usability of technology rather than the ideas or content it carries. For many media creators the idea of actively involving, or trying to empathise with, users in the conceptual stages of a project is perceived as diminishing the value generated by the unique artistic vision of the creator. This attitude contradicts the creators' desire for developing meaningful relationships with audiences, leaving those interactions restricted to post-development phases.

4.2 Beyond Consumption

An emphasis on implementation leads companies to consider the media experience limited to consumption. This approach overlooks relevant gaps in the experience that may entail a loss of users even before they reach the content. However, by taking a Service Design approach and without playing down the relevance of the content, the media experience is comprehended as an integral journey from initial awareness to sustained engagement. Ideally every step in that journey considered relevant by the user should be so for the creators. Aside from the fact that some sectors have a greater control of the pre- and post- content consumption experiences, simply mapping out the users' journeys has proved useful, whether companies control every step or not.

For example, by developing the emotional journeys for avatar creation in a fashion game, it was foreseen that the questions proposed and transitions through the steps in

the body-shape definition may be perceived as invasive by some users. However this issue was not dealt with until the data returned proving that an 80% of users left the game at this stage. was considered merely as a routine step towards accessing the content and not especially relevant. This indicates not only the value of using a user-centred approach and tools to empathise with users but a mistrust of qualitative analysis by industry.

Understanding the users' decision making processes and their pre- and post-consumption journeys have proved useful for other companies in informing their strategies, strengthening motivations for specific users or developing complementary services. Thus we claim the value for media production in breaking down the user's experience into coherent journeys where 'touch points', or elements of interaction, can be identified and designed, depending on the user. Communicating that value to companies might be challenging but the real challenge is to embed this procedure as a way of working rather than as an externally developed asset.

4.3 A Holistic Approach to Making

The lack of integration of different implementation aspects and stages, is another issue encountered in the production of media. Design studies indicate an increase in quality and decrease in development issues, when time is allocated for design and planning considering all aspects involved (9) (10). However, small companies tend to concentrate their resources on production *stage by stage*, failing to sustain a holistic vision of the creation processes. This narrows the vision of the project and entails a de-contextualisation of problem solving and thus risks incoherent strategies.

We have witnessed how the detachment between design and technology can generate delays due to gaps between visual content and display platform. Similarly, not establishing an initial set of values – building on user understanding and the content qualities – has led to develop incoherent marketing campaigns that attempt to grab users' attention through the wrong means, attracting the wrong type of users or creating unrealistic expectations. Identifying early in the process which elements of the experience will not be affected by the technology has enabled to start producing content wisely before a final decision on an appropriate platform is made.

Despite the value of establishing connections between all aspects of production to explore more coherent solutions before initiating implementation, few companies involve experts from different departments in strategy development. This is perceived as a 'managerial' activity and does not provide an instant tangible outcome.

In the production of media content many creators face a constant tension between artistic and commercial value. These two sides of the same coin clash and companies find themselves compromising the integrity of one to fulfil the requirements of the other. Many companies define projects as 'commercial' or 'commissioned' (those that bring in revenue) and 'our own' (those through which they express their creativity). We suggest that artistic and commercial values can be complementary if both aspects are considered equally and integrated into the creative process from the beginning and the focus is placed on the users rather than on the implementation of the content.

5   Contributions to Sustainable Reindustrialization

Our work within the media industries is proof of the value of incorporating Service Design thinking into the production and commercialisation of media. The shift from product to service is being pushed by the development of digital technologies and the increasing users' expectation of being provided with seamless experiences. Increased sustainability in media production could be seen reflected through several aspects:

- improved quality of the media services provided and associated audience strategies by deepening the creators' understanding of and empathy with their users and taking a more holistic approach towards the users' experience
- deepening their relationships with audiences by exploring new models for co-creation, feedback and involvement during the creation processes
- improving the creative and technical development of the content by taking a more holistic approach to the different aspects of implementation

But our desire for incorporating these transformations does not override the fact that the determination for change has to come from within and the integration of these new approaches will not happen immediately. We appreciate how the developments of new technologies, specifically the internet, are accelerating the evolution of these mind-sets and more user-centred and holistic thinking are now taken by both large companies and open-minded individual creators. But their full integration in the industry is likely to require of the renewal of the core understanding of media – from sole-creator and mass-consumed to collaborative and personalised. A few generations may be required for these methods to become part of the 'media language'.

6   Conclusions

Reflecting on this work we can now speculate on the long and short-term value and challenges of incorporating Service Design thinking into various aspects of the media industries and through different means, which may be transferable to other industries.

Small companies often identify their lack of users' understanding or global strategy as being due to a lack of resources - mainly time, budget and expertise. We believe the first two issues respond to a question of priorities and have pointed out the lack of value given to intangible outcomes, such as strategy, or the mistrust towards qualitative design research techniques. Therefore, shifting these approaches requires a change of mind-set that will only come with proven value.

It is, however, in the field of building expertise that we see the short-term value of adapting Service Design tools to media production. But tailored easy-to-use tools do not seem sufficient for the integration of design thinking, as its application requires of the development of a variety of skills, of which some entail extensive learning through practice or could be considered as natural qualities. What would be the value of these tools without the capability of translating insights into design or strategy specifications? Empathy, for instance, is an important skill in a designer. Being able

to understand and experience a product or service as its users would do is a valuable capability when it comes to developing quality experiences. But how is this taught, especially in an environment where time is a scarce resource? These are the kind of issues our research is only beginning to explore.

However, the complexities inherent to this process do not overshadow the potential value of integrating Service Design into media production. Developing autonomous tools that embed a smooth learning curve is a challenge we are willing to take, and the enhancement of Service Design thinking in media studies is worth pursuing.

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