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Ethical Co-Design as Deference Over Time

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Notes on designer positionality and Indigenous collaborations in a warming Arctic

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Integrating multi-stakeholder approaches is increasingly necessary to address global systemic issues, and the professional position of many designers has shifted from producer to facilitator in response. Facilitation-heavy frameworks of co-design and participatory design attempt to democratise design by involving community stakeholders in the process of problem-finding and creative response—yet the risk of performative collaboration can quickly perpetuate systemic inequality rather than mitigate it.

I argue for a co-creative philosophy built upon deference rather than facilitation, recognising that delegating power is not the same as seeking to rebalance it. Designers tout the importance of "trust-building" in a co-creative process, but what does it functionally require? Ambient time and sustained proximity are two such building blocks, laying a foundation upon which deference can begin to demonstrate trustworthiness and establish shared context. These are all crucial prerequisites for fostering the multilateral agency implied by the term "co-design" but rarely achieved in practice—including, but not limited to, collaborations between non-Indigenous designers and Indigenous stakeholders.

Throughout the presentation, these claims and insights will be illustrated by specific fieldwork anecdotes and auto-ethnographical observations from a period of design research concerning Sámi reindeer herders' perspectives on climate change across Sápmi and in the Finnish Arctic. Recommendations for integrating ethically critical co-design practices apply to individual designers but

especially to research funding structures and project reporting metrics that may unintentionally incentivise an extractive approach to community stakeholder collaboration.

KEYWORDS: design ethics, decolonial design, indigenous collaboration, co-design, deference, positionality, time, proximity, agency, trust-building, funding structures

RSD TOPIC(S): Cases & Practice, Methods & Methodology

Presentation overview

The systems design process itself is subject to the inequalities that characterise the world it seeks to transform (Costanza-Chock, 2020). If these imbalances are not consciously acknowledged and adjusted for, well-intentioned work can easily end up entrenching the very power differentials and systemic shortcomings that it attempts to disrupt (Tunstall, 2023). This presentation is a reflection on moral quandaries encountered during ten months of design research in Finland, especially the insufficiencies of unexamined co-design practices in the context of Sámi Indigeneity, climate change, and Arctic governance.

Power in positionality

The position from which each actor/agent approaches a topic of collaboration may start in a place of inherent imbalance or inequity—as is always the case when a non-Indigenous designer enters into partnership with Indigenous collaborators on issues ranging from language revitalisation to salmon governance. For instance, I'm a funded design researcher who has chosen to do this work because I believe it's important and have an opportunity to pursue that belief. In contrast, a Sámi person has inherited the histories of colonial exploitation and oppression behind their complex predicament today. Their related hopes and worries are a fact of their daily livelihood. This isn't to imply a lack of agency over the situation but to recognise that while hypothetical co-designers might share the same concerns, the positioning of why and how those concerns are addressed begins on uneven ground, unfit for the meaningful cultivation of co-design's presumptuous prefix.

The impossible but necessary task of being ethical demands transparency—even emphasis—around the work's pre-existing baggage and the limitations of its outcome. Related anecdotes will address these themes: *User* (Who is putting the work to use? To whom is the work directly in service?); *Audience* (Who is experiencing or encountering the work from a distance? Who is interested in discussing it?); *Access* (For whom is the outcome accessible? How visible/legible is the working process? Is opacity/transparency adjusted for different audiences?); *Labour* (Which contributions are expected from each actor, and why? What's considered fair distribution?); *Stakes* (What's "in it" for each actor? What are personal motivations behind involvement?).

Design as deference

A segment of the design field has been shifting from a framework of providing services to clients toward facilitating co-creation with collaborators (Wahl & Baxter, 2008). This change towards stakeholder-centric decision-making is progressive in many senses, but wielding new language can become a performative substitute for addressing the underlying power imbalances (Palacin et al., 2020). The traditional archetype of a designer's role as an all-seeing, problem-solving creative director can become further inflated if they position themselves as an orchestrator of their subjects' insights, even as they describe it as "facilitating participatory dialogue."

One way to avoid this false-facilitator pitfall is to reassume a deferential state, working in service of Indigenous self-determination rather than against or despite it. Humility is a requisite disposition, but deference suggests a pattern of action. To *defer* is to foster community ownership (Gonzalez, 2019), which transcends the limits of consulting, involving, and even collaborating. In this sense, the pathway to ethical co-creation may end up looking more like the traditional charge of providing services to clients. Designing with deference requires listening without an agenda or hypothesis and being poised to observe/ask what people think, want, and need. Even as more designers show up in communities with questions instead of answers, they may not be prepared for the questions themselves to be problematic or irrelevant—and to the detriment of all parties, they may never find out.

Ambient time, sustained proximity, and multilateral agency

Understanding the right questions takes time (spent both actively and ambiently with collaborators) and proximity (to the physical location and issues at hand). That's more likely to look like sharing months of meals than facilitating two-day workshops and conducting virtual interviews. There is a tendency to rush through relational aspects when confronted with the urgency and scale of catastrophic climate change. But *being urgent* is to work as if the end justifies the means, whereas *responding to urgency* requires that we recognise the end is actively shaped by the means. The fast work of climate mitigation must also be the slow work of repairing harms from extractive fossil fuel industries and colonisation in the Arctic.

Related anecdotes will address these themes: *Time* (How much does each actor have? What frequency, duration, quality? How does value, scarcity, or meaning of time differ?); *Proximity* (What is each actor's proximity to the issue, physically and emotionally? Is it adjusted easily?); *Agency* (What's the distribution of power in decision-making? When might one actor have more leverage than another?)

The "co" in co-creation is never activated if creative agency is not shared, and trust grows as a result of fostering multilateral agency over time and proximity.

multilateral agency

less time/proximity

more time/proximity

TRUST

unilateral agency
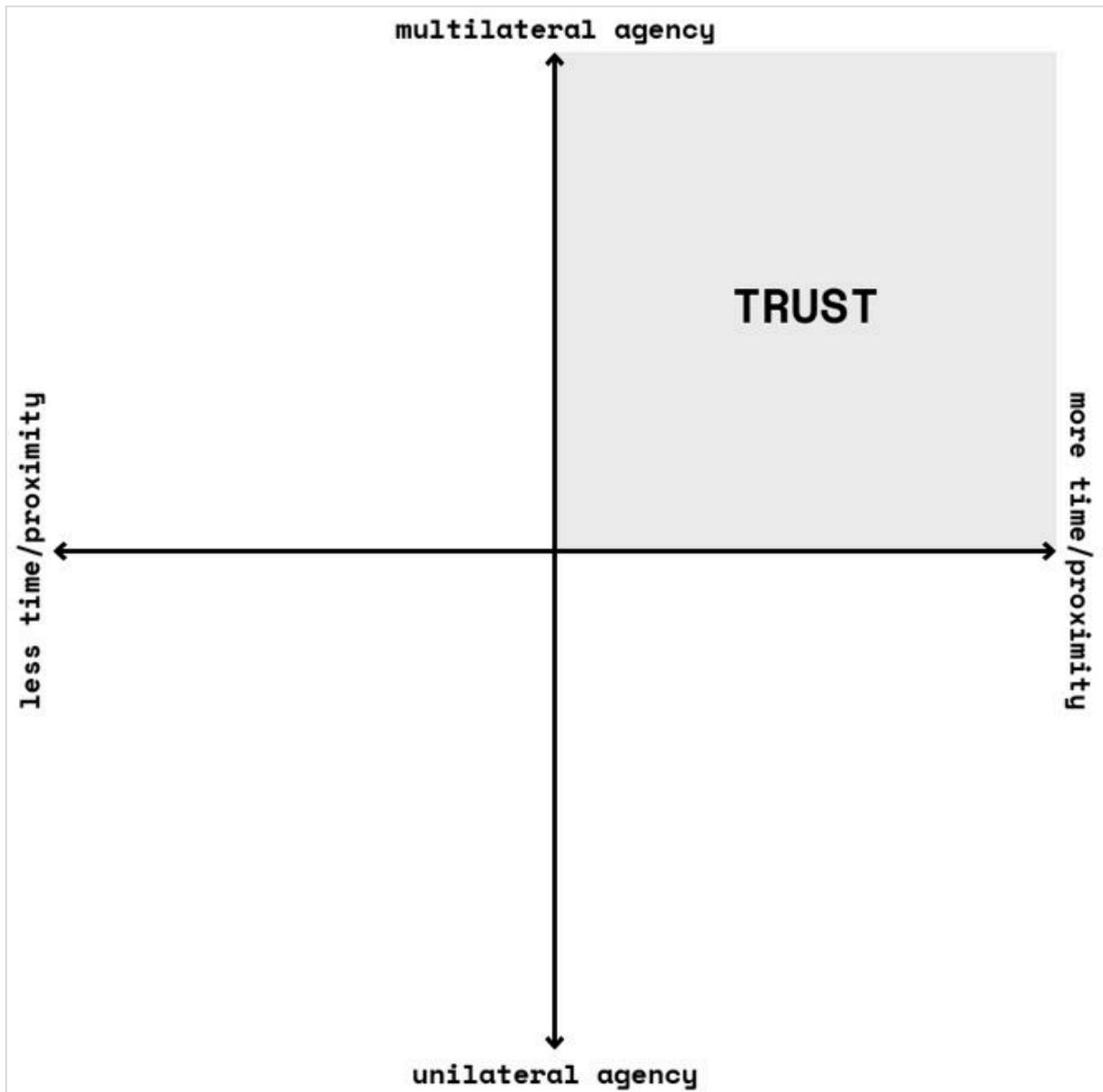
Relational ethics, funding structures, and systems change

Co-creating with integrity under a shared context and theory of systemic change is a powerful and exciting conception of design's purpose and process. Indigenous-led frameworks and ethical guidelines are becoming more common, aiming to "establish meaningful and mutually beneficial relationships to guide reciprocal research that is community-driven, self-determined, action-oriented, and culturally responsive and that upholds Indigenous sovereignty of data and information" (Hayward et al., 2021, p.404).

And yet, funding structures are slow to respond. How can we reform the dominant conventions to enable design research that prioritises trust-building and Indigenous self-determination? Donella Meadows reminds us that "power over the rules is real power [...] If you want to understand the deepest malfunctions of systems, pay attention to the rules" (Meadows & Wright, 2009, p.158). Ambient time and sustained proximity are rarely justifiable as a budget item or acceptable as proof of work, yet they are perhaps the most universal requirement for fostering organic friendships and the truly co-creative trust that follows. It's the difference between what philosopher Martin Buber describes as an "I—It" association and an "I—Thou" dialogue (Buber, 2020). Encouraging the possibility for I—Thou design relations through deference over time is necessary for ushing forth just systemic changes.

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