

The roles of role-playing in the Cumtree project: an examination



1. Introduction

As Mattelmäki (2008) observed, the complex design tasks of today are beyond designers' traditional expertise. Indeed, the Cumtree project implored us to design a new service – a marketplace for the buying and selling of human body fluids – which posed several challenges as none of us were 'virtuoso(s) of experience' (Storni, 2013: 51) in that space. Therefore, we readily adopted co-design techniques such as probes and role-playing in our project, encouraged by the norm of involving end-users in design research (Sanders and Stappers, 2008).

However, as co-design grows in popularity amongst various companies and organizations (Binder et al., 2008), it can also be used as a buzzword, and there is often a lack of clarity with regard to how co-design impacts a service-design project (Steen et al., 2011) and how to do it well (Burkett, 2016). Therefore, this essay aims to articulate and evaluate the contributions of role-playing, a co-design technique employed, in the Cumtree project.

2. Co-design

2.1. Co-design tools and techniques

In general, co-design tools and techniques can be divided into three categories (Fig 1.1 and Fig 1.2) (Brandt et al., 2012), where role-playing falls under the 'enacting' category.

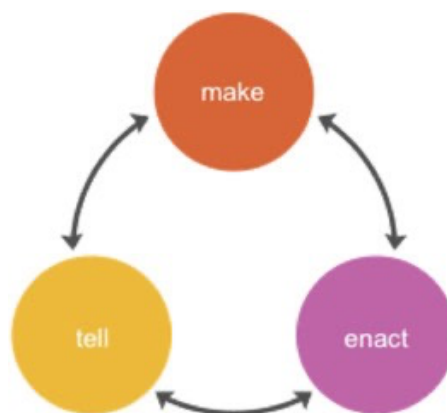


Fig 1.1: Making, telling, and enacting as complementary, connected activities in codesigning. Source: Brandt et al., 2012.

Category	Description
Telling activities	Refers to tools and techniques that support verbal expression, such as talking and explaining. Tools include diaries, logs and card sorting, used to express ideas, whilst games is another popular technique.
Making activities	Refers to tools and techniques for making tangible things, such as collages, maps, models and mock-ups. Three distinct approaches to making activities have been used over time: Prototyping, Probes and Generative tools.
Enacting activities	Refers to activities where one or more people imagine and act out possible futures by trying things out in settings or in locations that resemble where future activities are likely to take place, such as theatre techniques, scenarios, and role-playing.

Fig 1.2: Description of telling, making and enacting categories. Adapted from Akach et al., 2021.

2.2. Role-playing: a background

Burns et al (1994) wrote the earliest paper on role-playing (cited most frequently to be, atleast, as noted in Boess, 2006), observing how role-play overcomes “simplified portrayals of environments and users” that may arise with the storyboarding technique. Burns then joined IDEO, where it has since been developed further with approaches such as “bodystorming”, “informance or informative performance” in order to present ideas, issues and scenarios to an audience (Simsarian, 2003). Role-playing has also been related to the Scandinavian Participatory Design tradition (Brandt and Grunnet, 2000) and combined with low-fi prototyping for “experience prototyping” (Buchenau and Suri, 2000).

2.3. The need for role-playing in relation to the project

With lifestyles decisively impacting the adoption of digital services, it becomes important for designers to note these socio-cultural aspects and imagine them in a future scenario to develop the product (Svanæs and Seland, 2004). Conversely, users cannot vividly express feedback on future non-existent products (Salvador and Sato, 1999). Therefore, a practical way to recruit future users (of

the proposed Cumtree service) into the design process is to use role-playing (Iacucci et al., 2000). Role-playing then makes this involvement physical as opposed to just mental, providing additional team dynamics and insights (Simsarian, 2003).

3. Role-playing in the Cumtree project: description

During the Cumtree project, a role-playing workshop was carried out to understand what trust was influenced by and how it could fluctuate in three different scenarios. Four participants were given introductory sheets with instructions (Fig 2), establishing them as either a buyer with a fetish for urine or a seller that sells urine.

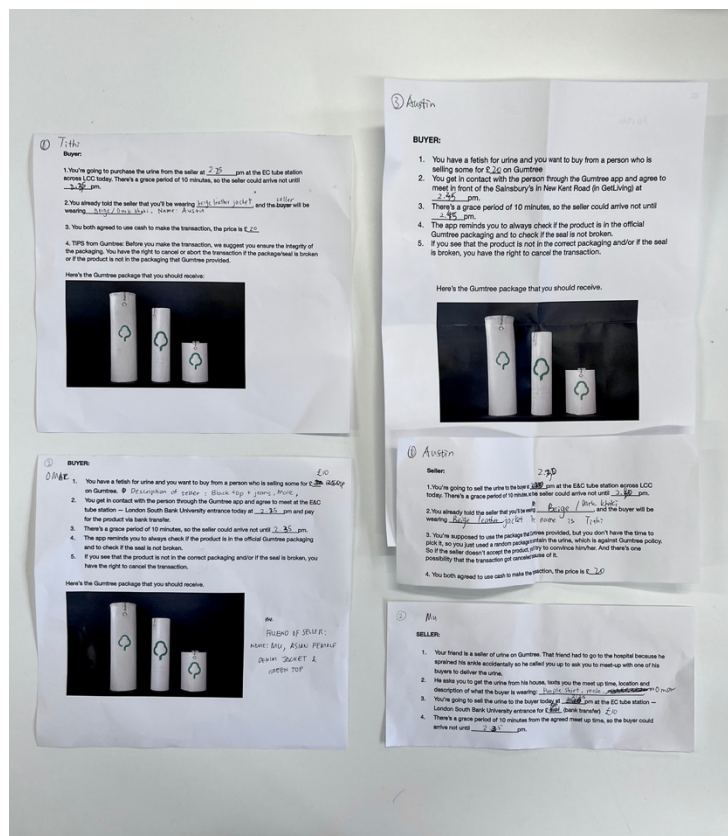


Fig 2: Instruction sheet for buyers and sellers

The instructions also contained the details of their meetup, such as the time and location. Tips were also included, such as checking the integrity of the packaging. Lastly, the sheet reminded buyers of their right to cancel the transaction should the seller exceed the grace period.

4. Evaluation

4.1. Svanæs and Seland's model: using objectivity, reliability, validity, and transferability

Svanæs and Seland (2004) propose evaluating role-playing workshops through four popular criteria (Fig 3) used in social science research, as design techniques (e.g. usability testing, interviews, field studies and focus groups) have been adapted from research methods from the social sciences.

Criteria	Application
Objectivity	To what extent do the scenarios and ideas originate from the users, and not from the facilitators or developers?
Reliability	Are the scenarios accurate in their description of the situations being studied?
Validity/Internal validity	Are the scenarios describing the important aspects of the situations with respect to the purpose of the workshop?
Transferability	Can the conclusions drawn from analysing the scenarios be generalized?

Fig 3: Svanæs and Seland (2004)'s criteria for evaluating role-playing workshops.

1. Objectivity

My group members and I acted as initial facilitators and were not physically with the participants during their transactions, leaving them to their choices (Fig 4.1 and 4.2).

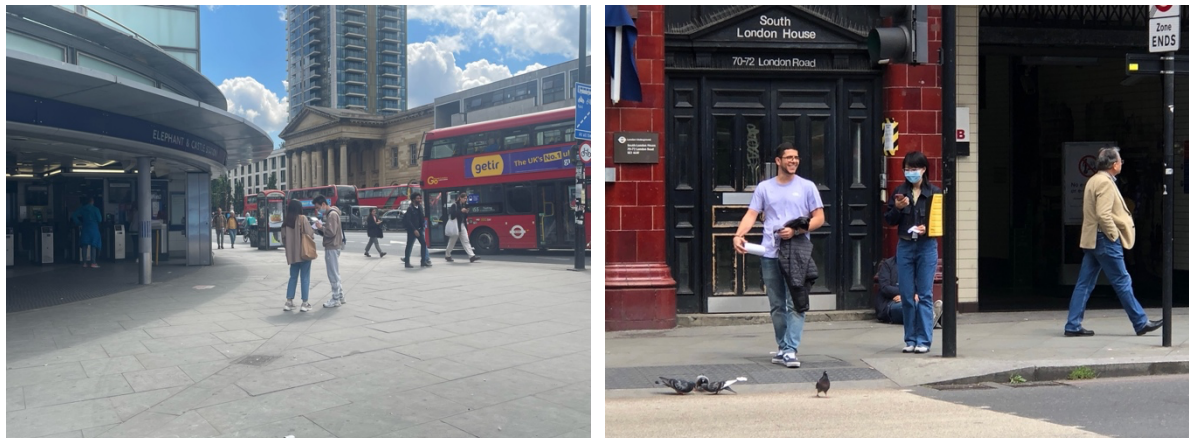


Fig 4.1 and 4.2: We stood far away, leaving buyers and sellers to their own devices

Therefore I propose that the ideas and feelings experienced in the scenarios, later expressed by participants, originated from them to a large extent.

However, we did determine the scenarios beforehand, which negatively affects our standing in this criterion to a large extent as well – we could have conducted a short workshop before the role-playing workshop to have more people, or the participants themselves, determine what roles would be most appropriate for them to play.

Moreover, it is extremely difficult to remove all unintended influences on participants. Some instances that may have influenced participants include highlighting the importance of checking the package before proceeding with the encounter, which not all buyers might immediately think to do.

2. Reliability

My group members and I wrote the three scenarios based on our own experiences and understandings of what could happen when buying and selling products. Although we have experienced several (more than twenty combined) transactions, we were still basing the scenarios on a sample size of three people, which negatively affected the reliability of the scenarios studied.

3. Validity/Internal validity

The purpose of the workshop was to ascertain what trust was influenced by and how it could fluctuate in different scenarios. The scenarios do describe the important aspects of the three situations where trust could be affected clearly: punctuality and packaging were variables that were clearly declared and carried through. Therefore, this criterion was fulfilled to a large extent.

4. Transferability

There were four conclusions drawn from the role-playing.

- i. A certain amount of identifiable information could build trust. This conclusion can be generalized to a moderate extent – our participants across all three scenarios noted that a photo of the seller could build trust, however, many sellers on current platforms such as

Reddit do not upload photos of themselves. Therefore, the conclusion drawn can only be upheld to a limit that is unclear as of now.

- ii. Signifiers help build trust but also endanger anonymity. Two participants noted that while the Gumtree packaging mock-up built trust in knowing that the fluids would be stored and transported well, however, they commented that it was done 'too well' (Fig 5) – that after some time, people would easily recognize them and know what they would contain.



Fig 5: The packaging mockup displayed a striking logo

This conclusion intuitively makes sense, not only with regards to body fluids but to illicit substances such as drugs, positively impacting the transferability criterion.

- iii. A high foot traffic meeting place does not necessarily build trust. The locations participants conducted the role-play were in front of tube stations, which took away from the focus on trust as participants were more concerned with people looking at them role-playing than the situation at hand. We had made an assumption that the more public, the better, but this alerted us to a more accurate generalization, positively impacting the transferability criterion.

- iv. A punishment system for dishonouring agreements would build trust. This conclusion, drawn from the third scenario where the seller did not show up, can easily be agreed upon to be generalizable and transferable – many applications impose a penalty system.

4.1. Boess and Saakes model: against rationales

Boess and Saakes (2007) propose evaluation against five rationales (Fig 4).

Rationale	Description
Communication within the design process	A popular rationale for using role-playing is the enhancement of communication within design processes.
Experience and empathy of designers	Role-playing “could allow designers to imagine better, (...) to empathise better” with potential users, emphasizing the strength of an activity rather than using abstract, deposited knowledge.
Increase of technological complexity	To help designers in dealing with the complexities brought on by computerization and miniaturization.
A shift towards tangible and embodied interaction	This rationale appeals to the value of lived, bodily experience.
Attentiveness to social change	Role-playing could be useful as a technique for designers to consider themselves and their actions in a context of social change, holding potential for innovating on interaction.

Fig 4: Boess and Saake (2007)’s criteria for evaluating role-playing workshops.

1. Communication within the design process

The role-playing workshop did communicate more efficiently the touch points and characteristics of trust within the design process. As participants enacted the scenarios as buyers and sellers, they could put themselves in the shoes of users more easily as opposed to having to imagine the process and then communicate their thoughts. Hence, the workshop did fulfill this rationale to a great extent.

2. Experience and empathy of designers

The role-playing workshop allowed us to empathize better with potential users. Several of our assumptions were disproven, such as high foot-traffic areas increasing trust, as mentioned previously.

However, it is still important to note that participants still have a subjective understanding of the scenario (Montola, 2007). For example, one of the participants commented that “if I’m buying pee, I should be proud of it”. This might not be true of all potential users, so our ability to empathize with potential users is still limited by the fact that our participants were playing a role that they had to approximate and might not fully understand. This is especially necessary to note as it is important to include real users as workshop participants, without which the workshop runs the risk of reinforcing existing assumptions and prejudices (Svanæs and Seland, 2004).

3. Increase in technological complexity

The workshop was not relevant to this proposed rationale as the application was not greatly technologically complex.

4. A shift towards tangible and embodied interaction

The nature of the brief demanded tangible and embodied interaction, so a shift towards it may not be the most appropriate rationale. However, the physicality of the role-playing workshop did emulate the reality of the transaction to a great extent.

5. Attentiveness to social change

We did not see role-playing as a vehicle for ‘exploring actions that depart from social norms’; rather, we were trying to pin down social norms, so this was not a relevant rationale as well.

6. Conclusion

Overall, this essay has introduced co-design, noted role-playing as being under one of its three categories, given a background of role-playing and the need for it in the project, and analyzed the role-playing workshop used in the Cumtree project through the lens of two models.

Whilst the first model predominantly allows for analysis of the conditions of the workshop, the second model allows for analysis of whether the workshop fulfilled particular aims, allowing for a comprehensive analysis. However, I feel that some of the aims specified in the second model were too specific and narrow, and in turn, not as useful. On the other hand, the first model was broader and furthermore, set out clearer ways in which the workshop could have been improved. Therefore, I prefer the first model as it is more generalizable and could therefore be more helpful, and would suggest that designers considering role-playing to examine it first.

1537 words

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