Creative Waves - International Online Student Design Project: Working with the most interactive community of designers we have (n)ever met.

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Theme: Balancing acts: traditional practices and technologies in Art, Design and Communication

Advancements in technology have always exerted a significant impact on creative practices in art, design and communication. However, have our creative processes (as visual communicators) and pedagogical activities (as art & design educators) responded adequately to the ever-increasing complexities of living, creating and learning in a global society that is culturally complex, technologically driven and operates twenty-four/seven?

This paper provides an opportunity to review the latest Omnium Project: Creative Waves (CW), the world's largest international online design project, and the first project of such nature to be endorsed by ICOGRADA (International Council of Graphic Design Associations). Hosted over a seven-week period throughout 2005, over 120 art and design students, teachers, practitioners, theorists and writers from around the globe were linked into small creative clusters, where no team member was in the same geographic location

By examining in detail an online conversation about 'collaboration in the creative process', this paper begins to reflectively critique the Creative Waves project and question whether such online projects are responding to revised global demands on creative practices.

Creative Waves website: http://www.omnium.edu.au/promo/creativewaves

Establishing a Framework for Effective Collaborative Online Creativity in Art & Design
The creative process has arguably undergone transformation over the last decade, from a predominantly private and singular activity, to one that encourages notions of collective and collaborative working processes (Jones 1991). However, such notions remain difficult to achieve, especially when collaboration is required to take place between distanced partners.

To this end, it is important not to underestimate difficulties that face artists and designers who wish to work collaboratively, but whose geographic locations and cultural backgrounds are diverse. The challenges of forming these type of online learning communities, have been designed, produced and facilitated by the *Omnium Project* (OP), based at UNSW in Sydney, Australia (http://www.omnium.edu.au/). With the aim of facilitating creative collaboration on a global scale, Omnium's latest initiative - *Creative Waves* (CW) - has become the world's largest international online design project (http://www.omnium.edu.au/promo/creativewaves). Designed, developed and convened by the authors, CW was conducted over a seven-week period throughout March-May 2005 and represents the first project of such nature to be endorsed by ICOGRADA (International Council of Graphic Design Associations) and it's worldwide education network (IEN).[1]

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[1] Member institutions that are part of the IEN can be found at: http://www.education.icograda.net/web/schools.shtml

The formation of this particular online learning community involved over 120 art and design students, teachers, professional practitioners and writers from around the globe who were linked into small creative clusters, where no team member was in the same geographic location. Using the unique internet-based *creative studio* software developed by the OP, participants were given the opportunity to balance individual and collaborative creative approaches, enabling them to interact in shared exchanges in response to challenges set by an unfolding and conceptual design brief.

This paper aims to develop premises from which a better understanding of the role and effect that 'online collaboration' can have in visual art and design practice might be established. The discussion that follows will focus upon an ongoing debate on this issue held within the CW project. Primarily this is presented via a selection of extracts posted by CW participants within a dedicated Omni-Debate discussion thread. We have formed a selection of insightful responses, personal observations and anecdotal comments for discursive purpose into three main strands of the conversation – for the most part leaving their words to speak for themselves. Concluding remarks summarise a combination of quantitative and qualitative data regarding collaborative online creativity.

Consistent with the mandate of the OP, founded by the co-author (Bennett) in 1998, CW was developed in response to a perceived growing dislocation between contemporary design education and professional practice, particularly in those areas of art and design involving new media and technology. In essence, OP has become an ongoing research venture, exploring the potential to embrace Internet technologies with collaborative creative practices, to establish new opportunities for visual artists and designers to work together across boundaries of culture, language, time and creative disciplines. Ultimately, our research aims to examine the viability and effectiveness of collaborative online creativity (COC). The research intentions that underpin CW revolve around how online collaboration can take place between distanced artists and designers across the creative stages of a project or brief. Two premises can be identified that influence and focus the research:

- Creativity through visual and written communication is essentially a social process that involves both conventional individual practice and increasingly prevalent collaborative approaches; and
- The Internet, as an effective and productive space and medium for communication and data transfer, poses a significant influence upon social interaction and the conduct of informational and communicative exchanges involved in the creative process.

Omni-Debate 2: an ongoing conversation about 'collaboration in the creative process': Discussion and selected extracts

Cs > ({ CprA } + { CprB })
i.e. Collaborative output is much greater than creative person A and B working separately.

This formula was offered by one of the student participants in Creative Waves as part of an ongoing conversation about collaboration and its role within the creative process. This forum was coordinated through a Message Board thread that would remain active throughout the entirety of the seven-week program. The term 'Omni-Debate' was employed to promote dialogue around a series of key themes that might be considered as central tenet of the Omnium Project.

They went on to observe:

> Collaboration holds special importance in creative fields because it is something like chemistry. For example: Sodium Bicarbonate and Citric Acid are two important chemicals having specific importance. But when they combine (or collaborated) with water.... BOOM.[2]

The following section of this paper draws upon the rich vein of perceptive comments, observations, experiences and anecdotes collected as postings to the Omni-Debate initiated by the co-author (Bennett). These insightful (indeed 'insight-filled') responses – mined from the amongst the 3000 plus entries that were posted to the numerous threads found in the Message Board during the CW project – complement the creative studio activities and give a sense of the breadth and extent of the CW initiative. A selection of these contributions, from students, mentors and special guests, have been extracted from this rich vein and organised to illustrate the following main points:

1. Why is collaboration important to creative process and how can it be applied?
2. Directions and definitions of collective versus collaborative approaches.
3. Socialisation and how designers communicate.

For the most part, these texts will be allowed to speak for themselves. Short introductory remarks will be used to introduce each topic and provide additional commentary as required. Some editorial licence has been taken with some of the chosen extracts, which may have been edited in cases, so as to stitch these conversational fragments together in the interest of discursive impact and to assist their narrative flow. Effort has been taken to retain the integrity, character and personality of these observations. At the end of this series the co-authors will conclude this presentation with some closing remarks in an effort to establish the two premises signalled earlier. The combination of quantitative and qualitative data will be shown to support of the claim that CW offered a demonstration of collaborative online creativity.

1. Why is collaboration important to creative process and how can it be applied?
From our respective experiences in teaching art & design for over ten years within multi-disciplinary undergraduate programs, we are both concerned that aspects of how creative disciplines in art & design are taught in an educational, institutionalised context might, broadly speaking, be found at odds with the role, importance and contribution of visual communication in facing the challenges of an increasingly technologised and globalised world. If we take a phenomenon that seems to have befallen many people in today's complex society that, for instance, their busy lives are seemingly packed into small pockets of time to achieve things, then what affect does this have on our creative activities? In his discussion of art and design methods, Jones (1991) identifies 'creative collaboration' as the main challenge since the introduction of computerisation in the design process, and that collaborative decision-making processes can provide the main strength in new methods. However, despite professional artists and designers recognising such potential, efficient online collaboration remains largely unrealised and under explored.

With this in mind, the co-author (Bennett) initiated a discussion forum to accompany the release of his introductory lecture at the outset of the CW online studio. This initial Omni-debate was introduced and proceeded (with participants of the online community responding with a diversity of points of view and opinions) as follows:

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[2] Posting attributed to AG [s] India; in the interest of ensuring a degree of privacy, the attribution of text extracts used throughout this paper will be identified by using an abbreviated syntax: Initials of the creator of the post; their status in the CW project (Convenor, Student, Mentor or Special Guest); country of origin.

RB [c] Australia –
Personally, I am very interested in the role and relevance of collaboration within the creative process. After all, the traditional notion of creativity is indeed one of an individual and reflective process. In fact, in 1987 renowned American graphic designer and writer Paul Rand, described design as being 'a personal activity, with collaboration more likely to hinder than enhance an individual designer's thought process' (Rand 1993). In terms of graphic design, I believe this notion to be especially interesting to re-examine.

Nearly twenty years on, I am more inclined to adhere to the thoughts of Tomato co-founder, John Warwicker (1999), for inspiration and direction. He discusses a contemporary global context of 'increased interconnectivity and multiplicity in ideas, cultures and practice ... There is a changed sense of the individual, an increased ease in interaction – the value of individuality is now seen within a collaborative context'. Warwicker goes onto state and conclude that in such a connected and interactive society 'change is the only constant'.

JJ [m] USA –
Creativity is both personal and shared. Collaboration is difficult and – like most difficult experiences – the hybridized 'fruit' of the effort is greater. I understand Paul Rand's observation. However, if we separate creativity from ego, there is something greater that exists: connectivity and community.

I tend to sympathize with John Warwicker's contention that there is a convergence of identity in post-modernity and even more so in this post-information age we are swimming in. Most all of us – no matter where and when – can gain information from thousands of sources. So, knowledge and access isn't the problem. Effectively connecting with others in a deeper way is the current problem as I see it.

RB [m] New Zealand –
My immediate gut level response would be that I'm with Mr. Rand. This no doubt stems from my abhorrence of the design-by-committee syndrome. Too often, group design scenarios became much more about personality, politics and ego massaging than producing quality design.

Does the fact, that an increased level of collaboration made possible via the Internet, necessarily mean that an individualistic approach to design is less appropriate or relevant? To my mind, nothing has changed fundamentally. It is wonderful to be able to interact with others this way and access so much, but there is a downside. So much exposure to what others are producing has lead to increased superficiality and 'style-mongering' in the graphic design world. There is surely still a place for both personal *and* collaborative approaches. It depends on what is expedient, appropriate and preferable for the parties involved in any given design scenario.

SZ [s] New Zealand –
Individualistic approach? As designers we are exposed everyday to design around us: there are magazines, books and even others in our classes that we are constantly being exposed to. While the individual needs to have a strong opinion about their design, they should be open to feedback, whether critical or complimentary, for this is how we grow through experience.

CW [s] USA –
To me, even a single input from another person toward your project already means some

kind of collaboration. Another person looking at it can have a fresh view of it that will help you better your work. This is collaboration in the barest minimum. At the other end of the spectrum, 'high-level' collaboration is great but it is very hard. I have had been involved in collaborative projects before with other people who have very distinctive directions in their design. And that was awfully hard, because a part of each of us was always battling, wanting our own way to come through. Like the interaction we have with a client, you have to communicate and compromise. To me, there is always a balance involved in compromising, too. Having the ability to work with other people is vital to being a designer. Collaboration is great, as our learning curve is never ending.

From this contentious starting point, the discussion shifted to soliciting opinions as to 'why' collaboration needs to be taken into account in design and considered an increasingly important attribute of creativity today.

RR [m] Australia –
Appropriateness: as good communicators, we should know the most appropriate form, output or delivery method to use. As designers, we are not restricted to the visual any longer; visual is only one of many outcomes. My point is that a communication designer should be more concerned about communicating appropriately and not just styling the visual. Collaboration is of paramount importance in the development and furtherance of our field.

KI [s] New Zealand –
I think that sometimes as designers we tend to put our 'blinkers' on and develop an inability to see beyond or through a particular concept or idea. If we are working solo at this time it can be very difficult to move past this mental and creative block. That's why I believe it is so important to promote collaboration within the design environment.

JCF [s] Mexico –
Regarding collaboration, I think it's a great resource, both in terms of productivity and creativity. The more minds you have access too, the richer your palette will be.

If it can be agreed that collaborative creativity is becoming increasingly instrumental factor in the design process, then how and in what ways can it be implemented and fostered in a creative scenario? The same student offers the following observation, by continuing:

But, I do think it's necessary to always have a leader in a creative group. In a discipline that leaves plenty of room for subjectivity I think it's important to always have someone to say 'go' or 'no go'. Not as an arbiter of 'bad design', but as someone that makes sure cohesion is always present and the end results are always congruent. If not, there's the risk of ending up with something that's a mishmash of semi-gestated ideas corrupted by compromise.

JJ [m] USA –
JCF, you raise an excellent point! Rarely, a collaborative team can succeed with pure equality of input and output. I agree with you that there needs to be some hierarchical structure, involving a project manager or similar. The leader could be heavy-handed *or* you could have weak leadership where there is no cohesion. Trying to manage creative people can be like herding cats! In my opinion, I like to think of the collaboration leader as needing to be a strong, visionary and articulate facilitator.

CT [s] New Zealand –
> There are many different 'ingredients' that contribute towards a collaboration being successful. I feel that one ingredient of a successful collaboration is selflessness. Members of a collaborative have to be prepared to accept that another person's idea may be better, or willing to combine their idea with that of another person to create something greater. You need to be willing to set aside your 'baby' and let someone else take over.
>
> Also, I think that for a successful collaboration you need to have a sense of where you are going and what your end goal is. If everyone in your group has the same goal then, yes, collaboration is an important factor as there is nothing better than a team effort. However in saying that, you have to have a rough idea of what you want to do, otherwise your end product will have no direction whatsoever and will just be bits and pieces of everyone else's work and ideas.

2. Directions and the definition of collective versus collaborative approaches

In order to fully appreciate the last point in the preceding post, it is important for the reader to recognize the associated studio practice being undertaken concurrently with this debate. The nature of Creative Waves's *03>04>05* brief was conceived so as to be 'unpacked' in progressive stages; adhering to Omnium's five-step process and incorporating a structure which supported the transition between phases of individualised production to a mode of team-based, shared activity. This brief expressly did not allow the students to know where they were going. This rationale is supported in part by this passage from *Process; a Tomato Project* (1996):

> It's about moving, seeking out, involving, becoming, not a journey along a line to a fixed point when it will all happen, when it will all be clear, but a journey within a circle that explores and maps the possibilities that arise along the way… from the centre to the perimeter and around, and back to where we came from, and then out again – finding, bringing back, showing, finding.

Countering the previous comment about the need for direction (a straight path from problem to goal) and instead countenancing what might be gained by finding your way through the design process, the co-author (Bennett) raised the following distinction between collective and collaborative approaches:

> Having the same goal (brief) could just as likely lead to a straight forward manufacturing process with everyone just 'churning' out a predetermined outcome. There is a fine line to balance in collaborative work. This raises the question of what collaboration is and how you can segment it. One of the things I like to examine and discuss is the role or the 'collective' or the 'collaborative'. I feel there is a big difference.

A discussion about the merits and ways of differentiating between collective as opposed to collaborative approaches followed suit:

AM [s] USA –
> I have always viewed the word 'collective' to derive from collection, and specifically in this project, collective would be our group work as a whole. 'Collaborative' would describe the product of our group's collective work, but directed together toward a common goal.
>
> In this environment – being such a diverse and worldwide experience – collaboration is definitely valuable, and will become of increasing value as the project goes along. I think

that since we all come from such varied backgrounds, situations and locations, having only a partial idea of the theme has given our teams the opportunity to create some genuinely amazing work that I believe has the potential to become invaluable imagery toward our ultimate goal.

VK [s] Bulgaria –
In my opinion, 'collective' means a number of people doing something together. However this does not necessary assure completing a successful project, or working well as a group. The hard work is achieving effective results with sharing responsibilities, motivating each other, and being able to work out problems rather them spreading them. That is what I consider as collaborative process. Of course leaders are needed otherwise planed activities would never start. In my point of view, a good leader is not a person who knows everything but someone who finds the right people to assist him to achieve her goals.

NV [s] Australia –
From my experience, collaboration in the creative process seems to depend on the personalities within a team and also the strengths and weaknesses of those individuals. It helps to have a leader who is able to recognize these strengths and weaknesses. Anything that encourages creative individuals to get together is a good thing.

RT [s] Peru –
I think in the process of collaboration, what you add to the group work is your individuality; interconnected individualities. 'Collectivist' means that what used to be individual is now collective, just like this Creative Waves process.

ET [s] Turkey –
I cannot really come to a decision about whether collaborative work is good or bad; I think it really depends on who the collaborators are. When I'm working in my studio, I ask my peers for their ideas so that I can maybe improve or sharpen an idea with their help. But I notice that the people I ask tend to be the same each time – because I obviously value their opinions and trust their vision to come up with a good idea. Maybe this is my own 'bigotry'. I mean you never know who will have the wit to improve a design at a given moment, do you? I think this project therefore may be a good chance to overcome my own narrow-mindedness.

3. Socialisation and how designers communicate
In discussing visual creative practice, Frascara (1988) argues that over-emphasis of the visual or formal structure within an aesthetic context ignores the social aspects of the creative process; aspects concerning the efficiency of communication and, most importantly, social responsibility. The establishment of the Internet as a widely used communication and archiving tool *should* allow such socially creative interaction to take place. Social interaction in the creative process surely can now be advantaged by the Internet, enabling groups of people to work together in the management and the production of complex visual projects (Fisher 2000; Sulek 1994).

KB [s] Australia –
(In response to the preceding post…) I have this same problem! I know whose opinion I trust, and when they give advice I know that this will ultimately improve my concept. I trust them when they say they do or don't like my work. The Creative Waves project, on the other hand, has shifted this notion as you are almost blindly trusting someone else's opinion without knowing if they are on the same level as you are. Having said this, I love the fact that we are taking risks and experimenting with this project. It is a real eye opener to how

people communicate in a group situation and by the end we will know whether this kind of group collaboration works to our advantage as a designer.

AM [s] USA –

As our profession evolves, the complexity of many design and communication problems requires increasingly specialized expertise from many different areas. The task of designing an enterprise website for example, engages skills in business strategy, visual communications, branding, culture and software engineering. 'In complex collaborations, design is a robust social activity that demands new kind of relationships and organizational structures'.[3] Creative Waves is just such a form of community that enables the analysis and problem solving of tasks from many directions simultaneously.

DS [s] USA –

As someone wrote earlier: collaboration is important, especially as when you've been working on a piece, you become attached to it, and you need another pair of eyes to see what is missing or what you need to take out. It's funny, because I realize people tend to pay attention to different things: one person can be very critical about your typography, the kerning, leading and then another will be critical of the image that you choose, or the relation of text and image, etc. The more input you get from various people, the more your piece will get richer.

An important contributing factor that propagated the ongoing discussion taking place within the dedicated Omni-Debate regarding collaboration in the creative process was the contribution from some of the accompanying lectures that were released in CW. These 'essays' were presented by a number of respected special guests and covered a range of themes that related to the breadth of the project. Collaboration proved to be the focus of two of these papers: *Learning to Learn in a Virtual World* included in the compendium of collected essays by Ron Burnett and Andy Polaine's *Collaborative Design in a Small World*. Polaine addressed some of the points raised in previous postings (and in recognition of their relation to the students' creative production in response to the CW brief) by adding the following personal observations to the discussion thread:

I'd like to clarify that collaboration doesn't always mean everyone doing the same job or the same amount of work. There are plenty of projects that I have worked on (in particular at Antirom) that I couldn't exactly say what my or others' contributions were, just that I know they had an important effect.

Trust and respect are important, but so is honesty. As I mentioned in my lecture, I think politeness leads to mediocrity. There is a paradox here - allowing your work to be scrutinised and taking on board criticism (done with respect) actually increases your self-confidence in your work and can inspire you to be more daring creatively. It's just that it feels like it will crush you emotionally. That's why a playful environment is useful, because when you play mistakes don't matter because it's 'not serious.'

KI [s] New Zealand –

There seems to be this underlying fear of making 'mistakes', but its inevitable that when you begin to push boundaries, mistakes will be made. I guess this is where trust, respect and honesty come into play. You need to be able to *trust* in the fact that the people you are working with will give you *honest* feedback while still maintaining *respect* for what you are trying to do. In turn, you also need to be able to respect and take on board the comments that

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[3] Reference made to Loretta Staple in Steven Heller, *The Education of an E-Designer* (New York: Allworth Press, 2001).

have been offered.

As you say, a 'playful environment' assists this because if a mistake is made it doesn't feel so serious, there is less 'weight' bearing on getting 'it right' (whatever 'it' is) and more emphasis on experimentation and trying new things.

AP [sg] Australia –
I've observed that there is a distinct arc that the work in the Creative Waves galleries has been going through. At the start you see all the various individual styles, some better, some worse, and then later on you all 'infect' each other, as it were. Now this is an essential part of collaboration, but Gallery 3, for example, is far less coherent than the ones either side of it.[4]

I think there is a moment in the creative collaboration process when everything goes off the rails a bit. This is a very important process because it is only by allowing yourselves to go out there 'on a limb' and allow yourselves the right to make 'dud' work that you move beyond the clichés and standards and come up with something new. The challenge is to stick with it, work through it and come out the other side with something fresh and exciting.

KC [m] South Africa –
I have just read an interview with cellist Yo-Yo Ma that provides a distinct take on the collaboration process. When asked: 'When you mix cultures, there's a risk of creating socially worthy elevator music: how do you make sure it synthesizes into something interesting?' he replied 'you have to give yourself over to your collaborators and be willing to forget what you know'.

Conclusion - A Culture of Creative Collaboration
The preceding presentation of this cross-section of responses to what role collaboration plays in creative process offers a diverse range of opinions and myriad points of view. Taken together, they offer a rich synopsis – or perhaps the term 'snapshot' is more suitable in the context of the Creative Waves project and its emphasis upon photomedia and visual communication practices – of the qualities that collaborative creativity entails.

In summarising the rich potential that collaboration brings to creative practice, Andy Polaine offers an amusing analogy:

You can also think of the collaboration like any other relationship. You have the first rush of getting together and you care about everything and how you look. Then you start to blend into each other and, often, a panic sets in that you are losing your own sense of identity. Lot's of couples break up at this point, fearing and despising the compromise. Sometimes this is advisable. But often when you work through this process and come out the other side as two individuals with a greater sense of self, the whole greater than the sum of the parts, that the real magic happens. Though it's never easy, there is a greater self-confidence having gone through that process.

In the interest of balancing this data with that of a more quantitative character, a survey was conducted following the official conclusion of CW. The collected data was based on responses by 60 participants to an anonymous questionnaire structured around general observations to the

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[4] Collected galleries of student work from various stages of the project can be found in the archived CW website.

project, communication and interface features, and culture, identity and language issues.[5] The experience of CW is enriched by superimposing such diverse, different types of observations – those highly contingent, subjective musings that have formed the basis of this paper and the statistics extrapolated from survey responses – onto its extensive, multi- dimensional and ambitious virtual studio project. Earlier the question was posed about creative process and educational pedagogy in response to creating and learning in a culturally complex technologically linked global society. Overall, the resulting findings of this paper further reinforce and support the propositions of this research, that collaborative online creativity is essentially a social process involving information and communicative exchanges, in both visual and written forms.

At the outset of the project as the community of designers was just coming together, the analogy of a recipe was used to introduce the notion of collaborative online creativity. When baking a cake, for example it's important to add the right ingredients at the right time, otherwise the mixture can be spoilt. Developing this 'sense' is all part of the learning experience. In summing up the 'formula' – the instructions, steps, methods or procedures – that Creative Waves might demonstrate and put forward for collaborative online creativity, the final words will be left to one of the participants who brought the project to fruition:

> Take large amounts of raw imagination and creativity.
> Add a good dose of intelligence and maturity and combine well.
> Leave to stand somewhere inspirational until the mixture has formed into a solid foundation.
> Once set, add as many more complimentary mixtures as you wish and combine carefully.
> Immediately sprinkle with equal amounts of cooperation, tolerance and open mindedness.
> Seal the mixing bowl tightly and shake well. Warning. Mixture may become volatile.
> Leave to stand again (preferably in a bullet proof vault) until the mixture has solidified.
> Enjoy.[6]

Attachment
Fig.1 Charts illustrating selected findings from CW questionnaire (CW_graphs.jpg).

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[5] Refer to the charts included in the illustrated attachment to this paper; these extracted responses have been selected because of their relevance to the present discussion of collaboration.
[6] KI [s] New Zealand