

Designs of the Oppressed

Week 3 (27/10/2022 - 02/11/2022): Wicked designs

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Last year, I, together with a group of complicators, staged a play at an online conference, to explore the idea of wickedness in design. The play was named *Wicked Problems, Wicked Designs* (2021) after the famous musical *Wicked* (2003), a prequel to the events in the classic story of *The Wizard of Oz* (Baum, 1900). We were inspired to discuss design practices and the power of Oz as analog to the power of the contemporary innovative, complexity-bearer, entrepreneur design thinker. The paper shared with you describes the experience of performing a theatre play as a design intervention at a conference and explores two main proposals:

The first is to challenge the design concept of wicked problems – problems that are too complex and deemed impossible to fix, but that can be tamed and solved with proper design methods. The concept of Wicked problems requires no introduction to this audience as it is a widely adopted and accepted terminology in design research. *wicked* refers to the malignant, vicious, tricky, or aggressive properties that complex problems may possess – and thus must be tamed through design.

The second is to present the method which we chose to use in order to explore the concept of wicked and wickedness in design, which was a Forum Theatre, which is one of the many methods that Brazilian playwright Augusto Boal proposes in his book *Theatre of the Oppressed*.

This session was held online as part of the Attending to Futures conference organised by the Köln International School of Design. Our play explores the struggle for period dignity in Brazil as a wicked problem, which is to be solved through design methodology by a foreign design agency in collaboration with a local designer.

We choose to use the musical *Wicked* as a popular culture reference as Wickedness has historically been a way of describing and imagining the historical position of women in society, and thinking the witch as an archetype of feminist resistance – women were burned and persecuted for such traits.

Different from the male wizard, who evokes an image of divination, the one who knows all, omnipresent, and all-powerful, but which, in *The Wizard of Oz*, is fake magic – here represented by a saviour/hero design figure. Through those references, we explored the theme of real versus fake magic, and wickedness as a dispute for power.

The format of Forum Theatre is similar to that of a conventional play, but it works as a political tool or stage to test and rehearse social emancipation, centering the oppressed as the protagonist of their own lived experiences. These form the starting point for debate and critical reflection of a concrete reality. It's a forum to explore actions and responses to oppressive situations in more depth and with the body.

The audience (which Boal refers to spect-actors as opposed to spectators) are encouraged to intervene and through these interactions, reflect on the oppressions presented in the play.

As the play was online this happened mainly through the platform chat. Which was also an interesting point as there were no guidelines for a completely remote Forum Theatre, so this required us to really embrace the features of all digital tools we were using, including the use of filters and digital backgrounds for costume, props and set.

Our provocation for the discussion are:

1. First, that the very concept and process of taming wicked problems flattens and depoliticizes the design discourse around social problems. There is a tendency to ignore the reproduction of anthropocentric, capitalist, colonialist, sexist, and racist tropes. Taming wickedness is a way of reinforcing normativity and reproducing the systems that created these so-called wicked problems in the first place.
2. We bring Forum Theatre as a fundamentally wicked practice as it manifests oppressive relations. And through it we attempted at reframing wickedness as relational quality. This way, wickedness is reclaimed and affirmed positively.
3. Transdisciplinary and transgressive qualities of wickedness carry the potential for other kinds of design thinking based on decolonial, feminist thought to be practiced in design methodology, highlighting the political nature of design work
4. How do we address fakeness in design / systems that allow for fake news to be spread/ [flintstoning](#), [wizard of oz mvp](#) as design methods
5. Thinking ways of using transdisciplinary methods from performance arts as a way to expanding discourse to enacting and embodiment practices as well as a different way of disseminating design knowledge

