

OSP's Collaboration Agreement

In this text, we propose a specific way of working together. We also try to explain some of the backgrounds of this specific way, as well as sketch out the practical implications.

Open Source Publishing (OSP)

Who are we, and where do we come from?

OSP is a heterogeneous group of practitioners making graphic design using only free and open source software – pieces of software that invite their users to take part in their elaboration. It was founded in 2006 in the context of Brussels art organisation Constant. At that time, we were making posters for GNU/Linux install parties but using proprietary software and it started to feel odd. At the same time, Adobe was buying Macromedia, leading to its quasi-monopoly on the graphic design software market. We became increasingly interested in how tools convey ways of doing that shape our practices.

How tools and free software change practice

Part of working in any field is to know the tools available and to be able to appropriate and customise them. Even though the final output of graphic design and publishing processes might be printed matter, its creation process nowadays involves primarily digital tools. Software then deserve to be scrutinised. In Graphic Design and Publishing, one software company has a monopoly. This means that practitioners that might work in hugely varied circumstances with widely varying aims and interests, all have to contend themselves with the same hammer. Software is necessarily full of conventions, often based on and reinforcing pre-existing labor organisations. In the mainstream commercial software (Adobe), it is no surprise that one finds inscribed a mainstream working practice. This makes for an impoverished visual culture. Commercial software tends to hide its digital materiality behind slick interfaces, giving the false impression that software is "just" a vehicle, a transparent means for connecting creative ideas to the final output. The culture of Free and Libre software inverts the situation by putting the inner workings of digital tools, their source code, at the center of its practice. To coordinate the development of Free Software projects, it has seen the development of a series of social and intellectual tools and practices that are inspiring in their breadth. Our practice has been shaped by the encounter with the tools and the culture of Free Software.

Definition of the research field

- we decide together with you the outcome we want to reach. Aiming for a common goal, but not a specific object "Audit"
- we do so with a timeframe and a budget frame in mind
- practice redefines the outcomes
- valorize the trip, and not only the destination
- replace 'deadline' by 'milestone', and 'estimate' by 'roadmap' is already a good start
- we agree on when to stop
- we gradually learn how our ideas about design can drive the instant need to meet deadlines

A commission is not just a job. Our way of working is strongly lead by a process of research, a trip which is more enriching to us —and we hope to you as well— than only the final outcome (appropriating new tools, new workflows...).

As a field of creation, graphic design is inherently concerned with research, and a studio that wouldn't claim for it would be surprising. We do also strongly embrace the research aspect, but consider research on a larger scope. True research is about taking risks, exploring new territories, questioning our confidence and accepting to step out our comfort zone.

Too often, requirements and specifications are preliminary to the job. Requirements include media output definition and technologies; or in other words "means". Sometimes, the scope of those means is limited by our imagination or previous experiences. Some other times, we fantasize about the perfect system that would fit them all without managing to grasp it.

The first case tends to prevent us from engaging in a rich collaboration, where "means" are limiting the scope of imagination, as what we produce and how are so closely intertwined. The second case tends to lead to vague ideas, unrealistic amount of work and in the end frustration when it comes to something that is only half-baked.

It is often hard to define a specific goal from the beginning, this is why part of the budget/calendar is dedicated to define altogether what this "something" is, building a shared vocabulary and a common understanding of what the project is and define its scope. Concretely it means that part of the budget and calendar is dedicated to explore new territories without any guarantee of direct outcome at this stage of the project. After this first round of work, OSP and you decide whether to continue together or not. If the project is still on, OSP and you decide, based on the first round of research, on a specific outcome, which could even plan possible post-project developments.

How do we work together

Free and open source software culture also challenges traditional education paradigms because knowledge is exchanged outside institutional borders, and participants move between roles easily (teacher, student, developer, user).

The "working team"

Following the motto "never alone", for each project, a team of two to four persons is set up according to one's interests and agendas.

The "conscience"

Represented by one or two people, the conscience is the middle ground between you and the rest of the team. Being the relay does not mean being responsible for the rest of the team. The conscience is often the person through whom the project came in, or is chosen by affinities with the project, or simply for internal logistics.

The "external conscience"

We try to set up the status of an "external conscience", another member of OSP who is not part of the working team. S/he has the role of forester. This external conscience will have the role of an external eye/advisor, helping with tough decisions, general management, planning or logistics of the research project.

Not just a client but a "collaborator"

OSP is not imposing any choices, nor you are imposing any choices; we work and decide together. This does not mean everyone is paid the same amount, even between different OSP's, daily fees can vary according to the different tasks inside one project.

Tools

Free Software does not explain why these various changes have occurred, but rather how individuals and groups are responding: by creating new things, new practices, and new forms of life. It is these practices and forms of life –not the software itself– that are most significant, and they have in turn served as templates that others can use and transform: practices of sharing source code, conceptualizing openness, writing copyright (and copyleft) licenses, coordinating collaboration, and proselytizing for all of the above.

– Chris Kelty, *Two Bits: The Cultural Significance of Free Software*

We inherit a set of thoughts and habits from the tools we chose to use. Source sharing and publishing are values we hold strong.

This is a model that we borrowed from the free software culture, based on how rich, diverse and collaborative it has become.

During a project, the working team works together using a versioning system which houses all digital files for the one project. This repository is accessible directly on OSP's website for the collaborator, and also to the outside public. Not only does this enable us to publish sources, but it also keeps track of how the project has progressed over time and who has contributed to it.

Intellectual property

The representational freedom of artists, part of which is the freedom to depict and build or comment on existing culture, to continue the conversation of culture, is the freedom of art.2

– Rob Myers, Open Source Art Again, 2006

Free and Open Source License are a 'hack' on the traditional copyright system. Because the copyright owner determines who has permission to use the material, the copyright owner can also decide if and how to open it up. To be able to license the designs under a Free and Open Source license, OSP retains the copyright to their designs.

In the joint creation of the design we will be using all kinds of visual and textual materials provided by you or by your partners. In the spirit of OSP, we urge you to use your intellectual property to open up this material under the same copyleft licenses OSP uses, and to convince your partners to do so as well.

The goal of these licenses is that the whole of the project files, both its process and its final result, become available for the community to build upon. This does not mean that strangers will be able to change directly the design we make for you. You and OSP remain responsible for the design we make together. Rather, it enables others to take elements of our work and use it as inspiration for theirs.

We are well aware that it is not always possible to use a license that enables re-use in a modified form. This could be the case, for example, with the logos of supporting organisations. In that case we require at least the right to redistribute these images; in this way the selection of files that makes up a project can still be shared as a whole, even if the usage requirements of the discrete elements differ.

Sharing Sources

Free software challenges traditional economical paradigms because professionals and amateurs are part of the same ecosystem, and instead of creating scarcity, embrace the possibility that one's work can be copied.

The licenses OSP uses on its production are copyleft. It means that anyone is free to reuse, modify and redistribute our materials, even for commercial purposes. That new flavour of the material has to be, however, redistributed under the same license: the ecology of sharing is therefore stimulated and preserved. It doesn't mean we give up our authorship, but that we invite others to get influenced by others and to acknowledge this.

It may sound unusual —even scary— in a society that overvalues the outcome over the process. We don't mind sharing source as we consider the value of our work to be the creative path that leads to an outcome (*Poiesis*), and not just the outcome itself (*Aesthesis*). In other words, we like to think of our work in terms of practice and not production.

Furthermore we think of design as a space for dialogue and tension between cultures. We see all the parts in the process of producing design to be parts of culture, from the tools to the recipes and the final object. And therefore should be free to use by all.

Some edge cases might prevent us from publishing right away the sources though. In journalism for instance, secrecy is not only an economical issue but also a requirement: one might need to strategically avoid immediate publishing or even literally protect the sources. The working team and the collaborator agree at the beginning of the project when and what sources are to be published.

The legal structure of our collaboration

Currently, OSP is an informal gathering of individuals. OSP is working on setting up a non-profit association for its pedagogical and self-initiated activities and a cooperative for its commissioned works. The status of a cooperative reflects better than a regular enterprise the fact that OSP wants to keep a research activity in its commissioned works. It also reflects the facts that OSP is not seeking for personal enrichment but that OSP wants to make a framework that is sustainable.

Until we have a cooperative set up, we are working through SmartBE asbl. At the start of the project, we set up an order form and decide together with you of a payment date. This allows us to get paid while working on the project and for you to pay only at the end of the project.

A job can't start without a signed collaboration agreement nor an order form which gives assurance for you that we have to deliver "something" and for us that our work will be compensated.

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