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Design Practice in Innovation Context through the Lens of the Jester Model

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Published in:
She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation

DOI (link to publication from Publisher):
10.1016/j.sheji.2018.05.003

Publication date:
2018

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (APA):
Minder, B., & Lassen, A. H. (2018). The Designer as Jester: Design Practice in Innovation Context through the Lens of the Jester Model. *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation*, *4*(2), 171–185. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sheji.2018.05.003

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The Designer as Jester: Design Practice in Innovation Contexts through the Lens of the Jester Model

Abstract Designers are trained to think in new terms and along divergent lines – they explore creative ways to challenge common assumptions. Collaboration with designers offers organizations the opportunity to adopt more flexible, creative ways of innovating. This article looks at the role of the designer as analog to that of a jester, who has a unique status relative to his (or her) superior, including the ability to playfully encourage self-reflection and propose novel directions for change. We present findings from three case studies to support an analysis of the designer's role in innovation processes as that of a jester. The designer as jester model includes creatively contending with resistance to new methods from established cultures inside organizations. Designers' ability to deftly demonstrate their innovation competence as they shift between tasks garners them the privileged position of the jester, including an ability to speak freely and question prevailing innovation assumptions in ways that lead to creative change.

Keywords
Self-reflection
Learning
Creativity
Collaboration
Change

Received January 20, 2018
Accepted May 9, 2018

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http://www.journals.elsevier.com/she-ji-the-journal-of-design-economics-and-innovation
https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sheji.2018.05.003

Introduction

Organizations know they have much to learn if they want their innovation goals to be successful, especially in today's world of shifting regulations, markets, and supplier demands.[1] Such renewed flexibility involves critical self-reflection and a special kind of (un)learning – the acceptance that not only have old models become useless,[2] implementing new models (that can support complexity) requires new skills, competencies, and the adoption of new perspectives. Collaborating with designers can help organizations contend with these challenges.[3] Over the last decade, a growing number of researchers have begun to investigate the nature of design collaboration, especially how design projects can operate as catalysts enabling organizations to envisage and adopt more open innovation approaches.[4] Collaboration with designers is different from adopting a design approach via a set of methods or tools created for non-designers, because collaborating means direct interaction between designers and non-designers in practice.[5] Design collaborations generate a more creative approach to innovation via interaction with creative professionals, who model an ability to take different perspectives on board, for example.[6]

In this article, we focus on the role design practitioners play in shaping innovation processes rather than how designers impact process outcomes. Designers are trained to think in new terms and along divergent lines,[7] and this enables them to challenge assumptions about the world in creative and user-centered ways.[8] We take the position here that user-centeredness applies not only to a design outcomes, but also to design processes such as iterative cycles of rough prototyping or the overall championing of an innovation project.[9] In collaboration, designers demonstrate how to use specialized approaches in ways that can accelerate organizations' innovation processes and, ultimately, enhance their competitiveness.

Consider the creativity and innovation workshops that are common components of designer/non-designer collaborative innovation processes.[10] These workshops usually take place during the early stages of the innovation process to generate ideas, assess them, and develop (product) concepts.[11] At this stage, collaboration is not without its challenges,[12] as businesses tend to value stability and control, while designers focus on real-world human experiences and open exploration.[13] There is evidence that design collaboration entails a degree of ambiguity for some participants, with many projects failing to meet expectations.[14] Also, it can be difficult to operate within contesting systems, as one system usually aims at dominating the other.[15] In fact, it remains unclear how designers' creative approaches influence collaborative innovation processes that involve non-designers. Scholarly studies have, to a large extent, separated the discussion about the challenges associated with collaboration from discussion of designers' reframing practice, for example, thereby limiting insights on any correlation between the two.[16]

This issue, however, is nothing new – part of the critical discussion around extended design practice includes an awareness that complications can arise when opposing logics collide.[17] By way of explanation, some have pointed to designers' lack of economic knowledge[18] or simply defended a design practice that preserves distinct values, beliefs, and principles.[19] From a public sector perspective, a report issued by British innovation foundation Nesta says that although designers are skilled at effecting change processes, they have weak implementation skills.[20] And that at times, designers place immense importance upon skills acquisition by others, but do not see that they must also learn new things to collaborate effectively.[21]

In this article, we will attempt to align the practice of the designer with

1 For example, see Keith Pavitt, "Innovation Processes," in *The Oxford Handbook of Innovation*, ed. Jan Fagerberg, David C. Mowery, and Richard R. Nelson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 87–114.

2 For example, see Harry Boer and John Bessant, "Organisering af Continuous Innovation" [in Danish], in *Fremtidens Produktion i Denmark*, ed. J. Johansen and J. O. Riis (Copenhagen: Dansk Industri, 2004), 77–99.

3 Colin Burns, Hilary Cottam, Chris Vanstone, and Jennie Winhall, *Red Paper 02: Transformation Design* (London: Design Council, 2006), available at https://www.designcouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/asset/document/red-paper-transformation-design.pdf.

4 Compare, for example, Sabine Junginger, "Product Development as a Vehicle for Organizational Change," *Design Issues* 24, no. 1 (2008): 27–35, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1162/desi.2008.24.1.26; Cara Wrigley, "Design Innovation Catalysts: Education and Impact," *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation* 2, no. 2 (2016): 148–65, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sheji.2016.10.001; Andy Dong, "Design × Innovation: Perspective or Evidence-Based Practices," *International Journal of Design Creativity and Innovation* 3, no. 3-4 (2015): 148–63.

5 One instance of a book created for non-designers is Francois Jégou et al., *Design Driven Toolbox: A Handbook to Support Companies in Radical Product Innovation* (Milano: Clac, 2006). Another tool is the card deck, for example see IDEO, *IDEO Method Cards: 51 Ways to Inspire Design* (Salt Lake City: William Stout, 2003).

6 Compare, for example, Ulla Johansson Sköldberg and Jill Woodilla, "Mind the Gap! Strategies for Bridging Artists and Organizations in Artistic Interventions," in *Design Management in an Era of Disruption, Proceedings of 19th DMI: Academic Design Management Conference*, ed. Erik Bohemia, Alison Rieple, Jeanne Liedtka, and Rachel Cooper (Boston, MA: Design Management Institute, 2014), 538–61.

that of a court jester – an agent of change and an eye-opener who, through play, expands the field of innovation. We argue here that designers' jester-like strategies – which we introduce here – lie at the heart of misunderstandings and barriers that arise during collaboration, because these strategies challenge existing hierarchies and pre-established innovation approaches. We ask, "What can the lens of the jester model teach us about the designer's role in organizational innovation processes?" More specifically

- When designers play the role of jester – eye-opener, change agent – what kinds of challenges does that create? What kinds of misunderstandings arise?
- To what degree are these barriers related to existing hierarchies and established innovation approaches?

When people think of a court jester, initially what may come to mind is the frivolity of a perennial merry-maker or a fool. Historically, however, British Court jesters were described as kind of eye openers: "… he contrives to hold a mirror to the king in which his patron can see a magnified image of his attitudes and decisions, and recognize for himself the folly in them."[22] The jester's job consists largely of delivering the (sometimes painful) truth to those in power,[23] and his or her playful mirroring of a contentious, problematic, or sensational situations subtly confronts and ridicules those involved in ways that would not be possible through direct speech. In the same way, the designer operates as an agent of truth who encourages self-reflection and a rethinking of prevailing perspectives. Our research explores the challenges related to this role across a range of organizational contexts that vary in size, amount of innovation experience, and hierarchical structure – each one at a different stage of their innovation process.

We will first provide a theoretical understanding of the concept of the designer as jester in the context of innovation collaboration. Next, we offer a brief description of our methodology, after which we present and analyze the empirical data we gathered regarding three cases, on the basis of which we develop four specific propositions for the designer as jester across different contexts.

Theoretical Background

Collaborating with Designers

Research examining the role of the designer during innovation projects typically focuses on the creativity they inspire and impart, for example through a more flexible and open approach.[24] Some have focused on the variety of roles designers can adopt and methods they might employ,[25] often through case studies involving collaborations with users and a variety of innovation stakeholders.[26]

There are three key aspects to design practice in this context that have received attention in the literature. The first is the introduction of material artifacts such as images, 3D objects, and mock-ups to foster generation of new knowledge across disciplinary boundaries.[27] Artifacts can play a major role in sense-making, because they facilitate the generation and negotiation of different meanings. This is in line with Klaus Krippendorff[28] and Roberto Verganti's notion of design as a kind of meaning making,[29] which takes place when a designer uses material artifacts to reinterpret or reimagine products and services for new contexts, users, or markets.

Secondly, research on design in innovation often focuses on the practice of reframing.[30] Creating a different approach to a problem or innovation space through reframing is a key creative step that enables innovation teams to formulate different perspectives on a design task.[31] During innovation projects, reframing creates a new landscape out of existing reference points, and redefines the problem

7 Alexander Styhre and Michael Eriksson, "Bring in the Arts and Get the Creativity for Free: A Study of the Artists in Residence Project," *Creativity and Innovation Management* 17, no. 1 (2008): 47–57, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8691.2007.00458.x.

8 Richard Buchanan, "Wicked Problems in Design Thinking," *Design Issues* 8, no. 2 (1992): 5–21, DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/1511637.

9 Tim Brown, "Design Thinking," *Harvard Business Review* 86, no. 6, (2008): 1–9.

10 Vareska van de Vrande, Jeroen P.J. de Jong, Wim Vanhaverbeke, and Maurice de Rochemont, "Open Innovation in SMEs: Trends, Motives and Management Challenges," *Technovation* 29, no. 6-7 (2009): 423–37, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.technovation.2008.10.001.

11 Stefan Hüsig and Stefan Kohn, "Factors Influencing the Front End of the Innovation Process: A Comprehensive Review of Selected Empirical NPD and Explorative FFE Studies," in *Proceedings of 10th International Product Development Management Conference* (Brussels, Belgium: Eiasm, 2003), 9–29, available at https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/0d67/33614c10acf14a3530b6432e2838bb70e5f4.pdf.

12 For example, see Cordy Swope, "The Way We Innovate Needs Innovation," in *The Highways and Byways to Radical Innovation: Design Perspectives*, ed. Paul R. Christensen and Sabine Junginger (Kolding: Design School Kolding, 2014), 97–113; and Judith Gloppen, "Perspectives on Design Leadership and Design Thinking and How They Relate to European Service Industries," *Design Management Journal* 4, no. 1 (2009): 33–47, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1942-5074.2009.00005.x.

13 Jeanne Liedtka, "Business Strategy and Design: Can This Marriage Be Saved?" *Design Management Review* 21, no. 2 (2010): 6–11, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1948-7169.2010.00059.x.

14 Ibid.

space, which opens up new avenues towards more holistic, innovative solutions. This is often achieved either by interconnecting old situational elements with new ones, or linking facts, experiences, or contexts together in new ways.[32]

The third aspect of design that often receives attention in this context is critical design practice. *Critical design*, a term coined by Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby,[33] leads to speculative design proposals that encourage people to revise their basic assumptions about everyday consumer objects, for example. From the critical design perspective, speculative design proposals can make people think, raise awareness, expose assumptions, provoke action, spark debate, and even entertain (implicitly critical design efforts often involve the aesthetic aspect).[34] They achieve this, for example, by highlighting social characteristics instead of technological ones.[35]

These three areas of design practice share an emphasis on redirecting the focus in a problem situation. They also share a focus on users, and how they utilize, change, or dismiss objects and services in their everyday lives. Despite these similarities, these approaches differ considerably in terms of their scope and their intended goals. Table 1 provides an overview of the scope and goals targeted by each practice.

Table 1. Overview of scope and goals of three key aspects to design practice in the context of innovation.

Creative Design Practice	Scope	Goals
Reinterpretation via material artifact	Products and services	• Identify novel uses for products and services • Target new contexts, users, and markets • Create new meanings
Reframing	Innovation process	• Bring a different, wider, or more holistic picture into view • Create space for novel solutions
Critical design	Innovation process	• Prompt the formation of new attitudes and perspectives on a situation • Foreground neglected elements of a design or design space

The Designer as Jester Model

In history and in fiction, the jester enjoys an enormous privilege – free speech. Using wit, creativity, and a degree of audaciousness, the jester mockingly delivers frank observations and highlights the folly of those in power. As a member of the court, with no other privileges or powers than the one to freely speak, the jester need not be afraid of consequences. You may recall the well-known example of the court jester, called the Fool, in Shakespeare's *King Lear* – he alone advises the monarch and provides him with honest insights.[36] According to some, the spirit of this historical and fictional character – a loyal voice of truth and change – can also be found in the context of present day organizations.[37] To us, designers play the role of the jesters – the agents of change who apply their skills to creatively and playfully diagnose problems, question the status quo, and propose new directions for change.

Privilege

Historically, jesters occupied a position of privilege within the English Court, for instance.[38] They answered exclusively to the king and were therefore far *freer* than other court members to speak their minds and question the status quo. The jester

15 Compare for example, Sköldberg and Woodilla, "Mind the Gap!."

16 Compare for example Geoff Mulgan, "Design in Public and Social Innovation: What Works and What Could Work Better," Nesta, last modified January, 2014, available at https://www.nesta.org.uk/sites/default/files/design_in_public_and_social_innovation.pdf.

17 Robert Young, "A Perspective on Design Theory and Service Design Practice," in *Designing for Services—Multidisciplinary Perspectives: Proceedings from the Exploratory Project on Designing for Services in Science and Technology-Based Enterprises*, ed. Lucy Kimbell and Victor P. Seidel (Oxford, UK: University of Oxford, 2008), 43–45.

18 Compare Mulgan, "Design in Public and Social Innovation," 5.

19 For example, see Nigel Cross, "Designerly Ways of Knowing: Design Discipline versus Design Science," *Design Issues* 17, no. 3 (2001): 49–55, https://doi.org/10.1162/074793601750357196; Lucy Kimbell, "Rethinking Design Thinking: Part I," *Design and Culture* 3, no. 3 (2011): 285–306, DOI: https://doi.org/10.2752/175470811X13071166525216; Lucy Kimbell, "Rethinking Design Thinking: Part II," *Design and Culture* 4, no. 2 (2012): 129–48, DOI: https://doi.org/10.2752/175470812X13281948975413; Jon Kolko, "Sensemaking and Framing: A Theoretical Reflection on Perspective in Design Synthesis," in *Design and Complexity, Proceedings of the Design Research Society International Conference*, ed. David Durling et al. (Montréal, Canada: DRS, 2010), 614–23; and Mulgan, "Design in Public and Social Innovation."

20 Mulgan, "Design in Public and Social Innovation," 4.

21 Ibid., 5.

22 John Southworth, *Fools and Jesters at the English Court* (Stroud: The History Press, 2011), 8.

23 Beatrice K. Otto, "In Risu Veritas, or Many a True Word Spoken in Jest," in *Fools Are Everywhere: The Court Jester around the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 98.

was granted unfettered access not only to the king's royal residence, but to the king himself.[39] The relationship between a jester and his (or her) patron was an ambiguous one, as "it was only in relation to his master that he was able to gain identity."[40] One quality that made jesters so indispensable was their *frankness* – a direct, honest, and therefore palatable approach to telling the (sometimes painful) truth. Often, this created a valuable link to the outside world, for example by demonstrating the universality of a particular flaw.[41] Jesters were also *provocative* – they could challenge prevailing wisdom without posing a threat to authority. One way to do this was by asking pertinent yet difficult questions, but offering no answers.[42]

The Strategies of the Corporate Jester

Tom Mcmaster,[43] Cliff Oswick,[44] and their respective colleagues outline four key strategies jesters inside organizations use to question the status quo and advocate for change. As officially recognized fools, jesters are able to

- induce change using creativity and humor,
- continuously reframe existing problem spaces,
- open up horizons for new ideas, and
- create entente through their likeability and the good company they provide.

Inducing change through creativity and humor is more than just pointing out that other possibilities exist – it means operating as the King's corrective. Jesters used their wit to make the monarch behave differently – in some instances, more humanely.[45] Humor creates distance from an existing situation and helps people cope with new or difficult information thanks to the cohesion it creates within a group. As scholars Tom McMaster, David Wastell, and Helle Zinner Henriksen explain, "[L]aughing together forms an immediate social bond."[46] Balancing constructive criticism with humor, and basing opinions on accurate observations and theory – rather than expressing them authoritatively – are both important aspects of this jester strategy.[47]

Continuous reframing is an essential part of the jester's approach to presenting harsh truths. The jester "presents an alternative reality, a different way of framing the prevailing situation."[48] Principle jester skills include mastery of a variety of storytelling genres, and including references to contemporary individuals in ways that juxtapose different realities.[49] Reframing is thus the artful composition of meaningful references able to deconstruct dominating perspectives.

Opening up new horizons refers to the Jester's ability to break down the barriers of conventional attitudes. They specifically use the power of unique or eccentric accessories and props to create an alternative or novel worldview and use them to suggest ground-breaking changes to conventional identities and meanings.[50]

Being likable and good company, finally, are essential to securing the privileged position of a jester. A jester "would just have to catch the monarch's eye and make him laugh to be assured of a job for life."[51] Making people laugh is often a skill associated with those considered good company, and the refreshing entertainment they provide eases tension.[52]

When jester-like qualities and strategies are applied within the context of innovation projects, specifically as part of the three key design practices associated with the early stages of innovation we described earlier, it is easy to see how design activity can become eye-opening, and how the designer as jester can become an agent of change. Figure 1 presents an overview of the possible ways that key design activities in innovation contexts can be supported by the qualities, strategies, and practices of the designer as jester.

There is a considerable range of possible relationships between the two dimensions. However, all the design principles are linked to the notion of the jester as

24 Burns et al., "Transformation Design."

25 For example, see Ezio Manzini, *Design, When Everybody Designs* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015); Ezio Manzini and Eduardo Staszowski, eds., *Public and Collaborative: Exploring the Intersection of Design, Social Innovation and Public Policy* (New York: DESIS Network, 2013); and Jacob Buur and Ben Matthews, "Participatory Innovation: A Research Agenda," International Journal of Innovation Management 12, no. 3 (2008): 255–73, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1142/S1363919608001996.

26 Jesper Simonsen and Toni Robertson, eds., *Routledge International Handbook of Participatory Design* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Pontus Engelbrektsson, "Effects of Product Experience and Product Representations in Focus Group Interviews," *Journal of Engineering Design* 13, no. 3 (2002): 215–21, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/09544820110108917.

27 Boris Ewenstein and Jennifer Whyte, "Knowledge Practices in Design: The Role of Visual Representations as 'Epistemic Objects,'" *Organization Studies* 30, no. 1 (2009): 7–30, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840608083014.

28 Klaus Krippendorff, *The Semantic Turn: A New Foundation for Design* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2006).

29 Roberto Verganti, "Design as Brokering of Languages: Innovation Strategies in Italian Firms," *Design Management Journal* 14, no. 3 (2003), 34–42, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1948-7169.2003.tb00050.x.

30 For example, see Bec Paton and Kees Dorst, "Briefing and Reframing: A Situated Practice," *Design Studies* 32, no. 6 (2011): 573–87, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.destud.2011.07.002; Bryan R. Lawson, *How Designers Think: The Design Process Demystified* (Oxford: Architectural Press, 2006); Nigel Cross, "Designerly Ways of Knowing"; Kolko, "Sensemaking and Framing"; Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

31 Kees Dorst, *Frame Innovation: Create New Thinking by Design* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015); Paton and Dorst, "Briefing and Reframing."

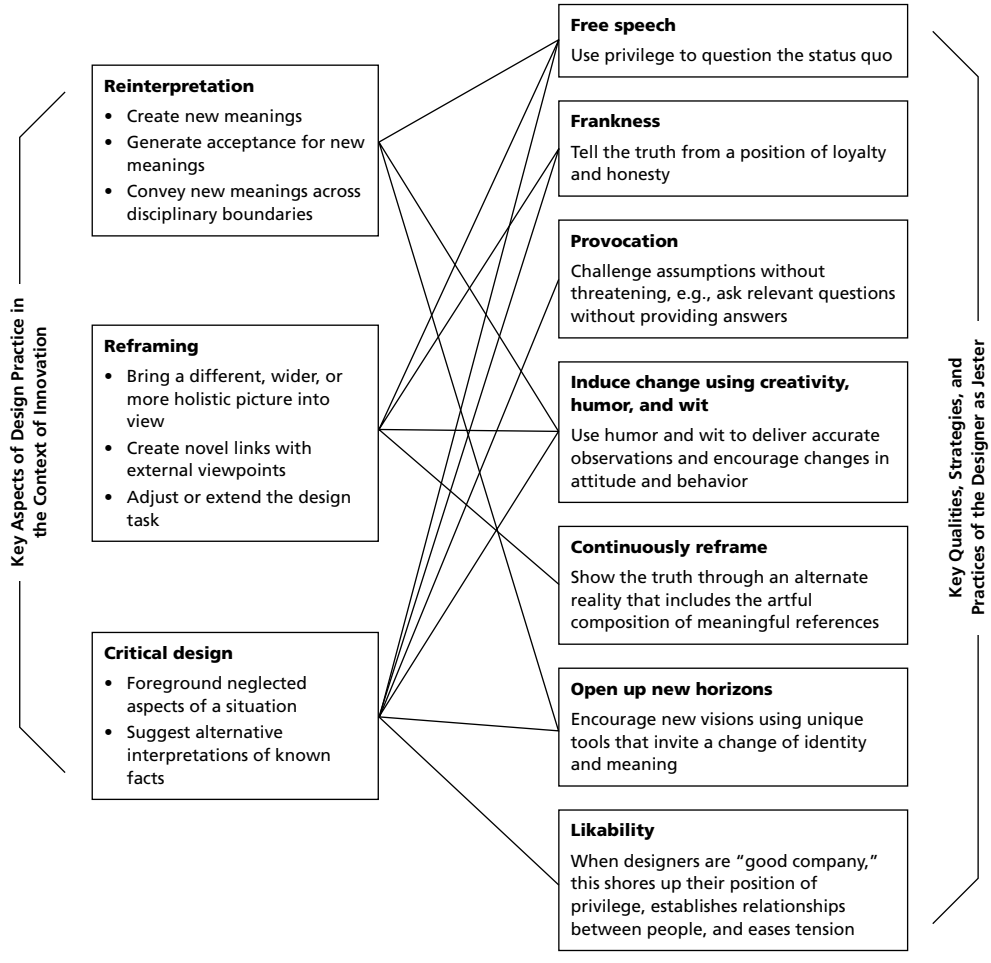

Figure 1 Three key dimensions of design in innovation contexts, and possible relationships to the qualities, strategies, and practices of the designer as jester. These relationships demonstrate ways designers can act as agents of change. Copyright © 2018 Bettina Minder and Astrid Heidemann Lassen.

privilege-holder, and the right to free speech. The table demonstrates the strong relationship between the unique role of the designer and the unique needs of innovation projects. It also underscores that design practice makes or creates change, rather than merely serving to enhance creativity. Reframing, for example, is typically associated with the early stages of innovation when creativity is needed to discern new ways forward, but it can also be seen as a strategy that aims to cast the (sometimes ugly) truth in a new light. This kind of reframing can invite, inspire, and encourage innovation stakeholders to envision new possibilities at any stage in the innovation process.

We know little about how these jester-like qualities and strategies in design practice influence the designers' role in innovation processes. For instance, what kind of behavior constitutes "good company?" How is humor and wit a necessary part of designers input in innovation processes? To date, not a single empirical study has explicitly analyzed the designer as jester-like change maker. Understanding the nature of this unique position – which extends design's role beyond its creative aspects – is even more important now, given that designers are increasingly being invited to join innovation projects taking place in the public and private sector. Hence our objective here: to explore how the jester model can increase our understanding of the role that designers play in innovation processes in a variety of organizational settings.

Research Design

This study aimed at exploring a phenomenon taking place in real-life contexts,

32 Verganti, "Design as Brokering of Languages," 34–42; Dorst, *Frame Innovation*.

33 Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, *Design Noir: The Secret Life of Electronic Objects* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2001).

34 Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, "Critical Design FAQ," *dunneandraby*, accessed May 8, 2018, http://www.dunneandraby.co.uk/content/bydandr/13/0.

35 Elizabeth B.-N. Sanders and Pieter Jan Stappers, "Co-creation and the New Landscapes of Design," *CoDesign: International Journal of CoCreation in Design and the Arts* 4, no. 1 (2008): 5–18, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/15710880701875068.

36 Robert Hornback, *The English Clown Tradition from the Middle Ages to Shakespeare* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2013).

37 Tom McMaster, David Wastell, and Helle Zinner Henriksen, *Fooling Around: The Corporate Jester as an Effective*

"when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not evident,"[53] which led to us opting for case-oriented research.[54] Our preliminary research results pointed to the fact that any issues that emerged would differ according to context. To explore these issues, we used problem-centered interviews with participants from three real-world cases. Problem-centered interviews focus on experiences, perceptions, and reflections related to a specific issue.[55] This approach allowed us to keep the interviews focused on the issues while maintaining an open dialog. We gathered our empirical data during twelve problem-centered interviews with workshop participants and designers. We chose participants from a range of departments (marketing, operations, management, and so on) and involved both staff members and users.

To locate these interviewees, we first needed to identify suitable cases to study. We took a small sample of innovation cases from a variety of sectors and from them isolated a rich set of selection criteria, which we then used to find the three design collaboration cases we present in Table 2.

These criteria were

- The innovation project must be organized as a process;
- The innovation process must be expected to result in entirely new products, services, or strategies;
- Designers from different domains should be involved in the innovation processes in different ways;
- Organizations conducting innovation projects should differ according to size, sector, and amount of innovation experience;
- Each project should be at a different stage of its innovation process;
- The success of the design collaboration should vary; and
- We would have privileged access to the designers and project partners.

The context of the three innovation cases largely differed, not only in terms of sectors but also in terms of innovation experience, organizational and regional contexts, and diversity of anticipated goals.

Case A saw designers inserted into the expert culture of a cultural institution. It involved five museums from larger and smaller cities in Switzerland. The cultural context particularly involved considering hierarchies between different museums (large and small) and between education, curation, and management, but it also involved an innovation culture, which mainly focused on exhibition projects, partly sub-contracted to external designers. Finally, a large portion of the participating museums where at least partly public institutions, which meant that they were required to report to government administration and new concepts or processes had to comply with official guidelines. The collaboration aimed at the generation of conversations between museum curators, management and marketing to arrive at innovation ideas and concepts.

Case B took place in a clinical context where chief physicians occupied the top tier of a steep hierarchy. However, increasing competition from other clinics generated a great need for novelty and innovation. Added to this was the fact that the clinic CEO strongly believed in an interdisciplinary approach, where everyone could contribute their expertise – an ambition that neatly coincided with a user-centered design approach. However, the designer had to accommodate a highly structured and complex workplace – including various schedules and different kinds of authority – when planning and conducting workshops. The case was located outside a small city in a region of eastern Switzerland dominated by small SMIs, agricultural interests, and farms. The collaboration aimed at building an open process to generate conversations between experts and stakeholders to approach particular service challenges associated with aging building infrastructures.

Change Agent for Technological Innovation (Boston: Springer, 2005).

38 Southworth, *Fools and Jesters at the English Court*.

39 Beatrice K. Otto, *Fools are Everywhere: The Court Jester Around the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

40 Southworth, *Fools and Jesters at the English Court*, 1.

41 Otto, *Fools Are Everywhere*, 120–22.

42 Ibid.

43 McMaster et al., *Fooling Around*, 134.

44 Cliff Oswick, Tom Keenoy, and David Grant, "Metaphor and Analogical Reasoning in Organization Theory: Beyond Orthodoxy," *The Academy of Management Review* 27, no. 2 (2002): 294–303, DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/4134356.

45 McMaster et al., *Fooling Around*, 140.

46 Ibid., 134.

47 McMaster et al., *Fooling Around*.

48 Ibid., 140.

49 Southworth, *Fools and Jesters at the English Court*, 7.

50 Oswick et al., "Metaphor and Analogical Reasoning."

51 Otto, *Fools are Everywhere*, 12–13.

52 Southworth, *Fools and Jesters at the English Court*.

53 Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003): 23.

54 Yin, *Case Study Research*.

55 Andreas Witzel, "Das Problemzentrierte Interview"

Table 2. An overview of our selected cases demonstrating how they meet the selection criteria.

Criteria	Case A	Case B	Case C
The context: the process	Museum: Open innovation process to generate conversations between museum curators, management, and marketing to arrive at innovation ideas and concepts	Health care/clinic: Open process to generate conversations between experts and stakeholders to approach particular services challenges	Technology start-up: Emphasize cross-functional teamwork and enhance learning culture during agile innovation processes needing to reconsider initial concepts
New product or service development	Challenges related to new technologies and decreased funding require novelty	Increasing competition from other clinics generates a great need for novelty	Enhance cross-functional teamwork to improve existing and develop novel technological modules
Designers' domain and role	Two services designers; a series of five innovation workshops (March to September 2010)	A product designer; one year innovation project collaboration; several workshops and meetings led by the designer (August 2013 to September 2014)	A product designer and a service designer; two innovation workshops (March 2014)
Innovation experience	Some sector-specific experience; innovation projects geared toward creating highly innovative exhibitions	Limited; strict hierarchical structures shaping innovation projects	Innovation being part of the start-up identity; well established agile innovation culture
Organization size	Five museums; staff sizes ranging from 20 to roughly 250 people	Roughly 200 employees	20 employees
Point of innovation process	Research phase and start of innovation development	Start of innovation development	Advanced stage of innovation
Privileged access	6 partners and 1 designer interviewed	2 partners, 1 patient, and 1 designer interviewed	2 partners and 1 designer interviewed
Collaboration success level	High; primarily positive feedback from designer and partners	Medium/conditionally successful; some positive and some negative feedback from both designer and partners	Low/ambiguous feedback; predominantly negative from the partner interviewed, mixed feedback from the designer

Case C involved collaboration with an IT-startup, which meant that innovation was part of their organizational identity. Agile management principles were well established in the innovation team. The designer was called upon in a situation where a fresh perspective was needed, as the concepts the team had developed did not deliver the desired success. Participants, even the external ones, where quite familiar with innovation approaches and the latest innovation terminology and had therefore a clear idea of appropriate innovation process steps. The partner for case C was located in central Switzerland, an area which includes start-up promotion programs and innovation parks. The aim was again to provide an open process to generate conversations between experts and stakeholders to gradually change standardized services.

Following Keith Pavitt's[56] description of partly overlapping innovation process phases, we focus on the initial stages of the innovation process, where ideas are generated and assessed and concepts are developed.

We recorded and subsequently transcribed the conversations that took place during the thirteen interviews. Then data was discussed with two designers (internal/external to the projects), before synthesizing the data across the separated cases.

We conducted an interpretative analysis of the data[57] to identify limitations of the suggested analog between the role of a designer in innovation processes and that of a jester as change agent.[58] We used a combination of within case and cross-case analyses[59] to compare single innovation processes within different innovation projects. This technique allows for "the identification of clusters of events that demonstrate similar patterns"[60] from which we could draw preliminary conclusions.

The criteria we used to assess the levels of success achieved during each collaboration were simple. We asked:

- Was the feedback from stakeholders and designers positive – did they express contentment with the outcomes? (yes/no)
- Was the feedback from all parties interviewed consistent? (yes/no)

We then classified the responses according to the amount and quality of any affirmative answers – those that were clearly positive or contained some critique. Out of the three projects, one we classified as successful, one as conditionally successful, and one less successful. This classification enabled us to better examine the influence of the designer as jester on the innovation process.

Findings

Table 3 presents selected statements made by respondents from the three cases reflecting key dimensions of the designer as jester. Notably, there appears to be a general consensus amongst the informants that the designers sought to inspire new visions and change in two ways: a) by distancing innovation teams from recognized truths; and b) by diagnosing problem spaces and supporting reframing efforts using empirical evidence.

The empirical data shows that there are differences in the type of collaboration and benefits offered by the designer as jester depending on the phase and aims of the collaboration. However, similar elements and characteristics of the designers' activity across all cases significantly influenced innovation processes.

[in German], in *Qualitative Forschung in der Psychologie: Grundfragen, Verfahrensweisen, Anwendungsfelder*, ed. Gerd Jüttemann (Weinheim: Beltz, 1985), 227–55.

56 Pavitt, "Innovation Processes."

57 Yin, *Case Study Research*.

58 Kathleen M. Eisenhardt, "Building Theories from Case Study Research," *The Academy of Management Review* 14, no. 4 (1989): 534, DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/258557.

59 Compare, see Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Source Book of New Methods*, 2nd ed. (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1994).

60 Eisenhardt, "Building Theories," 532.

Table 3. Overview of selected statements made by respondents from the three cases reflecting on the dimensions of the Jester.

	Privileged position	Frankness	Inducing change through creative activities and humor	Continuous reframing	Opening up space for new visions	Likability and good company
A	** *"I could sense this* gap *in that first meeting."* *"There were many terminology issues…. [I thought], 'This is not going to work out.'"* (Head of marketing 2)	*"This was the message …: 'Try it out. Just do it.'"* (Head of marketing 1) *"Naïveté is not always so bad, really….How often would people reject things, if it was not for naïveté? People learn something from it … and they know more the next time."* (Designer)	*"I was personally convinced that it was time to tackle [the innovation space]. But only after I had participated in the workshops did my employees realize that there might be a number of changes approaching us. And then I started to ask different questions."* (Museum director 2) *"For the first time, I realized how one can actually use [social media]."* (Museum director 2)	*"We got to know so many case examples from practice that we would be able to create our own concepts. The case examples specifically showed me a way of dealing with social media…."* (Museum director 2) *"The different languages were fascinating—you had the freaks that would bring up a new tool every time we met … and those who questioned everything all the time. I found it fascinating how they bound all these different languages together."* (Museums director 1)	*"[The workshop] created a free space where one could reflect on things one would not reflect upon otherwise during the day…. And free space for me means disconnecting from the daily grind, disconnecting from how things have been done previously, disconnecting from 'I know everything better, disconnecting from 'there is only one way.'"* (Museum director 1)	*"[excited voice] We even used social media as part of the workshop activities: we did a live stream [with an expert] from … I don't know where!"* (Head of marketing 1) ** *"Of course, the guided tour [staged by the designers] was amazing. But it also posed the danger that people might get* too *carried away….It runs the risk that the experience will overshadow everything else."* (Head of marketing 2)
B	*"It became clear that … she [the designer] had experience in this field."* (Head nurse) *"A patient was present. And the designer knew exactly what this meant….For me, her experience was really the key….And she got her foot in the door at that moment."* (Clinic director) *"I think motivation number one [for my joining the project] was seeing the request for proposals for the project in a respected journal."* (Clinic director)	*"I presented [the new feature] and I said, 'Just try it out….' I intended to write a report about it … telling the architect to consider these [insights] and consider spending a bit more money on these issues."* (Designer)	*"After the designer visited the clinic last year, I started to rearrange my room … with what I had available."* (Patient) *"The wood, the material, everything was pleasant, and it looks beautiful. And here is what surprised me: introducing the new installation was really no problem."* (Head nurse) *"She really included everyone's input … independent of their hierarchical rank…. I think this approach helped prevent any resistance to the project."* (Clinic director)	*"I measured lux level [in the clinic] and decibel levels created by the natural acoustics in the rooms…. And then I used the measurements on the floor plans … in the second presentation…. Physicians like empirical research—it's good when you can validate your work with evidence."* (Designer)	*"She really included everyone's input … independent of their hierarchical rank…. She included them in the project, gave everyone access to the process. I think this approach helped prevent any resistance to the project."* (Head nurse)	*"It was really something—the fact that my opinion was sought! After talking to the designer, I felt that my viewpoint was really important to her, and to the project…. Especially when she came back to me after everything was finished to ask what I thought."* (Patient) *"I saw that the project included a lot of creativity and that [the designer] was really trying to relate to the people that were to be treated here."* (Head nurse)
C	** *"We assumed that the moderator would know what [the project] was, beyond theoretical knowledge. And people realized that the moderator did't know [the fine details] in 30 seconds…. We could equally sense [the lack of understanding] in the discussion afterwards."* (CEO)	*"You learn to develop a filter about [the field] … and then you are able to say, 'This is an interesting aspect—and this is not.' You can pinpoint areas where the client has to be careful—and where there is interesting territory to explore."* (Designer)		*"Deeper insights can be gained [from people that are foreign to the field] than from people native to the project. Even inviting biologists to such workshops would be nice."* (Designer)	** *"I received these comments from a participant via email: 'To experiment with creative approaches … was not my type of thing … and since there was no opportunity to voice my opinion during the project I'm doing so here, now.'"* (CEO)	*"Involving people that know very little [about the context] means that they don't have tunnel vision. The interesting thing is that you don't perceive of your own perception. This was more [generally] the effect of the experience of the workshop."* (CEO)

** denotes a negative effect in respect to the Jester's dimensions.

Discussion and Proposals

As we have shown, looking at collaborative design activity through the lens of the jester reveals a number of similarities between designer and court-sanctioned fool. While the jester draws upon his (or her) knowledge of human folly, and the designer uses tools and empirical examples, both tell stories that open up space for new ideas to form and present alternatives to existing situations. Their innocent yet clever acts of subversion have the effect of challenging the entrenched assumptions of those in power, and at the same time making change seem attractive and (perhaps) inevitable. Both must earn the respect of their employers/fellow collaborators – and the privileged status that accompanies it – through a combination of wit and skill.

In this section, we will address our original research question – "What can the lens of the jester teach us about the designer's role in organizational innovation processes?" – by making and supporting three proposals. Each proposal is in line with the general consensus amongst the informants that the designer aims to induce change through the creation of distance, diagnosing problems, and ultimately putting the status quo into question – which demonstrates the plausibility of the designer as jester model.

Providing Novel Insights in a Compelling Way

Scholars Ezio Manzini and Eduardo Stazowski found that designers can make new ideas acceptable by basing them on empirical data.[61] Our findings show that material used by designers to mirror an existing situation was often drawn from user-centered approaches – meaning that they used external viewpoints to illustrate a wider perspective of an organization's current situation. Because design methods and tools are new to the majority of organizations, often designers must find creative ways to get collaborators on board with their approaches and the outcomes they generate. Mirroring a situation with the support of empirical data is different from enforcing a seemingly arbitrary point of view. The empirically-supported mirror reflects an undeniable "truth" of a given situation, and leads to insights that were not part of the decision making equation thus far. Stakeholders find themselves in new (yet relevant) territory, where they can see things from a different perspective, revisit their assumptions, and (eventually) consider new ideas.

During collaborative innovation activity, the designer as jester often identifies and reveals critical flaws in a situation that have yet to be examined, and also demonstrates the relevance of those flaws playfully and interactively. This becomes a goal in itself, rather than the means to an end, because illustrating – rather than merely pointing out – the flaws in an existing system can serve to make new ideas more palatable and thereby spur innovation efforts. The designer plays the role of an honest and skilled messenger who finds subtle ways to communicate a seemingly undeniable truth. Designers' credibility – and hence their effectiveness – is at stake, however. As our findings reveal, the success of a design collaboration sometimes depends on how adept the designer is at weaving together relevant data, tools, and techniques during design activity. When expertly crafted and presented, fresh insights can inspire organizations to move in new and innovative directions. We suggest that the quality of a designer's illustrations – in other words, how convincingly designers establish the relevance of contrasting or inspiring realities that come from beyond the four walls of the organization – is an additional criterion that can be used to assess the value offered by design to innovation projects, alongside workshop output. This leads to our first proposal:

> *Proposal 1: The more designers are able to present novel insights in a convincing way, the greater the acceptance they can create for new ideas in innovation processes.*

61 **Manzini and Staszowski,** ***Public and Collaborative.***

Out of the three cases we chose to study, Case B (healthcare clinic) best exemplifies the effective use of compelling illustrations. The designer used a combination of convincing results from scientific studies and personal observations from practice to illustrate flaws in the existing system. This was combined with striking insights into the needs of people involved that emerged during co-design workshops. The participants highlighted the variety of different presentations as one reason that the new ideas received such positive feedback throughout the clinic. The opposite was true for Case C – participants complained that nothing new was generated during the activities with designers. What is more, collaborators felt the elaborate design methods were useless "experiments with creativity methods." One explanation for this might be that there is often an established innovation culture at IT-startups, so the design activity the designer chose likely paled in comparison to methods already in use. Participants clearly felt that no value was added by the design collaboration. From this, we conclude that organizational contexts with experienced innovation teams can be demanding collaboration partners for designers, as they assess design activities in relation to their own innovation practices.

In Case A, the designer sought to elicit novel insights that were grounded in practical knowledge. Pioneers in the field were invited to participate, and collaborators learned about the latest practices. Further insights emerged during peer-to-peer exchange between workshop attendees and hands-on experimentation with new technologies. The organization saw the practical character of these activities as a positive aspect of the collaboration – getting up to speed with the technology and testing examples were of practical significance. This marriage of theory, empirical examples of the latest practices, and hands-on learning was itself a practical way to generate actionable insights. From this, we conclude that in innovation projects that involve new phenomena, enhancing peer-to-peer communication may increase the importance and practical significance of any insights that emerge. To enable organizations to reinterpret and revise old practices, conclusive practical evidence – both delivered by experts and gathered from collective hands-on experience – is an excellent anchor point. The role of the designer therefore includes maintaining an up-to-date, inspiring network.

Opening Up the Space for Novelty

The selected quotations demonstrate that free space for reflection was critical – in other words, providing more inspiring spaces supported consideration of new ideas and perspectives. A key design strategy that served to create such spaces was the designers' reframing practice. They adopted new frames, which allowed collaborators to re-interpret the innovation space itself. Reframing was achieved through interconnecting existing situations with new ones and tying facts, experiences, or contexts together in new ways, thus providing a fuller picture and redirecting associations. Viewed through the lens of the jester, however, reframing serves yet another purpose, because providing a fuller picture also suggests distance from the prevailing worldview – a putting of things into perspective. The cases show that the designer as jester particularly creates what we call a *temporary suspension of prevailing laws*. Everyday principles are put on hold, so to speak. One of the museum directors from Case A described this effect tellingly as "helping us disconnect from the everyday." This is different than redirecting existing associations, because it focuses on how participants perceive and then change their perceptions of the world around them.

Reframing is especially effective when speculative designs are introduced to support it. Critical design practices foreground neglected aspects, which in turn disrupts the customary understanding of an artifact. Also, in the light of ambiguous

presentations, and intriguing or deceiving performances, existing (personal or notional) constructs can become apparent, and participants may acknowledge them as what they are – conventions that are open to manipulation. Through the lens of the jester, the ambiguity of these artifacts also serves to open up the space for alternative visions. The value offered by design can therefore be assessed in terms of the level of openness created through eccentric presentations and references, rather than by evaluating the number and novelty of ideas that emerge. This leads to our second proposal:

> *Proposal 2: The more effectively designers are able to employ ambiguous design artifacts and reframing as means of generating new meanings, the greater the openness of innovation workshop participants.*

The designer in Case C used a "disruptive" question-answer design game, which our interviewee clearly did not appreciate as it was compared to a useless creativity experiment. One explanation for this might be that it was introduced at an inappropriate stage of the innovation process. The concept idea had already been developed, but mixed feedback from testing required that the innovation team rethink their strategy. The activity did nothing to prevent team members from sticking with the principle elements of the solution. In addition to the activity taking place at the wrong time, it also appears to have taken place in the wrong setting – a conventional meeting room, which made it virtually impossible to create an inspiring atmosphere. Finally, only one external participant took part in the workshop.

The opposite effect was generated during Cases A and B. Each of their designers were highly valued as creating the necessary space for self-reflection and self-positioning. We conclude that including people "who don't have tunnel vision" – who are able to see realities from beyond the four walls of the organization – does not always correspond to the needs of every stage of the innovation process. Even careful briefing and explicit definition of collaboration goals with experienced innovation teams do not prevent an organization from having a limited notion of what a design "collaboration" is, and what it means to engage with people with a different working approach. It is possible that organizations with established innovation cultures float design collaboration as kind of a test balloon for a better innovation approach. The collaboration is a kind of team "tryout" for the designer, who both needs to demonstrate his or her ability to disrupt and is virtually powerless to do so, especially during the later stages of innovation. This ambiguity needs to be further investigated.

Cases A and B instead emphasized the value of this type of open space for reflection during their respective innovation processes. The designers helped each organization get distance from their everyday perceptions by combining a variety of inspiring input and encounters with best practice examples. However, some participants found this marriage of creative input overpowering, and that it entailed the risk of everyone getting carried away. Case B focused on creating an out of the ordinary space by presenting exciting samples and propositions from co-design workshops. The participants emphasized how these activities were "well organized over a longer period of time" and how the designer was able to include experts irrespective of their rank. It was also interesting to see that enabling peer-to-peer exchanges encouraged self-reflection. Participants realized how the approaches and opinions of other members of the group contrasted with their own reality and ways of working. Here, the designer plays a role somewhere between an entertainer who provides inspiring, even disruptive new examples; a workshop facilitator able to engage people in participatory activities; and a project manager,

who ensures goal-oriented actions. The role of designer as facilitator of activities that offer the space for creativity has been widely discussed in design research literature,[62] but there is not much research about what happens when these activities do not address the needs of a particular organization or stage of the innovation process. We conclude here that the designer's role is associated with a multifaceted solution integrating different functions such as facilitating, inspiring, entertaining, and engaging. Designers are often entrusted with a wide variety of aspects that inform complex innovation processes. On top of any lack of knowledge about change processes and implementation skills,[63] they are confronted with the challenge of creatively opening up the space for reflection and operating as a project manager and facilitator. Switching between these roles is a key characteristic of designers in innovation contexts. Although these challenges have been acknowledged elsewhere,[64] they have not been discussed from the point of view of the jester, where the competent synthesis of these variables into one convincing performance constitutes the basis of success according to the findings of this study.

62 For example, see Per-Anders Hillgren, Anna Seravalli, and Anders Emilson, "Prototyping and Infrastructuring in Design for Social Innovation," *CoDesign: International Journal of CoCreation in Design and the Arts* 7, no. 3-4 (2011): 169–83; and Manzini, *Design, When Everybody Designs*.

63 Mulgan, "Design in Public and Social Innovation."

64 Ibid.

65 Southworth, *Fools and Jesters at the English Court*.

Competence

In every single case, the designer had to gain and maintain a position of privilege within the innovation team. We call this *obtaining the jester's license*. The jester's license bestows its holder with the privilege of freer speech – for example, to mock basic assumptions. As the statements made by the CEO of the health care clinic in Case B reveal, to even "get a foot in the door" the designer was implicitly expected to demonstrate specialized knowledge of the context as of the very first meeting. And the CEO we interviewed from case C emphasized the designer's lack of specialized knowledge about the project as a major cause of his dissatisfaction. As for case B, the designer's use of eccentric props, performance (of measurements), and references to scientific studies further supported his competence. It seems that "attracting the attention of those in power"[65] was part of what got the designer into a privileged position in the hierarchical context of the clinic, while the out of the ordinary design game (in case C) contributed to a loss of credibility for the designer. The designer's expertise was perceived as sub-standard and only minor practical improvements were inspired by the game. In both cases, involving people independent of their function or rank was critical for the assessment of designer's innovation competence. In other words, when viewing designers' activities through the lens of the jester model, a variety of different design activities together serve as means to convincingly demonstrate relevant innovation competence and thus secure the Jester's license. Our third proposal is therefore

> *Proposal 3: The more designers are able to arrange each of the singular activities as part of an overall demonstration of innovation competence, the more likely they will get into a privileged position with freer speech allowing them to question basic assumptions.*

Conclusions

Including designers as part of innovation projects has increasingly become the dominant strategy of organizations who realize they must adopt flexible and self-reflective ways of innovating. The antidote to stagnation is inviting in a complementary approach, yet this strategy does not have the benefit of data that demonstrates the practical influence and value of embracing design as a component of innovation.

The intention of this paper was to draw a parallel between key design approaches to innovation and the strategies employed by court jesters, both

to illustrate the similarities between the two and discuss the consequences of designers playing such a controversial role within the hierarchy of an organization. We argued that jesters and designers share similar flexible and self-reflective approaches in practice – for example by challenging dominant assumptions through an alternative presentation of (known) facts.

We proposed a designer as jester model where the designer (specifically in the context of innovation processes) and jester share certain rights, demonstrate similar qualities, and deploy similar strategies. They both must earn and protect their right to free speech. They must exhibit frankness and provocativeness. They must have the capacity to induce change using creativity, humor, and wit – the expertise of their professions. Both are constantly reframing existing situations, and in doing so, seeking to open up the space for new ideas. Both use likeability to create entente, and both are expected to demonstrate competence to establish trust.

We found that designer's ability to create a setting where different laws might apply played an important role in their collaborators' generation of novel perspectives. Designers achieved this either by creating distance from the everyday, or by disrupting (or attempting to disrupt) conventional thinking modes.

One essential strategy of the designer as jester, appears to be his or her ability to demonstrate the *inevitability* by making novel ideas seem practically possible, mirroring flaws and weaknesses in existing practices, and basing novel ideas on insights from empirical data. Also, presenting valid and inspiring alternative solutions appears to contribute to the perception that change is unavoidable. When the designer focused on relevant topic issues, included existing expertise, and showed honest interest and competence in the domain and innovation, the success rate of this strategy dramatically improved, because the collaborators saw one another as equals.

Our research opens the discussion on design practice as performance, where designers behave in a particular way for innovation groups in order to be perceived in a particular way – as creative professionals and collaboration experts. We invite future studies to look into types of comic performance such as clowns, buffoons, commedia dell'arte characters, burlesque, and so on, to increase our understanding of design practice as performance.

The unique contribution we offer to the literature is that we look at how design collaborators – designers and organizational stakeholders alike – *experience* the designer in the role of the jester. We draw conclusions about how the designer as jester shapes perceptions of the value the design brings to the innovation process, and thereby influences the innovation process itself. The criteria used to assess what design offers to innovation processes all too often focuses on creative outputs.

The results from this study indicate that a user-centered approach – the interest in truly accommodating another's perspective and challenges – plays a role in how successfully design practice operates in innovation contexts. Designers might be seen as aliens from a different world (with opposing values) or as captivating experts of creative principles for innovation. A designer has to display knowledge and awareness of the situation at hand in order to get his or her foot in the door. We conclude here that ignoring this shift – from service provider to loyal and privileged member of an innovation team – will likely torpedo a designer's chances to effectively mirror situations and initiate change.