Reaching a creative common ground

Enhancing the creative collaboration between a film editor and its respective client

Fredrik Kedfors
Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to locate current problems concerning the process of finding common ground between a creative producer and its respective client, furthermore it aims to propose a solution to this problem in the context of collaborative video editing. The paper starts off by exploring research related to the topic. After that, it establishes, through interviews with experts within fields of video editing and graphic design, what the currently existing problems are concerning communication within their line of work. As a solution to these problems, a collaborative software is proposed with the idea of bridging the understanding between the video editor and its client. The paper ends with some conclusions surrounding the current state of the topic and proposes a way forward for both practitioners and researchers.

Keywords: CSCW, common ground, design, collaboration, Human-Computer Interaction, video editing
1. Introduction

Being part of a team of designers means having to take part in a design process, this in turn demands a fluent communication between every member of said team. This communication can of course be carried out in a myriad of ways, it is however always considered to be a process of some kind (Senescu, 2011). With this thesis I focused on this exact process in order to see how using a collaborative software can help to enhance the shared understanding found in a producer-to-client scenario.

CSCW (Computer Supported Cooperative Work) is a field of research focused on designing both software based systems as well as whole physical environments made to support the process of collaboration (Benyon, D, 2013). Recent studies within this area has covered both areas of designing virtual environments, in order to receive creative feedback from a larger group of non-experts, as well as studies looking at creative collaborations in the context of social networking sites. These studies have shown both how you can design specific tools in order to receive relevant feedback to a specific project, as well as the positive benefits of an active communication during a design process (Xu, Huang & Bailey, 2014 & Marlow, Dabbish, 2014).

What most of this recent research has in common however is a focus on the collaboration of designers within a specific team. With this thesis, I instead want to move the focus towards the collaboration that can be found between a producer-of-content and its respective client.

A keen concept within the research of CSCW has been to understand the basic nature of collaboration from a distance and the role of collaborative technologies in that specific setting. In relation to this, the term common ground has been frequently used to describe the problems we face in the process of understanding each other during these circumstances. A term which is partly based on the grounding practice which formulates that every message sent needs not only to be received but also to be fully understood by the recipient (Bjørn, Esbensen, Jensen & Matthiesen, 2014).

Sixteen years ago (Olson & Olson, 2000) set up a framework for common ground research identifying four different concepts – collaboration readiness, collaboration technology readiness, coupling of work and organizational management. This is work that has stood as a canonical paper in the research concerning long distance collaboration (Bjørn et al, 2014).

Fourteen years later, (Bjørn et al, 2014) decided to revisit each of these concepts in order to analyse their continued relevance in the field. Their conclusion was that some of the arguments made sixteen years ago need to be to refined in order to remain current, but overall they concluded that the concept of common ground still stands as a fundamental challenge and that future studies should continue to identify, create, maintain and apply different processes in order to help the process of non-psychical collaboration.

With this study I hope to address this call-to-action made by Bjørn et al (2014) and in turn help to add more research into the problems faced surrounding common ground in the context of creative collaborations between a producer-of content and its client. By doing this I also hope to answer the following question;

“What are the current problems concerning the establishment of common ground between a creative producer and its respective client, and how could CSCW-centred design help to solve these problems in the context of collaborative video editing?”
The paper starts by going through the related research in the field. After that follows a description of the different methods used to collect data during the study; a method that involved two different gathering points used to establish both the current problems in establishing common ground as well as finding a possible solution for the future. The last part of the paper shows the result from all of these sessions accompanied with a discussion and conclusion surrounding the future of common ground research in CSCW.

2. Background to study

In order of performing this study I made contact with a small company just about to launch a new online video editing platform. Their platform was directed at companies wanting to communicate more through video but lacking the technical expertise needed in order to do it.

At the time of this study, the system currently supported a system for clients being able to send video content combined with specific editing requests. There was at the moment, however, no way to continue the communication between the editor and the client other than through emails being sent externally from the service. This is something that as a result can lead to confusion and, sometimes, creative misinterpretation between the two.

In order to solve this problem, I suggested to try and integrate the process of communicating with their client into the system, making it a complete solution for both the editor and the client.

As a result of this, the prototype built for this study focused on the producer to client scenario seen in relation to the design process of video editing, animation and illustration.

3. Related Research

This part gives an introduction to the research related to the topics of design, collaboration in digital environments, generating feedback and user participation when designing for research.

3.1 Design as a process

The design process as a research category houses many describing forms. One way to look at it is as a composition of different goal-oriented problem solving activities. The quality of this design process is in turn determined by the efficiency and the amount of information retrieved from the design team (Afacan & Demirkan, 2011; Karakaya & Demirkan, 2015). Another describing view point of the design process is that of Fischer, Nakakoji, Ostwald, Stahl, & Sumner (1993), describing it as a successive refinement through both trial, interpretation and reflection.

With these many viewpoints there are also ways of broadening the designers view during the design process. One way is through the use of digital collaboration, giving the designer the ability to both share and access various design ideas and design concepts (Afacan & Demirkan, 2011; Karakaya & Demirkan, 2015).
3.2 Navigating the digital creative environment

As mentioned, digital collaboration and digital creative environments can support the designer in many ways and on different levels. One aspect of this is through the gathering, sharing and integration of knowledge as well as the actual generated idea.

On a second level, digital creative environments can also make way for the creation of a creative artefact within a particular domain, given that the functionality of this said system is provided in a clear, direct and useful way (Karakaya & Demirkan, 2015; Greene, 2002). Furthermore, Greene (2002) mentions that a digital creative environment holds seven defining characteristics, which are as follows. It should:

**Support pain-free exploration and experimentation:** All actions taken by the user should both be immediate and give relevant feedback to the user. In the same way, these actions should be easy to revert, giving the user a sense of exploration.

**Support engagement with content to promote active learning and discovery:** Try to engage the users by promoting certain content throughout the system. This can be effective in ways of getting the user to discover new things, it can however at sometimes also feel forced upon the user who might want to have a greater control.

**Support search, retrieval, and classification:** Users should be given a clear overview of the content within the system. This content should also easily be able to be sorted, categorised and retrieved throughout.

**Support iteration:** Some form of iteration should always be expected by the end user. In the same way, saving previous iterations can be useful as a way to help the user advance by learning from previous mistakes.

**Support and perhaps encourage instructive mistakes:** The system should be instructive towards the user by sometimes challenging them towards trying out something new that they might fail at first, letting the system guide them towards the right line of actions as a learning method.

**Support the domain-specific actions that must be done:** The actions that can be taken within a system should be structured in a way leading the user towards a specific domain.

**Support collaboration:** Ways of collaboration can successfully be implemented in a system as a way of supporting the exchange of ideas, teamwork and to enable both creative critique, feedback and add a competitive nature.

3.3 Methods of generating feedback

To receive creative feedback is a critical part of the design process (Hundhausen, Fairbrother, & Petre, 2012; Xu et al, 2014). It can help to release creative blocks and generate new ideas as the feedback itself works as a retrieval cue to the mind, activating new thoughts. As a result, the designer might gain new perspectives, solutions or simply an understanding for what they’re designing (Nijstad & Stroebe, 2006; Xu et al, 2014).

One way of generating design feedback is through the use of computational methods such as software critics. This method involves applying domain-specific knowledge to evaluate a design following rules that are set up in advance. The limits of this method is however the incapability of the software to react to the unique goals of the individual user (Xu et al, 2014; Fischer et al, 1993; Schon, 1992).
In order to gain the user perspective, designers can instead take use of, for example, certain online communities. However, studies have shown that this kind of method can many times generate a very low-quality feedback (Xu & Bailey, 2012).

Xu et al (2014) present another alternative to these methods, a software called “Voyant” that gives designers the opportunity to receive feedback from non-expert users through the method of crowdsourcing.

Crowd vs Crowd or “CvC” is another design method that can be utilized by both experts and non-experts. It involves facing different crowds against each other in order to competitively complete a design task. A valuable aspect of CvC is that it helps the designers to collect and explore a wide range of ideas during the early phases of a design phase. Its an engaging method for non-experts and it helps them to both understand and contribute to the various phases of a design process. Participating as a stakeholder is especially effective as it lets you contribute with community-specific knowledge, participating in the design process also tends to increase satisfaction for the final product (Park, Lee, Son, Bae, 2013).

3.4 Establishing common ground

Common ground is a term frequently used within CSCW to describes the knowledge that we share between each other, as well as the knowledge that we perceive from one another, a concept based on the grounding practice (Clark & Brennan, 1991). It declares that formulating a message demands more than just a send off, it has to also be clearly understood by the recipient. Without a confirmation, we stand without assurance of how our message was received (Clark & Brennan, 1991 & Bjørn et al, 2014).

Another reference point to common ground research is that of the mutual knowledge problem found in research of distributed collaboration. This research covers the type of problems that can arise from not having a mutual knowledge about information within a certain project, problems such as (Cramton 2001, & Bjørn et al, 2014):

**Failure to communicate and retain contextual information**: When you work collaboratively in remote locations, the ability able to gather, retaining or updating each other about certain information can become lacking.

**Unevenly distributed information**: If you’re working in bigger teams, you may fail to distribute important information to every concerned party, either because of technical or human error.

**Differences in the salience of information among members of a dispersed collaboration**: Working remotely can also lead to a misunderstanding regarding the importance of certain information, you may for example choose to keep certain information undisclosed, unaware of its importance to the recipient.

**Relative differences in speed of access to information**: Different members in a team may choose to be less frequent in their communication compared to other members. This might lead to an unbalanced access of speed to certain information for the persons remaining uninformed.

**Interpretation of the meaning of silence**: Sometimes certain members of a group might stay silent for a while during a collaboration for a relevant reason. Because of, for
example, technological issues, this temporary silence might be wrongfully interpreted by the recipient.

When working in a team we form common grounds as we engage in communication with each other and through consistently expressing confirmation to each other. The risk of misunderstanding raises higher because of things such as the reasons listed above, but factors such as languages barriers or different cultural practices also makes reaching a common ground harder (Olson et al, 2000; & Bjørn et al, 2014).

There are two general versions surrounding the concept of common grounds that have been identified: content and process. The first of these describes the scenario of being on the same level as another person, conversing with a mutual understanding of a specific area. The second one describes the scenario of working together with a team, knowing when to share specific information in order to collectively move forward (Convertino, Mentis, Rosson, Slavkovic & Carroll, 2009).

3.4.1 Benefits of a shared understanding
There are many positive aspects of gathering a shared understanding with each other. When the members of a design team reach a shared understanding of the collaborative process for example, this is considered to be an innovative activity, furthermore, studies show that having a shared understanding within a team is (Pearce & Ensley, 2004; Kleinsmann & Valkenburg, 2008; Karakaya & Demirkan, 2015):

• Central to the team’s effectiveness.
• It helps in giving the team a greater confidence.
• It helps each member to better understand each other’s needs and in turn being able contribute in a more productive and helpful way.
• It helps to eliminate both the confusion and frustration that can happen because of a lack of understanding for what is being done within the team.

3.5 User participation in design research
When developing a system through methods of research it is important to not forget about the needs, goals and aspirations of the end users. By engaging the user through participation, the researcher can help to acquire a large amount of stories laying the ground for the analysis. These stories can in turn be transformed into more structured conceptual stories that not only builds an understanding but also works in generating further requirements for study (Benyon, 2013).

The Scandinavian approach to cooperative design is a work of research that further highlights the importance of having an active and creative participation from the end-users during the design process. It however stresses that the methods for including the user participation should be distanced from using traditional questionnaires and discussions about requirements as it’s hard for the user to bridge their professional knowledge together with the research questioning. Instead it’s better to apply cooperative workshops using mock-ups and other prototyping techniques (Kyng, 1994).
4. Method

This part describes the two methods of data gathering used during the study. It details the process starting from the initial data gathering, to the construction of the prototype and its evaluation.

4.1 Finding out about the process

In order of finding out about the current state of the communicational design process I conducted five interviews with experts in various field connected to working with design.

4.1.1 Five experts

The participants included two graphical artists, two animators and a project leader. The two animators worked at the company I had contact with in background to this paper and had experience in working with various forms of digital animation. The project leader was also working at said company and was in charge of all on-going projects. The graphical artists were external sub-contractors that I got in contact with through the company.

4.1.2 The form of the interviews

The questions I asked were related to describing the general flow of a design process within their specific line of work; this in relation to communication, digital environments being used, structure and other relevant aspects.

I also asked questions in relation to methods of finding out about a client's creative wishes, how important the creative influence of a client is to the success of a project, what kind of technical barriers that might rise in their communication with the client and their own expectations when starting a new design project. Every interview ended with an opportunity for all participants to raise anything in relation to the subject.

Three of these interviews took place in a physical environment, the other two were conducted over Skype. All of the interviews followed the method of semi-structured interviews, the reason behind this was that I wanted the interviews to be both open and flexible in order for me to explore new topics and angles as they would arise but with a constant structure to fall back on (Benyon, 2013).

4.2 Constructing the client scenario

For the next part of the process I wanted to get an insight into the perspective of the client. To help the data gathering I used the framework of blended interaction in order to complete a quick prototype. In order to evaluate this prototype, I took the use of some of the elements from the method of “SPES” (situated and Participative Enactment of scenarios), combined with elements from the method of “Role-Playing Game” (Iacucci, Kuutti, & Ranta, 2000). My hopes were that this approach would help in getting as close as possible to the view of the end user but also that it would let the participants participate in the design process with a greater understanding for the concept I was proposing.
4.2.1 Setting up the situation

As the idea was to get each participant to evaluate through the eyes of a potential user I used the elements from “SPES” to try and get every participant into the right mind-set by situating them within a scenario. In this case the scenario was: the ordering of creative services through creative inputs. The role playing aspects came into place by having each user formulate a fictive company and then situating themselves as the front person of this exact business. I myself took on the role as a guide throughout the sessions, sometimes steering them in a certain direction, sometimes letting them contribute with their inputs. My aim for using this method was to try and get as close to the actual scenario while saving the time it would have taken to build the actual software within the time of the research period.

The prototype itself was built through the wireframing software UXpin, allowing me to add basic interaction to the prototype.

4.2.2 Working with the framework of blended interaction

To speed up the design of the prototype needed for the evaluation I took use of the framework of designing with blends combined with the framework of blended interaction (Jetter, Geyer, Schwarz & Reiterer, 2012).

Blended spaces is a way for designers to think about the relationship between a psychical and digital space. The concept details the merging of different input spaces, creating a new kind of relationship that did not exist before. The physical and the digital parts part of the blend are not to be seen as two coexisting spaces, they are more considered to be an anchor or a touch point, linking the digital and physical together. In order for a blend to be successful, the user must have a conceptual understanding for both the physical and digital space being represented in the design. A clear example of this being the concept of windows in the context of a computer operating system (Benyon, Mival, & Ayan, 2012).

For this part of the study I relied very much on the use of conceptual blends in relation to the use of blended interaction, a framework that attends to the fact that the reality of today’s users is not solely dependent from the technology that we utilise in our everyday life, meaning that digital concepts can be used successfully in a blend without being grounded in actual real world analogies. Furthermore, this framework not only builds upon the use of designing with blends but also extends it onto four different domains of design, this in order to help reach a more systematic approach to the design of interactive spaces (Jetter et al, 2012).

When using this framework, I emerged from the generic space of “creative collaborations”, branching out onto two new domains which I called “client to producer communication” and “creative workflow”. Both of these domains in turn influenced by the result of my initial interviews. As a next step, these two domains were then blended into the idea of using both communicational tools such as instant messaging together with editing attributes taken from the creative workflow of a video editor.
Furthermore, this blend was then applied onto the four design domains of which blended interaction builds upon.

**The individual interaction:** When developing a system used for collaborative work between different users it is important to not also forget about the interaction of the individual. All individual tasks should therefore be considered as an equally integral part (Jetter et al, 2012). This meaning I had to take the actions of both the client and the video editor into consideration as well as their respective needs.

**The Social Interaction & Communication:** Within the digital design space, it is important to respect the social norms and protocols that we follow in our daily lives (Jetter et al, 2012). In this case, it’s important to take the customer well into consideration and to respect their business norms and ideas.

**The workflow:** The work processes of today are often very knowledge-intensive, interconnected and with a high need for flexibility. As a result of this, systems introduced into this workflow need to take the current work process into account (Jetter et al, 2012). In this case, I had to translate the workflow of a video editor making it comprehensible for the client. I also wanted the participant to get to follow the design process, giving a greater sense of involvement.

**The Physical Environment:** Every work situation involves a physical environment of some kind. This environment does, however, not only account for things such as the furniture found in a room, but also its displays, sound and lightning (Jetter et al, 2012). In this case, the design process for the client starts with them filming and uploading a new video onto the service. Because of a lack of time however, the actual physical part of this process had to be
simulated during the prototype evaluation. This was executed by having the participants get into mind-set of the potential users through a role playing exercise.

In the end, the use of blended interaction supported me in creating a prototype built on the concept of having a user take part in creative collaborations, initiating a creative communication, learning about the design process and even taking part in it through the use of certain tools and visual feedback.

4.2.3 The constructed prototype

The final prototype that I ended up using during the evaluations consisted of a parallax scrolling system that used system commands mimicking the voice of the editor as the initial interaction with each client.

It starts off by asking each client what is that they would like to do. Following this question, they are presented with three different suggestions written in the form of a suggested answer such as “I would like to change the feeling of the movie” or “I would like to strengthen my message”.

![Figure 2 – Showing the first question asked by the prototypes dialogue tree](image)

After choosing an answer the system automatically scrolls to the next part in the progress suggesting a relevant action in relation to their answer. For the scenario of this test, each participant had the opportunity to formulate and set a time placement for an animation, suggest a colour tone for the film as well as change the feeling and direction of the music.

When the client has finished selecting the tasks needed they get presented with a screen showing a summary of all their chosen options as well as way to ask any additional questions regarding any of the tasks they’ve ordered.
When the task has been completed each client gets presented with a screen showing them what has been completed together with comments written by the producer. Here they have the option to either give further comments, ask for possible changes or close the errand.

From the producer’s point of view, a similar version of each client page exist, detailing what task have been asked for by the client and a way for them to ask further questions or upload finished material.

My hopes for the state of this prototype was that it should be able to fulfil the purpose of the evaluation process as well as adhere to both the blend created earlier and take relevant
inspiration from the seven characteristics of a digital creative environment Greene (2002) mentioned in the related research.

4.3 Prototype evaluation

All forms of communication during the all interviews sessions took place over Skype combined with screen sharing so that I could follow the whole process and guide the participants through each scenario. The evaluation itself took the shape of four distinct steps.

Establishing the context: First off all, I started with a general question asking the participants if they, based on their own experiences, could describe for me the shape of a typical design process. This was a way of establishing the context of the evaluation and to initiate the mind-set of the user.

Applying the roles: This part of the process involved a lot of setup for the user in order to establish their role. First of all, it involved the participants watching a video that I had prepared in preparation for the evaluation. This was a video composed of five clips showing an office environment accompanied with an interview. All clips were shown without sound. After they finished watching the video I told all participants to write down the specifics to a fictional company based on the imagery from the video. This information included the company's name, what they work with, what their image was and why they were in need of video communication.

I then showed them an instructional video guiding the user through the process of uploading clips to the service, as well as how to edit them. Describing to them all of the steps leading up to the guided prototype.

Guided scenario: The next step involved the participants being guided through the system by me, detailing the specifics of each part of the system, at a few steps I asked the participants to make some inputs detailing what it was they wanted to order from the system.

Exploring their understanding for the concept: At the end of every session I made a final interview with every participant asking them questions about what it was that they've ordered, what parts of the system that seemed clearest to them and how they would have liked to communicate with the system further. Evaluating their understanding for the system as well as the design process itself.
4.3.1 The participants
The were four participants in total taking part in the prototype evaluation. The first of these had some previous knowledge about both graphic content in general and client communication with customers. The second participant had some work experience in relation to dramaturgy in theatre and film. The third and fourth participant had previous experience in client communication but with no professional creative background. None of the participants had any large-scale knowledge surrounding the process of video editing or animation.

4.3.2 Interview with the editor
As a final data gathering, I once again set up a session with one of the editors taking part in the initial interviews. The idea for this meeting was to initiate a semi-unstructured brainstorming session surrounding the result of the previous evaluation seen from the eyes of a working professional.

It started off with me describing the process of the previous evaluations and showing her the inputs that was given by each participants. From this I asked her to tell me how she would continue with the design process solely based on this information.

After this I read up some notes taken from the evaluation regarding the experiences that the participants had, asking some questions in relation to the problems experienced by the participants.

Together we discussed how a system like this could be used in practice, what further needs could be fulfilled and what the benefits could be in using such a system.
5. Result

This part shows the result of every step of the data gathering. I start off by summarising the general look of a common project based on the interviews by the experts. I then present the most interesting notes taken from the interview, categorized through relevant themes.

Editor/Animator 1 (Ed/An – 1), 24 years: A new project is received by the project leader and then forwarded to the editor. All communication is then continued between the project leader and the editor, the editor has no direct contact with the client. All communication is forwarded through e-mails, telephone calls or physical meetings.

Project leader (Pl – 1), 31 years: The project leader takes on every new assignment from a salesman and forwards this to the producer in order to initiate the project. Throughout the design process, the project leader receives continuous updates from the producer. He then makes a decision whether or not the content is ready to be presented to the client. All of this communication occurs through e-mails, telephone calls, physical presentations and through the sharing of content on Vimeo (video-sharing website).

Editor/Animator 1 (Ed/An – 2), 27 years: Usually the clients themselves make the first approach in the beginning of a project, contacting the editor directly, the editor then in turn also handles all the communication with the client on his own throughout the project. In the beginning, a physical meeting with the client always takes place (never over skype). During this meeting all information about the project is discussed and afterwards, the producer sends a job estimate over to the client. When the estimate has been accepted, the client then informs his subcontractors about the project and collaborates with the client for a script. From this script, a storyboard is drawn. The continued meetings with the client usually takes place over “skype”, “go-to-meeting” or through mail conversations, video content is uploaded to Vimeo.

Graphic artist 1 (Ga – 1), 35 years: In the beginning of a project, the producer receives a brief describing what is needed to be done. As a next step a workshop or another form of creative process is performed in order to figure out what needs to be solved. When a problem is detected a job estimate is sent to the client for approval. Following that, different sub targets such as producing, delivery and follow up are established.

Graphic artist 2 (Ga – 2), 34 years: The most commonly occurring scenario is that the design process starts with the producer receiving a call or an e-mail. Pretty quickly he gathers an idea of what needs to be done and a physical meeting is set up. After this the producer and the client go into more details about what needs to be done (and how), and a brief is created and forwarded to the client. After this brief has been accepted, there is a lot of forward and backwards with e-mails and telephone calls to see what needs doing. In general, a lot of meetings and calls take place before things take off. As the production phase begins the producer disappears for a while in order to return with either a request for more material from the client or to show newly produced content.
The client’s opinions: Clients have various degrees of meticulousness, meaning that the critique coming from the client depends very much on how picky they are.

*Ed/An - 1* "Depending on how picky the client is; if it’s a picky client it can be “I don’t like that colour” or “I don’t like that transition”, but if it’s a less picky client it can be more of the things I said in the beginning such as “I don’t like that specific imagery”

Clients need to have the right expectations going into a new project or else it might lead to disappointment.

*Pl – 1* “It’s very important that the sales person comes with the right information to the project leader that is about to perform the assignment.”

Clients often want to make late changes and many times this happens after a script has been confirmed and the production phase has already begun.

*Ed/An - 2* “The client always wants to add things, or remove things when you’ve already confirmed the script. Many come in hindsight, and many times I’ve been too nice. “Okay, we can do this but then we have to change either some animation or some illustration”. So often it’s the script where most things happen; that they regret something in hindsight. It’s not okay but I’ve noticed, it happens quite often.”

Clients are very visual resulting in the fact that the most critique comes when the client starts to see new things even though the optimal scenario would be that it would happen during the sketching phase.

*Ga – 1* “In reality it’s when you start to see actual things, optimal would be that you would sit in a wireframe or a disposition sketch and it’s there where most things happen.”

*Ed/An – 2* “As soon as a client gets their logo into a movie they light up, there is something about it when they see their logo, then it’s like, the movie is finished.”

Clients are often unsure of what they’re looking for and it’s therefore often during the first sign off that you usually get a feel for if you’re going in the right or wrong direction.

*Ga – 2* “A usual client trap can be “think outside the frames” or “think outside the box” and then you do that but in the end they say “we want something more conservative.”

Working in a team or through a middle-man: If there exists a middleman between the producer and the client that creates a bigger seriousness in the communication.

*Ed/An – 1* “They have a bigger chance to pitch ideas “can you fix this too?” it goes more into smaller details because they get directly in contact with me who’s the producer”

Working with a middle hand can be very positive for the producer as criticism from the client doesn’t reach them directly.

*Pl – 1* “It’s a big advantage for the subcontractor slash creator to not have to take either potentially positive or negative critique straight from the client. I, as a project leader, work as a filter.”
Sometimes there are too many voices on the other side discussing ideas between them and in turn making it harder for the producer to work based on their feedback.

*Ed/An – 2 “With the client there can sit several other people at the company that also want to pitch in, that makes it confusing as they may like different things. That’s why I always try to find one person at the company and establish that “Okay, so then it’s you and me who communicate and you’ll make all the decisions”.*

When you’re working with a team as opposed to working alone you need a platform to be able to sign off internally in order to make sure that everyone is on track.

*Ga – 1 “It’s a totally different thing working in a group, then you also have to be very clear about who has the responsibility for a certain task. Also in the documentation, “Now, I’m in this phase of the project.”*

Working in a group makes it easier for you to address different kinds of questions as you then have the opportunity to distribute knowledge over several people.

*Ga – 2 “There is a bigger weigh-in being more than one, partly because if you’re in situation where you don’t have the answer to something you can often get help from the other part ...you can then also distribute roles, we have different knowledge, therefore we can help each other out, we have the other one’s knowledge as well but there is always someone who has the advantage.”*

**Finding out about the client:** When you’re still figuring out about what the clients are looking for, a good way of asking for it, is through being specific, concrete and detailed about what kind of information you’re in need of.

*Ed/An – 1 “You should always have a list of things that you ask at every project.”*

*Ed/An – 1 “I can also, when I make the storyboard, if I’m uncertain about something, it has happened that I write “Here I need information about this”*

Working with reference clips is a good way of both finding out about the client's needs but also their ambition for the project.

*Pl – 1 “You, want to live up to the goal of the client, and if you can get the client to show a reference clip, perhaps a film that client likes themselves...it can always be a big resource”*

Usually the producer understands right at the first meeting what needs to be done and gives relevant suggestions based on that.

*Ed/An – 2 “Most often after the meeting I know what they’re after or they’ve given me a hint about what they’re searching for.”*

*Ed/An – 2 “Do you want to make a short film? Then you should use much infographics, icon-based animations or if you want a longer film we can...”*

Every project has different pre-conditions but not using a method can often prove to be useless.

*Ga – 1 “Often I invent methods in the moment and then I might reuse that for another client but I if notice that I don’t have anything to move on with, then I invent it on the spot.”*
As a producer it is important to gather as much knowledge as you can both about the client but also the reason behind their need for the final product.

Ga - 2 “To know a bit about “Why?”, so a mix of knowledge about the practice and knowledge about the client. And to also try to get to know the target audience.”

The client’s creative influence: The creative opinion of the client is important since it is their product, their company being represented, their role in the process should not, however, overlap with the role of the producer.

Ed/An – 1 “When it comes to artistic choices, such as that they think a certain style is ugly, is irrelevant...I should have the biggest input when it comes to any artistic choices and they should have the biggest input when it comes to the content.”

Engagement is always good for the design process as this means that the client is fast at replying to messages and want their films to be as successful as possible.

Pl – 1 “It is always a benefit if the client themselves have a certain creativity and an interest or engagement for film, it makes the process so much easier.”

If the client wants to rule with an iron fist and believes to know better than the producer, then the result of that project often gets worse as a consequence.

Ed/An – 2 “I’m a creator so I often see others things than the client does. And often when the client says to me “We want it exactly like this”, then I don’t think the result gets any good, if I don’t get to do what I think is best.”

Knowing the roles within a project is important and goes two ways. The producer can’t be an expert at what the client’s work is about, and vice versa.

Ga – 1 “It has to do with, once again, role placement and the knowledge that “These people are the experts, I trust them.” And I can never be the expert of what the client does. I come to them because I have a certain amount of specific knowledge, and they in turn sit with detailed knowledge about what they sell or do.”

It helps that they the clients are accessory and that they are burning for what you do. Their influence on the creative parts should, however, be more balanced.

Ga – 2 “Possibly not a creative impact, but that they feel that it’s important, or have an understanding for the creative things that we do.”

Technical barriers: The clients usually have a very varied understanding when it comes to different styles and terms related to the various projects within the practice.

Ed/An – 1 “The spectrum is between people who are like “Fix this. It should only take, like, ten minutes” and people who are more “We understand that we don’t know how long such a thing takes, but could you... maybe?”
Technical barriers can happen from both directions. It is sometimes hard for the client to describe what their business or message is about because of it being too technical, for example.

Pl – 1 “It is often hard for the client to, in a short amount of time, teach me what the idea behind a certain It-system is or how it works, where the value lies and so on.”

An over explicit storyboard might for example take a longer time to make, but overall it helps the process to move faster.

Ed/An – 2 “I try to be clear, extra clear, I always, when I create the storyboard, make it as overexplicit as possible. I explain it almost at a child level to avoid it. But there is always some technical problem or something they misinterpret, I don’t think you can get away from that.”

The technical barriers get better, but instead the steadily increasing amount of communication and collaboration tools on the market make it hard to find a concurrent tool of collaboration.

Ga – 1 “It gets better and better for every year, there are fewer moments when it happens but…the barrier today is that there are too many options…options for platforms, options for way of working. If a client uses one project leading software that I don’t use, then that creates a barrier.”

Usually the biggest technical barrier between the producer and the client is a lacking understanding for the amount of work behind a project.

Ga – 2 “It is a lack in understanding for how hard something can be, but if you use a different reference “It possible on the phone, then it should be possible on a website”, “Yeah, sure but that means that it’s a totally different platform. Another form of technique. It is a lack of understanding that leads to a lack in communication”.

5.1 From the prototype evaluation

Generally, terms were a problem during the questioning, when I asked the participants what kind of editing jobs had been ordered and produced, many answered, “The things I ordered” or “they improved the message of my movie” but when asked follow up questions, all participants were able to give a more detailed answer along the lines of “they changed the colour of my movie”. There was also some confusion surrounding the state of the prototype as text inputs weren’t saved throughout the whole session, leading them to be presented with options they had not actively chosen. All participants were also a bit confused by the role-playing aspects of the evaluation, leading to them moving in and out of their roles throughout the session.

First participant, Female (33 years): Would have liked more options for customisation as she thought the present ones were a bit basic.

“Either it’s warm or it’s cold or black & white. For example, that I wanted parts of the movie to be black & white and pick up some more detailed finesses. Increase the possible options”
She mentioned that if you’re not really sure what it is you’re after, it’s probably easier being recommend more options rather than having to make changes strictly based on the given options.

“If you can’t come up with it yourself then it can be nice for those who might think it’s a good idea to mix things around, but they can’t think of it themselves”

She also believed that being offered a small amount of options might give a false impression of what the system or the editor can actually offer.

“You might get the impression that this is what you can do, and then you don’t understand that you can actually offer other things too. Even if you can ask for it, you might not understand that you can actually ask for other variants as well.”

She would have liked the descriptions of each feature to have been more detailed and have a clearer approach. Such as with references, for examples.

“Maybe you could give some examples there, such as “do you have any websites you like?”, some more inputs concerning what you could possibly give reference to”.

The part that she felt gave her the biggest creative freedom was the first part where she was given the option to select a specific part of the video to add an animation. Even though this feature also gave her some constraints, as she could only mark out one specific part.

“What I thought changed my film the most? I think it was where I could go in and say where in the film the change should be.”

Second participant, Male (29 years): The second participant felt a bit worried about the fact that he had to choose where the animation was supposed to be situated within the movie, as he felt that it was a big creative decision. He also didn’t feel that it was as visually explained compared to the other parts.

“I’m a bit worried about how good it will look when I put in this animation, or just how well thought-out it will be, this one feels more important to be able to communicate.”

He believed that it is extremely important to give visual examples of what it is you’re wanting to express to the client, such as in the part of choosing a colour tone.

“When you have the pictures you some examples of what you mean. That, I think is very important. That you exemplify what you mean when you’re talking about feelings and expressions, as you can have a very different view.”

He felt the biggest creative freedom came in being able to express what it was his specific company was looking for.

“When I got to express what our company was and what we wanted to express, that I felt had the biggest impact.”
Even though he understood the concept of adding an animation, it was hard to actually establish an idea of what he wanted to ask for. And why he should use it.

“It opens up some questions there, what kind of a staple diagram is supposed to be there? What should we fill that with, what kind of information should we have there?”

On a final note he added that he felt that as customer it is a balancing act where you on one hand want to add the responsibility over to someone else but you also want to have some influence. He believed that the more alternatives you give to the client, a sluggishness will mostly occur in the creative process, and that it is better to convince the client that “this is what you should do”.

Third participant, Male (62 yrs): The third participant felt like it was hard to get into the role of an ordering client as he didn’t already have a picture in his head of what it was that he was looking for. He added that he would probably have been more invested if he had come into the system with a clear idea of what it was he wanted to do.

“The problem is when you order something, you have a certain idea of what you’re after. Now I had to make something up.”

He also felt that it was hard to imagine on your own what, for example, “happy music” meant without an example and wanted more continuous feedback from the system at every step.

“If you say like this, “What is happy music?”, it can be hard to understand without examples...it’s not something that I see in the picture, you would want some explanation to what it would mean”

He felt that changing the colour gave him the biggest creative freedom as he, during that part, was able to instantly see what his changes would do. This segment also seemed like the clearest aspect of the system.

“It was the part with the colours. That’s what you saw the most off of.”

Fourth participant, Female (57 yrs): The fourth participant would have wanted to see more options when it came to choosing a specific colour, for example, in order to understand what a “cold” colour actually meant.

“what kind of colours do you work with, the spectrum, I understand the text but if you’re redoing a kitchen you’re shown a whole colour spectrum...all of these colours are included in “warm”..”

She, in turn, would have wanted more information when it came to the part of picking out in-and out-placements for the animation as she felt that it was something that she wasn’t used to doing.

“Since you’re maybe not so used to adding it, you’re maybe more used to seeing live-action film but not with animation, so some examples of how it would work.”
She mentions that she had a picture in her own mind, regarding how the animation she wrote down in the guide should look, but had troubles expressing it.

“I have a certain picture in my head of how it should be illustrated, I might not be able to draw it myself, and absolutely not on a computer.. maybe I need to have a dialogue back and forth.”

She also felt unsure about the style that the editor would offer her with the final product, as she was uncertain about his or her style (this being the first time ordering). In the same regard, she felt that options of choosing the colour tone and music was a decision easier for her to pass on to the editor.

“Music I imagine that, there you can more easily express yourself, colours you can also express..with animation, before I get familiar with this company I don’t have a clue…I don’t know how you think that you could illustrate this”

She felt that the part of adding animation was hard to imagine. Even though she saw the example video, it didn’t give her enough of an idea of how this type of animation would look when placed within her video.

“It didn’t appear so clearly how it would look appearing in a live-action film”

5.2 Final meeting with one of the experts

Shows the result of the final interview and brainstorming session together with one of the initial experts.

About working based on the participant’s inputs: She liked the automation of the software, and not even having to call up the client. If the client is to communicate through text however, they need to be more controlled. Text input in the software should come with clearer guidance and instructions, clarifying that what you write there will lay the foundation of your actual animation. Textbook suggestions of the text formatting should also be provided.

About the categorization: The categorization of the three segments should be reversed in its explanation. Instead of offering to change the mood of the film, you should ask the client out front what kind of music they would like, and then explain why a change of music can be used to set the mood.

About the options provided by the prototype: One of the most important things to find about a client is the feeling that they are after. It says a lot about what choice of music or what kind of speed they’re after. Therefore, giving them options such as changing the volume of the music can be very damaging for the final product. The options provided should therefore be more in the line of an umbrella, covering a bigger variety of options within it.

Work with reference materials: It was suggested that more reference materials should be shown throughout the system. It is however important that all of this material comes from the editor him/herself in order to set the right expectations.

Working within a complete solution: The most well received aspect of the suggested concept was the idea of a complete solution for all communication. She thought that this would be extremely helpful in reducing time. She added that a visual marker should be added in order
to confirm parts of a process. That way, it would be easy for her to reference back to previous confirmations, should the client come with unrealistic changes at the end of the design process.

6. Discussion

The result of my research gives several insights into the complex workflow of a creative design process. It also gathers the current problems with finding a common ground in a design process from two perspectives. First of all, from the perspective of the producer in a producer to client scenario, giving an insight into the expert's view on the communication and collaboration inside of a design process. Secondly, it gives a simulated view of the client side, using non-expert participants taking on the role as the client.

The problems faced during this study was both a lack of time and a difficulty in setting up the real life scenario. For this reason, I feel that the situated scenarios played a great role in gathering relevant findings. I would also most likely be willing to use this approach in future studies, even though a bigger effort would have to be placed on forming the roles of each participant.

6.1 What are the current problems?

Common ground is a broad term, withholding a broad spectrum of problems, problems that are most likely recognised by any expert working in the field of design. A few years ago Bjørn et al (2014) asked the question whether or not distance still matters within the field of CSCW. Their conclusion was that common ground still continued to be a fundamental challenge. The result of my studies show no different view as you can clearly establish that the communicational methods used in the field today are far from reaching a constant common ground, furthermore many of the defining problems established by Cramton (2001) in relation to the mutual knowledge problem are still seen. Following is a summary of some of the current problems in the field related to problems with communication and establishing common ground:

- The process of communication taking place during a design process today is very dynamic, consisting of a large amount of tools. A call can initiate a project, a physical meeting can be the result of that call, e-mail conversations can take on the general form of communication and feedback can happen on a printed paper. The result of all of this being that the project gets unstructured and too many critics get involved in the process.
- Clients don’t possess the same technical knowledge and understanding for the content that they have hired a producer to create. This leads to them coming up with unreasonable demands that hinder the process, something that might be happening simply because they don’t understand the gravity of decisions they might have accepted early on in the design phase.
- It can be a very good thing for the project if the client is passionate about what is being created and feels a strong engagement. It is however important that this engagement finds a balance and that the roles of the client don’t overlap the role of the producer.
6.2 How can we address these problems?

Two years ago, Bjørn et al (2014) suggested that in order to solve the problems concerning common ground, future studies should help to identify, create, maintain and apply different processes and methods that support global collaboration.

In relevance to this I proposed the concept of a new form of collaborative software in order to solve the many problems found in a producer to client scenario. The purpose of this software being to bridge the understanding found between the client and the producer.

The prototype used during the evaluation was a low-functioning version of said concept and would most likely not have worked without the help of the situated scenarios. It did, however, fill its function enough for it to show a possible way forward. To summarise the key findings from the client’s perspective, it showed that:

- Visual feedback combined with relevant references are a key instrument in order to gain a new understanding for the unversed.
- The system needs to clearly establish each function that it might present and explain its relevance for the concerned project.
- Users are more willing to take part in the parts of the process that they feel that they’ve gained an understanding for.
- Clients are in need of some form of real-life dialogue.

Seen from the producer’s perspective, it was clear that the inputs received from the clients are important but need to be accompanied with some additional guidance in order to be fully relevant for a complete design process. To summarise the final concept, a system used in a producer to client scenario should:

- Give the client textbook examples of every concept that they might be presented with.
- Clients should be encouraged more towards expressing the feelings they’re after rather than giving concrete solutions. This, in order to give the producer a greater creative freedom.
- Offer a complete tool for communication, making it easier to structure each project.
- Give the producer a way to easily mark out important decisions for the client, creating a bigger understanding for what cannot be changed at a later phase.

My hopes are that future studies surrounding this subject will help to explore more scenarios in relation to finding a common ground in the context of digital collaborative environments. By doing so we can help to create new kinds of collaborative tools for the future, making the design process more accessible and understandable than ever before.

7. Conclusion

My studies show that establishing common ground in relation to the design process between a creative producer and its respective client is a highly relevant problem in today’s field. In order
to solve these problems, I suggested that a collaborative software could be used in order to bridge the understanding between the client and the producer.

As a method for evaluating this concept, a semi-functional prototype was built. This prototype helped to conclude several key features that should be implemented in future systems in order to establish a common ground. For future studies, more scenarios and contexts must however be studied in order to address and locate other possible problems concerning the field of design collaboration.

Due to time constraints and problems with finding enough participants, I was however also not able to explore the proposed research scenario to a full extent. This in turn lead me to having to try and simulate parts of the research scenario using a method of role-playing. As a result of this, getting every participant to move into the actual mind-set of being part of a physical workspace was proven to be very hard. Instead of taking the stance of being an actual company representative, many participants went in and out of their roles throughout the whole evaluation sessions. To solve this limitation in future studies, I would suggest not to rely too much on the role-playing aspects, especially if you don’t have enough time to properly set up the right conditions. In the case of this study, I feel that the evaluation came to demand too much of the participants.

Overall however, the results that I’ve gathered during this study has added both current knowledge surrounding the problems in establishing common ground as well as laid out some concepts to be used as a possible solution for the future development of collaborative systems. This makes the result relevant both to the current practitioners in the field, as well as to the research field concerning CSCW-development.

References


