

NOUVELLES CARTES PORTUGAISES: A GAMIFIED PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH TO PROMOTE PORTUGUESE CULTURAL AND VISUAL HERITAGE

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Abstract

This paper presents a workshop as part of a week-long event promoting Portuguese design culture among Graphic Design students in the French public higher education system. The workshop aimed to achieve three main objectives: promote awareness of 20th-century Portuguese Graphic Designers, artists, and their work; encourage reflection on the historical and current context of communication artifacts; and foster collaborative design strategies. The overarching goal was to design and produce a contemporary card game. The workshop was designed to be adaptable to various cultural contexts, promoting Portuguese and other cultures. It consisted of three main components: a historical and visual presentation, a cultural and political reflection stimulus, and an iteration-based collaborative design activity. The historical and visual presentation delved into the history and visual repertoire of 20th-century Portuguese graphic artists and designers. This included visual details and cultural/historical insights, stimulating group discussion within the contemporary context. The cultural and political reflection stimulus involved presenting the literary work “*Novas Cartas Portuguesas*” to stimulate reflection and challenge existing social representations and visual stereotypes. The collaborative design assignment centered around the creation of a deck of cards. Each participant was assigned a symbol or card value, and by using visual references, they had to reflect and synthesize these elements into a stencil fit for printing. The manual production of stencils facilitated embodied reflection and continuous iteration, with decisions made and discussed in real-time. The participants, comprising 40 students with diverse backgrounds, designed, developed, and printed their graphics on the same deck of physical cards during iterative feedback sessions, allowing for discussions ranging from technical execution to cultural semiotic interpretations. The final deck of cards became a tool for further discussion, with participants using them to explore the meaning of the graphics and develop a narrative for a card game. Other students were invited to play the game during the final exhibition. Qualitative feedback during the results’ presentation indicated that participants understood the assignment and successfully interpreted cultural values into minimal graphics. The interpretations were validated by their peers, demonstrating the effectiveness of the collaborative and iterative process in addressing cultural and social perspectives in Graphic Design. Overall, the workshop achieved its goals of promoting cultural awareness, encouraging reflection, and fostering collaborative design strategies.

Keywords: “*Novas Cartas Portuguesas*”, *graphic design education, cultural heritage, gestalt, gamification.*

1. Introduction

This paper describes a workshop as part of a week-long event promoting Portuguese design culture among Graphic Design students at a French public higher education institution. Three main objectives were defined for this workshop: promote awareness of 20th-century Portuguese Graphic Designers and their work, encourage reflection on the historical and current context of communication artifacts, and foster collaborative design strategies. The main objective was to design and produce a contemporary deck of cards. A graphic product based on a framework designed to help university design students of multiple nationalities and backgrounds find creative answers to the challenge of designing original and meaningful artifacts consistent with the gamified context of the brief.

This exercise, grounded in one country's cultural heritage, was based on experimentation (in terms of mediums and processes) and collaborative, face-to-face practices, promoting an environment of free questioning, discussion, and research, with the brief being open enough for solutions to vary. The aim was to contribute to creating an open exploration environment (albeit intensive, conditioned by a three-day timeframe), in contrast to the academic curriculum these students were following, which was more geared towards learning specific and traditional skills and more conventional working methods. As Papanek (1984) suggested back in the 1970s, the education of designers must adjust to their time. This is a fact then as it is today.

“Education for designers (like nearly all education) is based on learning skills, nourishing talents, understanding the concepts and theories that inform the field, and, finally, acquiring a philosophy. It is unfortunate that our design schools proceed from wrong assumptions. The skills we teach are too often related to processes and working methods of an age that has ended.”

Now is a time of multiculturalism and societal challenges to which graphic design is obligated to contribute positively. Our mission as educators is to provide our students with these experiences, enabling them to be more flexible, critical, and empathetic when stepping into the global work environment.

The practical outcome of this workshop – a deck of cards – was conceived to explore the potential that games can have as educational tools, so not only the aesthetic aspect but also the storytelling context and the game mechanics themselves were considered.

Kapp (2012) underlines the importance of the aesthetics of a game and how it can amplify the player's experience.

“Ignoring aesthetics in the design and creation of a game or the use of gamification techniques reduces the overall experience of the players. The space in which the game is played becomes boring without aesthetics. (...) The aesthetics help the players become caught up in the game experience.” (Kapp, 2012)

Kapp (2012) also identifies storytelling as one of the essential elements and variables of the complex system that is a game: “While not all games have a story narrative behind them, storytelling is an essential part of the gamification of learning and instruction. The element of “story” provides relevance and meaning to the experience.”

The aim of linking the graphic and formal references of the 20th-century Portuguese graphic repertoire with the concepts and challenges of the NCP work was to create opportunities for unique and meaningful game designs in terms of their appearance and rules. Games that could lead to a free exploration of the established cultural and social preconceptions, as well as visually compelling and original. Salen and Zimmerman (2004) suggest something somewhat along these lines by changing the traditional rules and roles of a card-based game:

“What if the deck of cards was altered by changing its four suits? Would we still be playing the same game? Perhaps Spades becomes Death, Hearts becomes Love, Clubs becomes War, and Diamonds becomes Sex. The change might entail a graphical alteration to the suits as they appear on the cards or the name by which players refer to the cards. (“I've got an eight of War.”)” (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004)

2. Nouvelles Cartes Portugaises workshop design & objectives

The workshop was designed to be adjusted to several cultural contexts and formal or informal settings, thereby fulfilling the aim of promoting Portuguese culture and intercultural relations. It was organized into three main moments: a presentation of historical and visual references, an incentive for culturally and ethically committed research, and a collaborative design experience based on rapid, analog-based iterations.

The historical and visual presentation focused on the history and visual repertoire of 20th-century Portuguese graphic artists and designers (Figure 1). This presentation included the showcase of several graphic examples by artists and designers and a historical and artistic overview of the development of graphic arts and design in Portugal during the 20th century. The objective was to inform the practical stage of this workshop and encourage a group discussion that could enable a critical analysis of contemporary design within a changing society.

Figure 1. The slide deck presentation of the history and visual repertoire of 20th-century Portuguese graphic artists and designers was complemented with showing and discussion of additional examples from Portuguese graphic design history publications. In the image, participants are appropriating Abel Manta's language into their designs.



Stimulating cultural and political reflection also involved presenting the literary work “*Novas Cartas Portuguesas*” (NCP) to encourage debate and challenge existing social representations and visual stereotypes. Published and banned in the 1970s, NCP is a literary work published jointly by the Portuguese writers Maria Isabel Barreno, Maria Teresa Horta, and Maria Velho da Costa. NCP played an essential role in the fall of the dictatorship and remains crucial to the contemporary political agenda.

The goal was to build a cross-cultural communication platform and collaboration framework towards tackling social and political problems, which were present in the 70s and are progressively reemerging today, aiming at a global and critical worldview. This an approach that the educator and philosopher Paulo Freire (1921–1997) called “critical pedagogy,” explained here by Giroux (2010):

“Critical pedagogy also insists that one of the fundamental tasks of educators is to make sure that the future points the way to a more socially just world, a world in which critique and possibility—in conjunction with the values of reason, freedom, and equality—function to alter the grounds upon which life is lived. That is hardly a prescription for political indoctrination. It offers students new ways to think and act independently.” (Giroux, 2010)

The practical project consisted of a collaborative design activity centered on creating a deck of playing cards in which each participant developed a symbol or card value. To design and play a new card-based game as a group. The workshop audience was diverse, with a robust multicultural profile consisting of bachelor and master students, and it was part of a Portuguese-French intercultural initiative. During the first stage of the workshop, the participants used visual references from the Portuguese graphic heritage presentation to create a stencil for printing. They achieved this by elaborating on the symbolic value of these references and synthesizing the formal elements. Additionally, they developed narrative variations derived from the input of the NCP stories—the manual production of stencils allowed for embodied reflection and continuous iterative decision-making, creating a hands-on approach.

3. Methods and outcomes

The workshop started with a showcase of the work of 20th-century Portuguese graphic designers, which included the presentation of graphic references, the NCP work, and its main theses. The briefing of the entire workshop game-design activity was then presented. The research, ideation, and sketching phases followed.

Working with 40 students from diverse backgrounds (including two Portuguese Erasmus+ students and two Luso descendants), our main objective was to create a deck of 34 playing cards.

Each participant was asked to choose one visual element from a list that included a suit, a card number, or a figure for a card deck. The workshop facilitators would produce and print the pattern on the back. The image of the card element could occupy up to one-quarter of the area of the card and should be reversible. It was essential to consider that each card would result from collaborative design and print processes. Thus, printing areas' overprints and "crossovers" should be planned and nurtured in their process and designs, as emergent graphics could lead to innovative and unpredictable creative solutions (Figure 2). The formal options should be adapted to the stencil technique, which requires a simplified design conscious of the counter forms. The color options were purposefully limited, which, along with the low fidelity of the manual stencil printing technique, fostered faster decisions and quicker iterations during the testing phase (Figure 3).

Figure 2. The use of tracing paper and fast sharpie sketching of initial shapes allowed for planning and promoting the design of collaborative compositions and the study of overprinting designs among participants during review phases.



Figure 3. The imposed limitations to the use of colors and low fidelity manual stencil promoted the research and design of the most efficient shapes in order to convey the intended semiotic meanings. It required a few iterations in the process, but the manual low fidelity allowed for a fast return process.



This was particularly important when individuals were working in a collaborative setting. From day one of the workshop, we implemented iterative feedback sessions covering technical execution to cultural semiotics and storytelling of the final game.

Although the result was a card deck, the initial briefing included a possible game design exercise, using the aesthetics of the cards to enhance the players' experience. The storytelling could ideally provide essential documents about the Portuguese graphic heritage and serve as a medium for reflection on social representations and visual stereotypes.

On the second day, the group refined the sketches and stencil preparation. This included test-printing of colors and color separations and the articulation of individual prints on the same card base.

On the third and final day, the students printed the card deck and rehearsed new card games' goals and mechanics that aligned with the stories and narratives on the cards. As the card deck neared completion, some students started to test the gameplay. However, this printing phase took longer than expected, leading to the decision to have a final gameplay using the rules of a conventional card game familiar to most group members. Other students external to the workshop were invited to play the game during the final exhibition (Figure 4), and an open-ended discussion took place to evaluate the workshop goals as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the process.

Figure 4. One of the clusters of the final focus groups impromptu test-play sessions with the final deck of cards. Participants are exploring the designs the participants made, while discussing their meaning, appropriateness and application in the proposed game.



4. Conclusions

Overall, the workshop promoted Portuguese Graphic Designers and culture, encouraged reflection, and fostered collaborative design strategies. Critical Thinking was encouraged by engaging in discussions on societal issues and challenging existing social representations, inspired by the literary work NCP and fueled by the diversity of the participants' various cultural backgrounds. During the workshop and using a collaborative practice, students were encouraged to think critically about their designs and contributions. The design process was hands-on and iterative, enabled by the stencil technique in use, involving rapid, analog-based experiences and continuous feedback sessions. This resulted in the production of a unique deck of cards.

The exploration of game design as an educational tool added a layer of complexity to the exercise by considering the aesthetic aspect, the storytelling context, and game mechanics. By doing so, the workshop aimed to create engaging and meaningful learning experiences. This aspect, however, had to be adjusted to the tight timeframe of the activity and will be revised in future editions of the workshop.

The workshop ended with an open presentation where other external participants could gameplay. According to the response received during the presentation of the results, the 13 participants that constituted the two-cluster impromptu focus group were able to comprehend the assignment and successfully interpreted cultural values and visual references into minimal but meaningful graphics. When questioned by the facilitators, the interpretations were further validated by several of their colleagues watching the game, demonstrating the effectiveness of the collaborative, hands-on, and iterative process in addressing cultural and social perspectives in graphic design and design education.

There was a clear effort to produce an engaging and thought-provoking game, and the feedback received during the presentation will be used to refine and improve the workshop for other geographical and cultural settings.

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