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**Article:**
Foster, J., Lin, A. and Edmonds, E. (2010) We don't do Google, we do massive attacks: Notes on creative R&D collaborations. Leonardo, 43 (1). 94 - 95.

https://doi.org/10.1162/leon.2010.43.1.94

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# WE DON'T DO GOOGLE, WE DO MASSIVE ATTACKS: NOTES ON CREATIVE R&D COLLABORATIONS

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*Submitted: 20/4/2009*

**Abstract**

The article presents findings from an exploratory study investigating the nature of collaborative research and development in creative industries. Participants in the study are two creative SMEs with extensive experience of participating in collaborative projects. A collective case study approach is adopted with data collected on the factors impinging on the effectiveness of such collaborations. Findings are presented at the macro and micro levels of such collaborations. The paper concludes with a summary of some of the challenges faced by small creative SMEs when collaborating with other organizations during the research and development process. Keywords: Creative industries, collaborative processes, macro context, micro context, challenges.

It is a truism that research and development in any interdisciplinary form of work includes a division of labor and hence collaboration among specialists who possess differing but complementary expertise. Within the creative industries there are many examples of successful collaborations involving practice-based artists, researchers, and developers in the fields of e.g. animation, music, performing arts, and games. Many of these collaborations also involve mass public participation as a key ingredient in the work generated. Such creative collaborations often have "a distinctive character [though] that challenges traditional models of research and business innovation. Specifically, the creative industries revolve around dynamic and often unorthodox coalitions, whereby numerous small and micro-businesses come together for the duration of a single project, then disband and form new partnerships for the next project" [1]. This structural preference for short-term project-oriented work poses some problems when a more conducive approach to creative practice may be to engage and sustain a creative collaboration over an extended period of time. This article reports on issues arising from an exploratory study into the factors that motivate arts-based organizations to engage in creative collaborations, the issues arising from their experience of the collaborative processes involved, along with any consequences for the sustainability of such collaborations beyond the duration of a single project. If practice-based research into creative industries is to continue to flourish, an understanding of some the factors that influence enable and constrain the viability of such collaborations may be useful for a range of audiences included arts practitioners, researchers, and policy-makers. A collective case study approach was adopted for an investigation into these factors. A case is defined here as a creative project, with the boundaries of the case being the beginning and end of the project. In keeping with the collective case study approach our prior interest rests however with an investigation into a phenomenon that binds the cases together. Each individual case therefore acts as an example of a project within which collaborative processes are embedded. Thus our investigation in the cases was constrained by our prior interest in the phenomenon of collaborative processes and what we can learn about these processes from the projects within which these projects are embedded. Any case also exists in a context and the situation is no different in the creative industries. Thus it seemed sensible to organize the cases according to the macro context of the projects, equating to a structural context of organizations, agencies, and processes enabling or constraining the initiation and sustainability of creative projects; and a micro context of the projects themselves and the collaborative processes that are embedded in them. Processes at the macro level will have consequences for the micro level and consequences at the micro level have consequences for the macro level. This approach to organizing the cases draws on Strauss and Corbin's conditional/ consequential matrix [2]. This matrix informed the design of an interview schedule used to collect data on collaborative processes. The questions used to collect data included: What does 'collaborative R&D' mean to you? What aspects of the broader situation in the creative industries are relevant to you in engaging in collaborative research and development e.g. international, government and government policy, political and economic elements, non-governmental organizations, critics, the media, the public; as well as technology and the legal context? What are the implications of any of these for collaborative R&D? What does the process of collaborating mean to you? What was the purpose of the project? What did collaborating mean in terms of practical actions on the project? What was the sequence of actions? Were there any adjustments? Were there any consequences of 'collaborating' on one project for collaborating on another; and for how 'Collaborative R&D' can be supported by other agencies e.g. government, research councils, universities? The findings in this article derive from in-depth interviews conducted with members of two distinctive arts organizations who exploit or draw on technology to a significant extent in their work. After addressing the first question as to interviewees' understanding of collaboration, the findings are organized according to issues arising from a discussion of the macro context, the micro context, and any interactions and consequences that arise between the two. A selection of issues are then highlighted and briefly discussed under each of these main headings before concluding with an assertion of our own.

## What is collaborative R&D?

Interviewees' understandings of collaborative research and development are framed by the projects with which they have been engaged. For SME1 this refers to a number of projects that now form part of a long-standing arts and technology collaboration with a university department. For SME2 collaborative R&D refers not only to arts-technology collaboration with a university department but also to a range of other collaborations with largely institutional agencies e.g. central and local government, schools. Thus, while the former has tended to focus on one productive relationship oriented around arts and technology the purpose motivating the latter collaborations has been to influence social processes as much as it has been to generate artwork. In all the projects referred to and discussed by the interviewees however a collaborative element has been present as a component of what one might call in business parlance the upstream activities associated with artistic production e.g. co-opting partners into cooperative artistic ventures, ideas generation, incubation, and production. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, collaborations can indeed be conceived of as a partnership in which a division of labour occurs and each party brings to the collaboration specialist expertise not hitherto accessible to any of the parties involved. This is one model of collabora-

 

tion R&D. The more effective creative collaborations however clearly involve empathy for differing disciplinary and professional backgrounds and practices; and are educative and occasionally transformational for those concerned. From the practitioner perspective the value and benefits derived from these collaborations are thus both material and immaterial. Resources e.g. sourcing technological expertise and finance are clearly high on the agenda. The artistic motivation for engaging in collaborative R&D however is the desire to engage in a relationship that is interdisciplinary and mutually influential. Indeed the very status of being an independent and largely autonomous SME enables its practitioners to inhabit a space that cannot clearly be defined and demarcated within existing academic disciplinary boundaries. This status of being a self-governing entity supports the ethos and commitment to interdisciplinarity. Some of the consequences of being a creative SME committed to interdisciplinarity are discussed below when addressing the micro context of creative R&D collaborations.

## Macro context

Any creative R&D collaboration takes place within the context of a broader situation that includes for example other arts organisations, government agencies, and research councils; as well as critics, and the general public. It is not the purpose of this article to give an overview of this macro context but in keeping with the methodology to highlight some of those aspects of the macro context that those interviewed consider to be of relevance to their work. One very practical example of the way in which the broader landscape of the creative industries has effected creative collaborations has been in the area of funding. The first of the university arts technology collaborations that SME1 engaged in during the mid-1990s involved the gradual accumulation of funds from rather disparate organisations. Since then, an increasing reputation, but also a changing funding landscape in which research councils and universities have been more mindful of the impact of universities on communities and the economy in general and more systematic in their financial support for creative industries in particular has contributed to a changing macro context that is very different as of 2009 than it was a decade earlier. Besides a changing institutional and funding context, identification of the issue of artistic value is also pertinent but in quite different ways. For SME1 the macro context will be inhabited by critics and the like who create a context for the reception of their work and assign value to their work. Hence for SME1 the value of a work and its contribution to their artistic reputation is inextricably tied to and mediated by the evaluations of art critics. For SME2 though the primary purpose of the macro situation was to act as a source of organisations as varied as government, local communities organisations, and public libraries as potential partners to be co-opted into the creative process; with this arts organisation acting as a mediator in the changing of societal and social processes e.g. governmental services, city planning processes, or processes of public consultation. Here reputational value is linked more to acting as a cultural physician and in circulating ideas amongst policy-makers rather than in influencing a traditional artistic audience. For SME1 the changing technological landscape is clearly important as the exploration of the cultural significance and creative potential of new technologies is currently central to their work. A final issue identified is the relevance of the legal context. Larger SMEs will have dedicated in-house legal teams, with micro businesses sometimes having little option but to check a contract once drawn up, rather than finance its writing. This also applies to any patent application where the overheads associated with maintaining and protecting these patents prohibit this. SME1 for example currently has no intellectual property agreements with its major collaborator, with ownership built on trust with known individuals. In other collaborations agreements have been put in place, but even here what is a fair division is sometimes complex, given the intertwining of the material and immaterial aspects of an artistic work.

## Micro context

Interviewees were also asked about the processes that can occur when collaborating on creative projects. It was considered that when working with technology there has to be an awareness and understanding of the constraints and opportunities afforded by that particular technology. This led, as one might expect when working with technology, to a working model favoured by SME1 that involved an iterative loop between technical development, testing, and creative outcome. As such, working very empirically through this loop and understanding the constraints of the technology and what it can offer. With regard to innovation: "You can only get a minute step forward from where the world already is. You can't create great ideas and build them. That is not our experience whatsoever" (Interviewee 1). A further factor identified was the impact of the nature of creativity on the collaborative process. The creative trajectory is most often not a linear process but a process that proceeds fitfully, often involving critical incidents and changes in direction. Flexibility from both sides as to key aspects of each others' professional practices will mitigate any negative effects of this process. A desire to preserve this creative process means that participation in larger commercially-driven and standardized collaborations can be problematic. It is considered that what is distinctive about innovation in this country is that there is such a strong tradition of small creative teams e.g. in music, design, comedy. Equipping small teams with business and marketing skills is one approach; equally supporting an ecosystem that enables a thousand flowers to bloom is another defendable approach. From the creative artistic perspective the autonomy such an approach gives is vital; from the perspective of a creative economy in which micro SMEs are encouraged to participate in larger standardized commercially-driven constellations preserving such autonomy becomes more problematic, particularly in the area of the legal ownership of work.

## Conclusion

For these SMEs working in collaborations and working through the collaborative processes that arise is clearly a highly valued activity and one to which these creative SMEs are committed to. A key interaction appears to be that between what we have called the macro context and the micro context of such collaborations; and balancing creative practice with the life support that involvement with larger institutional forms can bring.

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