



## Experimenting with design tools for just public services

Paula Hardie  
Griffith University, Australia  
p.hardie@griffith.edu.au

### Abstract

The emergence of digital public services in Australia is evidencing a techno-colonisation of service design imaginaries. This paper considers how design tools are mediating this process. A workshop with seven designers experimented with four speculative and decolonising design tools to interrogate three areas of public services. The resulting maps and design fictions suggest just public service futures might be envisioned through design tools that make socio-political tensions more visible.

Keywords: digital public services, decolonising design, design tools

### Digital public services

Throughout the industrial revolutions, designers have often illustrated future visions that service a technological modernity. Now, in the fourth industrial revolution, design has been enlisted by governments in a scramble to harness the perceived power of artificial intelligence, blockchain, algorithms, and big data gathered by ubiquitous information technologies to manifest such futures. As the Australian Government

pires to digitalise all public services by 2025 (Digital Transformation Agency, 2018), design's role in this 'digital transformation' is configuring the next 'modern' iteration of public services delivered by a government "fit for the digital age" (Digital Transformation Agency, 2018, p39). The design of public services from a technological packaging of options (Mignolo, 2011) carries forth a common dogma: that technological development is natural evolution (Fry, 2009). Citizens, characterised as passive consumers in a neoliberal technology marketplace, can expect to have systemic social problems like poverty managed with apps, automated algorithms, cashless cards, and online virtual assistants.

Tensions can be located across a range of socio-technical systems wherein digital public services are unfolding. For example, in Australia's welfare system, Centrelink's part-automated debt recovery scheme, known as robo-debt, has issued hundreds of thousands of false overpayment receipts to welfare recipients using an invalid data-matching algorithm (Karp, 2019). The scheme caused further adversity among already poor and vulnerable groups, transferring the demand for social services onto non-profit care organisations (Hinton, 2018) and legal aid (National Legal Aid, 2019). In public resource management systems, sensors and blockchain technology purport efficiency savings by tracking and managing waste streams with more speed. While waste generation rises each year, passivity is preserved by technologies perpetuating the concealment and speed of the material consequences of hyper-consumption (Schultz and Hardie, 2018). Similarly, increased speed and efficiency rationalises the design of a blockchain-based electronic voting app which promises to decentralise and remedy power imbalances in Australia's electoral systems (Elton-Pym, 2016). In this case, existing disparity in digital participation risks downgrading the political participation of those without access.

The concentrated vision for digital public services aligns with broader notions argued by design theorists: that the speed of technological evolutions evidences a techno-colonisation of plural imagination (Escobar, 2018; Schultz, 2018a; Fry, 2017). Design is implicated in this when it suppresses options beyond the digital for governments and communities to manage public matters. To explore ways for decolonising public service futures, this paper discusses an experiment with design tools that may enable designers to imagine public services otherwise.

## **Design tools for digital public services**

Upon brief analysis of the design strategies and tools used for Australian government services (Digital Transformation Agency, 2019), problems can be identified in the employment of user-centred design thinking tools. For example, standardised journey maps are used to chart an individual's 'life events' and points of interaction with government services informed by user research (Wilson, 2019). As a design tool imported from customer service management, journey mapping recasts citizens as passive consumers of services; a move that detaches the political agency from people. Journey maps also omit space for exploring the systemic origins of socio-political tensions. Instead, technical glitches or 'pain points' within digital public services, such as having to provide the government with information multiple times, supplement the absence of much more complex design problems yet to be sufficiently addressed. Journey mapping is one among many popular design tools that performs an inescapable neoliberal politics where complexity is visually reduced and rationalised by the objectivity of palatable data (Hall, 2011). Thinking, therefore designing, is trapped by the visual absence of relational forces, ontologically reproducing the same systemic conditions for social, political and environmental injustice.

## **Design tools for just public services**

In an attempt to experiment with design tools that might lead to visions of just public services, a workshop (see Figure 1) was designed by the author from a hacked compilation of four existing design tools that drew on speculation, relational and systems thinking, and visual complexity. The tools included critical mapping (Schultz, 2018b), visual dialogue (Sheehan, 2011), Dunne and Raby's (2013) futures cone, and design fictions.

The workshop began with a yarnning circle (talking circle) where seven designers shared stories that connected them to three systems of public service (welfare, waste, and democracy) by positioning their intersectional identities in relation to personal and professional experiences. Then, designers sketched and noted responses to the question, 'what will design be in futures of welfare, waste and democracy?' in futures cones on cards. Following Schultz's (2018b) adaptation of Sheehan's (2011) visual dialogue, the designers placed their cards on the floor to reflect on relational patterns and responses. The designers drew on forecasting sources (ARUP, n.d.), knowledge cards (Relative Creative, n.d.), tacit

knowledge and lived experience to map components of their system as it appears in the *present* (e.g. digital voting, health, and waste), tracing its existence into being by naming *pasts* (e.g. colonialism, patriarchy, and modernity). They identified points of tension in the systems where they were able to see *futures arriving* (e.g. ageing population, climate change, and technological singularity) poised to clash with the present trajectories of waste, welfare and democracy. Lastly, the designers used their mapped interrogations to imagine possible futures of just public service design. Their multiple speculative glimpses are summarised in the following design fiction:

In the year 2040, 'design' has been recoded in the public psyche. Design is no longer categorised into professional disciplines, but rather design signifies powerful processes for facilitating systems change. Job titles like 'Visual Systems Engineers' and 'Health Systems Forecasters' have opened technical design roles toward interdisciplinary modes of designing. A national strain on public health services, due to population growth and ageing, prompts a collaboration between designers, medical professionals, traditional custodians and farmers to decolonise food production. Australia's welfare systems roll out universal basic income alongside programs that reskill communities to become more self-sufficient and connected. Democracy looks different. Instead of electoral voting every few years, everyday community touchpoints (including workshops and online social networks) encourage active citizen participation and are facilitated by local councils, public servants and policy makers trained in design thinking. Algorithms are used to identify key values and contentions in community-generated discussions and artefacts to inform policy action. The combination of technology and in-person contributions allows a variety of people to be involved in vision-making and decision-making. In another vision, the redirection of waste parallels the re-design of education systems. A critical pedagogy that teaches students adaptation skills and values in affordances, not things, over time psychologically recodes the meaning of waste, transitioning Western cultures of linear production and hyper-consumption toward cultures of caring, sharing and repairing. (The Design in Futures of Waste, Welfare and Democracy Workshop took place at the Queensland College of Art at Griffith University in September 2019).



Figure 1: Two designers discuss and map forces, concerns, tensions and connections in democracy using knowledge cards, forecasting sources and a critical mapping tool (Schultz, 2018b) to produce design fictions.

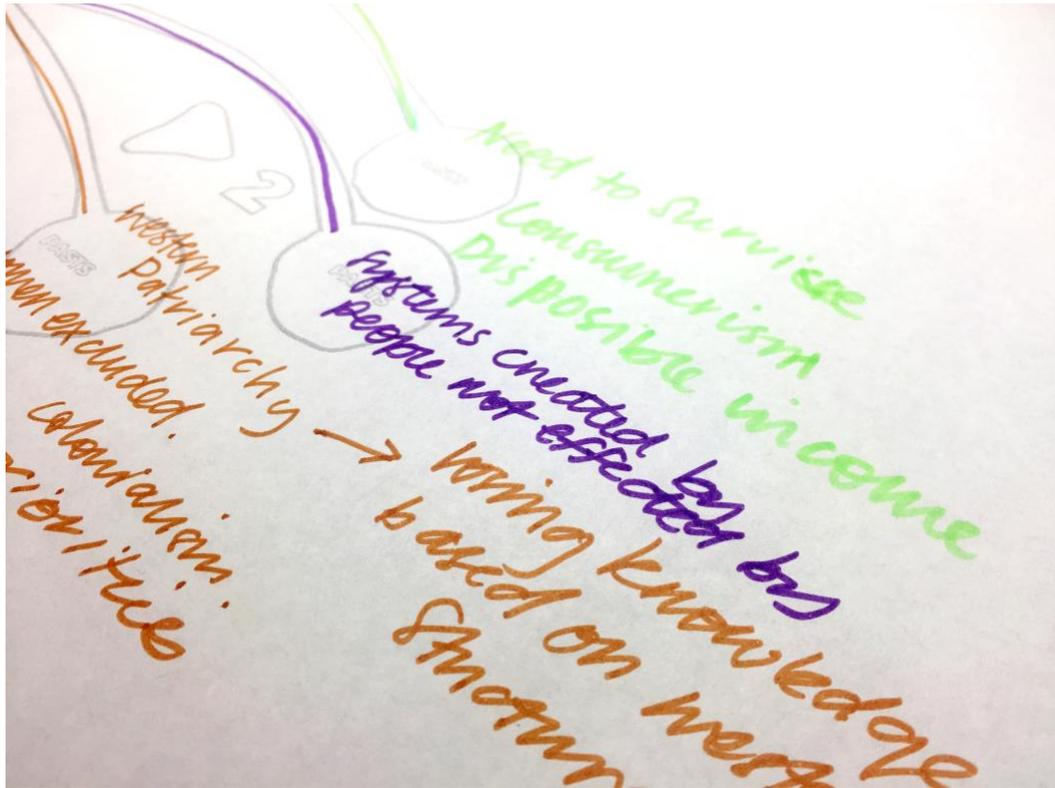


Figure 2: A close-up of 'pasts' identified in the welfare map.

## Conclusion

This paper considered how Australia's digital public services are manifesting through popular design tools such as journey mapping, then overviewed an experiment with four design tools with an aim to find alternative ways to arrive at just public service visions. The tools enabled a visual and verbal dialogue which prompted designers to reflect on their own knowledge and experiences within the systems through their identities e.g. as a woman, as a person with disability, as a racial minority, as a queer person. This allowed the designers to acknowledge who has been absent in the design of public systems (see Figure 2), such as how the exclusion of groups from Western patriarchal medicine has designed gaps in medical datasets today. In response to the mapped tensions, the group then discussed opportunities for mobilising interdisciplinary and participatory design processes between designers, communities and service providers.

A key finding from the workshop was that the design tools drew out socio-political tensions, rather than concealed them. Designers were able to articulate and locate complex and interconnected issues in the socio-technical systems in which public services are embedded. This contrasts the actions of a popular design tool, journey mapping, which was critiqued for concealing and simplifying tensions as 'pain points' passively experienced by citizen-users. The workshop's design tools shifted the scope for re-design onto societal systems, which prompted the designers into an open negotiation of their values, concerns and politics. This experiment suggests design tools that make socio-political tensions explicit through critical interrogations, visual complexity, relational understandings and decolonising visions could potentially provide a more just foundation to inform the configuration of technology and public service design.

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