

Mi Fink a musical app about afro-caucan territory protection

Andrés Eduardo Nieto Vallejo
Departamento de Diseño
Pontificia Universidad Javeriana
Bogotá, Colombia
nieto-andres@javeriana.edu.co

Isabel Cristina Tobón Giraldo
Departamento de Arquitectura
Pontificia Universidad Javeriana
Bogotá, Colombia
ictobon@javeriana.edu.co

Carlos Torres Parra
Departamento de Diseño
Pontificia Universidad Javeriana
Bogotá, Colombia
crtorres@javeriana.edu.co

ABSTRACT

The traditional Afro-Caucan farm is part of the northern Cauca culture in Colombia, but it is threatened. Mi Fink is an interactive app that vindicates traditional farming as a form of community work and an afro-descendant expression. This research-creation project is a case of participatory design carried out among boys and girls from the village of Villa Rica in northern Cauca in Colombia, with a team of professionals from different areas and academic researchers. This experience shows how children can carry out novel activities such as stop motion animation with digital devices despite expected limitations related to digital technologies access. On the other hand, this case study provides clues to demonstrate how participatory design allows the transition from passive mobile phone use to a creative perspective where marginalized actors from official discourse are can participate in the construction of other stories.

Author Keywords

Participatory design; co-design; co-creation; territory; participatory culture; social innovation; activism

IMPORTANT NOTES

UPDATED—5 May 2020.

- Mi Fink was also presented as an exploratory paper

for the Participatory Design Conference with this very same text

• My Fink app is available for download at <https://www.mifink.com/>, as well as more information about the project (in Spanish). It can also be downloaded for Android phones at https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=andreseduardonieto.territorios&hl=es_CO Or from the App Store at <https://apps.apple.com/co/app/mi-fink/id1487180145>

• Technical requirements for its exhibition are explained at the end of the document.

INTRODUCTION

Mi Fink is an interactive animation that vindicates the farm tradition as a form of community work and an expression about Afro-descendant communities in northern Cauca, Colombia. This research-creation project is a collaborative work carried out between children from the population of Villa Rica in northern Cauca in Colombia, social leaders from the Corporación Colombia Joven and researchers from Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá.

This text presents a participatory design experience designed to make visible the territorial conflict that takes place in the north of Cauca department, Colombia. With the silenced voices from social actors, we elaborate narratives shared visions on the values and principles from Traditional Afro-Caucan Farm, and mobilize them against the hegemonic use of digital media with the creation of a mobile app and a web site.



THE TRADITIONAL AFRO-CAUCAN FARM

The territory exploitation and commodification because of intensive and extensive production of sugar cane in the geographical valley of Cauca River, in Colombia, has historically limited the traditional practices of Afro-Colombian communities. These communities, from colonial enslavement processes, were organized into free communities known as “paleques” [1], places of refuge concealed in the bush, to which the enslaved fugitives went. Since then, people have created resistance expressions about their territory exploitation and looked for different ways of living. Now, new ways of resistance found their way in circumstances of great fragility, updated and remains in force, vital and hopeful. The Traditional Afro-Caucan Farm is a productive and reproductive agrarian form of family and community work. It is a production form that builds territoriality through ties of parentage and proximity and manifests a life appreciation from an ancestral perspective. Thus, it can be understood as a way of land habitation and care, and an expression of responsible care for the environment. The Afro-Caucan Traditional Farm entails a world vision, a thinking scheme of diversity that seeks coherence with values, social organization, political interests, the deep meaning of territorial cultural identity and the security of a place for life through affective relations with the environment.

The Project

The project tries to activate the Afro-Caucan Traditional Farm memories among younger generations to defend territory fight. The intergenerational recognition of forward-looking memories requires the exploration of alternative languages that connect different visions about the world and life in the same place. Participatory design workshops raised awareness about the recognition of community values that strengthen the territory defense through “artistic practices” [2].

Mi Fink intends to amplify and renew the repertoires of “collective action” [3] of social actors using digital media potentialities, this experience is part of a theoretical perspective that understands participatory design as an instrument and opportunity to defy power relations [4], in this case, the struggle for the territory of a community.

Mi Fink was also an exercise in what Manzini [5] calls social innovation, a collaborative design process between “expert designers”, in this case, the engineers, musicians, and designers involved in the project, and

“diffuse designers” characterized by the spontaneity appreciated in the pieces made by the community’s children. As a result, we observed a community more aware of its social reality, as well as the challenges faced by its territory, including child population.

Digital artifacts such as Mi Fink are part of what Henry Jenkins and his colleagues call Participatory Culture, characterized by the stimulation of values of diversity and democracy through the interactions that occur between members of a community, and with others, expressing themselves through the possibilities offered by digital media [6].

Co-creation exercise made participants relevant in an active way in all the stages of development [7]. In this case, children role was decisive in two moments: first, rising awareness about farm value through artistic practices such as narration, painting, and video games development; and in a second phase by musical interpretation through their singing and animation creation that later were integrated into the app (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Children making animations in stop motion

During the workshops in 2018 and 2019 about stop motion animation, narrative, drawing, and programming, children from the community mobilized in their family contexts the memories about traditional Afro-Caucan farm. These activated memories inspired the creation of nine animations made by children, consolidating what we understand as a “digital cultural artifact”. Mi Fink incorporates several achievements, an interactive music video, where the user can make different combinations activating animations that correspond to musical sections of “Mi Fink” and a website detailing the explorations in this co-creation project, which includes a documentary about the traditional

farm, produced ten years ago by the group Support Klan, from Villa Rica.

The App

Mi Fink is a mobile app available for phones that operate under iOS and Android platforms.



Figure 2. Each interface element is part of the song; users can try different combinations to create their own version of Mi Fink.



Figure 3. The app allows users to create their own animations using cell phone camera.



Figure 4. Each animation created by users can be stored (up to three combinations) to interact with them later.

The Process

From a previous reflection about territory dynamics in northern Cauca, an interdisciplinary team formed by the author of this thesis, an electronics engineer and a digital designer carried out the project. They worked together with social leaders from Corporación Colombia Joven, a long-standing NGO in Villa Rica that

brought together children from the community.

Inspired by participatory design techniques, throughout three workshops on stop motion animation, programming, painting, and narrative, children approached the farm tradition, a common productive practice among their parents and grandparents, but threatened by the pressure imposed to expand the intensive and extensive production of sugar cane. In the collective work carried out, we were able to verify this situation due to the difficulty that children had in identifying the usually harvested fruits in their territory.

In the stop motion workshop, we found that all attending children had smartphones, so we installed the free app Stop Motion Studio. Everybody adopted with great enthusiasm this activity incorporating into their experimentation different elements such as their toys or their shoes. For the final animations, they composed sequences with geometric shapes using fruits and elements from the traditional farm (Figure 5).



Figure 5. A visual composition in Mi Fink.

Parallel to the development of Mi Fink app, in the programming workshop, we developed a videogame template using App Inventor software to train children in such a way that they could program a videogame. In this case setting it with images and information about the importance of traditional farming. The game showed a collector who should only take fruits that come from the traditional farm and avoid other elements.

One of our main inspiration sources was a previous work called Visual Beat [8], an iPad application made by director and animator Max Mörtl. It is an interactive video where the user have a creative experience using various instruments and voices. Mi Fink retakes this proposal with animations inspired by the traditional farm using the music of Klan Support. On the other hand, Mi Fink also allows the user to make his stop motion animations on the musical structure of each song component.

After several iterations based on a digital prototype made with Marvel app we arrived to a final configuration, developed in Xcode and Android Studio so that it could be installed on mobile devices that have Android or iOS operating system.

FINAL THOUGHTS

This research-creation goes beyond university limits and community spaces to establish knowledge encounters and creation forms with specific objectives, such as in this case the appropriation of digital tools in childhood, using specific contents associated to their social whole. From university, a training form transcends courses and favors other languages between different realities; besides, community social groups socialize their needs, built expectations and interests and collective interconnection. Expert knowledge, from the local vision and tradition woven between different generations, updates the forms of struggle and disposes them to transcend in time and other spheres.

This experience shows how easy it is for children to perform novel activities such as stop motion animation with digital devices. Despite expected limitations related to digital technologies access in this region, the counterhegemonic use of media that question their reality is attractive for such a young generation. It also explores the transformation of their environment with their principles and values.

Digital media, such as mobile apps, can be a tool for mobilizing alternative messages to those circulating in traditional media. On the other hand, participatory design emerges as a way to move from the frantic use of mobile phone to a creative perspective where often-marginalized actors from official discourse can participate in the construction of other stories.

Digital artifacts such as Mi Fink open up possibilities that updates ways of struggle for the territory and life defense in northern Cauca. At the same time, they could establish links with other social organizations from different places with which they share objectives and needs. These contact points would strengthen collective actions and recognize other views on territory, productivity, diversity and life. However, there underlies a great challenge in terms of spreading this message; although the children participating in the activity became aware of the problem, we must explore some diffusion strategies that digital environments offers.

Interactive Session

In this session, the context of the problem addressed will be explained, emphasizing the tradition of the Afro-caucan farm and its cultural value for the community with which we work. Graphic material from the design process will be presented and attendees will be invited to install the application on their phones and create their very own animations.

Technical exhibition requirements

Option 1: app installed on a smartphone connected to a 55" screen or bigger, with high quality speakers or headphones.

Option 2: app installed on an Android or iOS tablet or smartphone with headphones.

An additional screen showing mifink.com project website would be desirable

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