

'Patadesign: a pedagogical experiment on Design of Exception, Absurd Artifacts, and Imaginary Interfaces

'Patadesign: un experimento pedagógico sobre el Diseño de Excepción, Artefactos Absurdos e Interfaces Imaginarias

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Reflection paper

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Abstract

By combining 'Pataphysics with speculative critical design approaches, our goal is to present 'Patadesign: a pedagogical framework and thought experiment that can expand possibilities for design practices. Invented at the turn of the 20th century by French author Alfred Jarry, 'Pataphysics can be defined as the science of imaginary solutions and laws governing exceptions. The collection of ideas explored by pataphysicians worked as a critique of traditional science and its concepts of rationality and progress. So, what does a 'Patadesign practice look like? Can it challenge and redefine designerly ways of thinking and doing? We explored these questions in a class called 'Patadesign: Design of Exception, Absurd Artifacts, and Imaginary Interfaces, taught for three semesters as part of the undergraduate design program at the University of Brasilia. The course was an exception in the curriculum, which was organized mostly according to a modernist agenda. Inspired by the work of Jarry and various pataphysicians, we developed a non-exhaustive list of 'Patadesign principles, including Uselessness, Absurdity, Humor, Bureaucratization, Latency, Exception, Ambiguity, and Equivalence. The purpose was to offer imaginative and provocative counterpoints to traditional design methodologies that resonate with a speculative critical design approach. What kinds of conversations can we inspire through useless cartographies, ambiguous organizations, or poetic services? In this paper, we provide an overview of 'Pataphysics as well as Oulipo and their influence on the 'Patadesign framework. We then present and analyze some examples of student work. Finally, we discuss opportunities that 'Patadesign can bring to contemporary design.

Keywords: 'Pataphysics, speculative design, critical design, pedagogical framework, imagination

Resumen

Al combinar la 'Patafísica con los enfoques críticos de diseño especulativo, nuestro objetivo es presentar el 'Patadesign. Un marco pedagógico y un ejercicio mental que puede ampliar las posibilidades de las prácticas de diseño. Inventado a principios del Siglo XX por el autor francés Alfred Jarry, la 'Patafísica puede definirse como la ciencia de las soluciones imaginarias y las leyes que rigen las excepciones. La colección de ideas exploradas por los Patafísicos funcionó como una crítica a la ciencia tradicional y a sus conceptos de racionalidad y progreso. Entonces, ¿qué es una práctica de 'Patadesign? ¿Puede desafiar y redefinir las formas de pensar y hacer designerly? Estas preguntas las exploramos en una clase llamada 'Patadesign: Diseño de Excepción, Artefactos Absurdos e Interfaces Imaginarias, la cual fue dictada durante tres semestres como parte del programa de pregrado en diseño de la Universidad de Brasilia. El curso fue una excepción dentro del plan de estudios y se organizó, principalmente, de acuerdo con un programa modernista. Inspirados en el trabajo de Jarry y varios Patafísicos, desarrollamos una lista no exhaustiva de principios de 'Patadesign, incluyendo Inutilidad, Absurdo, Humor, Burocratización, Latencia, Excepción, Ambigüedad y Equivalencia. El propósito fue ofrecer contrapuntos imaginativos y provocativos a las metodologías de diseño tradicionales que hacen eco en un enfoque crítico del diseño especulativo. ¿Qué tipo de conversaciones podemos inspirar a través de cartografías inútiles, organizaciones ambiguas o servicios poéticos? En este trabajo, ofrecemos una visión general de la Patafísica, así como de Oulipo y su influencia en el marco del 'Patadesign. Seguidamente, presentamos y analizamos algunos ejemplos del trabajo de los estudiantes. Finalmente, discutimos las oportunidades que el 'Patadesign puede aportar al diseño contemporáneo.

Palabras clave: Patafísica, diseño especulativo, diseño crítico, marco pedagógico, imaginación.

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Introduction

In this article, our goal is to present the concept of 'Patadesign, proposed here as a combination of 'Pataphysics as an inspiration and speculative critical design as an approach to design teaching and practice. We start by offering a brief history of the field of 'Pataphysics, followed by an explanation of our definition of 'Patadesign and 'Patadesign Principles. We then move on to explain how we explored this idea in a class called *'Patadesign: Design of Exception, Absurd Artifacts, and Imaginary Interfaces*, which was taught for three semesters as part of the undergraduate design program at the University of Brasilia. In this section we explain how the course was structured and present some examples of student work. The final section of this article includes the main learnings from this experience and a reflection on what design could be.

'Pataphysics

Invented between the transition from the 19th to 20th century by French author Alfred Jarry, 'Pataphysics can be defined as the science of imaginary solutions and of laws governing exceptions. It is the science of the particular, instead of the general rule, and describes a universe that is an alternative to the current one (Jarry 1996). Jarry's ideas were somewhat influential in the early 1900s and it can be said that they had a strong impact in the development of European avant-garde movements such as Dadaism and Surrealism (Hugill 2015).

In the 1940s, 'Pataphysics once again returned to the foreground with the creation of the College of

'Pataphysics in Paris. Hovering between the real and the imaginary, the College was structured with a minutious hierarchy, and its members studied many themes related to Jarry's science: ranging from the esoteric and pseudo-scientific to innovative artistic experiments (Hugill 2015). Even though it never intended to become a movement like the 20th century "-isms", the work produced by members of the College—especially among those studying and producing experimental literature—shared common interests and informed discussions around a collection of ideas. Groups such as the Oulipo (*l'Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*, roughly translated as *Workshop of Potential Literature*) held periodic meetings to discuss the group's general ideas, methodology and work, wrote essays defending their ideology and approach to literature, and developed many practical experiments (Hugill 2015).

Created in the 1960s by mathematician François Le Lionnais and author Raymond Queneau, Oulipo investigated the relationship between mathematics and literary work. One of the group's biggest realms of exploration was experimenting with the use of self-imposed constraints and how they could affect the work's conceptual and aesthetic results. An example of this is Georges Perec's *La Disparition* (A Void in English), a novel entirely written without using the letter e, the most common vowel in French. It can be said that it was through the work of oulipian writers such as Queneau, Perec, and Calvino that many of the ideas around Alfred Jarry's 'Pataphysics spread worldwide (Hugill 2015).

In 1975, the College began its Occultation phase, in which it restrained from public manifestations,

only returning to full activity in 2000 (Hugill 2015). After the creation of the College in 1948, other institutions also came into real-world existence, such as the London Institute of 'Pataphysics (UK) and the Longevo Instituto de Altos Estudios Patafísicos de Buenos Aires (Argentina).

'Patadesign

Absurdity, Ambiguity, Bureaucratization, Equivalence, Exception, Humor, Latency, Uselessness.

The methodology we developed at University of Brasilia to study 'Pataphysics and the impact it can have within the design field is through the investigation of what we call 'Patadesign Principles—even though we are aware of the contradictions of defining "capital P" principles for a science that intends to be as open as 'Pataphysics does. We found the exercise of defining principles useful, for it makes literary concepts more concrete and applied, and creates reference points to abstract ideas. They are also very helpful from a didactical point of view, since the list can help students create provocative projects. These principles were defined either by directly translating Jarry's definition—Exception, for example—, or by Jarry's or the College's general approach to life—Ambiguity and Bureaucratization—, or by researching the literary work of Oulipo and other pataphysicians—with principles such as Humor.

Our list of 'Patadesign Principles is not intended to be the ultimate, everlasting list. We believe there can and should be many other principles, but thus far we have selected the ones that could evoke provocative ideas for in-class exercises by offering productive counterpoints to modernist ideals of progress, clarity and universality, so ubiquitous and solidified in the teaching and practice of design in Brazil.

In order to investigate the potentialities of a pataphysically-infused design practice (Rosenbak 2019), we looked at speculative design approaches. Speculative critical design (SCD) is a term coined by Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby in their 2013 book *Speculative Everything*. The authors describe a particular way of using design not to solve problems and provide answers—the pragmatic and utilitarian role that has been tradition-

ally assigned to the field—but to ask questions and generate debate. Speculative critical design is critical thought translated into materiality, it is about thinking with form other than with words (Dunne and Raby 2013). Many SCD projects are not intended to be produced or used; however, through their ambiguous existence and questions raised, they do offer an alternative to how things are. It is possible to connect these ideas to Escobar's concept of a transition to the Pluriverse—a world filled with many other worlds (Escobar 2017), which leads to a conversation on decolonization and a Latin-American situated practice.

The combination of 'Patadesign Principles and a speculative approach to design was intriguing. For instance, what kinds of (social, political, economic, cultural, environmental, technological, ethical) conversations can we raise through the creation of useless cartographies, poetic services, ambiguous organizations, or humorous branding? What could a 'Patadesign practice look like?

'Patadesign as pedagogical framework

"Does not the word teaching imply usefulness or pretensions to usefulness? Does not the word usefulness imply seriousness? Does not the word seriousness imply antipataphysics? All these terms are equivalent (profound sensation)." (Sandomir 1948)

We explored these questions in a class called '*'Patadesign: Design of Exception, Absurd Artifacts, and Imaginary Interfaces*', which was taught for three semesters as part of the undergraduate design program at the University of Brasilia. The course was itself an exception in the curriculum, organized mostly according to a modernist agenda and aligned with how design schools have been historically structured in Brazil—based on the School of Ulm (Leite 2006). Embracing the contradictions of creating a course about a discipline that escapes definitions, and aware of the fact that "to understand pataphysics is to fail to understand pataphysics" (Hugill 2015), the course was mostly an opportunity to bring renewed energy to design conversations and practices through *spiriform* lenses. The goals of the course were to open space for creative extrapolation and experimentation; to explore new aesthetics

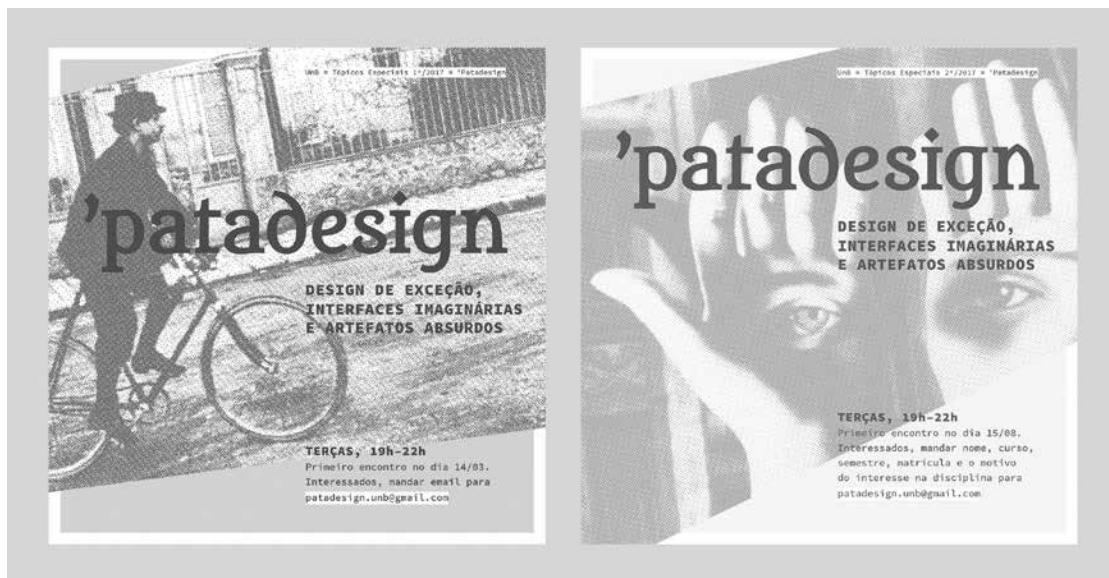


Figure 1. Course advertisements.

and narratives; to practice critical thinking and discuss political, social and poetic implications of imagination and design processes; and to explore new paths of thinking and making design in the contemporary context.

'Patadesign' was a weekly studio class with around fifteen students per semester. It was an elective course open to people from different backgrounds, and it mostly attracted students from departments such as Design, Visual Arts, Communication, Architecture, Music, and Social Sciences. The variety of disciplines in the room contributed to a rich discussion of the topic, as well as collaborations between students with different capabilities.

In relation to content, students were exposed to the history, context, influence, possible definitions, and notable examples of 'Pataphysics; an introduction to the speculative critical design approach, its methods and some examples; and a discussion about the combination of 'Pataphysics and design through 'Patadesign and its Principles of thought and practice. The activities proposed were an inquiry into the science of the particular and consisted of a series of short experiments throughout the course as well as a longer group project starting in the middle of the semester.

One of the short experiments was the creation of a cartography applying 'Patadesign' Principles as conceptual guidance. We understand cartography here as a dynamic and subject process of

representation that goes beyond territorial issues and defined formats. As a warm-up, students had to create a cartography of the classroom using one randomly selected Principle. Second, they had to create a cartography of a fifteen-minute journey in the university's main building using two Principles. Projects took varied directions and formats including audio, video, role playing, typography, and infographics. An example of a cartography guided by Absurdity and Latency was a project that used the first situation the student saw when he left the classroom as its starting point. There was someone smoking right outside the door, so the student decided to capture and map all instances of people smoking during his fifteen-minute walk in the main university corridor. His cartography was a simple visualization of those moments, where they happened, and how many people were involved. This visualization was printed on a translucent sheet of paper—in a clear reference to tobacco silk. To express ephemerality and the passage of time, he divided the map in three sections, filled them with tobacco and turned them into small cigarettes. According to the student, each cigarette takes around five minutes to be smoked, therefore, smoking the three cigarettes would complete his journey represented in the cartography.

Another cartography—this time exploring Uselessness and Humor—portrayed the university corridor as a scratch card to find useless elements, previously mapped by the student. Elements were either very abundant and without

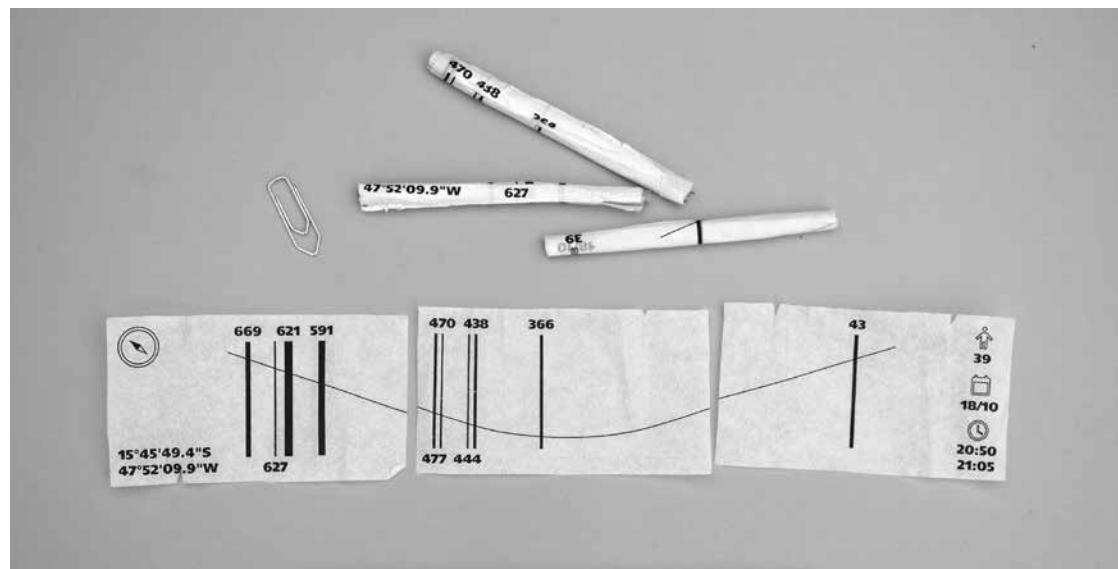


Figure 2. A smoking cartography. Work by Luiz Felipe Machado.

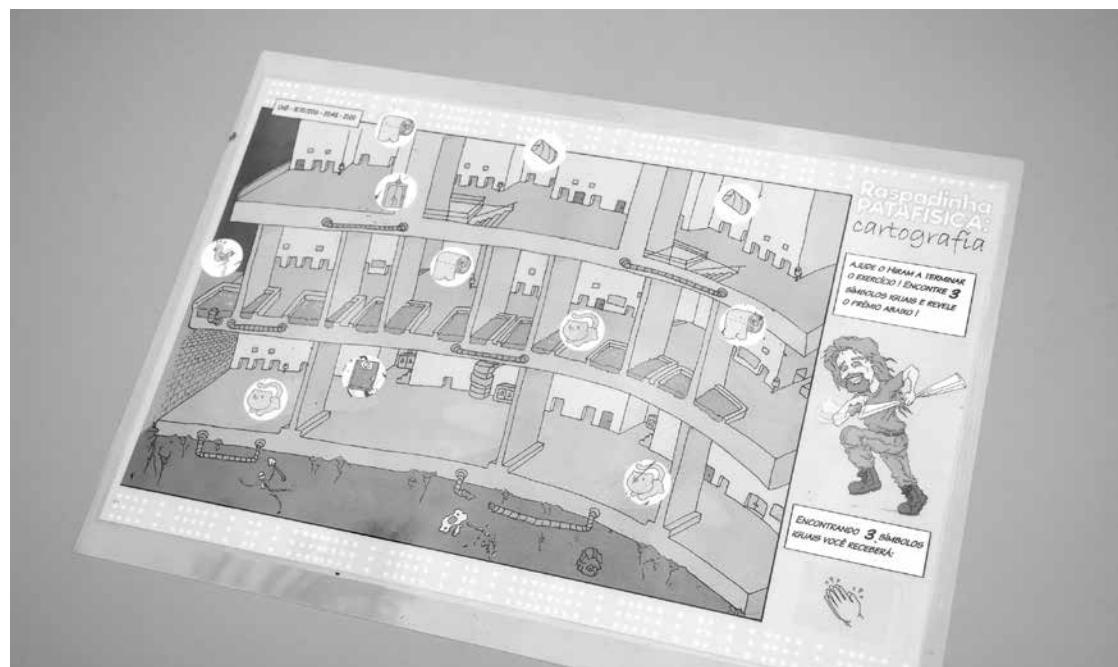


Figure 3. A cartography of the useless. Work by Hiram Miller.

a clear use (e.g. cats) or very useful but very difficult to find (e.g. toilet paper); it was a humorous critique of poor infrastructural conditions and maintenance in public institutions. Winning involved finding three of the same image in a row. The winner gets to scratch the prize, which happens to be a symbol of clapping hands. No further explanation is provided.

A second short experiment was the creation of an alliterative collection of three postal stamps, which are artifacts that represent bureaucracy and officiality. Students had to follow two main rules in the process: use thirty elements (attri-

butes, concepts, tools etc.) that started with a determined letter; and each stamp had to be made using a different process (handmade, digital, and photographic) yet remain cohesive as a collection. As a result of such restrictive, oulipian-inspired instructions, students found different tactics to develop their stamps and achieve interesting and unexpected outputs. Below is one illustrative example that exhaustively explored the letter B.

The final project was the creation of a system of provocative artifacts in dialogue with a critical question. In groups of three, students explored current news and trends and their possible



Figure 4. Example of an alliterative collection of stamps using the letter B. Work by Daniel de Oliveira.

macro-implications in terms of society, technology, economy, environment, and politics. Then, they identified a provocative instantiation (micro-level) in their scenario as their project frame. It consisted of a “what if” question, which informed the creation of artifacts as touchpoints to an imaginary reality as well as conversation starters for larger debates or reflections. They had to be aware of ‘Patadesign Principles and processes when developing their artifacts and narratives.

What if everyone was myopic? Exploring this provocation, a group of students imagined what would be the consequences if nearsightedness became mainstream in terms of geography, built environment, human relationships, and play. They developed devices to bring stars closer to

the human eye, souvenirs of temporary monuments, and in and out of focus games. Their objects challenged some of our current ideas about scale, orientation, proximity, and affection by shifting one single aspect of our perception, making the exception a rule.

Another provocation was: *What if people were highly flammable?* Based on this, students shaped government propaganda to disseminate the fear of fire, subversive groups, and their objects of disobedience. They also made home decor and crafts involving community superstitions, beliefs, and protection items. They were curious about the socio-cultural implications of pushing the limits of official discourse towards a scenario of constant surveillance and anxiety.

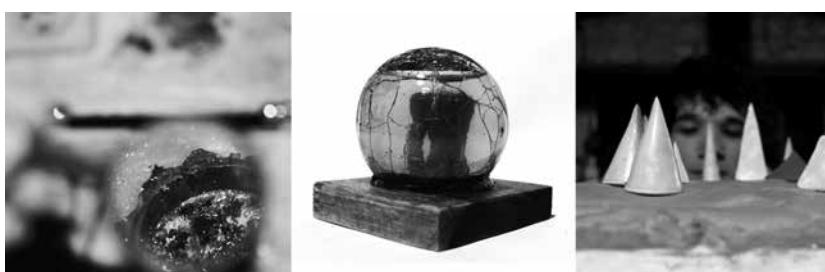


Figure 5. Souvenirs of a myopic astronomy. Work by Raissa Studart and Ra Lenicio Filho.

Figure 6. Ritual and embroidery amulets to protect the home against flames. Work by Kelvim Albuquerque, Jopes Cunha, and Paula Dias.



Figure 7. Passport, poster, and ocular devices for migration. Work by Candice Botelho, Lucas Sertifa, and Antonio da Mata.



Figure 8. Students and instructors at the opening of the final exhibition.

A third example of a final project came from the question *What if the human species had descended from birds?* Expanding common understandings about scientific facts, the group created an alternative present that resulted from a speculative past with an evolutionary process in which “humans” descended from birds. Students represented new body shapes through ocular devices adapted to their new restrictions and affordances; migratory routes and geopolitical implications through passports and maps; and stereotypes and disagreements between people from different territories through popular card games and songs.

Every semester ended with an open exhibit of students’ final projects. It was an opportunity to prompt a conversation with a broader audience and create conditions for interactions with the so-called real world.

Main learnings and final considerations

After three semesters teaching ‘Patadesign’, we can reflect on some of the main points that were learnt. First of all, turning critical thoughts about design into a pedagogical framework was itself a challenging exercise—how to provide structured content but keep it open ended? How to respect ‘Pataphysics slippery nature, not oversimplifying a complex matter, but also not taking a joke too seriously?

Weekly encounters with students allowed us to navigate these questions and slowly find an adequate tone, as well as its limits, both for theory and practice. Also, prompting a series of short exercises allowed us to iterate on instructions and conceptual frameworks, according to immediate learnings and feedback. After a short period,

the exercises constituted a considerable body of work, making it possible to identify patterns and make broader analyses.

The formulation of a collection of 'Patadesign Principles' revealed itself as an adequate practice-based entry point to 'Pataphysics and world-making exercises. They encapsulate some of 'Pataphysics main attitudes and qualities without the intention of explaining them too much and also not shutting down new interpretation possibilities. In terms of practice, the idea is not to establish a fixed set of methods, but rather to offer equivalent, non-linear and concise orientations that shift common mindsets and understandings about possible identities of design.

After each semester, we carried out a feedback session with students. We confirmed our hypothesis that the class was perceived as an exception in the curriculum, but we also learned that it informed students' projects in other classes they were taking. Understanding 'Patadesign' as a thought model—or even as a creative attitude—, students were able to add new layers of critical thinking and imaginative extrapolation to their design processes in a productive and complementary way. In a sense, the consecutive offer of the course created conditions for a community to emerge—people who were connected by their engagement with critical practices and a growing interest for exceptions.

However, an important point was that the class was not intended to be permanent on the design program. It was taught for three semesters as an elective course, and then entered its occultation phase, just like a parenthesis or a temporary unit of time, space, or thought in a given context. "At the same time, the parenthesis offers a place of endless wandering for thought. Not that it has an unlimited extent, but an infinite understanding." (Tiberghien 2008. Authors' own translation) The main purpose of the class was to open possibilities for students and for design itself. If it became too established, then it would lose its affiliation with the slipperiness of 'Pataphysics as well as with the strengths of that which is an event.

Finally, our intention with documenting this pedagogical experience is to create a reference point for other alternatives, whether they are

consciously pataphysical or otherwise. When possibilities are opened and new practices are experienced, different ways of making and thinking about design can emerge. 

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