

# Services Design in New Territories

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**Abstract:** New forms of service provision are appearing that rely heavily on interactions between businesses, communities, and governmental agencies. They raise new questions about how we are to think about the interpersonal underpinnings of services - especially when we look beyond 'promising' cases to a more general study of the network-tech. enabled groups that are starting to arise around the world. Attempts to define 'services' have historically been rather partisan, efforts to make a complex form of social activity tractable for a specific organisation or discipline. This paper delves into this history, sketches out observations that are useful, and through discussion of a recent project begins to formulate some of the pressing issues at hand about what it means to become involved in designing systems of regulated interpersonal exchange.

**Key words:** *service design, critical design, design and politics, design and anthropology*

## 1. Introduction

This paper attempts to rethink some tendencies in how services are thought about within design. It is drawn from a PhD project, currently in progress at Northumbria University, UK, that explores critical approaches to service design. Some would say that service design is already, in some sense, a critical practice. Certainly its proponents frequently position the development of new forms of service as a means to effect more democratic-egalitarian and less wasteful societies [e.g. 1, 2]. The basic conjecture of the research programme is that this visionary streak of service design aligns almost effortlessly with extant business and governmental objectives, and neglects other forms of burgeoning social organisation, an oversight it aims to redress [3, 4].

The paper begins by outlining the context of this inquiry, and then moves in the second section to a rough genealogy of common assertions about services - for example that they are partially 'intangible', or that they are 'multichannel' - by briefly sketching the history of attempts to define them. Services are complex forms of social organisation, involving forms of interpersonal exchange than can be regulated by many mechanisms; they are not easily conceptualised. Efforts to do so are often constructed as encapsulating services in their totality, in the form 'services are X, Y, Z'. Despite these pretensions, they have typically arisen within disciplinary-institutional projects that seek to apprehend services for very particular reasons, and emphasise the qualities of services that intersect with their interests. Some of these approaches, as I will show, have contemporary resonance, but their sharp focusses leave many gaps in understanding what it means to design a service. The following section introduces a conceptual design project, ARK-INC, that amplifies some of these issues. The project is used in the later sections of the paper to illuminate them brightly, and serves as a vehicle for me to advance a few initial

thoughts about how they might be addressed. This process does not culminate in advancing a new, singular, more 'correct' way of looking at services. Rather, it serves to point to theoretical shortcomings hoving into view about how services are thought and talked about within the design disciplines, and offers some avenues of approach that might enrich our understanding of service design.

## **2. Service Design as a Transformative Force**

Service design focusses not on the development of an autonomous object to be mass-produced, but on the structuring of relationships in which objects play part. As such, service design shares common ground with other practices of design 'beyond the object', for example experience design, or design thinking [5, 6]. Obviously, people have experiences when they use (or work within) services, and this can be attended to; 'design thinking' is, no doubt, involved. But to specifically emphasise the design of services brings designers into the purview of a distinctive set of claims about their practice, specifically, its potential to act as a force for the 'social good'.

### **2.1 Service Design and the 'Social Good'**

As a design activity, the development of a service primarily involves the production of (at their best, highly ingenious) schemes of co-ordinating access to resources, rather than new objects to be purchased. By dint of this, service design (in theory) evades an automatic connection between the design disciplines and the excesses with which they have been most commonly charged - namely, their complicity in furthering cultures of material acquisition and display, cultures increasingly seen as ecologically damaging and socially atomising. Avoiding these associations, service design has become a site for the return of arguments as to design's potential as an agent of social responsibility on a scale not seen since the proclamations of high modernism - the lofty, technocratic and patrician rhetoric of which has now been replaced with an emphasis on bottom-up, participatory processes [7]. Premised on the idea of use over ownership, service design, it is held, might lend itself to a 'less stuff, more people world' [2], combining into a single programme the dampening of human behaviour's environmental impact (by producing less new stuff) while effecting a kind of renewal of the social fabric, brought about through an emphasis on involving people in the production of the services that underpin their daily lives [8].

### **2.2 Promising Cases**

It should be noted, though, that the collection of cases on which are used to exemplify these ideas tend to be oriented in a very particular direction. This is manifest in the discovery and dissemination of reams of 'promising cases' [9] that envision a harmonious synthesis of business, government, and (usually 'local') communities, acting in concert to engender a less energy-intensive and more congenially democratic societal order while maintaining business, and government, much as usual. Attention to 'promising' cases alone is backed up by the rationale that to look at more problematic possibilities is, in one of the few explicit justifications that I have been able to find, 'pointless because, in the light of implications brought by other scenarios, it is the only direction in which to head' [1].

### **2.3 Problematic Cases**

But anthropologists [10], geographers [11], commentators on international security issues [12], and others have been sensitive - much more so than designers, it would seem - to the emergence of new forms of 'productive

community' based on recent technological developments, particularly networked technology, that are less easily assimilated in the current socio-technical landscape. These 'microstructures' are not necessarily friendly to the agendas of government or business in their familiar forms - indeed can be directly antagonistic to them. Often they involve radically new expressions of business logic and operate as de facto systems of local governance [12-14]. The Taliban [15] and the yakuza [16] are examples; so are small resilient communities (that use local currencies, grow their own food, are off-grid, etc.) [12]. When I speak here about 'service design', I want to include such cases, which if they are described as 'promising', immediately makes one wonder what they promise, and to whom (questions that should also be asked of cases labelled 'promising' advanced in design's mainstream). And, as we will see, such cases make very clear the paucity of how 'services' tend to be talked about in design.

### **3. What Do We Talk About When We Talk About 'Services'?**

#### **3.1 The Legacy of Economics**

It is often remarked that services cannot be transported or stored, and that ownership over them cannot be transferred: services are, in some sense, *immaterial*. Although the connection appears not to have been made in the service design literature, these concepts in fact derive from theoretical innovations in economics and accounting in the 18th and 19th centuries, emerging from attempts to inventory the wealth of nations (to use Adam Smith's famous phrase) [17].

Services were seen by Smith, Benjamin SAYS, and others to involve monetary exchange, and thus to be accounted for in economic calculations. Concepts like production and consumption, seen as distinct modes of behaviour, undertaken in different places at different times, were powerful ways to apprehend the manufacture, distribution and trade of products. But aligning services with them proved problematic. In response, certain practices of conceptual fudging - of which today's economists are sharply critical - seem to have arisen [18]. To give but one example, consider the idea that services exist in the momentary association of their provider-producer and client-consumer, 'co-producing' the service 'at the point of its delivery'. Ontologically rather suspect, 'co-production' makes services amenable to discussion in the same terms as products, but by invoking the former as a 'special case' of the latter. The concept implicitly acknowledges the limitations of the production-consumption axis with regards services, even as it maintains them.

Inherited ideas of this kind continue to linger in certain sectors of service design discourse, especially those from business and management perspectives [e.g. 19, 20]). As they define services purely negatively - in terms of what they lack, that material products do not - they are, unsurprisingly, of little use as a basis for design, or even in articulating what a service 'is'.

#### **3.2. (Post-)Interaction Design Perspectives**

A quite different understanding of services has arisen from within the design disciplines themselves, generally situating the theoretical and methodological basis of service design within practices of interaction design. The origin of this position is not entirely clear, but appears to be Elena Pacenti's 1998 doctorate at the Politecnico di Milano. Pacenti argued that the many channels through which contact can be made between a contemporary service and its clients can be understood as a single complex interface, one amenable to the practices of

interaction design [21]. This account, communicated with admirable concision by Chris Downs as ‘[w]hen you deepen an interaction beyond an interface and think about the network, you eventually end up at the service’ [22], has been influential: one might say it is the default narrative of how something called ‘service design’ came into being [e.g. 23].

Whatever its historical truth, it is important to note that this story constructs services in a very particular way. Services, following this line of argument, involve ‘many-to-many’ interactions between people and things across space and through time [24], resulting in their being ‘far more complex than most products’ [25], a complexity ‘made possible by new digital technologies’ [26]. The conception of service design that derives from such statements design stresses service design’s choreographic aspects, in turn making desirable new (to designers) understandings of dynamic spatial-temporal systems [27]. The question becomes of adopting, adapting or developing anew appropriate ways for designers to manage this evolution in logistical complexity, for example articulating ‘service-craft’ in the vocabulary of cybernetics [28], or considering services as comparable to architectural programmes partially disembedded from physical sites [29].

### **3.3. Toward the Political**

Approaches like these have great potential to enrich the language of service design and sophisticate its practitioners’ apprehension of their tasks. We should note, however, that this is a conception of services that focusses on the kinds of logistically-complex services that (we might presume) many self-labelled service designers work with, those that engender ‘experiences that reach people through many different touchpoints, and that happen over time’ [30]. But this statement excludes a Manhattan hot-dog vendor’s activities, while including a long-term relationship, or a war. We might say that the interactions between a prostitute and his or her john of jane may be complex, but this is not a logistical complexity, and is not so easily captured by the ultimately *formal* understandings described above.

A step towards understanding the social and political *ramifications* of a service’s existence is incipient in the work of a small group of designers involved with ‘new’ forms of service, for example Lara Penin and Cameron Tomkinwise [31], who explicitly acknowledge that the interpersonal dynamics of within services are a site for political scrutiny. Carla Cipolla [32], drawing heavily on the utopian socialist Martin Buber, points to the *relational* quality services of services, particularly emphasised in new forms of service in which ‘benefits are reciprocally produced and shared by the participants’, collaborating in ways that emphasise their mutual status as social partners. These theoretical maneuvers are to applauded, both for their perspicacity and their refusal to introduce politics into design by recourse to grand theories of world-system functioning. But they are presently quite limited - more focussed on the congeniality of ‘the service experience’ than the more complex issues suggested in section 2. I unpick how we might start to treat some of these issues in the rest of this paper.

## **4. ARK-INC**

The research programme from which the insights of this paper have been drawn in part involved a series of self-directed, conceptual projects. These functioned as experiments in using the design of services themselves as an investigation into service design’s foundations, assumptions, and possibilities, an inquiry pursued with a critical sensibility [27, 33]. I sketch the outlines of one of these projects below, an ongoing collaboration with the artist

Jon Ardern called ARK-INC. Much fuller accounts of the project are available elsewhere [34, 35], but this brief overview will illuminate some of the matters at hand.

### 4.1. Overview

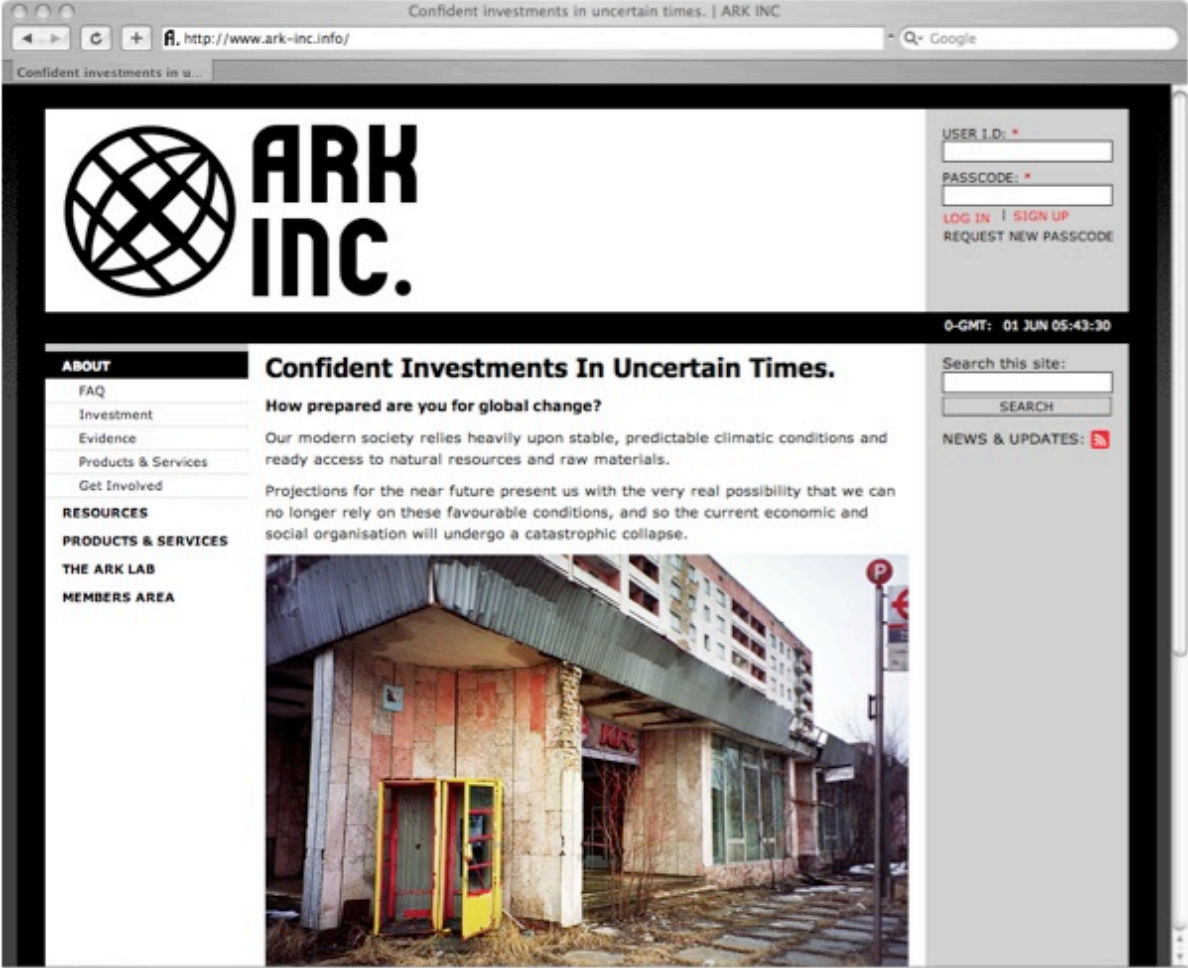


Figure 1. ARK-INC’s public face, www.ark-inc.info.

ARK-INC is a fictitious organisation, an anonymous group who cultivate and manage their fee-paying clients’ participation in ‘the ARK Movement’ - a distributed, cellular network of small, semi-autonomous groups (‘Collectives’). Its members’ motivations for participation vary widely, but what unites them is the effort to build networks of mutual assistance, at global and local scales, capable of withstanding the widespread ecological, economic, and social breakdown that shadows discussions of ‘sustainability’. This operational model is a contemporary re-envisioning of social organisations that have endured under tremendous external stress: Freemasonry, the French Resistance, and non-State paramilitary groups, amongst others.

ARK-INC operates as the central co-ordinating body of the ARK Movement, organising and guiding its’ members local efforts at building resilient social systems, and provides a capital reservoir to support promising

activities in part drawn from its high membership fees. But as it is directed by a nameless and faceless group of strategists, funders, technical experts and like, the exact agenda these services and products express is undeclared and left the subject of speculation.

#### 4.2. Design

The project has involved the development of a wide range of services and products ARK-INC provides to the Collectives, expressed through a range of media (text, models, photographs, film, performances, etc.). An example is *Guerrilla Infrastructure*, a sub-project that has explored ways to move around and bring together people, things and messages in ways that are covert, adaptable, resilient and minimally energy-intensive. *Guerrilla Infrastructure* culminated in the prototyping of *ARKNET*, a public-key encrypted, hyper-sustainable, low-bandwidth communication system that operate in a similar way to the Internet, but uses shortwave radio transmissions rather than the telephone network as its medium (Figure 2), modelled on packet radio data networks set up by groups of amateur radio enthusiasts [36]. It provides a secure channel for ARK Movement communications, and a P2P system encourages the uploading and decentralised storage of information pertinent to ARK members, while at the same time providing autonomy from conventional comms infrastructures.



Figure 2. The ARK Radio, which, connected wirelessly to a nearby computer, allows access to ARKNET.

#### 4.3. Reception

The ARK project used design as a strategy to engage in a kind of *speculative anthropology* [3], a way to envision plausible, near-future responses to incipient global trends from within design - in this case, the convergence of climate change predictions, progressive economic instability, and weakening government control over many

global territories. The project is - deliberately - provocative, and in a number of ways (not least in its presentation of social resilience as a luxury commodity for the wealthy). Yet it is also an eminently plausible proposition. It has been validated as a business proposal through a presentation to academics from the Saïd Business School, Oxford University. Vinay Gupta, a former consultant to the US Government, judged it not merely possible but, to use his term, 'prescient', a sentiment echoed in conversations with international security commentator and ex-USAF counterinsurgency officer John Robb. More directly, numerous people have contacted us, having slightly misapprehended the project, trying to join.

## 5. Services as Technologies and Services as Actors

It is clear that in order to think about what the existence of an organisation like ARK-INC 'means' takes us considerably beyond seeing it as a complex, dynamic system of activity. But how do we progress from this point? One response would be to see it as an exemplar of extant theories about how the world works - celebrate or decry it as capitalism run amok, for example. This kind of interpretation would be weighted with normative judgments, which are perhaps unhelpful in their tendency to deflect us from observing the facts on the ground, as it were [37].

In the first case, we might consider how ARK-INC threatens to subvert or disrupt other institutions, be they grass-roots communities, businesses, or existing strategies of governance. Two observations might be made here. Firstly, attention is drawn to the *regulatory wilderness* [38] an organisation like ARK-INC colonises. There would appear to be nothing 'illegal' about ARK-INC, but normative judgments - informal, or codified into laws - change, and they *will* change to accommodate or constrain new kinds of service (I will return to this point in the next section). More immediately, this points to the function of such an organisation as an *actor* whose operations (re)shape, even if slightly, various landscapes - material (urban, rural, domestic) and social (ethical, legal, psychological). The pursuit of an organisation's objectives might disturb the functions of other actors or align with them, becoming antagonistic to, explicitly enrolled within, or tacitly complicit with external agendas.

On a more personal level, conversations with Chris Ryan and Robert Kirkbride about the project have emphasised ARK-INC's *theatrical* nature. The products and services it provides are eminently pragmatic, useful, and 'sustainable'; but they can also be understood to function as a set of props for, effectively, apocalyptic fantasies. ARK-INC furnishes its members lives with an *infrastructure* that is material but also psychological, a platform that allows a particular form of life to be expressed: a *model of inhabiting the world*. Here, we edge beyond the idea that services are *based on* a form or forms of technology, as the 'interaction design narrative' suggests, to a richer conception of services *as* technologies - something akin to McLuhan's definition of a *medium* as an 'extension of man' that extends, distributes, and shapes individual's capacities to affect and be affected by the world [39].

## 6. Services as Things vs. Services as Acts

Illuminating as these observations may be, questions remain as to how we might consider the *workings* of a service, in a way other than the technological. An observation that arose during the ARK-INC project was that the design of the organisation was largely composed of *regulated forms of exchange*, even if it is only the provision of a communications channel: a perception that could be applied to any service. So far in this discussion, we have considered services as *things*. Perhaps complex, dynamic entities, but discrete *things* nonetheless. But seeing a service as predicated on *exchange* brings to our attention that services are also *acts*.

Obvious, perhaps, but it is often forgotten when the exchange involves layers and layers of mediators: buying a plane ticket online suggests that what is ‘designed’ is an interface. The ultimately *interpersonal* nature of the system is, to some degree, masked.

So, as an experiment, let us temporarily discard technological constraints altogether. Consider a very basic example of a service - simply, *an act done on behalf of another*, feeding, watching over or fighting for another, for example. Such services are not ‘multichannel’, indeed do not necessarily involve any physical equipment at all other than the mobilisation of the capacities of the body. They are also shared with other animals that live in social systems. In fact, we could go so far as to say that these *distributions of agency* are at the *origin* of sociality, features of any social animal that collectively inhabit a territory. We begin, then, with two bodies, one of which is engaged in action that in some way furthers the other: something like the *originary scene* of ‘the service’. And, as the pre- or non-human applicability of this observation shows, the *kinds* of exchange involved and the mechanisms that regulate them are extremely varied. Here I must depart from commentators such as Cipolla [32], who attempt to decisively taxonomise ‘service interactions’ into a small number of categories, according to their ‘qualities’.

All human interactions, even the most pleasantly ‘relational’ ones, are freighted with many layers of trust, respect and obligation, as studies of contracted and non-contracted forms of productive labour show [40]. Services bought, freely given, and compelled by other means might not be so easily disassociated from one another, as anthropologists have noted since the emergence of that discipline. To give just two examples: in some cultures, to offer money to a person one has slept with after the act (as it were), or to cross the palm of someone in authority in hope of preferential treatment, is not seen as a sign of moral turpitude but as a gesture of respect [41]; members of the police force in the Athens of antiquity were both well-respected and reasonably paid, but nonetheless were slaves [10].

## 6.1. Moral Statics

Perhaps, then, we need to think about general ways to consider the kinds of interpersonal interactions on which services are based. For example, returning to the basic interpretation of a service as a way of distributing one’s agency, we might see the provider of the service as adopting a kind of proximal role - i.e. for one person to act as a *proxy* for the presence of another (as in babysitting, paid-for or not). Or, if the service entails things you cannot do yourself, the person or people involved in providing it as fulfilling a *prosthetic* function (as in the preparation of a meal sumptuous beyond your capabilities, or, for most people, the piloting of a plane). We could go even go as far as Michel Serres, whose book *The Parasite* is an extended thought experiment in considering all relations between living beings as parasitical [42], to the point where we speculate that ‘[p]erhaps that which modern biologists call the environment is just the register of the addresses that can be parasitized from a given position... At the base of this system, we can observe the nesting of children in their mothers, who are the most compliant of all hosts’ [43]. To consider a mother as being compelled to provide a service to their unborn child may seem rather brutal. But this brutality is sharpened by the unavoidable recognition that ‘yes, this could be understood as a service’. It demonstrates both how deeply the idea of ‘services’ shade into everyday life, and reveals the apparent contingency of how acceptable it is to consider some forms of interpersonal relationship as ‘services’, others not.



Peter Sloterdijk observes that any human group that is insulated from contact with others (whether by choice or circumstance) will engage in what he calls the production of a *moral statics*: they will ‘generate within themselves a normative architecture that exhibits a sufficiently supra-personal, imposing, and torsion-resistant character to be regarded by its users as valid law, as an apparatus of obligatory principles, and as a coercive normative reality’ [43]. From this perspective, services can be understood as functional expressions of these apparatuses of obligation - that is, the point at which they result in someone doing something for someone else. If we acknowledge this contingency, the full range of motivations to provide a service - from imperatives of need or force, to the more subtle dynamics of voluntary association - are made immediate. But recognising the cultural contingency of answers to the question ‘what is a service?’ also puts us in a position to consider the development of *new* understandings of imperative, obligation, and mutuality. That is, new idioms of ethics, etiquette and exchange that may - perhaps must - arise in concert with new idioms of social organisation - the kinds of structure that would populate ‘less stuff, more people’ world.

## 7. Conclusions

ARK-INC, around which this argument is wrapped, is a fiction. But it bears similarities to many ‘real-world’ developments, as I have pointed out, and here has served to amplify the shortcomings in much discussion of service design when faced with these propositions. Services are not ghostly forms of products, nor are they merely functional, if complicated and dynamic, systems. Services impinge in many ways on the occupants of current socio-technical landscapes. They shape the possibilities open to individuals and groups, creating platforms on which practices of everyday life might take hold and flourish or be slowly extinguished. And while many new forms of service demand greater participation by people who use them, and this is not, I think, a straightforward scenario, as alluded to in the opaque blending of top-down interests with grass-roots activity that inheres in ARK-INC. I’ve argued that we should not let the technological dimension of services unduly obscure their ultimately interpersonal nature, that is, their design as the sculpting of forms of exchange. At the same time we, as designers, need to be attentive to not only forms of etiquette and structures of obligation that underlie services now, but also be attentive to new and perhaps idiomatic developments: who, after all, knows what kinds of reciprocal gestures of mutuality might emerge under a regime of increasing public participation in processes of production.

In the spirit of a first-pass attempt at outlining the issues that haunt these observations, I’ve simultaneously suggested some ways to apprehend them, proposals intended to be taken as neither definitive nor complete. But, in the context of this conference, I would assert that the complex nature of services, as constructed forms of exchange, suggests that ‘rigour’ in apprehending them is more a matter of developing multiple, complementary points of view than of advancing totalising definitions. This paper serves, I hope, to add to the palette of perspectives currently available.

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