

## OUTSOURCE ME!

LEONARDO SOLAAS

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[HTTP://SOLAAS.COM.AR/OUTSOURCE/](http://solaas.com.ar/outsourcing/)

*«Outsource me!» by Leonardo Solaas presents a competition within the competition of Readme 100. This ironic subversion is repeated on various levels of the project: it subverts the usual outsourcing relationships, as well as subverting the idea of the delegation of «technical» work by the «creative» artist to an «uncreative» programmer (or any «hands-on» person). One proof of the project's success is in the discussion that happened in the comment threads on Solaas's call for submissions to be his employer. Irony does not transcend all borders: one person took the call literally and was dismayed by the apparent reiteration of the same old pattern of the «uncreative programmer» and «handless artist.»*

*«Outsource me!» is a two-phase project: a recruiting phase and a production phase. When he posted the call for ideas, Solaas, who is Argentinean, considered limiting the circle of potential «employers» to people from so-called developed countries. This twist could have made the project funnier but could have seriously limited its scope, so Solaas and the Readme 100 organizers (who acted as Solaas's «meta-employer») decided to leave this option out. The mere fact that potential employers had to look through Solaas's lists of skills, interests and past works when deciding whether an idea is suitable for him seemed enough of an ironic twist.*

*Among the submitted projects — which were of a generally high level — were a few excellent ones. A favorite of this text's authors was «Appagotchi» by Eric Londaits, another of whose submissions was eventually selected to be realized. «Appagotchi» suggests creating a simple software application that must be nurtured (opened, closed, saved, etc.) similar to a Tamagotchi pet; only if it is sufficiently cared for will it grow into a full-featured, overly-complicated application. «Appagotchi» turned out to be too complex a project to be realized in the short time period available, so Solaas and the Readme 100 organizers decided against it. Having to negotiate with both an employer and a meta-employer must not have been an easy task for Solaas, especially given the weight of all the project's accumulated irony. One wonders if he is personally satisfied with the results of his project's subverted logic, or if he eventually tired of dealing with the multiple twists and levels of supervision he had devised. Then again, real jobs quite often involve the stress of coping with multiple supervisors who have conflicting sets of demands and priorities, and who, despite existing within organizations that often have meticulously organized institutional structures, somehow manage to function as if there were no coordination at all. Maybe Solaas's project isn't so ironic after all — or maybe it simply reminds us of one of the painful ironies of working life.*

*«Go Logo» by Eric Londaits is the winning idea of Solaas's contest. It was implemented in an incredibly short time period: a little more than two weeks. «Go Logo» makes its audience even more aware of logos' omnipresence and aesthetics: one of the logos generated by «Go Logo» when it was presented in Dortmund turned out to be an almost exact copy of the logo of the hotel at which the Readme participants and organizers were staying.*

AMY ALEXANDER, OLGA GORIUNOVA

## The story

When I first saw the call for projects for Readme 100 Software Art Festival, I didn't think it was for me. As a software artist, I was exploring several different ideas at the moment, but I could not see a match with any of them. So I just closed the browser page and went away—it was one more of the countless websites we leave with no further consequences on our lives.

Only, this one somehow stood with me. It hung around in the intranet of my brain and kept coming back to my attention window. It was something about the proposed subject: outsourcing. It was touching me. After all, I am an outsourced worker. I'm a programmer and site developer working for American employers.

At first I entertained this little idea, not taking it too seriously, but finding it nevertheless engaging: to put the outsourcing relationship upside down. I started to think about momentarily changing the balance of power among employers and contractors, which is also a small-scale model of the tension between developed and emerging countries. It was a chance to rewrite the rules of the game and to play a little joke on a very serious subject. It was also about my life.

This was probably the biggest hurdle I had to overcome in the process of turning this funny idea into a real project. Until then, my works had been rather abstract and detached. Now, this was also a very conceptual project, but it was also about me, about my work and my everyday life, about many of my frustrations and ambitions. It required me to step into the stage and expose myself in a way till then unknown to me. I could not keep a scientific

distance with this, my stance had to be closer to that of an actor, and I was not sure I wanted that.

But the idea would not let me go. It grew and gained neater edges, words started coming for the would-be Agreement that was to regulate this altered outsourcing relationship, and soon I realized that I had no chance but writing down the project and submitting it. This is not the way I usually develop my works. In general, I push my ideas forward. But now I was pulled by one.

Still after submitting the project, I felt I didn't had to worry very much. I didn't really think the selection committee would be choosing it. It was just too crazy, too unpredictable and open-ended. I was proposing an adventure, not only for myself, but for the Festival as well.

I was wrong again there. They not only chose the project, but supported it enthusiastically. Olga Goriunova and Alexei Shulgin were involved in every stage of the development, since the configuration of the site I made for receiving the submissions, to the execution of the piece once we had chosen a winning proposal. They assisted me with their opinion and experience all along this complicated but highly instructive process.

### **The idea**

I remember having an enlightening experience with one of my first foreign employers, an American. When we first made contact, in my ingenuity I asked for an hourly rate that was somewhere in between the Argentinean and the American standard fees. This was looking just fair to me. If there was a gap in the price of labor, it seemed right to share the benefit and enjoy a situation where everyone wins.

Soon I had to notice I was wrong. My skills were very interesting, but, why was I charging so much for my time? It was surprising. My would-be boss was aware of the usual fees in Argentina and

was expecting me to stick to them. I'm Argentinean after all. I live in Buenos Aires. That's undeniable. And he was outsourcing. He was counting on the benefit of that.

I pondered over the situation. It was not a bad deal after all. The rate he was proposing was maybe a little over what I was charging then to my local clients, and more important, he was promising a continuous stream of work. I had to choose between my personal idea of fairness and some more money on my pocket. Well, as you can probably imagine, I said yes. Reality wins. As things turned out, this American is at the moment my main employer and we developed an excellent working relationship. But I had to learn my place in the world.

Now I regard this little episode as the origin of Outsource Me! It was my personal lesson on the nature of outsourcing, and it made me recognize the various good and bad sides of this strange new form of association that the global communication technologies have made possible.

Still, I am lucky. I never had to compete with fellow programmers in the open Internet market. I felt rather impressed when I saw the sites where coders and buyers get together. Each request is a kind of reverse auction where the buyer puts all the conditions and the programmers have to show they are the best while simultaneously placing the lowest possible bid. And they not only have to be cheap and good, but timely and flawless, because, if they are chosen, their employer will later rate their work, and the rating is the most important capital they have at the site. A good rating will increase their chances to be commissioned, maybe even to charge a bit more next time, so they are under high pressure to keep it perfect.

No one is forced to take part in this kind of market. Everyone is there willingly. But I can't help feeling there's something terribly sad to it. The rates are often low even for a developing country such as mine. For someone trying to make a live as a freelance coder,

I imagine it must be difficult to relax. It's like giving exam every day: there's so much competence that only the fittest survive.

Is it not a waste of much intelligence and energy, a life devoted to keeping a perfect 10 at rent-a-coder?

So, Readme 100 was my chance to play on this. Outsource Me!

is a subversion of the outsourcing relationship. The balance and geometry of this rapport is altered in many ways at the same time:

- To start with, I was going to be commissioned for developing a software-art piece. I was mixing up two areas of my life that used to remain distinct: the work that earns me money, and the art that gives me pleasure. It was about this dream we all have and only a few make real: being hired to do what you love.
- Then, I was not going to compete with anyone for this job. Quite on the contrary, the employers were going to compete among them to have me developing their idea. I was going to have the power of choosing the one I liked the most among all the proposals.
- I was not going to be paid by the employer, but by a third actor, the MetaEmployer (the festival organization), so the former one would be deprived of the usual power of those who pay.
- I was also outsourcing a task myself: thinking an idea for the software art piece I was going to present at Readme 100. So, a certain symmetry was introduced into this relationship: my employer was also working for me.
- A relationship that is usually binary was becoming a triangle. The introduction of the MetaEmployer altered the schema in many ways, some even unexpected for me. It acted both as a boss and as a helper, as a neutral third part that was nevertheless deeply engaged with the project, and as a source of skill and support. The role of the MetaEmployer was perhaps, talking now from experience, the single most important invention of Outsource Me! I'm sure many outsourced workers would love to have one if they could only imagine how it is to have one.

- A relationship that is usually private was becoming public. The whole process was open and all those taking part were going to be on stage for the show.
- The ideas for art pieces were also going to be public, as all submissions are viewable by anyone at the website. This requisite probably deterred many people who subscribe the usual position that ideas must be kept secret and not be shared, and were thus not ready to free their brainchildren on the net.
- The project for Readme 100 was actually two projects. During the festival we presented a work and a meta-work, such as I had an Employer and a MetaEmployer. Go-Logo is inside Outsource Me! as a piece of art inside another piece of art.

### **The development**

The project development had many stages:

- Writing the texts that were going to introduce and sustain the proposal: the Facts, the Agreement, my Skills and Interests.
- Setting up a website to put this texts on line and gather the submissions.
- Writing an open call and broadcasting it through the usual communication channels in the digital arts community (websites and mail lists).
- Answering the comments, questions and sometimes surprising interpretations of the proposal by would-be employers that required clarifications before submitting their ideas
- After the deadline, choosing the winning idea, which had to be both interesting and feasible within the limited time frame we had before the presentation in Dortmund.
- Developing the piece.
- Putting it on line and preparing the presentation for the Festival. The Outsource Me! website was quickly designed and configured using Drupal, an open-source Content Management System based

in PHP and MySQL that I'm using a lot for my 'serious' work.

The call for submissions remained open for three weeks. During that time, we had 24 proposals submitted by people from various points of the world, from Croatia to USA and from Brazil to Norway.

For me, it was surprisingly difficult to choose a winning idea.

I think I respect a bit more the work of jurors in competitions now that I've been through something similar. Many of the proposals were attractive. Some were just too complicated to develop within the tight schedule we had ahead of us. Some were suggestive but not clear enough, or something very similar had already been done.

It was our preliminary idea to choose an Employer from a developed country. This was fitting the concept of the project, so Olga, Alexei and me had agreed on that. I remember sending to them a shortlist of the submissions I thought were interesting or feasible, and commenting at the end: «Then, there are these ideas from Eric Londaitis, which are really very good. But I'm leaving them aside, since he's not only Argentinean, but a friend of mine». But they also thought his ideas were good. They told me, «Never mind he's your friend, let's go for them!»

This was really an unexpected turn of the events, but then, what the hell, why not. Since we were creating our own rules, we were also free to change them. So I ended up having an Employer who is also a friend, and that's always nice. It was also a further tweaking of the outsourcing schema, because Eric lives in my city, so we cannot really call it outsourcing anymore, and is also my friend, what is not the usual state of things for an outsourced worker.

So we went for 'Go-Logo'. It had an interesting concept, a probably engaging visual dimension and it was possible to develop the idea, if not fully, to a reasonable extent before the presentation.

It came also as a natural follow-up to several investigations I had been carrying on generative systems.



The execution of the idea was accompanied by very much back-and-forth among the three sides of our novel association: the author of the idea, the responsible for its development (who, as an artist himself, had his own ideas about what was right or wrong), and the MetaEmployers, who engaged actively with their own points of view. The discussions were very interesting in itself and touched on several fundamental points, such as the nature of a software art piece, its relation to functionality and user expectations, etc.

I used Flash and ActionScript because it has become for me an optimal platform for fast development and solid results that are viewable on almost every browser in the world. Also, the vectorial nature of Flash graphics was a natural fit for logos. I developed several algorithms to produce graphic results that had to be both simple, interesting and varied. This is a difficult equilibrium which is not always possible to attain, but there's still ample room to improve and make the graphics better and more logo-like.

Algorithms are remarkable for their absolute lack of aesthetic criteria. So the challenge is coding some that catch the soul of 'logoness' and output results that we, humans, can regard as nice and well-formed.

Another condition we agreed on with Eric is that no randomness was going to be involved at any point during the process. I personally think that too much random functions are around in contemporary net art works. It's like a recipe for brewing instant pseudo-data where you actually have none. Moreover, this limitation allowed us to have a one-to-one association between words and logos. Even since the first version I put on line, a funny interchange arose: «Try this word!», «Take a look at that one!».

Following a suggestion from Eric, I used a well-known cryptographic hash function, md5, to generate a pseudo-random 32-cipher hexadecimal number from any character string entered into the







