

Art as Methodology

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INTRODUCTION

HCI has grown up with the desktop; as the specialized tools used for serious scientific endeavor gave way first of all to common workplace and then to domestic use, so the market for the interface has changed, and the experience of the user has become of more interest. It has been said that the interface, to the user, is the computer—it constitutes the experience—and as the interface has become richer with increasing processing power to run it, this experiential aspect has taken center stage (Crampton-Smith & Tabor, 1992). Interaction design has focused largely on the interface as screen with point-and-click control and with layered interactive environments. More recently, it has become concerned with other modes of interaction; notably, voice-activated controls and aural feedback, and as it emerges from research laboratories, haptic interaction. Research on physicalizing computing in new ways, on the melding of bits and atoms, has produced exciting concepts for distributed computing but simultaneously has raised important questions regarding our experience of them. Work in tangible and ubiquitous computing is leading to the possibility of fuller sensory engagement both with and through computers, and as the predominance of visual interaction gives way to a more plenary bodily experience, pragmatism alone no longer seems a sufficient operative philosophy in much the same way that visual perception does not account solely for bodily experience.

Interaction design and HCI in their interdisciplinarity have embraced many different design approaches. The question of what design is has become as important as the products being produced, and computing has not been backward in learning from other design disciplines such as architecture, product design, graphics, and urban planning (Winograd, 1992). However, despite thinkers writing that interaction design is “more like art than science” (Crampton-Smith & Tabor, 1992, p. 37), it

is still design with a specific, useful end. It is obvious, for example, how user-centered design in its many methods is aimed at producing better information systems. In knowing more about the context of use, the tasks the tool will be put to, and the traits of the users, it hopes to better predict patterns and trajectories of use. The holy grail in the design of tools is that the tool disappears in use. Transparency is all; Donald Norman (1999) writes that “technology is our friend when it is inconspicuous, working smoothly and invisibly in the background ... to provide comfort and benefit” (p. 115).

It is tempting to point to the recent trend for emotional design as a step in the right direction in rethinking technology’s roles. But emotional design does not reassess design itself; in both its aims and methods, emotional design remains closely tied to the pragmatic goals of design as a whole. Both are concerned with precognition—good tools should be instantly recognizable, be introduced through an existing conceptual framework, and exhibit effective affordances that point to its functionality; while emotional design seeks to speak to the subconscious to make us feel without knowing (Colin, 2001). These types of design activity thus continue to operate within the larger pragmatic system, which casts technology as a tool without questioning the larger system itself. More interesting is the emerging trajectory of HCI, which attempts to take account of both the precognitive and interpretive to “construct a broader, more encompassing concept of ‘usability’” (Carroll, 2004, pp. 38-40).

This article presents art as a critical methodology well placed to question technology in society, further broadening and challenging the HCI of usability.

BACKGROUND

Artists work to develop personal visual languages. They strive toward unified systems of connotative signifiers to create an artistic whole. They draw and

redraw, make and remake, engaging directly with sources of visual and sensory research and with materials, immanently defining their own affective responses, and through a body of work present their world for open reading (Eco, 1989; Eldridge, 2003; Greenhalgh, 2002). Artists of all kinds commonly keep notebooks or sketchbooks of ideas for development along with explorations for possible expression of those ideas. They habitually collect and analyze source material and work through strands of thought using sketches and models, simultaneously defining the aspect of experience they are interested in representing and finding ways of manifesting that representation.

What is Represented?

Debate about what is represented in art tends to highlight issues surrounding Cartesian duality. Commonly, processes of depiction and description might seem, through their use of semiotic systems, to be centered around the object out there; the desktop metaphor in HCI is a good example. This apparent combination of objectivity with the manifold subjectivity involved in reading art poses philosophical problems, not least of which is the nature of that which is represented in the work.

Merleau-Ponty defines the phenomenological world as “not the bringing to explicit expression of a pre-existing being, but the laying down of being,” and that art is not the “reflection of a pre-existing truth” but rather “the act of bringing truth into being” (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, pp. xxii-xxiii). Thus, when we talk about a representation, it should be clear that it is not symbolic only of an existing real phenomenon, whether object or emotion, but exists instead as a new gestalt in its own right.

Bearing this in mind, we may yet say that the artist simultaneously expresses an emotion and makes comment upon it through the means of the materiality of the work. Both these elements are necessary for art to exist—indeed, the very word indicates a manipulation. Without either the emotional source (i.e., the artist’s reaction to the subject matter) or the attendant comment (i.e., the nature of its materiality), there would appear to be “no art, only empty decorativeness” (Eldridge, 2003, pp. 25-26). This is where design can be differentiated as pragmatic in relation to art: although it may be a practice “situated

within communities, ... an exploration ... already in progress prior to any design situation” (Coyne, 1995, p.11), design lacks the aboutness of art, which is why the position for HCI as laid out here is critical as opposed to pragmatic.

What is Read?

Meaning making is an agentic process not only for the artist but also for the audience; a viewer in passive reception of spectacle does not build meaning or understanding in relation to his or her own lifeworld; the viewer is merely entertained. The created artwork is experienced in the first instance as a gestalt; in a successful work, cognitive trains of thought are triggered, opening up “authentic routes of feeling” in the viewer (Eldridge, 2003, p.71). The difficulties in talking about art have been explicated by Susanne Langer as hinging on its concurrent status as expression for its maker and as impression for its audience (Langer, 1953). However, this is the nature of any language, which is manipulated not just to communicate explicit information but as a social activity geared toward consensual understanding (Winograd & Flores, 1986). The “working through undertaken by the artist” is “subsequently followed and recapitulated by the audience” (Eldridge, 2003, p.70). Just as phenomenology sees language as a socially grounded activity (e.g., in the speech acts theory) (Winograd & Flores, 1986), so art as a language is also primarily a process of activity among people. The artwork is a locus for discourse, engaged with ordinary life and, indeed, truth (Farrell Krell, 1977; Hilton, 2003; Ziarek, 2002), as is phenomenology, expressing and inviting participation in the social activity of meaning making (Eldridge, 2003; Greenhalgh, 2002; McCarthy & Wright, 2003). The temptation to see artists’ disengagement from society as irrelevant to more user-centered practices is, therefore, misconceived. Empowerment of the user or audience occurs within both processes, only at different points, and with ramifications for the nature of the resulting artifacts. It is argued here that involving the user directly in the design process correspondingly lessens the need for the user to actively engage with the final artifact and, conversely, that removing the user from the process in turn demands the user’s full emotional and cognitive apprehension in interaction with the product. The

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