Performance and Critical Design

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ABSTRACT

Critical design is a powerful methodology for HCI research that contributes to personal benefit and social renewal. We propose performance studies as a way of implementing and extending critical design.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

• Human-centered computing~Interaction design theory, concepts and paradigms

Keywords

Performance; critical design; interaction design; experience design; social renewal.

1. WHAT IS THE POINT?

What is the purpose of the project you're working on right now? The answer probably isn't simple. Surely we would all like to think that we are contributing to the betterment of humankind in some way, such as the many examples of 'social renewal, activism, democracy, and grassroots innovation' at this conference. Two promising but underdeveloped approaches to these kinds of HCI research are performance and critical design. We propose a productive combination of the two for furthering socially progressive aims.

2. CRITICAL DESIGN

One potential tool for exploring the purpose and outcomes of HCI research is critical design explored in [1]. 'Critical design... is a research strategy dedicated to transgressing and undermining social conformity, passivity, and similar values of capitalist ideology, in hopes of bringing about social emancipation' [1 p.3298]. Depending on the funding one hopes to receive, one might soft-pedal the undermining of capitalism, but it is difficult to argue against research that discourages conformity and passivity in cultures that (nominally) are or strive to be democratic. The Bardzells have called on their fellow HCI researchers to develop critical design in useful ways beyond the limitations of Dunne and Raby's original conception [4], which includes examples such as an 'unintelligible' combination of golf club and clothes dryer [3 p.49], or performance artist Stelarc's robotic 'Third Hand' [3 p.32]. Specifically, the Bardzells critique

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three of Dunne and Raby's key arguments in an effort to make critical design truly useful 'for HCI researchers concerned about the futures that we are designing' [1 p.3306]. This paper stakes the claim that performance studies is a powerful lens for developing critical design as understood by the Bardzells.

3. WHAT EXACTLY IS PERFORMANCE?

Performance studies is a diverse discipline encompassing everything from West End musicals to ceremonial rituals to telematic shows to football matches. It is difficult to find a common denominator for such a range of activities without descending into pure metaphor, where anything can be studied 'as' performance [8]. Marvin Carlson defines it as 'all activity carried out with a consciousness of itself' [2 p.4]. This definition is particularly useful in the context of HCI, because it directs attention beyond the instrumentality of an interaction such as a request for information, towards the construction of meaning for the person making the request and for the person the request is directed at. These meanings can be personal and cultural, multiple and contradictory. When the interactions in question involve digital technologies, the significance of these meanings is amplified. Performance studies is ideally situated to investigate interactions with digital technology in which users are aware of the personal and/or social implications of their interactions.

In his seminal work connecting cultural, organisational, and technological performances, Jon McKenzie points out that cultural performances tend to be prized for their 'liminality' – in other words, their ability to place performers and audience members in a transitional space between the norms of everyday life and the norms established during the performance event – a transitional space that invites people to rethink their positions and attitudes [7]. We argue that liminality can be a key concept for critical design, which aims to place its users in a position of questioning their relationship to that design and to the socio-cultural systems underlying it. Ideas such as liminality and performance cannot be easily transposed between performance studies and HCI, and we certainly do not advocate attempts by HCI researchers to appropriate these concepts at face value. Rather, we see the power of using such terms and the perspectives that underpin them as entry points into the investigations of value and purpose demanded by critical design.

4. CRITIQUING CRITICAL DESIGN

The Bardzells' first critique of Dunne and Raby's framing of critical design is directed at the assertion that critical design is ethically pure and totally anticapitalist, while affirmative design serves only the interests of the morally suspect status quo. Performance studies supports the Bardzells' view that there is no solid separation between the two. Performance research tends to

use the ‘methodological keys’ of reflexivity and unpredictability [6 p.6]: it is centred around the position of the researcher in a complex set of contexts, which can alter the project (or the researcher) in unforeseen ways. The researcher continually reflects on the impact of her own choices and responds flexibly to issues that emerge. These performance ‘keys’ ground the researcher in the certainty that she can never be sure about her unfolding research process: in performance, there is no luxury of assuming an ethically pure stance within an inherently reflexive and unpredictable process. These ‘keys’ can help to unpick the tensions between transgression and conformity in the creation and analysis of any interactive event. The only assumption that can be made is that each performance (or design) implicates its makers in an unstable set of actions and interpretations.

The second critique is of Dunne and Raby’s view that critical design and art are mutually exclusive, with art existing entirely outside of everyday life. The Bardzells respond that art and everyday life are intertwined: they use the example of students playing music. Performance studies can take this intertwining much further: there are entire strands of performance based entirely on everyday interactions, and everyday life can be analysed as performance [8, 9]. Again, it is unlikely that researchers will find any simple definitions within performance studies that can be easily imported into HCI, including any assertions about the difference between everyday life and performance. However, it is important to note that what little consensus there is within performance studies includes the notion that Dunne and Raby’s bright lines between art and life are virtually meaningless in the context of interactional, event-based arts such as performance – and interaction design.

The Bardzells’ final critique is of Dunne and Raby’s description of the ‘criticalness’ of critical design, which they argue is unhelpfully reduced to ‘defamiliarisation and ideology’ [1 p.3300]. The Bardzells seek a broader and richer definition of criticalness through their investigation of the ‘practical resources’ [1 p.3300] to be found in critical theory and metacriticism. Performance studies is strongly grounded in many of the key perspectives of critical theory cited by the Bardzells. At least as importantly, performance studies tends to pursue the same goal as critical design: ‘not to describe the world but to *change* it’ [1 p.3301]. The creation (and analysis) of each new performance, just like the creation (and analysis) of each new design, alters the parameters of what is possible and acceptable. Performance studies remains firmly grounded in the particulars of individual performances and therefore continues to assume the possibility of communication, if not the establishment of ‘facts’, outside of grand narratives. This addresses two of the three key challenges that the Bardzells see for critical theory [1 p.3302] within HCI (unfortunately, no one can claim that performance studies is wholly untouched by sanctimoniousness). Performance offers both practical work and a rich body of theory that is for the most part speculative, dialogical, and reflexive, seeking to change cultural perspectives – all the elements at the heart of what makes critical design ‘critical’ [1 p.3304].

5. EXTENDING CRITICAL DESIGN

This brief sketch demonstrates how performance studies aligns with the Bardzells’ three critiques of Dunne and Raby’s work. We now offer an even briefer proposal in four points for how performance studies can productively extend critical design.

1. Performance studies is founded on the concept of events that people can have a variety of responses to, in different contexts and over time. In performance, even technological artefacts such as Stelarc’s ‘Third Hand’ are understood in terms of their varying meanings, emotional effects, and relationships to a wider socio-political context.

2. Performance is not limited to acting out fictional characters. Performance art, live art, and autobiographical performance involve versions of the performer’s own self, persona, and life experience. Insights from these strands of research can illuminate how people shape identities and relationships through engagement with emerging digital technologies.

3. Performance is also not limited to the people on stage. Those ‘devisers’ who create new performances without a pre-existing written script are analogous to interaction or experience designers in many ways. A study of the techniques, motivations, and effects achieved by devisers can reveal specific angles or topics to pursue in understanding the ‘criticalness’ of a design.

4. Performance studies opens up entirely new and arguably more relevant meanings of the term ‘aesthetics’. These refer not just to a visual look-and-feel but to the heightening of attention that occurs during a performance, among other things [5]. Studying shifts in attention can contribute significantly to an understanding of how people interact with technologies.

6. THIS IS THE POINT

We have argued for integrating some of the methodologies of performance studies into third-wave HCI, interaction design, and experience design [9]. This position paper sketches the contributions that performance might make to critical design in particular. The result can be a more reflexive, adaptive, and powerful way of designing and understanding technologies – one that empowers researchers to create work that contributes to personal benefit and social renewal.

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