

Perspectives on Participation: Evaluating Cross-Disciplinary Tools, Methods and Practices

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ABSTRACT

This workshop brings together a cross-disciplinary community of researchers and practitioners interested in participative practice and interactive systems design. The workshop addresses growing fascination with participation across interaction design, community informatics, the arts, science and social science, and asks workshop participants to reflect on the ethics and efficacy of the tools and methods used in these diverse practices. The aim of the workshop will be to map out a critical framework exploring the qualities of participation from multiple disciplines. The workshop outcomes will outline how cross-disciplinary perspectives on participation can contribute to participatory and user-centred interaction design.

Author Keywords

Participatory design; participatory arts; communities; evaluation; reflection.

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

WORKSHOP BACKGROUND

There has been a growing fascination with participation across multiple disciplines in recent years. It is no longer unusual for researchers and practitioners from diverse backgrounds and fields to engage with people—either as users/stakeholders (as in user-centred service design) or as co-operators (as in participatory design)—during and beyond research and design activities. In the specific context of design research and HCI, the rationales behind this move towards participation are many. They include the moral proposition that users have a right to be directly included in the process of design, the pragmatic rationale that users' input will increase the chances of a successful design outcome and in turn, increased likelihood of user-acceptance of the resultant products/services [2]. The

tradition of Scandinavian Cooperative and Participatory Design (PD) is also an established approach that embraces cooperation that greatly influences interaction design research. As researchers and designers have become to see the value in participation for design processes, co-design and collaborations with diverse stakeholders have also become popular. Most recently, we have seen an intermingling of approaches from participatory arts and PD [8], although a clear understanding of the role of such artistic practice in design research is still left wanting. This workshop attends to this gap in knowledge.

Attention to participative and collaborative methods is also encouraged by the inclusion of public engagement and social impact as an important criterion with which funding proposals are judged. For example, UK research councils ask applications to include 'pathways to impact' statements that encourage 'engagement and collaboration' with partners and 'in the wild' projects that focus on the participation of users throughout [9], and recently a project was funded whose sole purpose was to investigate how to give the best experience of participation for participants [5]. There are a range of approaches to engaging end users and members of the public in participatory projects across science, social science and the arts. Cultural institutions invite visitors to participate in making content for new exhibitions. Visual and performing arts practitioners collaborate with communities and audiences to inform or make new work. Such scenarios have led to a diverse range of participative practices that researchers interested in interactive system design can draw from.

The coming together of participatory tools, methods and practices, between HCI, PD, the Arts, and Cultural Heritage sector poses a challenge. Researchers and practitioners must now negotiate the appropriateness of methods given the different epistemologies and practices across the various disciplines. There comes a temptation to develop new methods without necessarily understanding those that have been used before or why they might be useful. At the same time, project and funding commitments may mean participation becomes an end in itself as opposed to a means for improving research processes and products. We argue that we should be careful not to reify the utility of

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DIS 2012, June 11-15, 2012, Newcastle, UK.

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participation. Instead, participation should be seen in light of how it can best serve the desired goals of a particular situation. For instance, there might be situations in which participation may not be essential to a project's successful outcome. Similarly, research that involves industrial and charitable partners may be influenced by the needs of these stakeholders as much as those of 'end-users'—a situation at odds with the tradition of PD [3].

The attention towards participation in design and HCI has also lead to the expansion of the typical participatory tools and methods. Tools such as paper prototyping and storyboards have been supplemented by provocative films [7] and improvised fantasy performances [6], among others, in workshop settings. New methods and techniques also continue to be developed as researchers work with different user-groups, such as those who may be unable to participate directly in the design process—including dementia sufferers in care homes [1] or children with special needs [4].

This context provides an opportunity to bring diverse communities with a shared interest together to make sense of why and how we collaborate with people in design, art and HCI. By reflecting on our experiences in participatory projects we can begin to situate when certain techniques are more appropriate than others and inform more fruitful project outcomes.

WORKSHOP TOPICS AND GOALS

This workshop will bring together researchers and practitioners from HCI, PD, Participative Arts, and the Cultural Heritage sectors with expertise and/or an interest in evaluating the participative methods used in their work. In bringing this diverse community together, we hope to unravel the reasoning and ramifications of the use of particular approaches that aim to engage users in design, and unpick some of the epistemological drivers of participation in diverse disciplines. In particular, we will ask participants to reflect upon: 1) *Why* they were motivated to involve people in a participative manner and why were people motivated to participate? 2) *What* were the key transformative moments within their project? 3) *How* was the success of the project's "outcomes" measured, if at all?

The goal of asking these questions is to engender a cross-disciplinary community of researchers and practitioners with a joint interest in evaluating the participative methods, techniques and process used in their practices.

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John Vines is a Senior Research Assistant at Northumbria University's School of Design. His work investigates how changes to the mind, body and the experience of technologies in later life impacts upon the design of new digital products and services for older people.

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interaction design to support the creation and sharing of stories in multicultural communities.

Tuck Wah Leong is a Senior Research Associate with the Social Inclusion in the Digital Economy hub at Newcastle University. His interest in technology is primarily focused upon understanding how people use, interact with, and in turn experience and make sense of their technology use.

Peter Wright is Professor of Social Computing at Newcastle University, and co-leads the Digital Interaction group based within Culture Lab. His current projects focus on health-related services and technologies from an experience-centered perspective on design.

Ann Light is Professor at Northumbria University's School of Design. Her work focuses on the politics of design, using participatory methods, in part, to inspire consideration of how tools shape our world and what we can do in it.

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