

Participatory Prototyping Proposal: Performance Methods for Engaging in Design

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ABSTRACT

This prototyping workshop will use methods adapted from contemporary performance to engage people in designing 'networks of things'. These methods have been designed to widen participation in the design process and to help people envision and articulate the alternative social and political worlds that technology engenders.

Keywords

Performance, Technology, Design.

Background:

The speed and scale of technological change is increasing making the challenge of enhancing participation in design simultaneously harder and more urgent. Ambient intelligence, pervasive computing, augmented reality, a network of things, smart buildings and clothes, identity tagging... the digital future is promised as seamless flows of information between environments, objects and people.

How can we equip people with techniques that enable them to engage with these changes? How do we broaden the constituency of design? How do we help people engage with social and political transformations engendered by these technologies?

Existing 'user-centred' design techniques are badly equipped for addressing the potential of technology to

produce social and political change. The ramifications of even simple technologies such as text messaging were neither anticipated nor modeled by existing design frameworks. Their impact continues to underline the challenge to design. Consider, for example, the role of SMS messaging in the withdrawal of Syrian troops from the Lebanon, or in getting Kuwaiti women the vote [1].

What can we do to help people envision and articulate the alternative possible social worlds that technology could enable? How can this process be made tractable for design? What methods of practical engagement can be developed to contribute to this understanding?

Performing Design:

In the DemTech project [2] we have attempted to address these questions through the use of performance techniques to develop methods that help people do 'design thinking'. Our goal has been to widen the franchise of involvement and to explore how future technologies could anticipate and reflect peoples needs and desires more closely.

We take as our starting point techniques that originally evolved within the tradition of Sociodrama [3] and Theatre of the Oppressed [4]. These forms are proven to be effective in activating marginalised constituencies in the articulation of social, political and organisational problems and in fomenting social change. They are demonstrably socially inclusive [4,5] and they aid people in the production of new versions of their own futures. Thus, unlike ethnographic methods, they provide methods for going beyond people's understanding of the current social organisation of their world.

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While performative methods have been adopted in user-centered design, they are not being used to articulate possible alternative social and cultural worlds enabled by technology. Our focus is on their potential for direct public engagement with the intangible world of digital technologies.



Figure 1: Participants in one of the DemTech Workshops

Format:

The workshop is designed to facilitate moves from the concrete to the abstract, from everyday objects to new tools and toys. We present some techniques that have been specifically developed to address the design of computer technology and the connections it enables between people and things. Using envisioning, play, associative thinking and other means of overcoming self-censorship, we tackle

possible new forms of relationship in a creative and constructive way.

This workshop is suitable for anyone who works in the community or with users to discuss technology, the future, active participation and empowered voices. It will take the form of some exercises and discussion, with reflection and time for feedback. It does not involve performances as such and is designed so that even the shyest participant feels confident to get involved.

The techniques were devised with older people in local London communities, but are applicable for a range of groups who do not regularly participate in design discussions and would benefit from support doing so.

To apply, participants should send a brief description of their interests to the organisers. Please note, there will be no formal presentations. The workshop will focus on discussion of methods.

REFERENCES

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