Towards New Goods: Philosophy of Technology Meets Human-Computer Interaction

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Abstract

As interactive digital technologies are becoming more important to everyday life, our world is increasingly being experienced with, through, and by these interactive artifacts: appliances, mobile devices, web services, and software applications. At the same time, traditionally analogue and mechanical technologies are becoming enhanced with digital capacity, networking capabilities, and interactive behavior; and new pervasive networking technologies enable these artifacts to communicate with each other on the fly. From the perspective of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI), these digital transformations pose a number of important questions whose reach we as a field are currently struggling hard to grasp. While the concept of designing for user experience is rapidly catching on in HCI as an alternative to traditional usability metrics, few thoughtful notions exist with regard to what would constitute a 'good' user experience. Also, the current pervasiveness of the digital in everyday life is starting to make it increasingly difficult to distinguish such a 'user experience' from just any other experience. The trend towards pervasive networking where digital artifacts primarily interact with each other and with computational power embedded in the environment has come to blur the concept of 'user', crucial to almost all current methodological and theoretical approaches in HCI.

These examples show that the problems with which HCI are concerned, in developing technology behaviors and understanding the interaction between these technologies and people and environments, have grown considerably in complexity. Increased complexity forces HCI to deal with what has been termed 'wicked problems' in design research. Traditional approaches in HCI, that have dealt primarily with relatively well-defined, controlled problems, find wicked problems intrinsically difficult, not least since they typically bring about and make explicit ethical and philosophical concerns that seem to persist on a level above individual efforts of design, use, and evaluation. These are challenging not only current theory and methodology, but also to old truths in the field regarding its scope, purpose and aim. Ultimately, these questions come to threaten the notion of good and bad in HCI and in doing so, we argue, come to make visible the field's lack of a coherent vision of what it seeks to achieve.

This paper explores the potential of the field of philosophy of technology to be in support of HCI in the process of understanding its 'new good'. To find and establish a new guiding vision in the paraphernalia of approaches, technologies, and frameworks that is today's HCI, we need new concepts and tools for thinking that allow us to take a step back from the technologies we develop and the direct, apparent effects they have on users and their tasks. This paper uses the notion of the device paradigm (Borgmann) and the concept of non-neutral human-technology relations (Ihde) as starting points in forming such a guiding vision.