



The Politics of Imaginaries: Probing Humanistic Inquiry in HCI

Gabrielle Benabdallah
gabben@uw.edu
University of Washington
Seattle, Washington, USA

Daniela Rosner
dkrosner@uw.edu
University of Washington
Seattle, Washington, USA

Michael W. Beach
mwb8@uw.edu
University of Washington
Seattle, Washington, USA

Kavita Philip
kavita.philip@ubc.ca
University of British Columbia
Vancouver, BC, Canada

Nathanael Elias Mengist
mengin@uw.edu
University of Washington
Seattle, Washington, USA

Lucy Suchman
l.suchman@lancaster.ac.uk
Lancaster University
Lancaster, UK

ABSTRACT

Over the past few decades, human-computer interaction (HCI) and interaction design (IxD) scholars have embraced humanistic traditions to cultivate new modes of inquiry: widening examinations of technology's social constitution, from affective computing [10], aesthetic interaction [4], and experience design [23] to critical race theory [28], post-colonial computing [19], and "the more-than-human turn" [27]. Today, with mounting political and environmental crises, scholars increasingly turn to humanistic inquiry to emphasize the necessity of both critical and imaginative encounters. This work often involves recognizing and reworking systemic inequities baked into the practices, policies, and governance structures associated with computing worlds. The goal of this one-day workshop is to bring together scholars, practitioners, and makers working across HCI and the humanities to develop a concern for the politics of imaginaries. We explore technopolitical imaginaries as the creative connections drawn between past, present, and future possibilities that shape computing development. Across discussions and hands-on activities, we seek to lay the foundation for a broader conversation on the stakes of a humanistic imagination and how HCI might learn from its optimism without shying away from the necessity of its pessimisms.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **HCI theory, concepts and models.**

KEYWORDS

Critical Design, Speculative Design, Imaginaries, Design Futures, Knowledge Work; Knowledge Maps; Humanities

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1 INTRODUCTION

The field of HCI emerged and evolved through engagement with, and sometimes the appropriation of [33], a variety of disciplines, including cognitive and behavioral sciences, psychology, anthropology, sociology, and overlapping strands of the humanities. Across the 1970s and 80s, encounters with ethnographic traditions shaped studies of use and usability, pointing to emerging techniques for assessment, iteration, and design, such as locating agency through moment-to-moment action [35]. In the early 2000's, an interest in critical approaches opened opportunities for questioning the assumptions, values, and positions implicated by HCI research [9]. Just 11 years ago, the CHI panel "The Humanities and/in HCI" [5] signaled a profound turn to critical-imaginative engagement: proffering a dual commitment to understanding technology's social, cultural, and institutional histories, and to creating the conditions for new and different worlds. As HCI researchers and designers committed to both critique and generative creativity, we use this eleventh anniversary reflection to review and reassess our roles as researchers at these intersections. How might we more explicitly focus the humanistic methods and approaches in HCI on concerns of privilege, power, and access [6, 16, 19, 31]? How might we better hold these technologies — and the market infrastructure around them — to account? In order to build on this rich beginning, we suggest, HCI/Humanities researchers should work on shifting the weight and target of our speculative and critical strategies from a generalized transhistorical ethics to a place-specific, historically situated politics [25].

Reflecting on the scope of humanities and/in HCI laid out eleven years ago, we believe that HCI can benefit from a renewed theoretical and conceptual grounding from the humanities. In this iteration, we seek to draw selectively from the expansion of humanities scholarship over the last decade, foregrounding the powerful new work in black studies, decolonial studies, radical cultural anthropologies, and political economic geographies to help us imagine futures that actively refuse to reproduce the oppressive social, cultural, and economic conditions of the past. In doing so, we hope for a practice of imagination in HCI that explicitly engages with "the entangled histories of/and ongoing connection among the impoverishment of peoples and worlds, enslaved and gendered labor, Indigenous dispossession, developmentalism, and knowledge work" [12]. In this engagement, radical humanistic approaches offer a means of acknowledging feelings of hopelessness while articulating hope for another world. With this possibility in mind, we ask: Can HCI learn from the radical edge of the new trends in humanities without

shying away from the necessity of its pessimisms? What new programs of work come from an engagement with contemporary humanities methods of inquiry and analysis? What forms of thought and action emerge through the entanglement of critical thinking and computing? Our workshop invites design researchers and practitioners to explore these questions around the creative and critical potentials of an evolving humanistic HCI. The main aim of this workshop is to build on foundational HCI critiques [1, 29, 42] by collectively examining the politics of imaginaries: the relationship between (1) cultural values and images reified in technical objects, and (2) the positions, assumptions, and governance structures that shape technological development. By inquiring into existing and emergent approaches from HCI and the humanities, we explore humanistic methods that center on issues of relationality and power [2, 20, 21, 38].

2 BACKGROUND

Why might we argue for HCI to turn to the humanities once again, more than 10 years later [5]? For us, this question is more than an opportunity to respond to prior formulations of the connections between the humanities and HCI. It is also an opportunity to continue to expand those conversations: drawing new connections with past and contemporary approaches to critical inquiry with ongoing humanistic HCI analysis. Observing resonances with anti-solutionism and speculative strands of HCI inquiry we return to the question of humanities and HCI by asking “what pedagogies and practices afford the generation and proliferation of imaginaries” that refuse to reproduce historical, ongoing injustices [12]? This line of inquiry has deep roots and touches many branches of knowledge. The notion of imaginaries as pursued by philosophers and scholars [3, 11, 22, 40] offers insights into how critical engagement with both aesthetics and politics can counter the dehumanizing histories of technology development while enabling different technological futures.

Within HCI and engineering, there is a rich relationship between imagination and technological development. While many technical systems find their roots in science fiction [24, 34, 39, 41], design and engineering are always acts of “collective imagining” [14], envisioning not just artifacts and systems but also relationships, experiences and events—that is, ways of being [17]. These visions might be explicit or implicit, but they are always enacted through the usage and deployment of technical systems, shaping the possibilities of individuation, togetherness and collective organizing.

Imagination is therefore not just a foundational activity of HCI design, but also of political life. Chiara Bottici draws from a long philosophical tradition which views imagination as “the capacity to produce images in the most general sense of the term” and stresses the role of this capacity for the development and sustenance of political life [11]. In order to hold together the ways in which imaginaries uphold simultaneously collective and political practices as well as technical and material ones, Suchman proposes we pay attention to configuration [36]. Configuration is a practice of “figuring things together,” in our case the “entanglement of imaginaries and artefacts”.

In this workshop, we seek to reinforce the bridge between the humanities and HCI by making technopolitical imaginaries [18]

an integral part of how technologists think about artifacts and systems. As many of the organizers and their colleagues have recently demonstrated, the political ramifications of technological artifacts are dependent on the imaginaries they are built from, for better or worse. The better can be facilitated through theories and methods from the humanities ranging from Afro-pessimism [13], critical fabulations [32], investigative journalism [37], value sensitive speculative design [7], material speculation [8], material historicity [30], and world building [26].

3 WORKSHOP AIMS AND TOPICS OF INTEREST

Our goal is to bring organizers and participants together to envision futures in plural whereby a refraction of intersecting pasts and alternative futures can resonate across differences. To investigate the configuration [36] of a particular artifact of their choosing, participants will develop their knowledge and ignorance maps using the activity outlined in Joseph Dumit’s activity “Writing the Implosion: Teaching the World One Thing at a Time” [15]. We will explore multiple dimensions of technological imaginaries, such as: labor dimensions, epistemological dimensions, material dimensions, political dimensions, economic dimensions, symbolic dimensions, textual dimensions, historical dimensions, educational dimensions, bodily/organic dimensions, and mythological dimensions, among others.

As Dumit observes, the goal of the activity is equally to make evident the gaps in your knowledge, and “to imagine how and where you could get the answers you are missing” [15]. Participants will engage with one or several dimensions to flesh out the technopolitical imaginaries of the system, device, artifact or phenomenon of their choice. Through this activity and subsequent discussion, we seek to address some of the following topics of interest:

- How can we re-infuse speculative projects and reflections with the political stakes of technological development and design?
- When do speculative projects in design and HCI fall short of engaging with the actual cost of extraction, oppression, and marginalization of technical systems?
- What are the stakes of ignoring issues of class, ability, race, caste, indigeneity, gender, and sexuality in technological development?
- What are some ways we have to keep designers, engineers and technologists accountable?
- How can we counter and open out mainstream speculative design and futurist discourse to embrace plural future visions?

The workshop aims to explore the connections between the humanities and HCI, with a focus on how imaginaries can be leveraged to think at the intersection of politics and technological development. We seek to encourage critical inquiry and engagement with both aesthetics and politics to counteract the dehumanizing histories of technology development. With this workshop, we aim to provide a space to explore the images reified in technical objects and the positions, assumptions, and governance structures that shape technological development. This workshop will provide an opportunity for participants to share their ideas and work related

to the integration of the humanities into HCI, and how these humanistic and critical legacies shape, hinder or bolster designers' and researchers' capacity to penetrate the imaginative layers of technical systems.

Our aim is to initiate and reinforce conversations about the role of imagination in both HCI design and political life. By paying attention to the entanglement of imaginaries and artifacts, participants will be prompted to envision different technological futures –and, more importantly, to flesh out the collective implications of these envisionings.

4 CALL FOR PARTICIPATION

In the past 15 years, HCI and Interaction Design have seen an increase of humanistic methods and approaches combined with the empirical traditions familiar to these communities. New powerful work in feminist STS, design justice, black studies, decolonial studies, radical cultural anthropologies, and political economic geographies, among others, can help researchers imagine futures that actively refuse to reproduce the oppressive social, cultural, and economic conditions of the past. These critical and sustaining perspectives on systems design often take root in explicit or implicit technopolitical imaginaries –the webs of images, concepts, narratives, and sense experience that structure and stabilize systems' and artifacts' collective becomings.

We invite designers, researchers, and practitioners with an interest in exploring the politics of technological imaginaries to submit a knowledge map for a technology or system of their choosing, with an accompanying 3-5 pages proposal that elaborates the issues raised by their case. Participants will develop their knowledge map using the activity outlined in [15]. We will provide support materials that break down the knowledge map activity into parts as a PDF worksheet made accessible on the workshop website. All submissions can be sent as an email attachment to submissions@politicsofimaginaries.com. All accepted submissions will be added to the workshop website and a link will be published prior to the workshop for asynchronous participation.

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