

Building a community: A personal journey through the early years of HCI

Submission to HCI2020 History of Human Computer Interaction online workshop

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Intro

The history of HCI can be viewed through a number of lenses. The one I would like to focus on is how the field has evolved through a diverse range of disciplines, communities and perspectives that have come together over the years.

My objective is to capture some of the dynamics behind this, and seed a discussion of how others see their background leading them to HCI and considering the bigger picture of the way this almost organic growth has shaped the field.

I am going to present this very much as a personal journey and make little attempt to justify any characterisation of the bigger picture – we can keep that for discussion.

My route into HCI

When i think of my HCI journey, I am reminded of Douglas Adams' set of rules that describe our reactions to technologies:

1. Anything that is in the world when you're born is normal and ordinary and is just a natural part of the way the world works.
2. Anything that's invented between when you're fifteen and thirty-five is new and exciting and revolutionary and you can probably get a career in it.
3. Anything invented after you're thirty-five is against the natural order of things.

That pretty much captures how I got into HCI, and made a career of it!

It was probably also important that I had the benefit of a very broad-based Scottish education that let me follow interests in both science and humanities. I went to University to study for a MA in Maths, Physics and Economics, and because of the vagaries of the Glasgow Arts faculty at the time, ended up with a degree in Psychology!

I was already therefore juggling a variety of disciplines to follow my interests, and when the opportunity arose to make use of computers to run and analyse psychology experiments, this definitely felt new and exciting! My PhD followed this route and I learned a lot about using computers in a practical setting. Although this could not be regarded as HCI, I was aware that similar techniques to those I was engaged in were being used specifically to study the use of computers, most notably then at the MRC Applied Psychology Unit. That was therefore a dream job and I was fortunate that the end of my Durham contract in 1980 coincided with the start of the second joint APU / IBM project on HCI, so I ended up in Cambridge.

Although the work we were doing was fairly narrowly focused on dialogue aspects of interaction, it was able to demonstrate how insights could be gained systematically, and the IBM connection

provided me with valuable insights into the kinds of real world problems that we were addressing. This period was the time when HCI was beginning to take off in the early 80s.

When Xerox set up EuroPARC in 1986, I was the first full time member of research staff – William Newman, and I think Tim O’Shea, were already engaged as consultants. This was the start of the period where I really experienced HCI developing rapidly as a highly interdisciplinary community. The team we built at EuroPARC was very diverse, with backgrounds ranging through computer science, engineering, typography, architecture, psychology, sociology and anthropology. We also had a regular flow of HCI people spending sabbaticals with us, so it was an incredibly stimulating environment, and as a relatively small group, it was probably the most intensively interdisciplinary HCI group in the world.

Alongside all that I also led the EuroPARC contribution to the Amodeus project, which made great strides in developing the more academic side of HCI with psychologists and computer scientists working closely together.

I found this melting pot incredibly stimulating. I was probably fortunate in having enough breadth in early experience that I could just about make sense of the variety of perspectives. This was the period where I moved to design, and specifically design rationale, as a research focus. One of the great strengths of that perspective was that it provided a framework which could incorporate the range of relevant inputs into system design and interaction. It also helped me realise that there is no point in having world beating insights into one narrow part of the design if you can’t at least satisfice all the other contributions that are required.

Conclusion

Although this is very much a personal account, it is perhaps a microcosm of how the field as a whole evolved through absorbing more and more perspectives, and I would be interested in exploring that further in the workshop, perhaps with a discussion of challenges met along the way, which I have not considered here.

Looking beyond the period covered here, I think viewing the evolution of HCI as being driven by new communities coming on board still holds. I would point especially the increasing number of UX / Usability etc. practitioners as a major trend that is still exploding now.

On that note, I will end with another of my favourite Douglas Adams quotes:

“The History of every major Galactic Civilization tends to pass through three distinct and recognizable phases, those of Survival, Inquiry and Sophistication, otherwise known as the How, Why, and Where phases. For instance, the first phase is characterized by the question 'How can we eat?' the second by the question 'Why do we eat?' and the third by the question 'Where shall we have lunch?’”

It is probably a bit pretentious to compare HCI with a Galactic Civilisation, but I wonder if we are moving out of the phase of Inquiry to that of Sophistication? Discuss!