
Operationalising In-Action Ethics

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Introduction

In previous work we made the case for a framework we called **In-Action Ethics** to address the serious shortcomings anticipatory ethics presents in the context of human-computer interaction design and research. Building on the work of others (e.g., [6, 1]), our aim was to argue for continuous, critical reflection on our actions, so that ethics becomes folded into the practice of HCI work, rather than being a tick-box exercise. By taking part in this workshop, we hope to take this work a step further and discuss possible ways to operationalise it in the context of HCI research projects. We aim to bring a number of early concepts to the table and involve other participants in discussing their potential suitability within their contexts.

In-Action Ethics

For many parts of society, technology has become ubiquitous and pervasive, reaching into ever more aspects of our lives. This has led HCI to respond with a methodolog-

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ical as well as an epistemological shift. In what has been termed the third wave of HCI, it has been recognised that the design of interactive technologies is inherently situated, embodied and values driven [3]. However, we argue that this vastly extended scope for design also requires us to re-think the kinds of responsibilities that researchers and practitioners have when creating new technologies, both in terms of individuals involved in the process as well as society as a whole. And while we have evolved the methods for design, we argue that ethics in HCI is still lagging behind, predominately operating in the mindset of past paradigms that sought to anticipate possible sources of harm and to mitigate risks in line with the traditional waterfall-model of engineering. In our article, we identify a range of challenges that demonstrate that such a perspective on ethics is clearly unfit to deal with the kind of dilemmas HCI researchers and practitioners need to concern themselves with in reality [2]. While HCI still needs a strong regulatory ethics element for ensuring that fundamental principles are upheld, the practice and research of HCI has become too complex to be guided by such ethics alone.

With “In-Action Ethics” we have proposed a framework that aims to close this gap, building on the work of Munteanu et al [6] who have put forward a similar line of argument. Taking inspiration from third-wave HCI and relevant discussions in other fields, such as Action Research (AR) or interactive media-arts, we argue to extend existing anticipatory ethics procedures by a reflective practice that embeds ethical awareness in the design process. Thus, the key features of In-Action Ethics are *reflection-in-action* - the ability to reflect on ones decisions and judgements as the design process unfolds; the perspective that ethics is *co-constructed* within the situated context and the stakeholders involved, which requires a new quality of *openness* and transparency about how ethical judgements are made; and

a shift in *working-culture* that makes explicit the *shared-responsibility* of co-constructed ethics.

As the guiding principle in In-Action Ethics, we propose the concept of *ethos* as a moral commitment or stance, a moral attitude that underlies a particular practice. In contrast to guidelines, we understand ethos as something that is intrinsic and embodied - not only in people, but also communities, projects or companies. The ethos becomes the tacit knowledge that guides decisions within a reflective practice (compare Schön [7]). We also consequently have re-imagined the role of ethicists who, rather than being policing ethical conduct, become *midwives of ethics* who scaffold and facilitate the process *ethos* development.

Concepts to operationalise

In our article, we have motivated and laid out our arguments for In-Action Ethics, but also made first suggestions about how to operationalise the framework. By participating in this workshop we hope to be able to further develop some of these thoughts:

Ethics workshops

Within research projects, the typical procedure for dealing with ethics is to out-source it to a designated person. The ethics expert produces a document that satisfies the requirements of the funding body and only gets involved in practical matters of the research when policies such as informed consent need to be enforced. There are, however, a few examples in which projects have looked to engage the whole team in a discussion of ethics and thereby raise awareness for the topic for all people involved. For example, as part of a large research programme of the European Union, the Ambient-Assistive Living (ALL) programme, a workshop format was developed that aimed to engage whole research projects in identifying and discussing eth-

ical challenges in designing technologies for the elderly - MEESTAR workshops [5]. We would like to exchange our experiences in running such ethics workshop with others to assess their effectiveness in terms of shifting the working culture in such projects.

Ethos development workshops

More specifically, we are currently thinking about appropriate formats for workshops that target ethos building in particular. This would likely involve working with, negotiating and reflecting on values. However, the context and other people will also shape the ethos that emerges to be used in certain projects or for groups. We ask how we as ethicists can be effective midwives to ethos development.

ANT Workshops

Another technique that we have started to experiment with is what we call ANT workshops. The concept borrows the fundamental idea from Actor Network Theory (ANT), that human and non-human actors are part of the same, interwoven network [4]. This perspective is powerful in understanding the relationships between things, people or concepts within their interconnected context dependencies. Given this lens on any design or research project allows one to ask questions of ethical concern, such as power relationships or impacts. This represents a very early idea, some way before becoming an applicable tool, however, we would be keen discussing if ANT can provide a valuable perspective for talking about ethics.

The ethics future workshop

Future workshops, alongside design fiction and other narrative based techniques, have become part of the repertoire of HCI work, particularly as a means to think outside the box and to ideate novel concepts. In a pilot study, we have used a variation of a future workshop to engage a group of students in a discussion about the ethical rele-

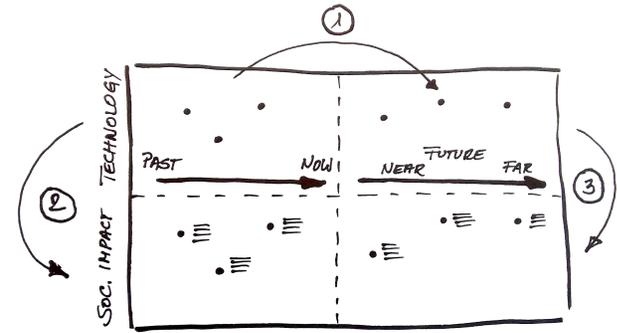


Figure 1: Ethics Future Workshop

vance of their design decisions (see figure 1). On a large poster which initially is folded twice, we asked them to put past innovations, relevant to their current work on a timeline (1). Subsequently they were asked to unfold the poster towards the right and imagine where future innovations could lead from what has been possible in the past (2). We then asked them to unfold the poster towards the bottom and add thoughts about the impact each innovation in the past had on the way people lived (3) and then do the same for their projections in the future. We found that talking about the more extreme consequences that resulted from the innovations they imagined in the far future, helped having a discourse about the design decisions they need to make today. We are keen discussing similar approaches and techniques that open new perspectives on the relationship between design decisions and the impact of technology on people.

The Ethics-Bug-Tracker

Within a project that has started recently, we are experimenting with another possible tool we alluded to in our arti-

cle. Inspired by common processes in software-engineering, we are implementing an Ethics-Bug-Tracker. To address the challenge that HCI research has become much more fluid and exploratory, with many ethical challenges becoming unforeseeable, we have installed an Ethics-Bug Tracker and encouraged everyone on the project to file a bug whenever they come across a dilemma that has not been anticipated or for which there exists no pre-defined protocol for solving it. Ethics-Bugs are discussed transparently amongst all members of the team until a consensus is reached about how to move forward. An extension of the system in which participants could report bugs too, is also planned. Apart from documenting and transparent decision making, we hope this system will increase the awareness amongst all project members that ethics is a team effort and a shared responsibility.

Conclusion

We have discussed our stance on ethics in HCI which is based on our recent article “In-Action Ethics” [2] and seems to resonate with the thinking of others in this field, in particular the organisers of this workshop series. With this contribution, we would like to ask how we can effectively bring these ideas into the practice and research of HCI, what kind of barriers might be preventing this and how we can overcome them or need to adjust our approach.

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