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Design Researchers Need a Shared Program, Not a Divorce

In a 2017 paper, Jodi Forlizzi, Ilpo Koskinen, Paul Hekkert, and John Zimmerman called for a “divorce” between “pragmatic” and “critical” threads of “constructive design research,” or CDR [1]. As a provocation, it did what it was supposed to: It got a lot of people talking. And while it made many great points, I think it also made some missteps.

Much of Forlizzi et al.’s paper is devoted to an account of the differences between what they characterize as pragmatic versus critical approaches to design research, considered in both historical and epistemic terms.

Pragmatic approaches “attempt to make a specific and explicit change in the world by producing knowledge researchers and practitioners can apply in future work.” Pragmatic design often works closely with social science and engineering to pursue its ends.

In contrast, the authors characterize critical design (CD) as “avant-garde” and emphasizing “political critique.” CD “uses strategies such as hyperbole or irony to communicate a point that is disconnected from the artifact that has been designed.” It also “rejects science and prioritizes artistic expression” and “devalues interpretative social science in design.”

The authors then “ask for a divorce between pragmatic CDR and CD,” arguing that distinguishing “two sets of objectives, goals, and knowledge outcomes” will benefit the community.

REACTIONS: I’M A STRANGER HERE MYSELF

I take the authors to be suggesting with some hyperbole (i.e., the divorce metaphor) that the design community needs to make better distinctions between different sorts of research.

I agree that such an agenda could be beneficial for the community, and I was happy to see this group make the effort. Even so, there are several aspects of this paper that undercut its intended ability to mitigate conflict in the community.

Above all, I find the intentionally provocative language of divorce unhelpful. Divorce suggests irreconcilable differences and an attempt to permanently sever ties. It tacitly seems to deny the epistemological commitments, practices, and goals shared across design research. It foregrounds the pain that we sometimes inflict on each other and invites us to turn away from each other. Like a Freudian slip, this figure of speech says more than it means to.

My second concern is that the paper’s characterization of critical design is at times ungenerous. The claim that CD rejects science is simply wrong. The Menstruation Machine [2] was partly the result of Sputniko!’s long-term collaboration with a medical researcher, for example. The claim that CD devalues interpretative social science also makes no sense to me, given, say, the roles of interpretative social science within design deployments, the interpretation of cultural probes, or the extensive use of the likes of Foucault and Shusterman throughout the community. That CD allegedly seeks to “communicate a point” separate from design artifacts makes little sense given the attention to artifacts and their presentation that Dunne and Raby and many others have emphasized.

Further, the paper’s structural assertion of an opposition between critical design and “pragmatic” design seems to exclude CD from pragmatic outcomes, a damning characterization of any design practice. The idea that “producing knowledge researchers and

practitioners can apply in future work” is a distinguishing feature of pragmatic design implies that either CD doesn’t produce knowledge or that no one can apply that knowledge in the future. I’d be fine with a more nuanced argument to the effect that CD pursues *different forms* of practicality than other design approaches, but to set criticality and pragmatism in opposition seems to deny the profound inseparability of critical thinking and pragmatic pursuits.

The view of CD offered in the paper is also painted with too broad a brush. The authors lump Dunne and Raby, design fictions, Shaowen Bardzell’s and my joint work, Gaver’s oeuvre, and much more into a single category, and they let (early) Dunne and Raby speak for that whole category.

One problem here is that many of us have been critiquing Dunne and Raby’s earlier formulation of CD (and to be fair, Dunne and Raby have evolved quite a bit from that as well). Shaowen and I do not, for example, view CD as about polemics and debates; we argue instead for critical *appreciation* [3]. Blythe’s work on design fictions [4] is playful and at times intentionally absurdist; with them, he creates surprising openings to possible futures. Gaver’s work has a much more overt research emphasis than Dunne and Raby’s and features empirical methods via design deployments [5]—and, for Gaver, the artifact actually *is* the point. Further, Gaver does not want his work to be seen as critical design at all; his reasons for saying so are important, even if one sees affinities between his practice and (some construal of) CD. In sum, I don’t recognize myself in this account of critical design, nor do I recognize many others grouped in this article as doing CD.

In metaphorical divorce as in real-life

divorce, the first move is to turn our partners into strangers.

RECOMMENDATION: LET'S BUILD ON WHAT WE SHARE

I agree that as a community we have problems and needless conflicts, but I view paper-acceptance issues as a *symptom* of the problem, not the problem itself. I'd propose reframing the problem as follows:

We all believe in the importance of design research and yet we recognize that we are failing to build well on each other's work; we are thereby failing to achieve the potential of design research; and in the end we are failing to help the wider IT research community see the excellence in what we are doing.

With that framing, it is still easy to agree with quite a bit of what Forlizzi et al. are arguing. *Of course* I think it is worthwhile to develop theory that proposes meaningful distinctions between different design practices; I don't think that everything should be critical design or judged on its terms; and I think there needs to be space for design research that is about everyday commercial objects.

Above all, I agree that we need to develop the right distinctions for different strands of design research. But I think we should do so by *working together in a project of mutual sympathy based on what we share*, which is quite a lot.

A child can easily distinguish a sonnet from a haiku, but she can also see that both are poetry. We should be able to distinguish between different forms of design research without denying that they are all design research.

What is it that we share?

- We believe that designing can be a form of research, that design artifacts can be knowledge bearing, and that verbal discourse can help us develop, disseminate, and apply that knowledge.

- We share a sense of what constitutes design history (e.g., Arts and Crafts, Bauhaus, streamline design, conceptual design, participatory design, etc.) and that informs our work.

- We share a sense of design professions (e.g., architecture, product design, industrial design, fashion, communications design) as well as a commitment to learn from them.

- We share design practices, methods,

and foci (e.g., meaning and form, design materials, aesthetic craftsmanship, design crits, etc.).

- We share an intellectual and theoretical vocabulary (e.g., wicked problems, problem framing versus solving, back-talk, reflective practice).

If we situate different design research practices in this shared history, rather than in opposition to each other without any context, we can better understand as a community where the most important distinctions and overlaps are. We might then collectively construct an account that offers more nuance. It could provide everyone with a language in which to legitimate their stances, methods, and goals. And it holds out the promise of high buy-in throughout the community.

We need a shared yet heterogeneous and pluralistic design research program—not a divorce.

ENDNOTES

1. Forlizzi, J., Koskinen, I., Hekkert, P., and Zimmerman, J. Let's get divorced: Pragmatic and critical constructive design research. *Proc. of IASDR 2017*.
2. Ozaki, H. Menstruation Machine. 2010; <http://www.di10.rca.ac.uk/hiromiozaki/menstruation-machine.html>
3. Bardzell, J. and Bardzell, S. What is "critical" about critical design? *Proc. of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. ACM, New York, 2013, 3297–3306; <https://doi.org/10.1145/2470654.2466451>
4. Blythe, M. Research through design fiction: Narrative in real and imaginary abstracts. *Proc. of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. ACM, New York, 2014, 703–712; <https://doi.org/10.1145/2556288.2557098>
5. Gaver, W. What should we expect from research through design? *Proc. of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. ACM, New York, 2012, 937–946; <https://doi.org/10.1145/2207676.2208538>

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