
HCI and the Essay: Taking on “Layers and Layers” of Meaning

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Abstract

HCI in general, and user experience research and design in particular, is taking an increasingly critical and aesthetic approach to interaction experiences. Such approaches inevitably rely on interpretative strategies, much like their counterparts in the arts and humanities. Yet whereas in the arts and humanities, where the essay is the dominant form of scholarly expression, in HCI the essay suffers from low prestige, because the nature of the essay's contribution is misunderstood. This misunderstanding arises from an epistemological mismatch between HCI's traditionally scientific orientation and its emerging humanistic interests. The effect of this mismatch is to marginalize essays—and by extension to risk marginalizing the kinds of contribution essays excel at providing.

Keywords

HCI, interaction design, experience design, user experience, interpretation, hermeneutics, essay

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Introduction

In a chapter of *Technology as Experience*, John McCarthy describes his experience attending a jazz concert. Noting that this concert was a transformational experience for him as a listener, McCarthy writes of the performer, “whatever he did that day got me in the gut” [5]. For a transformational experience, described by an internationally recognized expert on experience in arguably his primary work on the subject, this may seem like a surprisingly inarticulate summary. Though McCarthy continues on to attempt to put into words characteristics of the music, the visuals of the event, the social context of how he ended up there, and the energy of the crowd, in the end, McCarthy is not, in this short passage, able to convey “whatever” it was that “got me in the gut.” Instead, he concludes, the “concert had layers and layers of sound, feeling, and meaning.”

In [3], aesthetic philosopher Richard Eldridge explores the difficulties of a coherent philosophy of understanding art, in part by noting that actions “are normally *overdetermined* by a number of reasons and motives, both conscious and latent” (emphasis in original). As an example, he demonstrates the many, and stunningly diverse, reasons why a tennis player in a given match served the ball to a certain corner—basically offering a rich, if partial account of a single arm swing. His notion of overdetermination seems to echo McCarthy’s “layers and layers of sound, feeling, and meaning”: experiences are so rich and polyvalent that it is impossible ever to offer a comprehensive and truthful representation of them.

HCI, Experience, and the Essay

Today, HCI is devoting considerable scholarly resources to developing methods and metrics for the evaluation

of user experiences. That is, HCI wants an analytic understanding of why a given interaction is pleasing, frustrating, engaging, worth sharing, etc. In asking these questions, HCI enters a conversation that has been going on for millennia, at least since Aristotle’s *Poetics* [1] first sought to articulate what makes a play good.

The fields that have traditionally engaged in these sorts of questions include philosophical aesthetics, literary criticism, art history and criticism, music history, dance and performance studies, film studies, fashion studies, and many others. Though diverse in many ways, these fields share a commitment to a non-reductive, intellectual engagement with the full complexity of an individual’s interaction with an aesthetic work, where both the individual and the work are both understood to be significantly situated in dense socio-cultural-historical contexts, all of which collectively “overdetermine” or contribute “layers and layers” to the meaning.

The primary scholarly form in which this research is disseminated is the essay. The essay is at its core a written argument, in which the writer works through some ideas pertaining to a theme. HCI has historically been hostile to the essay. For example, ACM CHI, the top conference in HCI, does not even consider the essay to be one of its eight acceptable contribution types. HCI essayists that I have known have concluded that essays are supposed to be submitted using the “opinion paper” contribution type, a denigrating description that seems to deny the possibility of intellectual rigor at the heart of the humanist scholarly enterprise. At the Papers and Notes Subcommittee meeting for a recent major HCI conference, an internationally famous HCI researcher spoke dismissively of a submission that was clearly an opinion paper—that is, it lacked any recog-

nizable scholarly rigor—saying that it was “just an essay,” using the term in a pejorative sense in which “opinion” and “essay” are interchangeable. HCI’s skepticism toward the essay is manifest in countless other ways (not least of which are blind peer reviews!), but what they generally have in common is a lack of understanding of the nature of the essay’s scholarly contribution, in particular its epistemology.

Interpretation and Its Expression

In the footsteps of the essay tradition in the humanities, I argue that the essay as a form is particularly well suited to make a certain kind of scholarly contribution. I also argue that a good essay offers a scholarly contribution type that HCI is increasingly seeking. In particular, the essay is an effective form for the expression of critical and scholarly interpretation.

The interpretative reasoning that dominates the humanities is no stranger to the social sciences, either. One of the clearest articulations of the role of interpretation in social science can be found in a seminal paper: Charles Taylor’s 1971 “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man” [6]. In his introduction, Taylor defines interpretation in ways that clearly resonate with the McCarthy and Eldridge examples above:

Interpretation ... is an attempt to make clear, to make sense of an object of study. This object must, therefore, be ... in some sense confused, incomplete, cloudy, contradictory—in one way or another unclear. The interpretation attempts to bring to light an underlying coherence or sense. This means that any science which can be called [interpretative] ... must be dealing with one or another of the confusingly interrelated forms of meaning.

Taylor identifies three conditions of interpretative science:

- There needs to be “field of objects” of interest. These constitute “texts” (such as films, books, sonatas, and presumably organizational flow-charts and ethnographic jottings).
- There needs to be distinction between physical/embodied signifiers (e.g., the text itself) and its meaning, or the sense or coherence made of it.
- All of this needs to happen *for someone*, that is, for a sense-making subject.

This third point is the key, for it is through the subject—the embodied, social, sensual, sense-making, interested subject—that the layers and layers of meaning come into play.

Yet empirical science, with its commitments to replicability, methodological rigor and transparency, and objectivity, understandably plays down the subject responsible for producing knowledge. For some intellectual enterprises, having objectivity as an ideal toward which a researcher aspires is perfectly reasonable. This is especially true when the sources of data lie “out there” in the external world, e.g., for zoologists, meteorologists, and volcanologists. However, human experience—the alleged object of study in experience design research—has human subjectivity itself as its source of data. And this subjectivity itself is, as we have seen, inextricably and irreducibly engaged in layers and layers of overdetermined meaning—as is the UX researcher, who is also a subject. Indeed, it is this subject-to-subject relationship that is the frame through which all

understanding—even empirical analyses of data—are processed.

The essay, as a scholarly form, discloses, rather than represses, the inquirer as a subject. That is, the essayist discloses her or his point of view, which is perhaps why some, embracing the ideal of objectivity, likely conflate essays and opinion papers. But this is a misunderstanding. For the essay is not about offering a representation of someone's pre-formed opinion, but is rather about the process by which a reflective person formulates an interpretation ("reflective person" here is defined loosely to include anyone who seeks to bring a "confused, incomplete, cloudy, contradictory" cultural text/experience to clarity, through careful analysis and reasoning).

The essay discloses a thoughtful subject's *thinking*. Film critic Stephanie Zacharek, in a symposium on film criticism in the Internet Age, distinguishes between blogs about film (some of them written by professional writers) and film criticism: "So much of what you read on the Web is reactive rather than genuinely thoughtful... what they're doing isn't 'real' writing, in terms of rigorously thinking an argument through, of shaping a piece of writing into something that will be interesting, entertaining, and possibly lasting" [7]. In her comments, Zacharek stresses that film essay has two key features: it reveals a *process of thinking*, and it is *shaped and crafted* as a work of writing.

Another professional essayist who talks about the essay as a form is Philip Lopate. I'd like to explore a series of quotes he has made in one of his essays about the essay as a form [4]:

[T]he essay offers personal views. That's not to say it is always first-person or autobiographical, but it tracks a person's thoughts as he or she tries to work out some mental knot, however various its strands. An essay is a search to find out what one thinks about something.

Often the essay follows a helically descending path, working through preliminary supposition to reach a more difficult core of honesty.

Readers must feel included in a true conversation, allowed to follow through mental processes of contradiction and digression, yet be aware of a formal shapeliness developing simultaneously underneath.

An essay is a continual asking of questions—not necessarily finding "solutions," but enacting the struggle for truth in full view. Lukács, in his meaty, "On the Nature and Form of the Essay," wrote: "The essay is a judgment, but the essential, the value-determining thing about it is not the verdict (as is the case with the system) but the process of judging."

Clearly he agrees with Zacharek's view that the essay is a structured form that supports and reveals thinking, and he makes explicit aspects of the processual nature of this activity: we don't first have a deep thought, and then sit down and represent that, but rather, we develop our thinking by means of the activity of writing to a given audience (a position that should surprise no one in HCI familiar with Lucy Suchman's *Plans and Situated Actions*).

Conclusion

If Taylor is right that interpretation amounts to a serious effort to bring clarity or coherence to something hitherto understood or experienced in a fuzzy or muddled way, then the essay form, which is a crafted and shapely genre of writing that stresses the processual enactment of the struggle for understanding, seems well suited to it.

The question remains, then, what sort of contribution such a form offers to HCI. Here I argue by analogy: readers not impressed by a film critic who can tell them that *Titanic* was popular. Box office receipts tell them that. readers turn to film criticism with the hope that it will offer “an analytical awareness” of the film, to bring clarity to the confusion of emotions readers feel after seeing it, in the hope that such clarity brings to light experiential qualities and understandings that readers had not been aware of before [2].

Equally, one doesn't turn to a user experience researcher simply to learn what users' galvanic skin response (GSR) was during an interaction, or what the mean score users chose on a Likert scale concerning superficial “interface aesthetics.” These of course may be relevant and useful data points. But what we really want from user experience researchers is an ability to “get it,” to clarify the inarticulate tangle of how users *feel* when they interact with a technology—and how features of the interaction as a material design; how social, physical, and cultural contexts; how user intentions, sensuality, interestedness, and sensibilities; and how designer expectations, needs, and goals all collide to produce layers and layers of meaning—and, of course, what we as designers can and should do about it.

Such a contribution is interpretative and “subjective” in the sense that whatever there is to be known has its origins in human subjectivity; it cannot be discovered “out there” in the world. It is a contribution that must be *made*, not found, and its processes of construction should be disclosed and open to critical scrutiny, not hidden behind the rhetoric of certainty or objectivity. The essay as a rhetorical form is strongly positioned to support such a contribution, and it is no coincidence that it is the dominant form of scholarly expression in interpretative arts and sciences. It is time for HCI to embrace the essay and its type of contribution, alongside other contribution types and rhetorical forms.

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