

Finding Inspiration for the Future in Our Past

by Scott Klemmer

HCI Remixed is a collection of 51 essays by current researchers in human-computer interaction reflecting on a past HCI paper that inspired them or changed their way of thinking. Taken altogether, this edited volume makes for an exciting and personal history of the field. The book works wonderfully both as an introduction to HCI and as a means of broadening one's perspective of the field.

Several of the discussed articles are “classics,” works that have shaped our understanding of HCI. For example, in one essay, contributor Leysia Palen traces how the idea of designing the social experience surrounding a product found an early expression in a Computer Supported Cooperative Work article on the Freestyle multimedia tablet: “It was clear that this award-winning system required just as careful ‘deployment design’ as ‘interaction design’ if it had a chance of being used in the real world.” While the original article described a product released in 1988, this insight applies just as powerfully to the iPhone 20 years later.

Compiling these influential papers together facilitates reflection on what makes these works become classics—what makes them impressive. One commonality is the unique ways the researchers have reframed the questions originally asked of them. When AT&T approached Jim Hollan's research group to investigate telepresence—technologies that allow a person to feel present at a remote location, for example videoconferencing—Hollan's insight was that telemedia can be most valuable precisely when it offers differ-

ent characteristics than simulated presence. Similarly, during the 1980s as Xerox began investigating how office workers followed plans and procedures, anthropologist Lucy Suchman questioned the underlying assumption that office workers *did*, in fact, follow plans. As contributor Austin Henderson writes: “Lucy found that the relationship between people's actions and the procedures they were following was distinctly more indirect.”

Another recurring theme among the source articles in *HCI Remixed* is that important ideas arise from the careful, creative consideration of concrete problems. For example, contributor Chris Schmandt writes how John Gould at IBM's TJ Watson research center studied the potential value of spoken dialog interaction and dictation before speech recognition technology was mature and reliable. Gould conducted a series of experiments where an automatic dictation system was simulated by the use of an expert typist hidden from the user in another room. In the 25 subsequent years, this “Wizard of Oz” technique has emerged as a powerful method for prototyping the future.

Crowdsourcing a book from so many different voices is not without its pitfalls. The numerous and varied perspectives offered can obscure the larger message, potentially leaving some looking for ‘the big picture.’ At the same time, the book's strength is that it provides a panoply of personal



and unique voices. However, unlike most edited volumes, where the contributions are a summary of an area, this book focuses on what inspired its contributors.

In this way, as a book about inspiration, I highly recommend it to students or anyone seeking a personal account of why research is worth pursuing and how to find one's muse. For the novice, the book offers a set of sign-posts for further exploring the field. For the expert, it offers fresh perspectives and distills key insights. Both can expect to be inspired. I certainly was.

HCI Remixed: Reflections on Works That Have Influenced the HCI Community, by Thomas Erickson (Editor), David W. McDonald (Editor). January 2008. The MIT Press, 344 pages. ISBN-10: 0262050889. List \$40.00 in hardcover.