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What's Your Problem with the Dog Internet?

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Abstract

In this paper, we make an argument for using "the absurd" as a useful lens through which to critique modern developments in interactive technology. We argue that absurd positions are generative and engaging; they provide scope and direction for developing artefacts that people want to talk about and discuss. We argue for adopting absurd positions because; 1) as publicly funded academics, beholden to commercial interests, we can, 2) it's fun, and 3) doing so draws out, highlights, and plays with the often weird, fake, nonsense, bizarre, and surreal aspects of modern interactive technology artefacts - and the often weird situations that arise when interacting with those artefacts. In order to illustrate this argument, we present a number of case studies drawn from 10 years of our absurd research papers, many of which were published at previous iterations of this conference.

Author Keywords

Absurd; Troublemaking; Critical Design; Adversarial Design; alt.chi

CCS Concepts

•Human-centered computing → HCI design and evaluation methods;

Introduction

"What is the Dog Internet?" This is a question we've been asked, and have asked ourselves, countless times over the past ten years. On a simple level, the answer is that "it is like the human internet, but for dogs". A more complete answer is that "we don't really know, but we can't stop talking about it." The dog internet represents to us a particular kind of research process, engaging in which has changed and challenged how we, the authors of this paper, do academic research on interactive technology. That process involves discussing an emerging trend in HCI research and making darkly humorous jokes about why people may want to do that research, the vested interests that may be involved, and the long term implications of that research on the discipline, the culture and the planet.

The result of a research group adopting such a "process" is the development of a set of increasingly elaborate in-jokes and absurd ideas about why current topics are trending and who benefits from them. In our experience, we have found that there is more than a grain of truth to any good joke. We argue that the reason why these ideas are funny also makes them important. In this paper, we use the dog internet and a number of other projects to illustrate "the absurd" as a critical approach in HCI. This use of the absurd has great tradition in HCI, and especially alt.chi (e.g. [5, 18, 28]), to complement these projects we hope this reflection on a collection of work can help demonstrate the accidental productive potential of this approach over a decade of experiences.

The Dog Internet and Other Stories

Digital technology, and the internet specifically, has been transformative for humans. It is predictable then, that we have collectively become interested in how these technologies affect the other species with whom we share the earth.

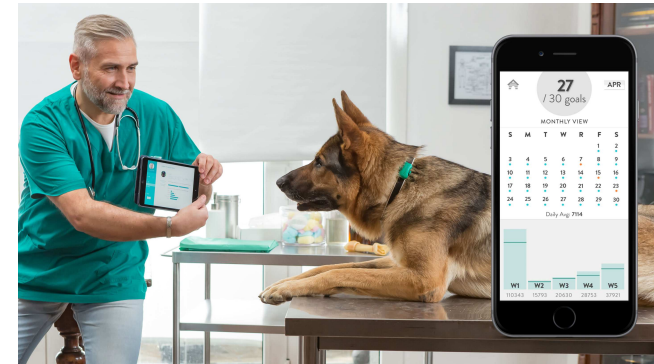


Figure 1: Dog looking blankly at a graph from FitBark[21], ©FitBark Inc.

In working contexts, technology has been applied to animals for thousands of years, from the yoke and beehive to the milking machine. The emergence of species-shifted digital consumer technology for companion animals (i.e. pets) is particularly curious. Excellent examples are things like videogames for cats, and fitness trackers for dogs. These are interesting because they are technologies specifically designed for, and understood by, humans, transplanted to other species with very little change.

What does it mean to design a fitness tracker for a dog? What does a dog understand about this technology (see Figure 1), and how does this change its relationship with its human companion? In HCI we are rightly concerned with the needs and desires of our users, but how do we handle an anthropocentric user-centred design process when our user is not human.

Researchers in the Animal-Computer Interaction (ACI) community are doing excellent work unpacking these issues

(e.g. see [34, 20]), and defining new ways of working with animals that take the best practice from work with human users and carefully examining sensible alternatives. However, this is a subtle issue and each year sees more start-ups promising dog translators and cat beer.

In frustration at this we came up with the idea of the Dog Internet as a purposefully provocative and extreme example of this technology. The dog internet is imagined as an inherently dog-centric technology, one that is difficult for humans to co-opt, direct and coerce. The absurdity and simplicity of the notion has been productive in helping us explore the issues central to the problem of inter-species design; issues such as power imbalances, and the necessity of language as a basis for useful communication technology. In particular, we have developed a series of physical prototypes of technologies for dogs to use on the internet.

EmotiDog is a dog collar enhanced with an array of physiological sensors that promises to measure the physical and emotional state of the wearer, and then convert that into an emoticon-like display that can tell the dog's human companion their current emotional state. We conceived this as a natural but extreme progression of the kinds of pet technology that we saw being released, but now 5 years later the idea feels quite ordinary. We showed this prototype to a series of human pet owners [30], and were shocked and alarmed by the speed people would trust dodgy technology made by unqualified computer scientists (again, how times change).

Dog CAPTCHA saw a refinement of the Dog Internet, and a focus on the mechanics of how a dog might use a computer network, focusing on security and privacy infrastructure. This led to the construction of a wooden kennel as an interface to the dog internet, where the species of the user was



Figure 2: A dog smells a synthetic anus to prove they are a dog

authenticated based on the reaction to having anal secretions sprayed into their face (see Figure 2,[23]).

In all of the work we have done on the Dog Internet, apart from willing models for photo-shoots, dogs have not been the main audience for the work. After all, apart from not being ACM members, they also have a poor grasp of satire.

Many HCI researchers will be puzzled by all of the time and effort we have spent on Dog Internet-related projects and articles, questioning whether it is a good use of our time, whether it is just an elaborate in-joke, and why we are not engaged in more productive and serious projects? Our response to such an argument is that it is time much better spent than just developing something a few months before Apple or Google do it. We argue that the great value in academic research is in doing things that commercial companies cannot or will not fund. Time spent playing with ideas is time well spent.

Playing with Location Data

The location-tracking capabilities of smartphones has been a topic of continued interest. In particular, we spent a lot of time thinking about the contrasts between definitions of "global position", as a flat representation of a user's location (i.e., latitude and longitude) and "location" as places with changing social, emotional and historical contexts. This has been a rich vein for many in our community, in particular the work of Nottingham's Mixed Reality Lab in collaboration with artists Blast Theory (e.g. see [3, 37, 15]). Inspired by this and other work, we developed a series of projects that interrogate this idea from different perspectives.

Blowtooth is a mobile game where players are asked to smuggle virtual contraband through real airport security. The player moves around check in, "hiding" contraband, which they are asked to recover once they have passed through the security check. The game is very simple technically, and works by maintaining a hashed list of Bluetooth devices that are broadcasting their presence, however the complexities of the space itself are where the game becomes interesting - airports are one of the most highly secure, and most surveilled, environments most people encounter in their lives. Airports are Ballardian non-places that exist outside of space and time, where different social and legal rules exist, alongside a massive transient population whose every move is closely monitored. Blowtooth is a playful way to give travelers permission to explore these aspects of the specific kind of place [25, 35, 27]. Blowtooth turns players attention towards the social and political structures of the airport environment that direct their experiences of this space.

FearSquare is a project that challenged the way we understand data as it relates to places we experience regularly. In 2010 the UK Police started publishing open data

about crime in the UK at street-level. They still maintain a site where you can enter an address and see what kinds of crime have been reported in that area. Predictably, this data is used by house selling sites as some measure of "safety", but this kind of application of crime data is potentially problematic and liable to be misread and misused. For example, what exactly does it mean that one street saw a lot of anti-social behaviour last month? Maybe it is just a town centre with a lot of bars? Or, maybe it is actually a police station that is putting their own address into reports by mistake. Fearsquare works as an app that allows users of location check-in service Foursquare to compare the places they have visited against the crime database to give a score in "FearPoints". These points are then displayed on a global leaderboard, so players are implicitly encouraged to visit places with higher levels of reported crime[16, 17]. In other words, the absurd data-driven game of "how dangerous is your life" actually exists to provoke reflection on whether the published crime data actually contain any useful information.

GetLostBot was an experimental bot project which, like Fearsquare, used the Foursquare API to monitor check-in activity. Foursquare is a recommender system, that can suggest places you might like to visit based on places you have been before, and places your friends liked. The bot was a dumb idea and a trivial implementation - an anti-recommender system that took the Foursquare recommendations and subtracted them from the list of nearby places, therefore creating suggestions to visit places Foursquare does not recommend[26]. These suggestions are generated when the bot detects you have spent too much time in too few places, and take the form of a mysterious unmarked walking map to a destination within a few km of your current location. This was framed as a serendipity generator, and the idea of "breaking out of a routine" and visiting unusual

places. This resulted in us being hailed in the press as representing a new wave of situationists and flâneurs[8, 22].

These projects take a simple angle on location data, Blowtooth is about a specific kind of place, GetLostBot is about our relationship with frequented places and Fearsquare about our understanding of place and data. However, all have an intentionally absurd streak - they are playful and interactive theses about how our devices understand and mediate our experience of place, but in games about airports and crime. Hardly the easiest way to interrogate complex ideas about “places”.

Robots from the Future

At alt.chi in 2013, we presented *CHI and the Future Robot Enslavement of Humankind: a Retrospective*[29], a paper where we, as robots sent back from the future, celebrated the work of HCI researchers in supporting the eventual domination of the species by evil forces. The critique here is transparent, as we highlight a series of popular HCI topics (such as crowd-sourcing, gamification, and affective computing) and point out how these technologies are directly useful to those who seek to exert control over a population. We do admit that we were slightly wrong about this - we see now that HCI actually is more keen on uncritically supporting the rise of 21st-century fascism, providing and perfecting tools for regressive governments to track, punish and marginalise the politically undesirable.

The paper itself uses absurdity, leans on tropes from popular culture, and a fair share of humour, to present a serious issue within our research community in an accessible way. Where a more direct and less funny approach might have made a stronger contribution, in actual fact this more gentle mischievous approach led to more visibility, both at the conference (alt.chi sessions are always overfull) and more widely as the format is so accessible, leading to a strange

legacy of impact. Shortly after that paper was published, we were approached by a fiction author asking for our blessing to take the paper as inspiration for a new young-adult science fiction novel they were writing. A year later that novel was released on an online platform, hit the top of various charts and has since been read 1.9 million times[1]. Bringing it full circle, the authors presented at alt.chi about their experience in 2016[7]. But the story continues - in 2017 we were approached by the UK government to provide official evidence to the House of Lords Select Committee on Artificial Intelligence. Apparently, as robots from the future we were well placed to have opinions on this matter, and now those opinions[36] inform the development of government policy[6].

Games Against Health

As game design researchers, we watched the growth of “Games for Health” research with some dismay. To clarify, we are not in any way opposed to the idea of exercise-based games; fun games like Camogie, Boxing, American Football or British Bulldog have stood the test of time and offer fantastic experiences to players. The problem lies in the medicalised tone of much “Games for Health” work, where games are weaponised as tools whose primary goal seems to be only to make you skinnier. The big problem is that behaviours considered in “games for health” research as “bad health” indicators are usually deeply entwined with the pleasurable activity of playing a console or computer game (i.e., sitting still for long periods of time). Moreover, rarely are any of the resulting games inherently fun to play. Damage is done to both our games and our exercise.

In response to this observed trend, along with Sabine Harner and Marcus Carter, we developed the absurd “Games Against Health” manifesto:

"We acknowledge the values, tastes and pleasures of billions of game players worldwide. We argue that game designers should engage more efficiently in the disimprovement of player health and wellbeing in order to cater to those players' existing preferences."

"GAH proposes that instead of games being interrupted for health reasons, health should be interrupted for games reasons."

The manifesto was presented in the form of an eating contest at CHI2015, for which the winning contestant won a pack of cigarettes. We could easily have made a similar point by carrying out a literature review, or via a classic essay format. However, we argue that the absurd way in which we presented this argument was more accessible, memorable and enjoyable than either of those.

Intermission

So far, indulgently, we've talked about a collection of our own work that we think is great and interesting. Therefore, this is probably a good point to back-fill a little legitimacy and try to justify why we are parading this work again. For context we refer to the 1965 novel *Monday Begins on Saturday* by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky[38], two of the most famous and influential soviet science fiction authors. In the west they are most well-known as the authors of *Roadside Picnic*[39], which forms the basis of Andrei Tarkovsky's influential 1979 film *Stalker*[40].

"Monday" is an interesting book because the main themes are around academia and academic working in the space of emerging technology. The book is a series of vignettes set in the (Soviet) National Institute for the Technology of Witchcraft and Thaumaturgy (NITWITT), a research organisation that deals with the investigation of the fantastical.



Figure 3: Still from *Charodei*[9], a 1982 TV adaptation. ©Odessa Film Studio

Departments such as the "Department of Linear Happiness" and the "Department of Absolute Knowledge", work among demons, fairies and other fantastic creatures from a range of folklore traditions. Researchers work on a variety of projects, including time travel, teleportation, and trying to find a definition for happiness. It provides an enticing and flattering picture of academics as wizards, with growing and incredible power over nature enabled by technology, but it is also a cynical picture as the system within which the research exists is increasingly revealed to the main character (a computer programmer turned academic!).

In particular, the entire organisation is bogged down by overbearing and unsympathetic administrators, who demand constant reports, impose nonsensical schedules and generate endless menial tasks. These administrators are usually presented as former academics, who, having lost touch with the joy of the work, engage more and more with

the bureaucracy of the institute and its activities, with the side-effect of growing thick hair from their ears. The work of hairy-eared academics grows more in service of that bureaucracy than it does in service of the research itself. Most dangerous, however, are the “calculating and unprincipled” hairy-eared academics who shave their ears to hide their nature, and work to “turn any bad situation into a good deal for themselves”, becoming highly rated, prized and promoted above those who don’t need to shave at all. In this way, we see a system where the pressure of bureaucratic responsibility sees the fantastical turned into the mundane, and trickery and illusion more highly regarded than genuine research.

“The problem is that the most interesting and elegant scientific results frequently possess the property of appearing abstruse and dreadfully incomprehensible to the uninitiated. In our time people who have no connection with science expect it to produce miracles and nothing but miracles, but are practically incapable of distinguishing a genuine scientific miracle from a conjuring trick or intellectual acrobatics”

Through this cynical view, although flattering and appealing to those of us who feel they don’t yet have hairy ears, the Strugatskys demonstrate insight into the core challenges of academic work on technology, and especially the border between genuinely valuable contributions and the carefully constructed illusions appealing to funders and the public. In the book, the researchers busy themselves and attempt to insulate themselves as best they can from these politics and bureaucracy, while causing trouble by evasion and finding ways around the constraining systems. Through defensive working strategies, and just enough engagement

with the infrastructure (e.g. attending boring presentations from senior colleagues) they are able to recognise it, keep it at comfortable distance. It is this way of working, that allows them to continue engaging with the absurd, and the wonderful fairytale creatures and fantastic situations that are most motivating and rewarding.

Troublemaking

In HCI, and design research especially, the last two decades have seen movements emerge that use troublemaking as a central way of making a contribution. In particular, through making and building things that explicitly situate themselves as in conflict with the “status quo”. Most familiar is Dunne and Raby’s Critical Design[13, 11], as an opposite to “affirmative design”[12]. With this kind of work, designs are created that “reveal potentially hidden agendas and values, and explore alternative design values” [2]. This approach recognises the systemic bias and values present in existing work and deliberately undermines them in order to expose and question implicit ideas. Relatedly, Adversarial Design[10] can be seen as a more agonistic approach, with projects explicitly designed with political intent, perhaps presenting more answers and challenges than the open questions common in critical design work.

Critical and adversarial design are explicitly about presenting arguments and highlighting conflicts as an output, however, related to this are ways of working that embody critical perspectives and recognises the politics and issues in the production of research, but where the output may not necessarily be about this conflict. Light talks about the potential of “HCI as Heterodoxy”[31], and the importance of recognising the politics inherent in the system:

The conservative stance of pursuing a commercial agenda in HCI is encouraged by the re-

lation of funding and research. A discipline that is dependent on technology-led research councils and industry for its continued freedom to practice - and which is often validated by its relation to successful R&D - may well produce a research program that is risk averse and technically orientated and where research stays close to the agenda of the dominant interests providing the means to conduct it.

In particular, she argues for the importance of learning from methods of “queering” as ways to create spaces in the conservative space of HCI to allow for more diverse perspectives. She emphasises the importance of trouble-making, and “obliqueness” in HCI. More recently she revisited this idea in criticism of “bovine design” in HCI [32] and frustration with HCI’s ongoing uncritical acceptance of a dominant neoliberal ideology.

Obliqueness and Absurdism in Practice

As research, this kind of gentle troublemaking through obliqueness is very keenly aware of the context within which the research exists. It sits awkwardly in academic conferences and journals, situated alongside work that more comfortably aligns with the dominant academic politics. There are some venues where work with this kind of character is welcome, such as among the delightful freaks and weirdos in the alt.chi community, a space considered with some bemusement and tolerance by our more hairy-eared colleagues. However, increasingly we see this emerge into the wider community, good examples being research fiction - totally fictional abstracts, studies and papers that are permitted in the main track [4, 33, 24] - studies with shoplifters[14] and further work in Animal-Computer Interaction, all once seen as curiosities that are now accepted more widely in our research community.

This kind of work is important to recognise because, unlike this paper, it is not about itself, but are examples of the practical value of absurd and oblique work in form and practice. In other words, they are heterodox works that come from an alternative process of doing research, rather than being overly concerned with the methodology itself, be that critical, adversarial or otherwise.

Discussion

This paper is a brief, somewhat coherent, reflection on a decade of working in and around alt.chi, but especially on the mischievous and playful character that we find in this community to have inspired and encouraged us over that time. Much like Sasha Privalov, the protagonist in the Strugatskys’ novel, as our careers progressed we have become cynical about the academic machinery around which we are obliged to work, but have also found motivation and kin in what Haraway calls “staying with the trouble” [19].

On the Dog Internet, and the other stories, our key reflection is recognising the value in working this way, and the productive potential in the absurd, outside the pressures and expectations of employers and colleagues. It is important to recognise the privilege in having the space to do this kind of work, where many can’t, especially since this is all unfunded work we have sneaked past our various employers over the years. Thankfully it is also very cheap to do - a few hours here and there, a hackathon or game jam, is the sum effort of each project introduced.

As a research community, many of us are in a trusted position where we can self-determine at least some of the research work we do, and who we do that work with. It is possible for us to work on the absurd and with the ridiculous, in spite of the academic edifice. Like Privalov, we can use some of this trust to work with the fantastical, in ways

that can be concealed from or disregarded by the rest of the machine, in venues like alt.chi which hide chaos and joy within the crushing pressure of a multi-track international conference.

Not only is this kind of work possible and rewarding, we have found it profoundly, accidentally, productive. Our most successful and visible work has been through the stupid ideas expressed earlier in the paper. The Dog Internet has become symbolic of this, and serves as a great touchstone—it is a humorous, absurd and playful idea that maybe went too far, but one that attracts attention and continues to create conversation and insight. It hides complex ideas of anthropomorphism, power, animal psychology and techno-utopianism, but energised through humour. However, the productivity was never the point. We have cherry picked interesting examples from a decade of work to give a flavour of the weird lives these projects can take, but we've learned that weird outcomes can't be planned, just invited.

In this paper we don't dare propose a methodology for the absurd, or even suggest that we know the "right" way to do this kind of work. However, we hope that through this reflection, readers, especially those in early career, can find spaces and be reassured that humour and absurdity is an available stance.

Finally, more broadly in HCI as a field, we feel it is critically important for us all to recognise the ridiculous in the field of human-computer interaction. Perhaps rather than wringing hands about legitimacy and being taken seriously, worrying about replication and implications for design, it is possible to choose to embrace the bizarreness of the things we create, the implausible scenarios we explore and the weird ways we talk about computers, and lean into it. We're here for you, leave the hairy ears to the dogs.

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Commentary

For alt.chi paper
*What's Your Problem with the
Dog Internet?*

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I like to imagine this paper in terms of a blockbuster film. The trailer for this film would have the inimitable voice of Redd Pepper (<https://youtu.be/6N5I0sgPP5k>) introducing it.

*"From the team that brought you The Future Robot
Enslavement of Mankind: A retrospective".*

Thunderous cinematic percussion punctuates a pause.

"And... Blowtooth..."

Another pause is filled by laser-like synthesisers as the faces of the authors flash on the screen with Instagram fidelity.

*"Spring 2020 will answer the question we've been
asking for years: What's your problem with the Dog
Internet?"*

Meanwhile the film poster would quote a pretentious-but-respected film critic's review—perhaps it would be Mark Kermode—"Poised for seminality; important work" it would say.

To give some context, I first encountered the work of the authors around 2013, as I was starting my doctoral research into the field of Design Fiction. At the time I was trying to learn my way around the disciplinary boundaries that my own work needs to

navigate (including those between Design, HCI, Sociology, Anthropology). Discovering that there was space among the CHI caravan for intentionally irreverent contributions was an invaluable revelation, and has been an important influence ever since.

Drawing upon a unique ability to cut through the comparatively staid tone of normal research contributions the 'absurd' is, it seems, incredibly productive. The body of work this paper draws upon sits absurdly-but-proudly in the annals of the ACM's Digital Library, and likewise the enigmatic presentations of it at the CHI conference will live on in the memories of those lucky enough to be in attendance.

This retrospective arguably represents the end of this particular phase of absurd research. There's always been something quite Ignobel about this work: it makes you laugh, but then it makes you think. What *this* paper does is put the onus back on the broader community. It shows how we must address our prejudice of absurd, funny, and stupid ideas; they're clearly valuable. In trying to establish what *your* problem with the Dog Internet is, the authors of this paper suggest that what was once the preserve of arthouse cinemas, are becoming the mass-audience blockbusters of the future.

Commentary

For alt.chi paper
*What's Your Problem
with the Dog Internet?*

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In 'What's Your Problem with the Dog Internet,' authors Kirman, Linehan, and Lawson provide a survey of their past work that has employed absurdity, queerification, willful obliqueness and play in order to reveal the obscured underpinnings and potential pitfalls embedded in the meta-structure of the HCI research process.

By presenting several projects in a survey like this, the authors aim to present a set of different experiments that seemingly produce similar results. These results comprise a sort of evidence that the thought processes evoked by these absurd projects reliably stimulate thinking on the systemic bias, bureaucratic inertia, and other deleterious factors that ensnare fairness and progress in HCI research.

The authors argue that through such "research" they hope to clarify and sharpen the distinction between "genuinely valuable contributions and the carefully constructed illusions appealing to funders and the public."

One of their past works that is surveyed is their long running "in-joke" about the "Dog Internet," which is a reaction to the author's perception that serious work in Animal Computer Interaction, which should have at its center the question of how an "anthropomorphic user-centered design process" can be applied to a non-human, is often sidelined to research embodied in startups that promise "dog translators and cat beer."

Perhaps the most satirical of the "Dog Internet" projects, is the "Dog CAPTCHA" which is an authentication system for the Dog Internet that works by recording the user's response to "having anal secretions sprayed into their face."

This sort of commentary on the sort of hoops one must jump over in order to gain access to the "crushing pressure of a multi-track international conference," leaves little to the imagination, but is certainly quite funny.

Ultimately the authors rally for embracing "the bizarreness of the things we create, the implausible scenarios we explore, and the weird ways we talk about computers," in order to continue to "attract attention" and "create conversation and insight," in HCI research. They may be onto something. After reading, I found myself searching out the source articles mentioned in this paper and so far, have enjoyed the trip through this rabbit hole.