
Uptake of Situationism Considered Harmful

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Abstract

The interplay between arts and HCI has become increasingly commonplace in the past years. In this paper, we examine Situationist art practice as an inspiration for HCI design. We argue that methods from Situationist art practice have often been picked up without regard for their underlying sensibility. We describe an experiment in incorporating Situationist sensibility in design and use it to elucidate the challenges that face HCI in truly integrating the arts.

Keywords

Situationism

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous; J.5 Arts and Humanities: Fine arts

Introduction

HCI has a long history of drawing from a wide variety of disciplines to understand and design for the site of interaction, ranging from engineering disciplines, such as computer science, to social science fields, such as cognitive psychology. More recently, HCI has begun to draw from the humanities and arts for inspiration; these areas have become particularly pertinent with growing interest in understanding and designing for the

complexity of human experience in interaction, such as its aesthetic and emotional dimensions [e.g. [1][14][15][17][18]]. In the process, challenges arise from the mismatch between theories, methodologies, and conceptualization in these new disciplines and those already at play in HCI.

A major issue that arises in such appropriations is a mismatch in the understanding of 'method' between HCI and these other disciplines. As a result, methods may be appropriated as relatively straightforward recipes for action, without regard to their richness or use in their home discipline. So, for example, Dourish has critiqued the uptake of ethnographic practice in HCI, arguing that theoretically grounded analysis which takes into account the analytic stance of the ethnographer has been reduced to a simple method by which any person can extract objective meaning from a cultural situation [4]. Similar issues are discussed by Boehner et al. [2] in the uptake of the cultural probes; what was intended as a subversive, arts-inspired approach questioning the basic assumptions of HCI methodology has become a relatively standardized and unproblematic method (see also [8]).

In this paper, we look at issues of methodology that arise in the uptake of the arts in HCI. Specifically, we look at the relatively popular use of situationism as an inspiration for alternative forms of HCI design. We will argue that, as with ethnography and the art-design approach of the probes, Situationism has frequently been adopted as a set of methods irrespective of its original motivation and context of use. We demonstrate through a case study of the design and evaluation of an alternative system inspired by

Situationism what it might take to draw seriously on the arts in HCI.

Background

Situationist art practice developed over a period of sixteen years from 1957 to 1973. The Situationists deemed the present the age of the "spectacle," a concept that evokes connotations with mainstream theater, a display, a show, or any type of performance that positions audiences in the role of passive witnesses of onstage dynamics. According to the Situationists, consumer society positions people in similar passive roles. The role of the consumer, as the Situationists saw it, limits participation to a set of predetermined choices that may satisfy material wellbeing, yet impede peoples' agency in shaping the underlying structures of society. The spectacle of material abundance conceals the alienation from one's creativity and environment (i.e. society). The Situationists set out to devise 'situations', or experimental practices aimed at raising awareness vis-à-vis the general conditions that prevail in a place or society. Situationism proposed effecting a shift in awareness towards a participatory model that would challenge materialism as the basis for negotiating human relations.

The Situationists developed tactics to support questioning of the consumer spectacle, such as the *dérive*, a series of random drifting walks through the physical space of the city [13]. The *dérive* was taken up by the Situationists as a method for exploring psychogeography, the 'experimental science' that the group employed in studying the interplay between localized ambiances and the human psyche. Through drifting, participants approached the city outside of a goal-oriented frame, aiming to experience a new social,

political, and historical ambiances or moods in traversing the physical space. The *dérive* was conceived as part of a larger set of generative strategies geared towards the creation of situations that would reveal and disrupt the conditions of the 'spectacle.' The Situationists also employed *detournement*, a form of subversion in which media elements are rearranged to question their given meaning, in order to intervene in the status-quo. Key to *detournement* is the re-appropriation of tools and ideas that the established order deploys for its ideological ends, in order to suggest new, alternative meanings and to support critical reflection.

Uptake of Situationism in HCI

Situationism has gained popularity in the HCI community in recent years [3][5][6][9][12][16], with contemporary technology designers that sympathize with the liberal outlook of modernist counter culture seeking to engage its artistic legacy in conceiving and building machines. Perhaps the most prominent example of the uptake of Situationism in HCI is the cultural probe [9] [10]. Probes draw on *detournement* to encourage users to reflect on their lives differently and designers to see them differently as well, "designed to disrupt expectations about user research and allow new possibilities to emerge." [11] (p. 23). While the original probes draw direct inspiration from Situationist games and related art movements such as Fluxus and mail art, their broader uptake in HCI has often lost this subversive sense [2] and as a consequence become unrecognizable as a form of Situationist practice.

Similar issues arise in other projects that draw on Situationist art practice. As we will describe shortly, in being adapted to use in HCI, these projects often pick

up on the easily-recognizable external forms of Situationist practice, but without recognizing or incorporating the motivations and intentions that underlie it. The forms of Situationism become decontextualized, reified and reproduced while the spirit that animates them is lost. We particularly note the two following problems.

REINFORCING RATHER THAN QUESTIONING THE SPECTACLE

Instead of questioning the implications of consumer culture (i.e. the "spectacle"), these projects often play into values that characterize the capitalist modes of production Situationists sought to question. For example, FIASCO [3] is described as a location-enabled urban game where "the goal...is to dominate territory on the map (p. 330)." The Situationists, however, did not condone the colonization of urban space but rather actively questioned the legacy of ownership of space. As another example, Instant Archaeologies links an art gallery with urban space through projections of a *dérive* enacted through participants' cellular phones. But the Situationists saw art galleries as problematic spaces, authoritative sites that supported the commercialization of art practice by warranting the artistic value of objects [6]. This was part of a larger critique in which Situationists denounced the artificial separation between art and life. More generally, Situationism is drawn on in projects whose ultimate end-goal is to create new commercial products – a purpose which is fully opposed to the Situationist aesthetic.

REIFYING TACTICS AS METHODS

The decontextualization of Situationist tactics, such as the *dérive* and *detournement*, contributes to their codification as method. To understand what is at stake in this shift, it is important to understand the difference

between a tactic in arts practice and a method as used in HCI. A tactic is a strategy employed for critical means, which may be continually changed according to the context. Far from a recipe, it requires reflection on its use and is altered and developed to fit the circumstances on the ground and with the goal of promoting the original critical intent. A method as conceived in HCI, on the other hand, is much more stable. It is based in the notion of codifying practice to support broad use, and promotes stabilization and generalizability. Although all methods require reflection to apply in a situated context, value in HCI is often found in methods that require less reflection and tailoring and that are more easily transferable between projects and persons. To put it perhaps too broadly, methods are oriented to establishing means, while tactics are oriented to achieving ends.

In the uptake of Situationist tactics in HCI, they generally become codified as methods, and, in the process, lose the link to their original intent. For example, Sonic City is a pervasive system that samples music by sensing variables, such as ambient light and temperature, in the urban space [12]. It encourages users to interface with the city through continuous movement by linking changes in the music to those in the environment. The method used in this example is the *dérive*, but there is no recognition of the political implications that drive the design and use of the *dérive* in Situationist practice. Instead, mobility is used only as a method, not as a tactic.

Rethinking Situationist Uptake

The designers of the above cited HCI projects share the Situationist goal of building technologies that support users in reflecting on physical or conceptual spaces and

their interaction with these spaces. It is in part for this reason that they draw on oppositional and activist culture. At the same time, the projects tend to enact a split between the techniques of Situationism and its broader goals, drawing on the first while leaving the second behind. This split is not inherently problematic – to slavishly copy Situationism as a cultural form is both unnecessary in new contexts and contradictory to the tenets of Situationism, which would encourage reflection on all forms of reification, including that of Situationism itself.

What *is* problematic about this split is the fact that it is largely undiscussed. By drawing on the ‘methods’ of Situationism without reference to their intent, these projects separate easily reproducible forms and procedures from the complexity of the activist context that gives them meaning. By not acknowledging this separation, the motivation behind the separation is not clear, while its consequences are unexamined. Such work leaves behind the possibility of a deep engagement with art practice in favor of an instrumentalization of its methods.

What would happen if HCI were to take Situationism seriously on its own terms? We explore some answers in the remainder of this paper by describing the conceptualization, execution, and results of an experiment in taking both Situationist goals and tactics seriously in technology design.

The Situationist Agent

Drawing on the Situationist goal of questioning the Spectacle, our intent was to build a critically-inspired system that encourages reflection on the everyday use of computers as a tool.

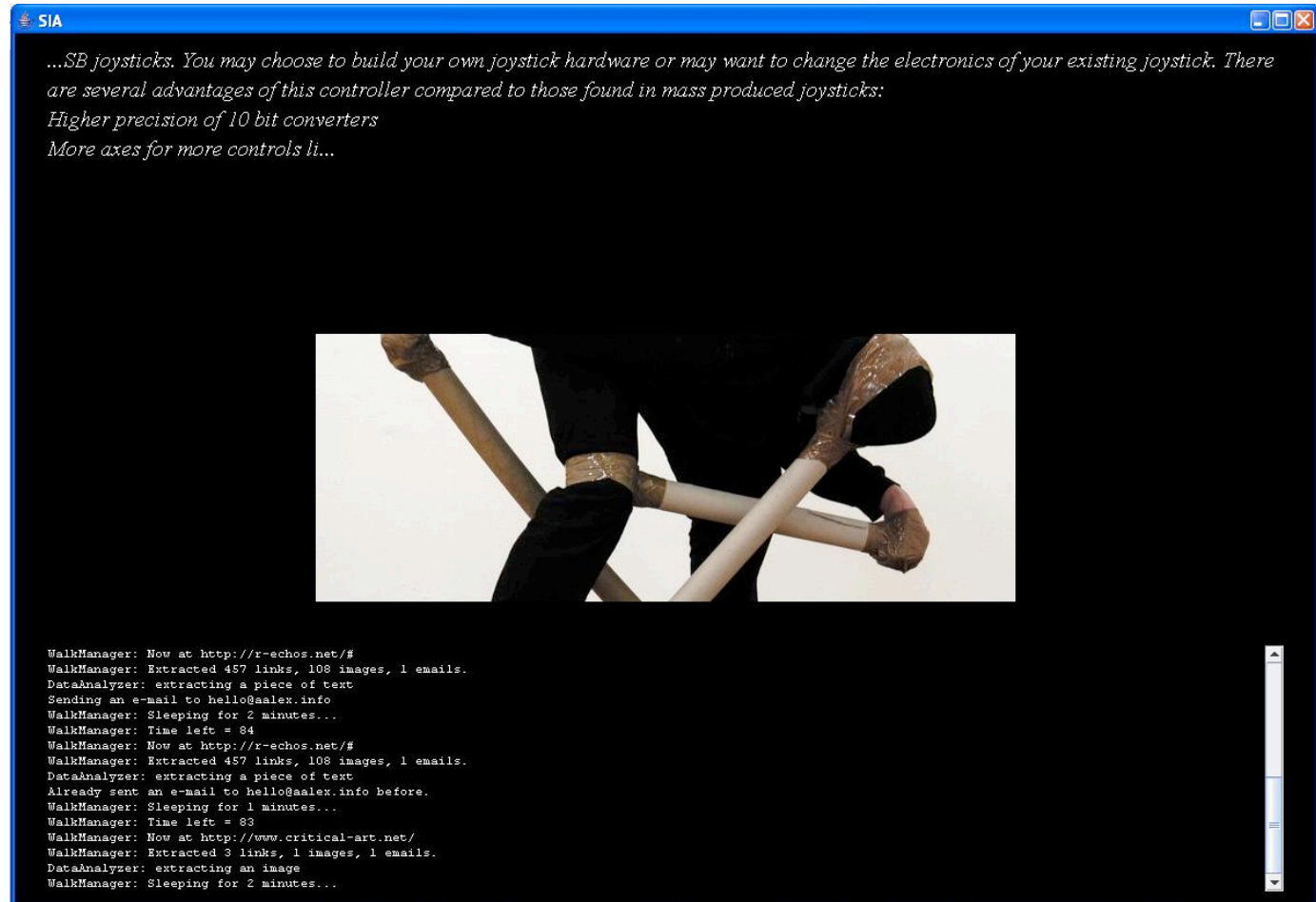


Figure 1. The SIA window.

Design

The Situationist Agent, or SIA for short, is a software application that crawls the web, starting at one of several pre-specified websites and following links as the 'walk' progresses. The agent collects images, text and e-mail addresses that it finds on its virtual *dérive*. The images and text are displayed in the agent's window. The bottom part of the SIA window includes a panel that displays debug messages, which included the information about the agent's whereabouts and actions.

In the following we exemplify and justify how the SIA engages with Situationism art practice, speaking to its original tactical intent. The separation of the design decisions with respect to the two identified problematic aspects is artificial, as some of the design features support both arguments.

QUESTIONING THE SPECTACLE

As mentioned before, the SIA's goal was to encourage reflection. As such, the purpose of our experiment was not to design an end-product in itself (i.e. the SIA), but rather to set up a reflective experience facilitated by the agent; in Situationist jargon the SIA involves both users and designers in a 'situation.'

In order to stage this 'situation,' we use a *detournement*: the appropriation of computers for non-practical purposes. This is in itself not novel as personal computers are often used for work and entertainment purposes. The SIA is however not designed to entertain the user per se. As the user has no control over the activity of the agent, the design of SIA is oriented around questions about the role of technology and the illusion of choice in today's society.

Another design feature deployed to question the spectacle is the collage of images and text collected by the agent on its *dérive*. As these images and snippets of text are truncated and presented out of context, their original meaning is being subverted. The new meaning of the collages is purposely left ambiguous to allow the users to engage with the agent in an unconstrained way and to develop their own reflections [7].


Apart from images and text, the SIA also used the *dérive* to engage in new conversations by way of e-mail: virtual graffiti was left behind, in the form of e-mails sent by the agent to the addresses discovered on the visited websites (Figure 2). The SIA graffiti carries the intention to create situations of communal expression, provoking other online users to enter into dialogue: a wiki was set up for the SIA, explaining the project, offering the visitors the chance to submit comments and to download the agent.

KEEPING TACTICAL INTENT

In the design of the SIA we were interested in adapting the main Situationist tactics (*dérive* and *detournement*) to our needs. We attempted to go beyond the easily reproducible 'form' of these approaches and to stay in line with the Situationist 'spirit.'

On its virtual drift the agent is directed by textual (Situationist) rules towards sites that contain words and images connected to particular ideologies associated with Situationism. The intended effect is to direct users' reflection to the ideologies underlying the spectacle of the virtual. In other words, the *dérive* goes beyond simply traversing a space, it is intended to critically engage with this space and its intrinsic

Greetings from the Situationist Agent

 sia.cornell@gmail.com to info [show details](#) Nov 30 (1 day ago) [Reply](#)

...d - Over the last twelve months, we have seen nature at its most unforgiving: whilst the tragic tsunami hit Asia, Spain experienced freak frosts that decimated crops and fruit trees followed up a drought that many believe is one of the worst in living memory. This summer, whilst the USA was hit by K...

Soyons cruels !
Let's be cruell

You have been contacted by the Situationist Agent (SIA), a web crawler designed to take a virtual walk around the Internet. The system also consists of a small window that displays snippets of websites, such as the snapshot included in this e-mail, that have been encountered by the SIA during its walk. This window is currently installed on 8 computers for evaluation. The SIA was created by student researchers at Cornell as a course project on the design of systems that inspire critical reflection. If you would like to provide feedback on the system, please contact us at sia.cornell@gmail.com. Please note that e-mails are insecure and there is a small chance that your message may be read by a third party.

Your responses may be posted on the SIA Home (<http://siahome.pbwiki.com>). All of your identifying information will be removed before that happens though. If you're not comfortable with us posting this response, please let us know.

Yours,
SIA
sia.cornell@gmail.com

[Reply](#) [Forward](#)

Figure 2. An example of the virtual graffiti left by the SIA.

meaning. The SIA's drift has the form of a Situationist *dérive* as well as a tightly coupled reflective component.

The uptake of Situationist ideas in our project is also ironic towards Situationism itself. In keeping with the idea of a subversive art practice, the SIA subverts the Situationist practice using a Situationist tactic. Central to the design of our agent is the detournement of the Situationist persona: the SIA is coded to 'behave' as a quintessential Situationist. The SIA is equipped with a knowledge of French, a penchant for using lots of big scholarly words, to refer to boredom ("there is nothing they won't do to raise the standard of boredom."), poverty ("of the university, of art") and pleasure, to be familiar with Dada and Surrealist, and to use Marxist jargon.

Evaluation

Because the SIA was inspired by Situationism, it was only appropriate to choose an evaluation approach that reflected the arts-based design of the system. Appropriate forms of evaluation for arts-based systems are not straightforward to develop because of the differences in orientation and goals of art objects versus functional, task-oriented systems [14]. First, it is important to note that as a form of art practice, the SIA design is *itself* intended to raise questions about the cultural values surrounding technology. This differs from typical understandings of design in HCI, where a design is typically thought of as successful only if the perspectives embodied in the design play out in practice. Art objects, in contrast, are a form of expression, and hence may be considered interesting objects-to-think-with even if they are not accessible to 'average' users.

At the same time, within Situationist-inspired practice, evaluation can be understood as an opportunity to create another 'situation,' one which can stimulate reflection by users and designers alike. Our main goal in this evaluation was to assess the extent to which we were able to spur critical reflection about consumerist ideals of technology use, especially the widespread cultural notion of the computer as a tool for productivity and efficiency. At the same time, we wanted to allow enough room for the users of the SIA to express how they created meaning from our use of detournement (e.g. the snippets of text and images taken from the SIA's *dérive*).

The SIA system was given as a gift to 8 friends of the designers so that they could install the system on their computers for a week. We chose to use friends as giftees so that our shared historical experiences would help us elicit richer narratives that might be created in the interpretation of the SIA. At the same time, we were aware of the danger that our giftees might not feel as free to express negative feedback. We also hoped that our previous connections with the giftees might help them to trust us more as we installed a defamiliarizing system on their personal computers since the giftees were not given much info about the SIA's actions.

In keeping with our design goal to preserve tactical intent, we played in the evaluation with the idea that the SIA had an autonomous identity as a Situationist. During the week, we sent daily e-mails to the giftees from the SIA using the slogan-like language of the Situationists as a probe to encourage reflection on the content displayed during the system's *dérive*. To keep up the game, we created a separate e-mail account for

the SIA to make it seem that our agent was solely responsible for the sending of the messages.

We also implemented more traditional forms of evaluation as well. Midweek, we sent a short open-ended e-mail questionnaire to each giftee. These differed from the previous SIA-sent e-mails as they were sent from our personal e-mail accounts and the language was of a conversational tone. At the end of the week, we conducted in-depth interviews with each giftee to engage them in conversation about their experience with the SIA.

The results of our evaluation were similar in some ways to the appreciation of art, in that aspects of our tactical approach highly resonated with some of giftees while others were indifferent to them. For example, three of our giftees responded to our SIA-sent Situationist probes while the other giftees were not quite sure how to respond. On the other hand, they were willing to answer the traditional e-mail questionnaire because that format was familiar to them.

In terms of our main goal in assessing the occurrence of critical reflection about the spectacle of technology as tool, this was again taken up in an art-like manner in that three of our giftees responded strongly to the actions of the SIA. These reactions ranged from assessing the privacy tradeoffs that one makes to participate in a networked society to a fundamental realization by one giftee in that he needed to have complete control over all aspects of his laptop. The others believed it to be nice to look at but ultimately a peripheral interface that did not serve a 'real' function on their computer.

One of our giftees, MF was especially receptive to the SIA's tactics and responded to the system in a Situationist-like manner. We had purposefully left much of the code running the program exposed in a directory that would be easily accessible to the giftee, if he or she was so motivated to look for it. MF was unhappy with the images of the spectacle that the SIA was choosing for him so he altered the parameters of the program so that the *dérive* would drift in a different manner. MF adapted our initial tactic of *detournement* to his own end and then challenged us during his in-depth interview on whether our system was indeed truly Situationist.

In the end, our giftees expressed some general frustration in their experiences with the SIA which derived from the methods used to defamiliarize people's expectations of software as a tool. They were unhappy at times with the lack of controls in the interface and were puzzled by the seemingly random assemblage of text and images displayed by the SIA. On the other hand, almost all of our giftees, with the exception of one, managed to figure out how the SIA worked by reading the code panel at the bottom of the interface. This realization did lend a measure of reassurance to our giftees that the SIA did not have a malicious intent.

Discussion

Our design and evaluation of the SIA brings out a number of challenges to existing practice that are likely to come up if HCI seriously engages Situationism.

1. Reflective, art-inspired work is not necessarily going to be fun or popular. We cannot begin the design process with the expectation that an arts-based

system will necessarily provide its users with an enjoyable experience. When art is applied as critique, the end result may be unsettling and provocative for its intended audience. During the deployment of the SIA, the critical and ideological strands of the project may have caused more frustration than reflection for a number of the users. From a traditional HCI standpoint, perhaps our project would be categorized as a failure. However, if we apply the standards of art, the visceral reaction of frustration might be welcomed by the creators of the system. If we, as system designers, are serious about drawing from the arts as a resource, we should be prepared for users to have an unpleasant reaction.

2. The focus changes from product to process.

The goal of Situationist practice is not to create specific products – far from it - but to create situations that inspire reflection on the consumer spectacle of society. Both design and evaluation shift from an outcome orientation aimed at creation of a final product, or a binary answer of success and failure, to ongoing processes of feedback and reflection for designers, users, and the broader HCI audience.

3. The absolute value of reified methods must be questioned.

The codification and de-politicization of certain tactics which were not intended by artists to be employed merely as tools in the design process is a disturbing aspect of the uptake of arts practices, particularly alternative and subversive ones, into HCI, and one unlikely to win allies in the tactical arts community. Situationist tactics are not intended to be one-size-fits all recipes for cultural production, though they have often been taken up this way, not only in HCI. Their uptake as reified methods raises questions

about why reified methods are so valued in HCI in the first place.

Fundamentally, serious engagement between arts practices and HCI suggests the importance of self-reflective practices of design and evaluation. The political and critical perspectives built into Situationism are too often defanged in its uptake in HCI and underlie the shift from questioning to supporting the spectacle. This raises serious challenges for an HCI which traditionally has been focused on the creation of technologies as potential products for the capitalist market. We see another potential for HCI, as a site at which political, critical, and ideological questions about the role of technology in our culture can be raised and answered through design. We believe, in the end, that human-computer interaction as a practice can only be strengthened by critique.

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