
Monstrous Design: Design Proposals for Decapitalism

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Abstract

Technological developments are necessarily political, and as technologies gain prevalence they are able to alter societal functioning. Based on this understanding, this paper puts forth some initial design proposals for an anti and post-capitalist HCI. Two key ideas are proposed: building systems for collective articulation and resource/knowledge sharing, and 'monstrous design' disrupting the dominant perception of capitalism through the deliberate exaggeration of visual elements to reflect the social ills they commit.

Author Keywords

Capitalism; neoliberalism; design; collective action; Uber.

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ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Introduction

Capitalism constantly revolutionizes the instruments and relations of production, transforming all social relations as a result [3]. As instruments of production, technological developments are thus necessarily political, changing how society works and how people relate to each other. When technologies become more prevalent, they interact with an already complex social system and alter its workings. Critical, considerate technological design is therefore more important than ever in an age of intensifying neoliberalism and social division.

The programming and design of technologies makes theoretical ideas concrete. Take, for instance, the idea that the relationship between supply, demand and price is natural. In this neoliberal world-view, if there is an excess of demand and a limited supply, price should increase so that demand decreases. This relationship is not *natural*, but rather the actualization of a neoliberal worldview, a choice. When these choices are coded into systems (such as Uber's surge-pricing mechanic), they bring theory into reality and force people to live as if they were natural and true.

The dominant belief that neoliberal capitalist ideas are objectively true encourages technological design to be based on projections from a degraded, zombie-like present in which people are merely 'producers' and 'consumers'. If there is to be any future outside of capitalism, we must abandon capitalism's own image of itself as the only system capable of producing advanced technological futures. My 'grand vision' of a post-capitalist HCI begins by embracing Nina Powers' notion of 'decapitalism' – a constant acknowledgement and exposure of the damage caused by capitalism [4].

Design proposals for decapitalism

In attempting to design against capitalism or for a post-capitalist future, we must embrace an adversarial design approach which seeks to make power relations explicit and engage individuals in constructive, healthy contestation. Collective articulation and 'monstrous design' are two potential methods of adversarially designing technologies.

Relational peer support and collective articulation

Currently, I am exploring the design and creation of a relational peer support system for young homeless people in the North East of the UK, intended to facilitate collective communication and sharing of knowledge and resources. Though the project is in early stages, it aims to enhance and build new social networks of care and support between young homeless people and to provide opportunities for moments of collective articulation.

The problems experienced by homeless people are often individualized, concealing the systemic structures (such as economic austerity) that sustain them. For young homeless people, poor experiences of these structures can be even more harmful, as cuts to youth services in the context of austerity often resulted in the

abandonment of traditional youth work, which played an important role in the prevention of youth homelessness [5]. Further systems, platforms and devices which expose the systemic nature of social issues and which provide opportunities for collective articulation may help to build consensus for post-capitalism.

Monstrous design

The well-designed user interfaces of apps such as Uber conceal the systemic violence behind their daily functioning, which actively reproduce social inequalities. Making this violence clear in design, or applying techniques such as culture-jamming (the act of subverting expectations with familiar brands) to digital technologies can help to disrupt the image that capitalism cultivates of itself, making the problems of capitalism more visible [3].

In Deleuzian philosophy, interpretation of another's work always produces a 'monstrous' hybrid of the two things [1]. To disrupt the dominant image of capitalism, I would thus advocate for 'monstrous design' – the deliberate exaggeration of design elements to produce grotesque images of capital within technologies that expose the power relations that sustain that technology. A monstrously designed Uber, for example, might become less functional over time, berate the user, spontaneously cancel rides, and exaggerate surge pricing.

Building socially just algorithms

If Uber's surge-pricing mechanic, for example, encodes a neoliberal vision for the world into a well-used service, then we must be engaged in the development of socially just algorithms. Any grand vision for post-capitalist technologies should produce a set of guidelines for how to write socially just algorithms, or a set of values

against which potential technologies can be checked against.

Conclusion

Building systems for collective articulation and redesigning existing things monstrously can help to provide a critical and affective perspective on how capitalism uses and abuses people in order to sustain itself. This perspective could then be used to generate design proposals for a post-capitalist future which specifically avoided the pitfalls of these hyper-capitalist designs, and which can contribute towards the creation of socially just algorithms and technologies.

References

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