
The Levinas Game – Using Design Games to Explore the Intersection of Philosophy and HCI

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ABSTRACT

Integrating philosophy into the design process can be hard. This paper suggests that a way to do it could be through play. So-called “design games” is a form of play that have a long-standing history in many design-related practices, and are valued for their capacity to playfully stimulate relevant discussions. This paper proposes that design games could be used to examine what kind of philosophical questions related to HCI that needs investigating, what types of philosophy that could provide inspiration to HCI and how the two fields could work together without devolving into piecemealism. We have created a design game and exemplify it with a scenario and the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, which is related to both phenomenology and existentialism and concerned with issues such as the topic of responsibility.

INTRODUCTION

It has been proposed that the field of HCI is experiencing some sort of identity crisis, transforming from “helping system developers create useful and usable technologies” to something new and not yet defined [1]. In other words, the field can be said to be in an “era of discipline realignments” [2].

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KEYWORDS

Design Games; Philosophy; HCI; Levinas

This suggests not only an opportunity, but also a *need* to explore new possibilities, and the realm of philosophy has been put forward as one way to further evolve the field [2]. However, incorporating philosophy into design can be daunting. Each philosophical strand is complex, and it can be difficult to know even where to start and what questions to ask.

Design Games

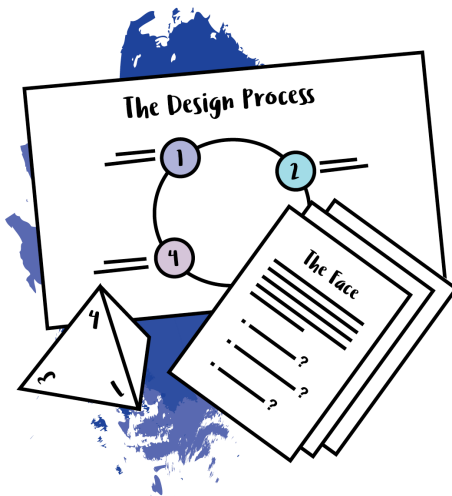
There are obviously many ways that the intersection of philosophy and HCI could be examined. One viable suggestion could be the use of so-called design games. These kinds of games have a long-standing history in many design-related practices [3], and are valued for their capacity to playfully stimulate relevant discussions and “support participants in sharing their experiences and dreams” [4]. They can be used in many different circumstances, from more general – such as the exploring of design spaces [3] – to the specific – such as addressing the energy transition in a particular city [4]. In other words: design games are very versatile, and have been used in, for example, Value Sensitive Design Toolkits [5], IDEO:s Method Cards [6], and NOVA - Tools and methods for norm-creative innovation [7]. Design games can be framed in different ways [3]: a game, an experiment, a lab, a participatory co-design practice, a jam, or a mix of several aspects. All of these framings can be relevant to the suggestion presented here: making use of design games to explore how to introduce philosophy into the design process.

“It is natural, probably even necessary, for philosophical novices to start out as specialists, and only later to become more well-rounded by broadening their horizons gradually” [8] – this would advise that when exploring philosophy, we should focus. That is why it might be useful to try “the philosophy game” with one specific philosopher and philosophy at a time. To exemplify, we are going to deal with the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas has not been discussed widely in HCI circles, but fits well within more widespread approaches such as existentialism. Also, a scenario will be used to illustrate the game and show some applications of Levinas’ notion of responsibility into HCI.

Levinas can be hard to read, it is at times “not easy to comprehend his thought” [9], his writing style being poetic and often assuming prior knowledge of philosophy. A design game could be a good way to approach his philosophy, since the game format lowers the threshold and opens up for accessible exploration. The philosophical ideas of Levinas will be elaborated on below. First, however, an introduction of the game.

AN APPLICATION: THE LEVINAS GAME

To create a setting that most designers can relate to, the base of the game is suggested to be the design process. We assume that an iterative cycle of *analysis – design – implementation – evaluation* is a model that most can accept. Physical game components needed are: a board with the design process visualized and each phase assigned a number (i.e. analysis is 1, design is 2, implementation is 3 and evaluation is 4), a four-sided dice, cards with relevant philosophical concepts, and something to write on. Before the game starts, the players decide on how many rounds they are going to play (there should be at least as many rounds as there are players).



Emmanuel Levinas and the Topic of Responsibility

One of the main approaches when exploring how philosophy could influence and enrich HCI has been existentialism. The existential perspective is well-suited in this day and age since it addresses topics of great relevance at this moment in time, such as meaning(lessness), freedom and identity. A concept from Levinas that embraces many of these topics is *responsibility*. To be responsible for creating your own meaning is a key existential thought, as well as “taking responsibility for the things we unleash in the world” [10]. The Lithuanian philosopher Emmanuel Levinas has done groundbreaking work on the nature of responsibility and has influenced fields such as Responsible Innovation (RI) [11] and the debate on ethics by the Information Systems community [12]. Therefore, it might be interesting to exemplify the game by way of Levinas and his philosophy.

Levinas published more than twenty-five books spanning over 60 years [9], discussing a wide variety of topics, responsibility being a central one. It is not possible to sum up his whole oeuvre in a few short sentences, but the thoughts related to responsibility are summarized below, as input for understanding the idea of the game:

Levinas studied with phenomenologists Husserl and Heidegger, who were major influences on his work [9]. By promoting ethics as a first philosophy, Levinas gave phenomenology a “radical ethical orientation” [9]. Calling it a first philosophy means that ethics, often discussed by Levinas as “responsibility for the Other”, is said to preexist self-consciousness [13] thereby making it “first”. How can this be? For Levinas the feeling of responsibility for the Other is not a rational choice but something that happens to you [9], that is, not a decision based on “rational deliberation” as Kant would put it, but something both beyond and before rationality and thus before self-consciousness [9].

For Levinas, seeing the face of another human being summons you to responsibility, and makes you relate to the sameness and otherness of the one you are looking at, the other being “irreducible to the I” [11] and constituting the I, “it is an assignation of me by Another” [13]. Beyond the Other, Levinas introduces the “third” that “becomes involved in the relation of self and other, and that is also an other, for the self as well as for the first other” [9].

These are all concepts that should be appropriate to discuss in any human-centered design.

The Levinas Game, Illustrated with a Scenario

This scenario aims to illustrate the game: Designers P and S are working on a project on citizen-based data collection in Athens. The project is just starting and P and S want to explore new approaches and find inspiration. This is their reason for trying this game. P throws the dice and gets number 4 which is the number matching the “Evaluation”-phase. P takes the top card of the card pile. The topic of the card is “The Face” and contains a description of this concept, and related questions. P reads the description out loud, then picks the question that speaks to him the most and asks it: “Ethics and responsibility is evoked by looking at a person’s face (looking at ‘the Other’). How could this influence us?” Both players first take a while to reflect on their own, and jot their ideas down. After a couple of minutes, one of them starts to speak.

The Face

According to Levinas, looking at the face of another human being (“the Other”) summons you to responsibility towards the other. This feeling of responsibility is the base of ethics, and is not a rational choice but rather something that happens to you.

The face of another makes you relate to the sameness and otherness of the one you are looking at, the other being “irreducible to the I” and thus constituting the I.

- Ethics and responsibility is evoked by looking at a person’s face (looking at “the Other”). How could this influence us?
- How could this idea of sameness and otherness be relevant to us in our work?
- Since this view of ethics is not based on rationality, how should we relate to the rational?

About the authors

Sharon Lindberg is a PhD candidate at the department of Computer and Systems Sciences at Stockholm University, Sweden. Her main area of interest is philosophical dimensions of designing digital technology. She has a MSc in Business Administration, a BSc in Philosophy, and 20+ years of work experience as a designer of mostly digital things. Potential goals of research: Identifying main ethical challenges in the digital design industry, related to the design of digital technology. Based on insights from field work, co-create and formulate solutions to meet identified challenges.

Petter Karlström, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer in interaction design at the department of Computer and Systems Sciences at Stockholm University, Sweden. His main research interests lie in humanistic approaches to HCI – in particular those that concern interpretation, meaning and ethics. Having a background in linguistics as well as in computer science, one of his current interests is to apply semiotics for reading interactive systems. Philosophically, he is interested in existentialist approaches to meaning and ethics – in particular in relation to technology.

S: “Since we are looking at the Evaluation-phase, what comes to mind first is face-to-face user tests and observations, so that we meet the users in person, and see their faces.”

P: “Yes! But what if we can’t meet all user groups? The budget doesn’t allow traveling ...

S: “Perhaps we could do online video interviews as well?”

P: “I like that idea, it seems totally doable. We should also prioritize meeting the developers in person when delivering our findings, so we see their faces as well, since they’re ‘the Other’ too, right?”

S: “Right. We are responsible towards them as well then. And towards all our stakeholders ... there are going to be lots of meetings and looking at faces! ‘FaceTime’ takes on a whole new meaning!”

P: “Indeed ... but video conferencing or such can work for some stakeholders too, don’t you think?”

S: “Agreed. Maybe we should also add video and photos of users to show the team and stakeholders, when explaining our findings, so they too can see the faces of the users? Or, even better, invite them along for the user testing! Then we would all see each other.”

P: “Great! I think it would make a big impact on these stakeholders and developers to see the users and each other live. It would impact us as well.”

S scratches his beard in a disquieted manner. “But, then, when it comes to the finished design, we are kind of contributing to the anonymous nature of online communication and data collection.”

P: “Yes, but I don’t think that we are able to solve that in our design. On top of that, there are privacy concerns.”

S: “Perhaps if we included user reactions to anonymity versus privacy in our testing?”

P: “Yes, that could be one way to invoke those questions in the team and with stakeholders.”

S: “We need that kind of impact too!”

They both go silent and think for a while. Nothing more comes up.

P: “Well, I don’t have anything more to add right now. You neither? Seems like we’re done with this round then. It’s your turn to throw the dice!”

The dice roller of each round summarizes the round’s reflections and ideas. The round is finished when the topic seems “saturated”. The game is finished when the agreed-upon rounds have been played. After the game, the players look through the summaries, reflect on them, and may choose issues that they might want to take further somehow.

CONCLUSION

By exploring philosophy through play, we might make philosophy in HCI more accessible, and explore particular schools of philosophy or philosophers that could be relevant for the development of the field. We have introduced Levinas notion of responsibility through a design game and started to show how it can be used when designing.

Future iterations of the game could take place with HCI scholars as well as design teams outside of academia. The aim would be to develop the game and further explore the philosophy of Levinas and how his notion of responsibility could affect HCI. This type of game could also be adapted to explore other philosophies, contributing to the development of philosophy in our field.

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