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Food for Thought: Designing for Critical Reflection on Food Practices

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With increasing demands on our time, everyday behaviors such as food purchasing, preparation, and consumption have become habitual and unconscious. Indeed, modern food values are focused on convenience and effortlessness, overshadowing other values such as environmental sustainability, health, and pleasure. The rethinking of how we approach everyday food behaviors appears to be a particularly timely concern. In this special section, we explore work carried out and discussed during the recent workshop “Food for Thought: Designing for Critical Reflection on Food Practices,” at the 2012 Designing Interactive Systems Conference in Newcastle upon Tyne, U.K. [1] (see http://www.urbaninformatics.net/resources/ffthought/ for the accepted papers).

The workshop brought together people from industry and academia, across disciplines including HCI, architecture, and psychology. Together we considered the challenges, successes, practices, and future directions of designing digital interactive systems to engage people in critical reflection toward positive changes in their everyday food practices. Ultimately, we wanted to find ways to promote more environmentally aware, socially inclusive, and healthier food practices through critical reflection. Critical reflection refers to “the kind of thinking that consists of turning a subject over in the mind and giving it serious and consecutive consideration” [2]. When applied to food practices, critical reflection brings to the fore our habits (good and bad—e.g., composting food waste or mindlessly consuming fast food), cultural conventions (e.g., pizza is a vegetable), and the assumptions we make about foods (e.g., all vegetarian food is bland).

Through focusing on critical reflection, we aimed to encourage submissions to the workshop that examined not only cultures of food practice, but also the cultures of HCI practice [3]. Specifically, food practices occur simultaneously across work, home, and leisure spaces, are ubiquitous and mobile, and are often unconscious and habitual. Thus, they are not easily examined through methodologies established by ubiquitous, mobile, affective, or persuasive computing, nor can any of those disciplines alone offer easy solutions to problematic food-related behavior. Indeed, the breadth and complexity of food-related behavior presents significant challenges to the design of technology for meaningful sensing, augmenting, supporting, and engaging. In this respect, human-food interaction pushes the boundaries of HCI research and invites new insight on traditional practices. Many of the papers submitted to the workshop acknowledged and responded to this complexity through the use of inductive research methodologies, designed to capture the subjective experience of users.

Another striking theme that emerged from a large number of submissions to the workshop was the value of popular social networking platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, as a means for provoking critical reflection on food practices. These systems were leveraged to capture food consumption, both on an individual, participatory level, and in aggregate across cultures. They were used to deliver persuasive messages, to actively effect food choices, to add value to food practices, and as a way to explore social communication around food and, more generally, understand social media consumption in the kitchen.

The workshop itself consisted of two discrete sessions. In the first session, participants were invited to present their work. The second session was used for group design activities. The evening before the workshop, a field trip was organized to allow participants to visit some of the social and culinary highlights of the city of Newcastle. Newcastle is infamous for its nightlife, which has been voted one of the U.K.’s top tourist attractions. Crowds typically consume excessive amounts of alcohol and fast food, and produce large quantities of food and packaging waste. Participants were asked to respond to this challenging scenario, and to create innovative design solutions that facilitate people’s engagement in critical reflection on their food consumption, ultimately leading to broader sociocultural transformation of Newcastle’s foodscape.

The design work resulting from the workshop, some of which is presented here, reflects the interdisciplinary nature of the workshop, HCI more generally, and the variety of research examining food practices within HCI. We looked to respond to issues of visibility and invisibility in the food chain, diversity and mobility for food retailers, and the creation of flexible, accessible urban spaces for resting and relaxation. These areas were identified in the need for consumer control (e.g., DIY kebabs, food-packaging standardization to denote healthiness); civic engagement (e.g., mobile night-food market, social media incentives for engagement); and the challenges of public and private space in the city (e.g., pop-up and transient architecture, crowdsourced socializing spaces and “street angels,” and wayfinding measures to help people in the city).
While these ideas remain open to further development, in this special section we present three papers from the workshop in their extended form. We hope the section will provoke critical discussions and future collaborations that will contribute to building healthy, environmentally sustainable, and socially inclusive food futures in various parts of the world.

ENDNOTES:

ABOUT THE AUTHORS
Jaz Hee-jeong Choi is the deputy director of the Urban Informatics Research Lab and ARC Postdoctoral Fellow (industry) at Queensland University of Technology, Australia. She understands play as the core of urban sustainability, and is particularly interested in how playful experiences are designed and integrated in different cultures. Her current research explores opportunities for playful technologies to cultivate sustainable food culture in urban environments.

Rob Comber is a Marie Curie Experienced Researcher in the Digital Interaction Group at Newcastle University. His research, through projects such as BinCam, Balance@Home, and Telematic Dinner Party, explores everyday food practices as a means to understand and design for topics including social interaction, health and well-being, and sustainability.

Conor Linehan is a lecturer in HCI at the School of Computer Science at the University of Lincoln, U.K. His research interests include the application of behavioral psychology principles to the design of social, mobile, and games technology for education and behavior change.