Everybody's Hacking: Participation and the Mainstreaming of Hackathons

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ABSTRACT
Hackathons have become a popular tool for bringing people together to imagine new possibilities for technology. Despite originating in technology communities, hackathons have now been widely adopted by a broad range of organisations. This mainstreaming of hackathons means they encompass a very different range of attendees and activities than they once did, to the extent that some events billed as hackathons may involve no coding at all. Given this shift away from production of code, they might instead be seen as an increasingly popular participatory design activity, from which designers and researchers in HCI can learn. Through fieldwork at six hackathons that targeted non-technical communities, we identify the types of activities and contributions that emerge through these events and the barriers and tensions that might exist. In doing so, we contribute a greater understanding of hackathons as a growing phenomenon and as a potential tool for participatory research.

Author Keywords
Hackathons; participatory design; co-design; jams; making; innovation.

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

INTRODUCTION

Hackathons have emerged as a popular activity in technology and maker communities in recent years. By bringing together participants in a single location over short periods of time, they support intensive bursts of creativity around technology. While once largely exclusive to software development, hackathons have increasingly moved into the mainstream in recent years [4]. Hackathons are now being run by organisations as varied as museums and charities, on subjects covering everything from fashion to climate change [4, 9, 37]. With this variety of goals and organisers come formats and audiences that diverge significantly from the original concept. Despite being ostensibly focused on development activities, these events appear to have been successful in engaging a wider audience beyond technology communities.

Figure 1. Conventional hackathons bring together developers for intensive bursts of activity. Image © Sebastiaan ter Burg

As HCI researchers, our interest in hackathons stems from a belief that they represent a type of participatory design activity that is succeeding in engaging the public in thinking about the application of technology to a variety of issues. Against a growing diversification of participatory methods used in HCI and the recognition of challenges for the field [36], we see potential for hackathons—or at least some of their properties—to contribute to our array of methods. Existing research, particularly around issue-oriented hackathons [6, 17, 18], points to their ability to bring together developers and activists around civic issues such as engagement with local government, and to the value of networking at these events over the actual technical outputs. We also see the degree to which hackathon participants shape the process, mirroring recent calls to better support participants in doing this [36]. However, other aspects of hackathons are problematic from a participation perspective, as some of their defining characteristics are widely acknowledged as creating diversity issues [5, 25].

Considering this potential, but also issues including diversity and the apparent disparity between their focus on development and attempts to engage a wider audience, we

CHI 2018, April 21–26, 2018, Montreal, QC, Canada

ACM ISBN 978-1-4503-5620-6/18/04.
https://doi.org/10.1145/3173574.3173746