

PREFACE

Design during and for Pandemics

The Plague. The Pestilence. The Black Death. Up until very recently, these were the immediate associations that would come to mind upon hearing the term pandemic, even if it were only in passing. Such is the impact that the bubonic plague had in the world's collective psyche. Modern medicine made it so that in our everyday lives, we only thought of pandemics as things of the past. Recent events with the COVID-19 crisis changed that and made us keenly aware of just how present and current pandemics are. The life we knew was disrupted, we have had to find new ways to live through, and even work around a pandemic. However, COVID-19 is not the only pandemic currently active: Tuberculosis kills millions of people every year, HIV/AIDS and Malaria kill hundreds of thousands per year, etc.

Pandemics are a sudden increase in the number of cases of a specific disease above the expected, which spread over several countries or continents, affecting a massive number of people. During these situations, circumstances change and government agencies and healthcare systems, often take different approaches and protocols in response to the threat levels. Thankfully, organizations like the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have experts that work on providing guidelines that healthcare professionals can embrace and adopt to manage the situation. Unfortunately, no such considerations exist for Human-Computer Interaction researchers and practitioners, who have had to mount strategic responses on their own.

The unique circumstances of a pandemic require a multidisciplinary approach in order to safely support people and societies. The normal methods we use for designing and evaluating technological artifacts may need adjustment for these special situations. With COVID-19 cases, we saw restrictions preventing contact with people to limit spread of the disease, but the same kind of limitations would be true if we were to design for Tuberculosis patients or persons with AIDS. In one case we would be unable to approach them because of the risk of being infected, while on the other we ourselves pose a risk to their safety. Living in a world with pandemics means that new methods may need to be adopted or created to still perform research to understand the users' needs, values, and wants.

Conducting parts of the design process online has already been discussed in the field of Human-Computer Interaction but not extensively, and certainly not under a pandemic situation. In the past, studies showed that data collected in lab settings for usability evaluation, can be also collected remotely by using different software and other systems. Similarly, there are different techniques for online recruitment. However, the design process includes much more than just evaluation. Brainstorming and participatory prototyping remote sessions is less researched and applied. Moreover, the physicality and intuitiveness of the tools doesn't necessarily transfer to the digital world. This impact both the creativity of the participants as well as their equal participation and future access to the digital world.

In this focused issue, we invite you to look at cases in which the authors have carried out the different parts of the design process under the varying levels of restrictions and limitations imposed during the waves of COVID-19 pandemic. You will read about how going through a world-wide pandemic has influenced their design, their research, and their results. You will discover how each group has addressed different issues and problems, and see how their perspectives have changed. Join us in taking a look at, just a few of the many ways in which, we can design technology during, and for pandemics.

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