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Polyphonic Speculations

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Editorial: Polyphonic speculations

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Abstract: Polyphonic speculations unites plurality and possibility in an exciting new proposition for design research. A nascent concept, it invites a wide variety of interpretations, but equally draws upon an emerging body of work that configures multiple perspectives on speculative imaginaries, potentialities, and provocations. This track theme combines a variety of distinctive works, each offering a different perspective on the potentialities and practicalities of polyphonic speculation.

Keywords: polyphony; speculative design; plurality; imaginaries

1. Introduction

Polyphonic Speculations unites two influential concepts — plurality and possibility — with potentially significant implications for the field of design research. 'Polyphony' in the Bakhtinian sense, advocates for a rich, dialogic interplay of voices, viewpoints, ideologies, ethics, aesthetics, and identities – across multiple forms, formats, disciplines and platforms (Aston & Odorico, 2018). It shares common political, ideological, and aesthetic ground with the DRS 'pluriverse' community, and (among other things) it can be considered as a kind of response to the challenge of imagining *for* and *with* multiple, parallel, potential – possibly incompatible – *pluriverses*. Harnessing the notion of 'speculation,' it aspires to consider not just uncertainties about the future, but also diverse histories and interpretations of the past, and multiple readings of the present, as well as the many connections between points in space and time, both real and imagined. One way of thinking about polyphonic speculation is encapsulated in the question, *what happens when we imagine collectively?*

Practically speaking, polyphonic speculation could serve as a methodology to collectively engage with complex challenges. For example, it has been conceived as way to frame processes that employ speculative design, dialogue, and reflection among multiple design researchers (Green et al., 2023). However, its potential configurations are manifold. It can



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equally foster transdisciplinary dialogues, consider imaginary creation processes, and facilitate knowledge exchange across disparate disciplines and publics (Ranner, 2014). It could be expressed as a framework for reflection and reimagination, or a basis for focusing dialogue on themes such as resistance and recovery. Polyphonic speculation is a nascent concept, and it continues to evolve. This track theme at DRS2024 is a first attempt to assemble some relevant critical thinking and practical examples of polyphonic speculation, as a lens on its plural potentials, its preliminary principles, and the ways it could be operationalized in ways that bring value to design theory and/or practice.

We invited a wide range of contributions and received a diverse collection of interpretations and perspectives – *a polyphonic speculation in its own right...* Contributions ranged from critical examinations of the foundational concepts of polyphony and speculation to practical examples that intersect with existing ideas and hint at exciting synergies. To reflect two complementary approaches across this spectrum of ideas, we prepared two sub-tracks for the conference: ‘Potentials for Polyphonic Speculations’ and ‘Polyphonic Speculations in Practice’.

2. Potentials for polyphonic speculations

The ‘Potentials for Polyphonic Speculations’ sub-track begins with ***Research through Designers: A Pictorial Reflection on Engagements, Encounters, and Environments at a Design Research Jamboree*** (paper #210). In this playful pictorial, Berger et al present a series of photographs from an event – an ambiguous ‘Jamboree’ – with short, poetic insights from different contributors; the photographer, the event organizer, attendees, and non-attendees. These contextualisations touch upon a variety of themes – material outcomes, bodily presences, disciplinary esthetics, social commentary – with the aim to inspire design researchers to engage with reflective engagements of what it means to do design research.

The next paper once again turns the speculative lens upon Design Research itself. In ***Exploring the ‘Defining-Finding Dilemma’ in Design Research: Insights from a Series of Speculative Co-Design Workshops*** (paper #486), Dore et al describe how a series of co-design workshops used sketches and visual metaphors to facilitate collective discussions about a hypothetical database of Design Research. The authors describe how this process led to the identification of distinctive qualities that characterize Design Research, thereby exposing a vital dilemma at the heart of Design Research.

In ***Landscape of agency of objects in public space: a collective expression*** (paper #1396), Cigdem Kaya reflects on an international series of participatory projects – each combining text and photography – tracing human relationships with objects in cities. The variety of experiences catalogued forms a kind of “*collective expression*,” that suggests a speculative landscape of agency for objects in public spaces. The author advances the idea of “*thingification*,” offers practical techniques for coding image-based materials in the tradition of grounded theory, and outlines a compelling vision of future work.

A contribution from the open call, with a rich connection to polyphonic speculation – and therefore a welcome contribution to the track theme – is ***Towards a mapping of empathic design methods*** (paper #235). Noting the lack of an overview of empathic methods and their respective value for innovation, Drouet et al draw upon a series of workshops to map ten empathic design methods. The resulting map offers a rich resource that foregrounds the values of engaging with empathic methods in design research.

In ***Designing with the Challenges of the Anthropocene*** (paper #286), Meyer and DiSalvo reflect on the role of design *in turbulent times*, by exploring the popular-yet-slippery concept of ‘The Anthropocene’. They elaborate three key challenges – unsettling Modernity; noticing neglected multiplicity and creating new imaginaries – via a selection of creative projects. Through their analysis, they offer a matrix of themes, tactics, and mechanisms. By suggesting a way of mapping the relationships between design and Anthropocene, the authors provide an enriching temporal foundation for polyphonic speculative work and a firm anchor in the global historical context.

The final paper in the ‘Potentials for Polyphonic Speculations’ sub-track is Kwon et al’s ***Engaging the public in technological futures: a participatory speculative design approach to polyphonic representational spaces*** (paper #798). The authors advance the concept of ‘participatory speculative design’ (PSD) as an approach to engaging non-designers and non-experts in speculative design, particularly around policy design. Their study explored how PSD was used – and can be used elsewhere – to support participants to work collaboratively to build narratives around digital technology in public spaces.

3. Polyphonic speculations in practice

The ‘Polyphonic Speculation in Practice’ sub-track begins with Zohar et al’s ***Fostering Pluriversal Perspectives in Theory of Change: A Case of an Urban Regeneration Project*** (paper #287). Framed around urban regeneration projects, this paper presents a visual map that draws upon – and advances – the Theory of Change model to support pluriversal perspectives, through multiple time horizons, multiple actors, and reflections on long-term impact. The authors propose a new approach for portfolio-based interventions that emphasise the values of long-term thinking and care.

In ***Vovousa 2048: a Design Fiction workshop imagining the future in a rural and remote area in Greece*** (paper #915), Costas Bissas draws on a 4-day design fiction workshop in a rural village in Greece that explored different scenarios for the future of the settlement, set in the year 2048. The author describes how artefacts from these imagined futures were combined to instantiate and inform an ongoing community inquiry.

Contextualizing Comedy Techniques for Speculative Design: Unraveling Futures Cone from Sketch Comedy Series, ‘2032/2033 Futures’ (paper #433) by Park and Shin connects ideas from comedy and speculative design, framed around and elaborating upon the ‘futures cone’. The authors draw on insights from an interview with the producers of a hit YouTube

series to make an emphatic case for the value of embracing absurdity and humour to productively expand the limits of speculative design beyond the 'limit of possibility' into the realm of the preposterous.

“Bejay (water) is our sister”: *Wearable speculations to entangle collectively* (paper #263). In this thoughtful paper, Botero et al. explore ways to ‘entangle collectively’ through the traditional weaving practices of the Kamëntša people, speculative design, and discourses of environmental care. Motivated by the challenges associated with regional flooding, the authors’ wearable speculations inform dialogue about water, environmental care, and ‘wrapping’ as a form of care.

The final paper in the ‘Polyphonic Speculation in Practice’ sub-track is ***Co-creating pluralistic futures: A systematic literature review on participatory speculative design*** (paper #1316). In this paper, Ye and Zhang develop and draw upon a literature review of recent participatory speculative design research, identifying three practical pathways; *technical*, *social*, and *integrated* speculation, through which they propose a shift in focus – from artifacts to process.

The diversity of the work represented here demonstrates the dynamic potential of polyphonic speculation, its entanglements with various related terminologies – *participatory speculative design*, *speculative co-design*, *polyvocality*, *collective imagining*, *community inquiry* – and hints at an opportunity space for exciting new directions for design research. Our ambition for this track is to invigorate a discourse that draws together existing work (in design research and beyond) and imagines new opportunities for polyphonic speculation, where the intrinsic and extrinsic values of plurality are united with the rich trajectories of speculative design.

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Dr. Mayane Dore is an interdisciplinary researcher working across design and anthropology. She is interested in the ways in which both areas can work together as world-making processes toward just and sustainable futures. Her recent work includes developing the concept of an 'Atlas' for the world of Research through Design.

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