

AGONISTIC DESIGN: NEW APPROACHES FOR ENTANGLEMENT

ROBERT COLLINS

UMEÅ INSTITUTE OF DESIGN

ROBERT.COLLINS@UMU.SE

My research concerns Designing for Contestable Systems¹. Looking into how we can negotiate and contextualise automated decision systems at the front-end and address power imbalances between people and the systems which increasingly intervene to take decisions about our futures.

Coming from a background of anarchistic self-organisation, my first inspiration came from the Right to Repair movement. Understanding our bad interactions with automated systems as a form of brokenness provides a less abstract perspective on our relationships with these distant processes and to think of them as repairable. Taking the Repair Café as an example of grassroots activism, I proposed the concept of the Contestation Café (Collins, 2022). A community-based space where the public could come to share experiences about unfair and inappropriate treatment by algorithmic systems and to find support and ways to contest and redesign them. Gatherings around these concerns can create the kind of critical mass which results in systemic change, like the recent backtracking with Apple and John Deere (Anon, 2022), where large companies were forced to

recant their tactics and allow their users to repair and have ownership over how their products are used. In the same way, we can challenge how our data is used and how automated decisions can be repaired, negotiated with and understood.

While it is helpful for the general public to have the tools to "punch upwards" at oppressive systems, it is also necessary to provide designers with ways to pass down affordances for these users to contest with their designs. This is where my research intersects with the Nordes theme. Neither the designer or the user should have the sole responsibility for making technology fairer - rather, I believe it should be an ongoing and participatory activity through the interface and through shared conversation. This is where I perceive the blank space to be - in a lack of connection between the primary stakeholders, the users, the designers and the system itself.

New design approaches are needed to bridge this space and fill in the blanks. I am exploring agonism as a way to value the struggle between the user, designer and system - to encourage discourse,

¹ <https://dcode-network.eu/cohort/rob-collins/>

reconfiguration and to view design as the journey towards solutions that can always be challenged and will never become concrete (Miessen et al., 2012).

Within this, I am inhabiting the role of The Fixer, a character who might "know and see different things - indeed different worlds - than the better known figures of "designer" and "user"" (Jackson, 2014), and who could act as a 'contester-on-behalf-of' the bleeding edge of society and for those from more marginalised communities who are often the first affected by new technologies.

My next steps will be to look for examples of agonistic design through history, consult with a broad sample of stakeholders involved in contemporary design and technology, and to define a set of values for this design approach which brings design and repair together and opens up a space for contestability, redesign and discourse as an ongoing condition of design.

REFERENCES

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