CHAPTER 8

Summary

"Theories are more like a pair of dark glasses. We put them on and the world is tinted. The change brings some objects into sharper contrast, while others fade into obscurity." (Christine Halverson, 2002, p245)

So what next for HCI theory? Given the various problems that have been identified when moving between theory and practice, might we be better off by abandoning the theory industry in HCI and letting interaction design evolve more as an applied field, where new methods and approaches — based on practice rather than abstraction — increasingly lead the field? After all, many popular methods, innovative interfaces and design solutions have been developed without a whisker of a theory in sight. On the other hand, it would surely be a shame to throw the baby out with the bath water. Theory can be very powerful in advancing knowledge in a field.

Many researchers already have moved on from the theory-practice debates that were so central to the Classical and Modernist periods of HCI theory development. They are much more motivated by addressing societal goals and the difficult challenges of big HCI, and are happy to use whatever methods come to hand to enable them to deal with more open-ended tasks, community relationships, policy negotiation and conflict resolution. Other dilemmas are replacing them, however. For example, for those who are working in the area of ICT4D, there is the tension of trying to help a community through "developing" and implementing an appropriate technology versus trying to make a new contribution to the field so that they can get published — after all they are funded as researchers. Many weeks, months and years can be spent by a team of researchers, to establish a new technology infrastructure that can help a local village collect water more efficiently, only for it not to be deemed methodologically rigorous enough for it to warrant publication at a CHI conference!

At the other end of the spectrum, are those who have moved into core computer science areas or nouvelle AI, where machine learning, big data and sensor networks are the order of the day, and the contribution is in the quantifying, combining and analyzing of algorithms and data in order to model and visualize new forms of human behavior.

My own view is that theory importing and building will continue to play an important role in HCI. The battles that were fought and the gallant, but often in vain, efforts to bridge the theory-practice divide already seem like a distant past. Instead, we are beginning to learn to be tolerant, open and transdisciplinary. As a result, in the future we will develop broader discourses, conversing with ever more fields, embracing the big and small, creating new theories in-the-wild that ultimately, can make an impact on society, at many levels. Theory may even lead practice rather than lagging behind it. As we continue to cast our nets further afield, theoretical posturing will diminish, making place for healthy theoretical debates about social responsibility, generalization and abstraction.