

A New Form of Hackathon

A Critical Reflection on Hackathons as Participatory Design: Iterating Feminist Utopias

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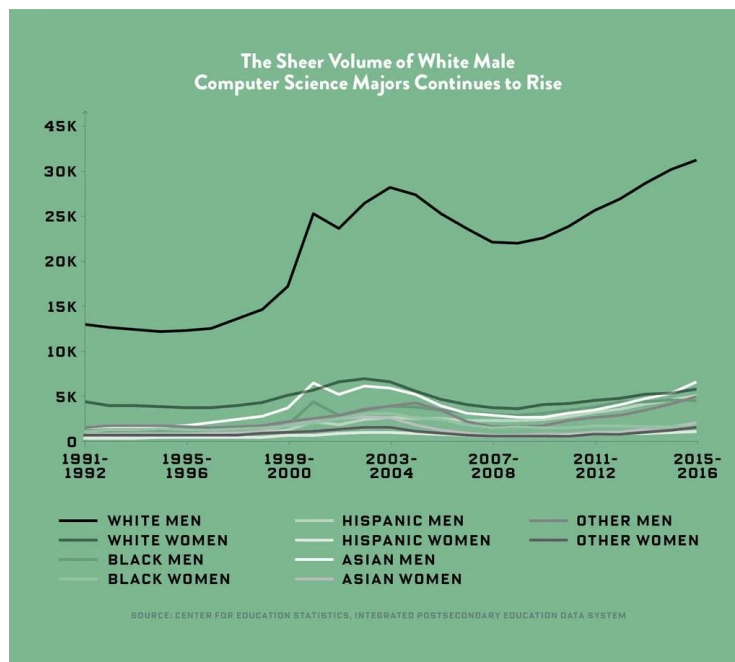
This essay relates the experience of two previous hackathons organized by the authors on breast pumps and the maternal nutrition industry. The first iteration of this event, in 2014, was structured similarly to traditional Computer Science hackathons, while the second one, in 2018, had a new structure. This new structure helps favorize equity, diversity and inclusion. I agree that the second model is a very effective one. I even think that it could be implemented, maybe at a smaller scale, in the traditional tech field's hackathons.

The main point that is discussed in this essay is the way of conducting a hackathon that this team decided to do, the reasons behind it and the benefits. This hackathon is designed to innovate on breast pumps and everything surrounding breast feeding issues. In summary, instead of this high pressure overnight serious competition ambiance, this hackathon is designed to be playful, inclusive of children and collaborative. They conducted workshops on equity as a method for design, which means to design with the most disadvantaged people in mind. They also made the environment very inclusive to mothers of all kind, transforming this cold MIT building into a warm and welcoming space. The idea was to be relaxed and not have the high pressure of competition. In that sense, instead of a first prize, they nominated prizes for 12 themed categories, allowing to direct the media coverage on different creations and people.

Something that is mentioned in the essay and that I found interesting is the idea of intellectual property of products or concepts developed at the Hackathon. In the essay, it is explained that discriminated people would prefer in this situation to have intellectual property of their creations in the context of this hackathon, because they are used to have their ideas used by people in positions of power, so they would like to have intellectual property while they can. This hackathon was very centered around equity, so it is expected that these questions should be raised, but these questions are also asked on traditional hackathons. Are hackathons a form of exploitation? Who pockets the gain? A study was made by Sharon Zukin, professor of sociology at Brooklyn College and co-author Max Papadantonakis, that led to troubling conclusions. "In other words, institutions use the allure of hackathons, with sponsors, prizes, snacks, and potential for career advancement, to get people to work for free (Lurie citing Zukin)" This is true

especially with hackathons sponsored by corporations, since the profits of these creations will go to them. Not only this is a form of exploitation, the worst is that it makes this a norm in society. Workers are expected to participate to these types of events, or work at that rhythm, which is not possible for everyone, and the conditions are far from ideal.

These concepts of equity, diversity and inclusion are as much or even more so important in the computer science and tech related fields as an issue to work on. For example, in the computer science field, only 20% of workers are female (Computer Science.org). This field is dominated by white cis males (see figure below). This situation is very alarming, because, with the arrival of artificial intelligence, these new computerized brainpowers are programmed by this white-men community. Therefore, AIs learn their biases: their sexism, racism and other forms of discriminations. Technologies also tend to work better for caucasian people, like cameras having problems recognizing slanting eyes or analysing dark skin tones (Crawford). By implementing hackathons based on diversity and inclusion, this could help to create solutions adapted to everyone, so that our future world is adapted to everyone.



To conclude, I think that the principles of the hackathon as described in this essay are very beneficial and should be applied to the tech industry. I think that overall hackathons, especially of this new type, are very beneficial to favorize creation coming from many different voices who are not in current positions of power in society. It encourages collaboration and diversity in this homogeneous tech world.

Works cited

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