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Designing New Socio-Economic Imaginaries

Chris Speed^{a*}, Bettina Nissen^a, Larissa Pschetz^a, Dave Murray-Rust^a, Hadi Mehrpouya^b,
Shaune Oosthuizen^a

^aCentre for Design Informatics, University of Edinburgh

^b Abertay University

*Corresponding author e-mail: c.speed@ed.ac.uk

Abstract: This short paper recovers the term ‘imaginaries’ which is often used in the social sciences to describe a meaning system that frames individuals lived experience of an inordinately complex world. The paper goes on to reflect on the extent to which design has the capability to disrupt imaginaries through the development of products in order for people to construct new ones, or whether the discipline is perpetuating old models of the world. The paper uses a workshop method to explore socio-economic models in order to better balance the multiple imaginaries that participants hold with the opportunity to design disruptive and critical propositions. Reflections upon the workshop and the concept of imaginaries allows the authors to identify a challenge for design in which it must accept its role as mediator and exacerbator.

Keywords: Imaginaries, Economic, Design, Smart Contracts

1. Introduction

The word imaginary has become a useful term to encapsulate both the way that people sustain a model of the world, but also provide clues to the challenges that design research faces in revealing norms and hegemonies that define social practices within society. Described by Thompson (1984) as “the creative and symbolic dimension of the social world, the dimension through which human beings create their ways of living together and their ways of representing their collective life” and Steger and James (2013) “imaginaries are patterned convocations of the social whole. These deep-seated modes of understanding provide largely pre-reflexive parameters within which people imagine their social existence-expressed, for example, in conceptions of ‘the global,’ ‘the national,’ ‘the moral order of our time’.”

2. Going on in the world

Simply put, imaginaries are a way of describing the meaning systems that frame our lived experience through habits, routines and beliefs, that allow us to ‘go on’ in a world that is full of complexity (Jessop, 2013b).

Toward the latter part of the twentieth century, social scientists began to use the term imaginaries to supersede the concept of ideologies that were associated with political and religious principles. In his

2013 lecture, Jessop extends the complexity of social imaginaries by describing the different entry points and standpoints that allow people to 'go on' in an ever increasingly complex world:

- selective observation of real (natural and social) world,
- reliance on specific codes and programmes,
- use of certain categories and forms of calculation,
- sensitivity to specific structure of feeling,
- reference to particular identities,
- justification in terms of particular vocabularies of motives,
- efforts to calculate short to long term interests.

Jessop goes on to use the following diagram (Fig. 1) to describe the apparent tension between semiosis ('sense and meaning making') and 'structuration: managing the compossible'. Describing semiosis as "an umbrella concept for all forms of the production of meaning that is oriented to communication among social agents, individual or collective." (Jessop 2013a), (Whilst "structuration establishes possible connections and sequences of social interaction (including interaction with the natural world) so that they facilitate routine actions and set limits to path-shaping strategic actions" (Ibid).

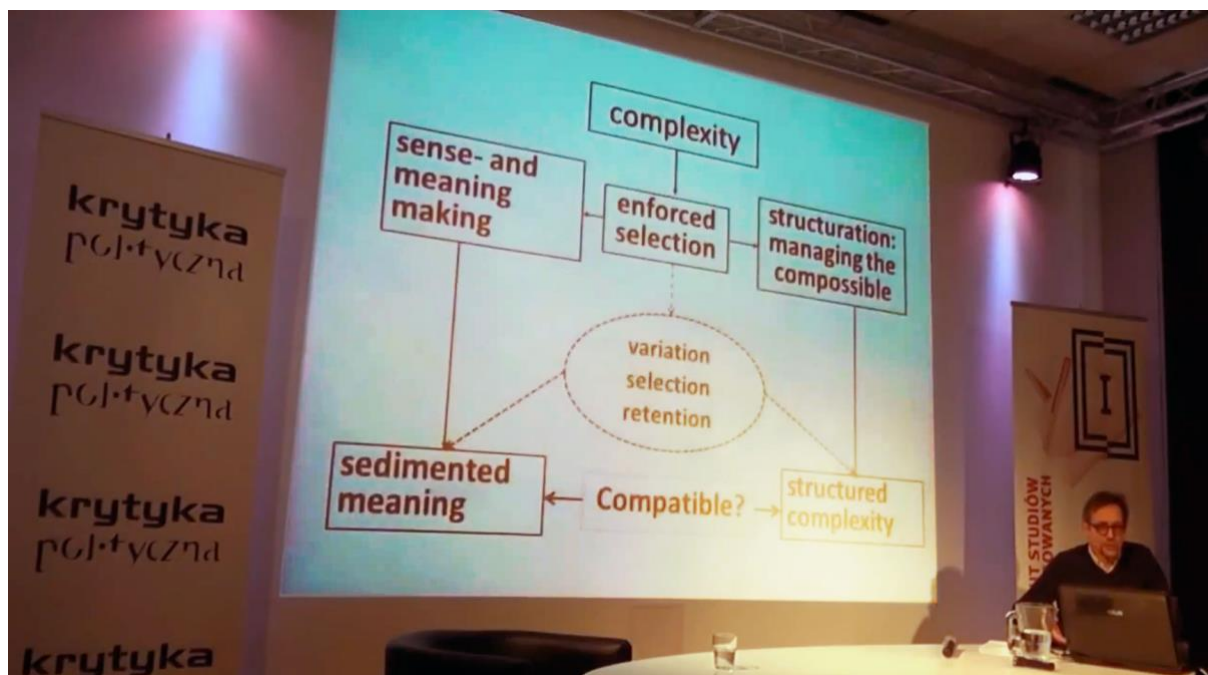


Figure 1. Jessop's diagram to describe the synthesis of semiosis and structuration within people's imaginaries.

It is (arguably) across these tensions that design finds its fiercest challenges. On the one hand providing products within services that offer insight and critical sensibilities for making sense of the world at large (contributing to semiosis), and on the other fuelling the market with products that allow people to 'make do and get by' without worrying about everything (contributing to structuration). At the base of Jessop's slide is the question of 'are these activities compatible' from a human perspective? For people who 'use' designed solutions, compatibility is simply a way of finding the right tools, products and services that correspond to how they have made sense of the world for as long as they have been within it (sedimented meaning). This suggests that however unethical and unsustainable a product may be, people will find a way to make it compatible with their imaginary in order to 'go on' in the world.

For designers who provide products and services, we might ask, whose imaginaries do we think we are offering products and services for? And furthermore, when is it possible to commensurate the two drivers of semiosis and structuration? Whilst not a design academic, Jessops frames this challenge in such a way that is entirely pertinent to the design community as he outlines the ‘project’ for the lecture at the beginning of the video: “How can we develop distinct patterns of material practices and material cultures that are transformative and lead to development and not merely quantitative growth?” (Jessop 2013a, 9’ 10”).

3. Designing New Economic Imaginaries

Of the many imaginaries that we share, economics and the flow of value are complex and highly uneven according to the distribution of wealth. With a view to ‘brokering’ new economic imaginaries, members of the Centre for Design Informatics developed a workshop that empowered participants to design how the flow of value took place across smart-contracts that were deployed in the street. To do this, the team developed a piece of software that runs in the browser of a smart phone, that allows participants to script GPS coordinates with simple economic rules: if somebody enters these coordinates debit their account, if somebody enters these coordinates credit their account etc. The economic zones can be easily administered through a web interface, allowing workshop organisers and designers to quickly set up new experiences alongside participants (Nissen et al, 2018).

Following a short ‘body storming’ experience in the street based upon the scattering of coins by workshop leaders, participants are invited back to the workshop to design their own economic settings that function according to the deployment of smart contracts. After identifying a context and an ‘imaginary’ in which social practices are influenced by a socio-economic model in which value flows between actors depending upon their actions, participants are asked to use simple cards to plan out the rules for why money should be deducted or gained. Based upon an adaptation of the simple logic ‘If This Then That’ the cards prompt participants to decide on how they should deploy the GeoCoin smart contracts across the local area.

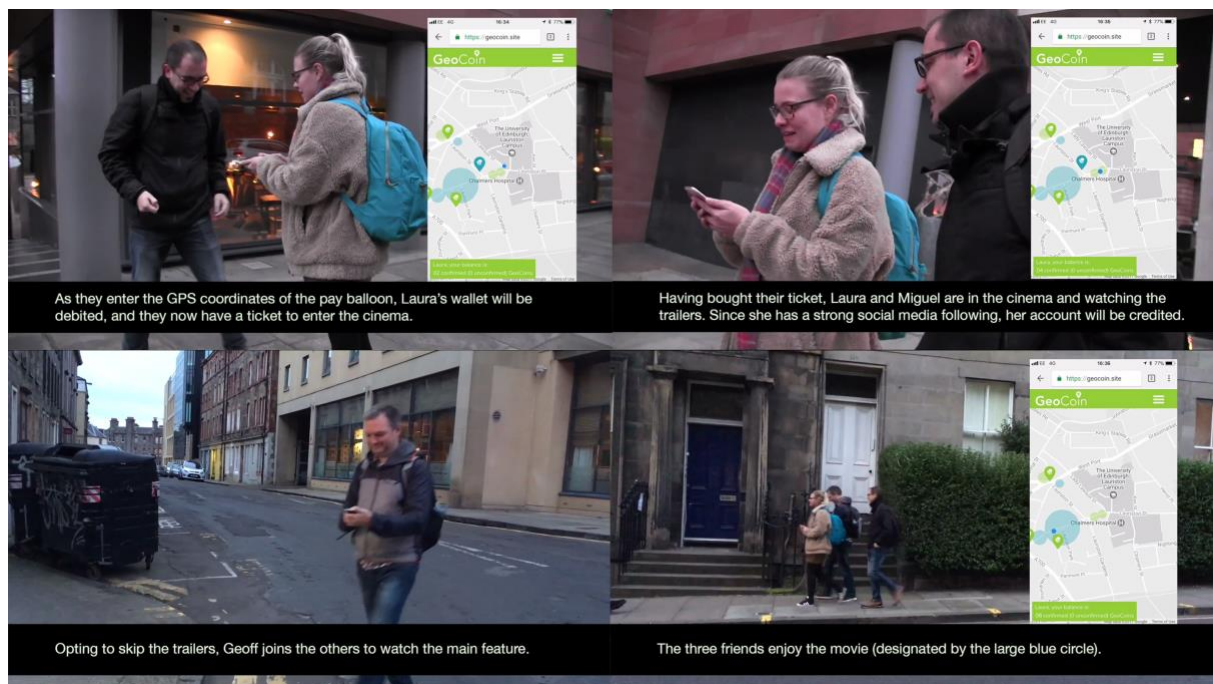


Figure 2. Geocoin participants enact their economic imaginary for new models of cinema ticketing.

The workshops end with the deployment of the rules into the software platform and participants moving outside in order to ‘practice’ the imaginary. Screen captures from the video (Fig 2), show three participants taking part in a GeoCoin workshop who have ‘re-imagined’ an economic model for experiencing the cinema.

The GeoCoin workshops synthesise the complex nature of smart contracts and provide a platform through ‘body storming’ that allows participants to use them to develop novel imaginaries. Whilst, it is probably too ambitious to suggest that the practices of participants in the GeoCoin workshop have ‘sedimented’ to form any robust new economic imaginaries, however it is interesting and indeed exciting to see how participation in the design of new digital systems is able to lead to conversations in which both the representation of value transcends simply money and that the flow of value is explored across multiple actors, and correspondingly their multiple imaginaries. The authors would suggest that the combination of body storming that enabled participants to ‘embody’ digital economic transactions, and their empowerment in the design of an economic system, contributed to a synthesis of both semiosis and structuration, to form a new economic imaginary. One in which participants attain the agency to balance economic value with the social, environmental and cultural values.

4. Mediator and exacerbator

We shouldn’t interpret the shift to considering social and personal imaginaries to have entirely supplanted ideologies, after all we live alongside multiple generations of people who have grown up in many different times. A significant amount of the population was born during or soon after war time in Europe, and closely identify with the role of the state to direct and govern services centrally. The majority of those who are leading the teaching and research at design schools today are 60s, 70s and 80s kids, whose lives were defined by globalisation, mass communication, the time/space compression of Post Modernity (Harvey 1990) and an “incredulity toward metanarratives” (Lyotard 1979). The younger people that we collaborate and work with are networked, empowered by digital technologies and are excited by the autonomy offered by decentralisation. In this push and pull between centralised and decentralised forms of society, design remains a vital link to offer social and material services that bring to the surface the beliefs, politics and practices that constitute the many imaginaries of a community.

However, let’s not kid ourselves that design is a stable practice, it is itself made of up many imaginaries. Design still occupies a space in which it attempts to solve problems in the face of the intractable, that it makes sublime artefacts that only the few can ever cherish, and that it’s processes of global production and manufacture remain unsustainable and unfair for many. But by reviewing the languages and literatures of the social sciences the community can mitigate against the fallout of these activities that exacerbate the tendencies toward quantitative growth. By acknowledging that there is limited common ground across the very many imaginaries, design can provide platforms to mediate the differences through social, economic and material practices.

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About the Authors:

Chris Speed is Chair of Design Informatics at the University of Edinburgh where his research focuses upon the Network Society, Digital Art and Technology, and The Internet of Things.

Bettina Nissen is a design researcher in Design Informatics at the University of Edinburgh. She holds a PhD from Newcastle University and her research interests span across interaction design, digital fabrication and tangible data engagement.

Larissa Pschetz is an interaction designer, researcher and lecturer in Design at the University of Edinburgh. Her research explores the role of design in supporting or challenging socio-economic systems, e.g. in the context of energy and international trade.

Dave Murray-Rust is a Lecturer in Design at the University of Edinburgh. His research focuses on the interesting messy bits between people and computational systems, from large scale Social Machines through the Internet of Things to Personal Data and privacy.

Hadi Mehrpouya is a lecturer and digital artist at Abertay University. He is currently researching the relationship between individuals and the financial sector (banks, insurance, pensions and individual investments) and their social/environmental damage.

Shaune Oosthuizen is a creative technologist who explores the space between physical interaction and the digital plane. Within Design Informatics Shaune's focus is on the development and future applications of blockchain technologies and HCI design.

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