

Let's re-position joy at the heart of the sustainability transition?

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In this position paper, I propose to embrace joy as a foundational building brick of the transition towards sustainable ways of living. Research shows the many complexities of promoting awareness of and action against climate change. It also indicates that providing people with information does not fully address the issue. Current efforts may thus need to be reinforced holistically, broadening the focus from pure rationality to also embrace emotions, sociality, and culture. To facilitate that move, I propose to establish joy as a guiding value in the design of technology for sustainable transition(s); I call for a shift from informing people about the issues derived from climate change (and how to act upon them) to helping them to find meaningful ways to (both joyfully and sustainably) rethink their daily practices and habits. Overall, I hope to engage in a discussion around the importance of joy in shaping alternative lifestyles, and to promote a design agenda of creating tech that supports ways of living that are joyful and sustainable alike.

CCS CONCEPTS • **Human-centered computing**~**Interaction design**~Interaction design theory, concepts and paradigms

Additional Keywords and Phrases: Sustainability, climate change, design research, joy, interactive technology

1 INTRODUCTION: ON THE BRINK OF DISASTER

It is no secret that our current ways of living, producing, and consuming are leading us to ecological collapse. News that should be devastating are becoming routinary: the diversity of life forms on Earth is decreasing [30]; the sea level [19] and temperature [27] are rising; the weather is becoming rougher and harder to predict [15]; or ice reserves are melting far and wide [7]; to name a few. The impact of those involutions is expected to be massive, for humans and beyond. There is consensus that a drastic change in our lifestyle is needed if we want a chance at reversing this issue; and that said change needs to be imminent as the ecological crisis is in exponential growth [2]. Given the systemic nature of the problem, the changes needed to address it apply to most (if not all) areas of our lives. As such, they require a multifaceted revision of our lifestyle, holistically and in depth. As noted by literature in this area (e.g. [4]), the depth, complexity, and potential impact of those changes are important bottlenecks when it comes to implementing them.

Critically, despite the known urgency for a transition towards sustainable living, people's engagement with ecological care is far from satisfactory. Though there is a raise in awareness [3], active engagement with climate change mitigation is still scarce, leading to a failed response to the crisis [31]. The problem is massive and must urgently be addressed, and we are generally aware of it – we just do not do enough to fix it. People's lack of information is proposed as a key factor in people's disengagement [16], and efforts are put to educate on sustainability [20]. Yet, the issue of disengagement is far more complex than a simple lack of information. An array of other, less rational factors also play a role:

First, the complexity of the ecological crisis hinders active engagement. The magnitude of climate change is huge. It operates at multiple scales ranging from systemic to local, and there is often a lack of direct feedback between what people do and the impact they generate. Such complexity distances the issue from the scale of the body, at which humans are known to best operate and comprehend [24]. That makes it harder for people to act – both rationally and emotionally. Related to that problem is the issue of denial: researchers have found that the large-scale (and seemingly imperceptible) nature of climate change reinforces attitudes of neglect where people ignore the problem despite rationally knowing it exists [22]. Finally, active engagement with climate change mitigation is also hindered by emotional factors: living in the midst of an imminent and ever-growing crisis that cannot be straightforwardly addressed is known to produce eco-anxiety [23], which affects people’s wellbeing and hinders their capacity to act.

In different ways, the above issues apply to a broad spectrum of people ranging from non- to super-engaged individuals. Clearly, many are already aware of the ecological crisis. We know several things we could do to contribute to addressing it; yet, we are still far from doing enough about it. This indicates that a purely rational approach to educating society to act against climate change might not be enough, if we are to ever overcome it. Here I suggest that, to better support the much-needed transition towards a sustainable society, we may need to broaden our focus of intervention: First, we should strive to bring action to the scale of the mundane, the local, and the bodily – promoting practices that are actionable and accessible, and that operate at the scale of the human body. Second, I suggest we should help people to find ways of playing a part that are meaningful for them – to frame their engagement as a transition towards an upgraded way of living that, rather than making people miserable, also helps them to holistically thrive. Overall, I suggest that for the sustainability transition to be successful, the transition itself needs to be sustainable – ecologically, yes, but also in social, emotional, and cultural terms. Below I discuss what HCI could do to facilitate that.

2 A PROPOSAL: WHAT IF SUSTAINABILITY STOOD ON THE SHOULDERS OF JOY?

To respond to the above challenges, here I make a proposal to the HCI and design research community: we may want to embrace joy as a key factor of a truly sustainable life. Joy (and associated phenomena such as fun, pleasure, enjoyment, playfulness...) has received abundant attention from scholars. There is a consensus that it is key to the flourishing of both individuals and communities [9]. Yet, in technology design, we often seem to gravitate towards ignoring it – perhaps due to our longstanding tradition of seeking to respond to solutionistic [21] agendas such as supporting a productive and efficient life [5]. Interestingly, one could argue that such joyless paradigm also permeates our efforts around climate change. Interventions often take the form of rather dry informative campaigns or programmes – or even worse so, they use warnings and threats as the key call to action. As an example, I will mention a campaign I stumbled upon a few weeks ago as I walked the streets of Barcelona (see Figure 1). Leaving aside the reliability (or non-) of the information it provided, seeing that poster made me wonder: Is thinking about a chocolate-less future really supposed to entice me to wholeheartedly embrace a radical change to my life? Or does it rather make me feel even more hopeless?

Experiencing joy is known to be key to the wellbeing and flourishing of both individuals and groups. It is also known to motivate and empower us to act even if a materially productive outcome is not a part of the picture [26]. Considering that, I refuse to think that our transition(s) towards more sustainable ways of life need to be deprived from joy, just as the above example is. Our capacity to act (and to persuade others to do so) will only be stronger if we strive to imbue our actions with joy. I thus wonder: Could we better support people’s sustainability efforts if we helped them to find joy in living a sustainable life? Would people care more for the planet if they could holistically flourish in the process?



Figure 1: Photo of a poster belonging to a campaign aimed at promoting sustainable lifestyles. It asks (in Spanish) the question of “do you imagine living without chocolate?” and provides an “expiration date” of 2050.

My proposal is far from being utopian. Living sustainably can, indeed, be a great source of delight – with and without the mediation of technology. Examples of the inherent joyfulness of ecologically caring practices abound: eating seasonal vegetables, which is known to leave a smaller ecological footprint, brings pleasure through constant novelty and change (not to mention increased flavor!); buying locally, which enables a tighter supply chain where the consumer can keep the producer accountable for their practices, contributes to a sense of belonging to a community; upcycling, which is known to be needed as many materials cannot yet be recycled, appeals to people’s desire for creative activity and expression; or playful activism, which is much necessary if we are to facilitate a radical transition in our ways of life, raises awareness and brings communities closer alike. These are just a few examples of how many of the actions one could take to contribute to a more sustainable society come with an intrinsic element of joy. Unfortunately, that joy is not always visible or accessible to people. In light of this, I wonder: What can HCI do to help people to find that inherent joy of living sustainably, on top of telling them how important that is? Could we shift from “making people understand they need to act and how to do it” towards “helping people to find joyful and meaningful ways to reconfigure their lives”?

3 A DESIGN RESEARCH AGENDA: CREATING TECH FOR JOYFULLY SUSTAINABLE LIVING

As creators of technology-mediated experiences, HCI practitioners have a chance to influence how we approach the transition towards a sustainable way of life. I thus propose a design research agenda of imbuing that transition with an element of joy, to help individuals and communities to build alternative habits and lifestyles in ways that are both ecologically caring and socio-emotionally rich. How might we, as technology designers and researchers, help the world to discover the many joys of living sustainably and thus flourish in the transition towards a healthier world?

The agenda I am proposing reclaims the importance of joy in human life and extends it into the sphere of environmental awareness. By positioning joy as a foundational of the sustainability, it centers on supporting people to celebrate (rather than survive) the act of living an ecologically caring life. My proposal builds on a longstanding tradition of research on how to support celebratory engagements with ordinary practices (e.g. [14]), as well as on how to playfully re-ambiguate aspects of everyday life (e.g. [1][6][11][17]). It also builds on the idea that play and playfulness are far from frivolous; in addition to their capacity for affording joy, agency, and social connection [1], they are inherently political as they can instigate change and challenge of the status quo [12][28]. Such combination of experiential richness and capacity for subversion is powerful: we should leverage that potential to support people to lead a more sustainable life.

Importantly, my proposal does not align with existing approaches such persuasive technology [18] or gamification [8]. Though they also seek to promote changes in people’s habits, they tend to do so from the top-down; as such, they are oftentimes seen as manipulative [13]. Rather than providing extrinsic [25] motivation to act against climate change, my proposal seeks to empower people to, from the bottom-up and in their own terms, find their own way of shaping joyful and sustainable relationships with the environment. My proposal is also different from sustainability-related games [10], which seek to educate through autotelic [29] gameful experiences. My agenda is not to communicate the “what’s and how’s” of climate change mitigation through playable media; instead, I propose to help people to figure out how sustainable practices, in and of themselves, can bring about fun, joy, and multifaceted fulfilment.

4 CONCLUSION

In this position paper I proposed a design research agenda for HCI that may contribute to revitalizing and making more meaningful the transition towards a more sustainable future: designing technology that helps people to both joyfully and sustainably reconfigure their lives. My proposal is a response to the limitations of existing efforts in this space, which often focus on information delivery and warning. As such, it also responds to the challenges derived from those approaches,

such as eco-anxiety, lack of actionability, and denial. I look forward to attending the workshop to engage other researchers and practitioners interested in issues related to climate change, to discuss our different proposals and to join forces towards promoting a sustainable (and hopefully also joyful) turn to increasingly sustainable ways of life.

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