Moving Forward – Trying to Make my Way in Academia without Loosing my Mind

Katta Spiel
TU Wien (Vienna University of Technology)
Vienna, Austria
katta@igw.tuwien.ac.at

ABSTRACT

The Early Career Symposium offers a chance to reflect on and compare current challenges faced after finishing the dissertation with a cohort of peers and experienced mentors. As someone sitting between and on many chairs with a somewhat unique background, I hope to provide insights to peers from my experiences and learn from theirs.

EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND AND CURRENT POSITION

My scholarly career started as a student at Bauhaus UniversitÃďt Weimar (BUW). There, I first studied Media Culture (a humanistic degree that draws from Media and Cultural Studies). Realising that many observations lack sufficient depth regarding the technical details, I decided that to gain a broad overview over the interactions between humans and technology, I would also have to pursue a degree in Computer Science (or, how it was called at BUW, Media Systems), which I subsequently did with external funding. During my Master's, I combined both of these interests, albeit nominally I received one in Computer Science and Media.

From there, my journey led me to TU Wien (Vienna University of Technology), where I conducted my PhD with Geraldine Fitzpatrick, Christopher Frauenberger and external guidance from Eva Hornecker. Topically the PhD focused on assessing the experiences of autistic children with technologies we co-created for their well-being with a strong focus on their first-hand perspective. I used humanistic theories and made them applicable for HCI evaluation. Last December, I defended with distinction, which marked the end of my degree.

Currently, I am still involved as a project assistant within the Social Play Technologies project at TU Wien. Last summer, though, I spent four months with the University of Waterloo. My contract is limited to a maximum of one more year.

CURRENT RESEARCH

In my current research, I am tying up loose ends from my PhD and drawing on the corpus of data for further analyses. Topically, I am concerned with marginalised perspectives in HCI. This includes interest in playful participatory design and the use of critical humanistic theories and approaches to understand more about them. I work with people often neglected as active stakeholders, such as refugees, disabled people, queer people, people without work or in low-paying jobs, elderly and children, homeless people, foster families, fat people or people of colour. Through participatory design (&) research, I contribute to technological design and development as well as a fair society at large. I create technology not just for but with people in playful and critical research settings. By developing methods and technologies that are empowering for all, I make technology for people that is meaningful and relevant to them. In that, I use physical computing and digital games as platforms for novel interaction mechanisms and critical content. As a playing field for investigations into aspects affecting people and the technologies they interact with, games additionally offer a research instrument, which is engaging for participants. The area of games and play then comprises a tool which will allow me to not only understand players and their motivations better but also further innovate in the areas of game and technology development.

CAREER, RESEARCH AND PROFESSIONAL SERVICE GOALS

While I am a competitive person, my career goals are not very specified. I would like to be able to do self-guided research in an interdisciplinary environment and combine it with teaching and student projects. Coming from the Bauhaus and subscribing to their idea of merging teaching and research, I see this as the ideal situation. To my understanding, doing so would require a tenure track position in the near future.

Research wise I have several avenues I could follow from here to make my critical stance and my passion for including marginalised perspectives clearer. For this, I have several project sketches to draw on, that I would like to develop into fully fledged proposals.

Regarding service, I do not have particularly specified goals. I just love contributing to the research community in the best way I can through local service, reviewing and being part of the organisation of conferences, where people can exchange ideas and become inspired by each other. I also am interested in making these places more welcoming for those who are currently marginalised or excluded from our community.

CHALLENGES AND EXPERIENCES

At this stage after the PhD, several post-PhD challenges became apparent to me. For one, I have limited time to refine my independent research profile as long as I am employed within the same context and project lead as during my PhD, particularly given the additional load on service work and having entered the ring of the application circus.

With my topics and interest, I sit squarely between the chairs of Design, Computer Science and Cultural Studies. My research, similarly, might not provide a solid agenda to any of these disciplines and I find myself having to leave things out in certain circumstances to create a coherent story. As this feels particularly dishonest to me I try and own my multitude of interests (which is how I have done it so far). Hence, one of my questions is, how people navigate their interdisciplinary and potentially eclectic profile successfully particularly while they are on the job market. How do they find a place where they belong? Are there wrong choices to make?

In Austria, two things are keeping me structurally from gaining more experience in teaching: for one, as a project assistant, I am not paid for voluntary teaching, instead, I essentially build my teaching portfolio by offering a free service to the university. Additionally, Master's and PhD theses can only be supervised at the level of Associate or Full Professor.

From a private perspective, I also worry about the education of my child and feel a window of opportunity closing in which we can move around. Hence, time-constrained positions at different locations seem particularly infeasible compared to others, who might not have a family to factor in as well. And finally, being non-binary, I am not entirely sure how to navigate this identity within the application process and within research life, given I came out within the research community to create visibility (hopefully leading to acceptance), but now worry about taking from my achievements by letting people focus on my identity.

PARTICIPATING IN THE EARLY CAREER SYMPOSIUM

From my participation in the Early Career Symposium I wish to be able to establish camaraderie with peers facing similar and different challenges and to gather strength and mutual guidance from our experiences. I expect that mentors will be able to listen and share how they navigated this stressful period. In return, I hope to be able to listen to and understand others' experiences and give them a space in which they may share freely so we can think about potential strategies together.