
Reject Me: Peer Review and SIGCHI

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Abstract

The HCI research community grows bigger each year, refining and expanding its boundaries in new ways. The ability to effectively review submissions is critical to the growth of CHI and related conferences. The review process is designed to produce a consistent supply of fair, high-quality reviews without overloading individual reviewers; yet, after each cycle, concerns are raised about limitations of the process. Every year, participants are left wondering why their papers were not accepted (or why they were). This SIG will explore reviewing through a critical and constructive lens, discussing current successes and future opportunities in the CHI review process. Goals will include actionable conclusions about ways to improve the system, potential alternative peer models, and the creation of materials to educate newcomer reviewers.

Author Keywords

reviewing; reflexivity; systems; design; methods.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m [Information Interfaces and Presentation (e.g., HCI)]: Miscellaneous;

Introduction

"We are sorry to tell you that we are not able to include your Paper submission."

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Sometime around the late fall of every year, CHI reviews are released and discussions about the promises and perils of CHI reviewing resurface. The review process evolves as numbers of submissions, topics, and online participation grow [1,9]. Other HCI researchers have reflected on the state of the community and on paper acceptances (see overviews from Grudin [3,4] and Kaye [6]). Recently, these recurring conversations have also taken place publicly online through tweets and blog posts, including Oulasvirta's "Why your paper was rejected" [10], Karger's "Do we really need three reviewers for every paper" [5], and Landay's "I give up on CHI/UIST" [8]). Oulasvirta's post garnered 6,000 views and Landay's post generated 83 comments.

CHI has many sub-disciplines, which have been roughly formalized into the review process by way of the Program Committee subcommittees. The community is challenged to review papers from a wide variety of disciplines and methods with fairness and consistency. Other challenges also exist.

- How valuable is interestingness? How do we recognize and acknowledge interesting ideas? [11]
- Reviewers can be unnecessarily harsh. It is sometimes easier to report what is wrong than what is right. How should we encourage fair and constructive reviewing?
- How much domain expertise should a reviewer require to be qualified to review a paper? How much should they know about methods?
- How should contributions be evaluated when they have different methods and contributions (e.g. systems versus ethnography [2])?

While these issues are pervasive and persistent, there still exist few or no resources to guide reviewers in meeting peer review goals. Reasons for this lack of resources include: 1) no one has taken the time to create them, or 2) CHI as a community hasn't yet decided what they should be. We suspect that both of these are contributing factors. Thus, the goals of this SIG are to identify existing strengths and weaknesses of the review process, to develop resources to aid newcomers in participating, and to discuss the future of reviewing and alternative models.

Topics for Discussion

Fostering participation in less-experienced reviewers

The marked increase in HCI conference submissions (most notably at CHI) necessitates expanding the pool of potential reviewers by including a greater number of junior researchers. While many of these younger researchers are graduate students who may have the domain expertise required to assess conference submissions, they may be overlooked for a variety of other reasons relating to their lack of experience, such as inability to recognize disciplinary assumptions and biases or distinguish amongst contribution types. By taking steps to foster participation among such junior reviewers, we believe that the community can encourage both reviews and submissions of higher quality. Specifically, as part of our discussion, we aim to address the following:

- Generate materials to help academic institutions create seminars or workshops to introduce students to the review process early in their careers.
- Compile a repository of papers along with their reviews; such a volume should include both positive and negative examples in order to be instructive.

- Develop more extensive materials to guide new reviewers in assessing various contribution types, including the possible creation of ‘rubrics’ which could help identify appropriate criteria for evaluation.
- Encourage new reviewers and hypercritical reviewers to focus on constructive reviewing rather than simply finding flaws in a paper

The future of peer review

SIGCHI has an opportunity to blaze a path in rethinking peer review. SIGCHI conferences like CSCW and UIST have already begun reconsidering their review processes. For example, our community has experimented with journal-style revision models and desk rejects that ease the reviewing load on senior researchers. We would like to raise these topics for community discussion: where are these experiments going? What should the future of peer review in our community look like?

One thread of discussion centers on continued tweaks to the current reviewing paradigm. Are there ways to ensure that papers are matched to reviewers who share methodological biases with the authors? What can we learn from “reviews gone wrong”? How can we ensure that reviewers are not overloaded and authors receive high-quality critical feedback?

We would also like engage in a discussion of alternate models for peer review in SIGCHI. Sites like arXiv.org have seen great success using a “publish first, review second” model. Could SIGCHI adapt elements of this model? Also, are there ways to rethink our publishing model in such a way that we increase our community’s ability to translate ideas into practice or product?

Engaging Participants

Before the SIG

Discussions about the reviewing process tend to be abstract, seeking to identify issues generally without revealing specific papers and reviews. Even at program committee meetings, only a fraction of people who weigh in on a paper will have read it or the reviews. In order to engage the community in a deep discussion on concrete issues, we will spearhead a web-based community review process of select CHI submissions prior to the SIG. We will use an extended version of the considerate system which has been specifically adapted to this purpose [7].

ConsiderIt has a number of affordances that will enable reviewers to probe deeper into the mindset underlying their own and other reviewers’ reviews than current review systems. Specifically, ConsiderIt asks every reviewer of a paper to (1) create a pro/con list representing their opinion about the most important factors weighing into the decision about the paper’s acceptance, (2) identify their opinion about acceptance on a slider from strong support to strong oppose, and (3) contribute a prose review that summarizes their stance. Reviewers can use other reviewer’s points and can comment on one another’s reviews. To kickstart each paper discussion, we will gain permission to post the official reviews of the CHI submission. We have already gained permission from two of three reviewers for one forthcoming CHI paper that describes one of the systems underlying the ConsiderIt platform.

During the SIG

We will begin with a brief introduction to the peer review process. After this overview, we will break out into groups organized according to the two discussion

topics outlined above: developing resources for newcomers and assessing the peer review process.

The first group will meet with the goal of identifying a body of resources which should be developed to aid newcomers in learning how to generate high-quality reviews. The ideas and materials generated by this session will be compiled collaboratively in real-time in a wiki format during the session. This format will allow for future use, allowing the discussion and development of materials to continue after the meeting has concluded.

The second group will meet with the goal of discussing and refining the review process in a constructive, face-to-face setting. This will include discussion positive and negative aspects of the current review process, as well as identification and assessment of alternative models. As with the other group, this discussion will also be documented online on a wiki; ultimately, we hope that the discussion will lead to actionable steps which can be implemented to improve how papers are reviewed for CHI.

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