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Words in Freedom

Words in Freedom:
A Manifesto Machine as Critical Design

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Abstract

Words in Freedom is a design project aimed at artists, activists, and others that draws from research on the manifesto to create a studio environment or 'Manifesto Machine'. Drawing primarily on the sub-disciplines of Design for Good and Critical Design, this project seeks to enhance conscious self-expression and empowerment while questioning "design's inbuilt optimism" [16] and the effects of automation on human agency. When we automate for improved performance, what do we lose in the process? Do the benefits outweigh the loss of agency? How can technology aid expression without overdetermining it? Ultimately, Words in Freedom seeks to create a collaborative writing environment that strikes the right balance between freedom and constraint, agency and inspiration. We trace the manifesto's return to prominence in digital form, arguing for its usefulness as a potent discursive artifact. We then describe the Manifesto Machine as a set of tools to help write and disseminate persuasive manifestos, introducing our initial prototype (or probe, as in Reflective Design [20]) as a means of conducting our primary research, engaging with groups and understanding social practices around declaring principles and beliefs.

KEYWORDS: manifestos, activism, critical design, reflective design, collaborative virtual environments

Background

'*Manifestos exist to challenge and provoke*' [8].

How to write a manifesto? The manifesto may be defined as "a declaration of artistic

aims and principles loosely based on the revolutionary political form of the 19th century, for example *The Communist Manifesto*. It is usually a pamphlet-length, polemical, public declaration" [9]. According to F. T. Marinetti, the leader of Italian Futurism and the most prolific manifesto writer of the 20th century, the key elements of any manifesto are 'violence and precision' [19]. Manifestos must be bold and direct like the advertisements they imitate.

The manifesto is currently one of most vital and adaptable online genres. The sudden acceleration in mobile computing a decade ago, including the rapid rise of social media and image-and-slogan-dependent 'meme culture', combined with the mainstreaming of political activism, have contributed to the manifesto's timeliness. Today the manifesto is more relevant than ever: no grassroots political movement, startup, online zine or hacker collective is complete without a declaration of principles. From Postcapitalism [21] to Xenofeminism [11], Occupy [18] to Black Lives Matter [2], movements are using manifestos to announce themselves to the world.

Building on the 'manifesto moment' heralded by the current era of online activism, we present the preliminary results of a new project, Words in Freedom, which analyses innovations in form, content, and dissemination signaled by the digital manifesto (and its analogue predecessor), maps what has been done in recent years, and grows the capacity for future interventions in the form of a 'Manifesto Machine'. While we are designing a tool or 'machine' for making manifestos, our purpose extends beyond simple technical facilitation and what Dunne and Raby call "design's inbuilt optimism" [6]. We want to encourage users to reflect – through collaboration, conscious expression, and public dissemination – on what they stand for and why, and how their beliefs might intersect with the beliefs of others. In so doing, we hope to invite reflection on the productive and potentially undervalued role of criticality in HCI, in effect fusing two sub-disciplines: Design for Good [1] and Critical Design [6]. As Tonkinwise has argued: 'Designing that does not ... Criticize, Provoke, Discourse, Interrogate, Probe, Play, is inadequate designing' [22].

One area where Critical Design and HCI diverge is in their approach to problem solving. Generally speaking Critical (or Speculative) Design seeks not to solve a problem *per se* but to stage it dramatically, to encourage engagement, invite reflection, and embody critique. Frequently cited aims of Critical Design and Design Fiction include provoking action and debate [7, 13], opening up discursive spaces [12], forcing conversations [3],

and "inspir[ing] and encourag[ing] people's imaginations to flow freely" [6]. These aims correspond closely with the aims of the manifesto itself – which exists "to challenge and provoke" [8] – making the Manifesto Machine an ideal Critical Design object.

Combining Critical Design with the digital manifesto also opens the way towards greater attention to activism, engagement and critical self-reflection within the field of HCI. Our work shares affinities with Reflective Design, which "supports scepticism" about its own design and draws on critical approaches to HCI in "folding critical reflection into the practice of technology design" [20], and Participatory Design, in which users play an active role in the design process [5]. In particular, we position our initial prototype as a technological probe [10] as framed by [20] for understanding users and social practices, and as a means of inviting critical reflection as the basis for inspiring further design.

Introduction

As social media in the age of political crisis demonstrates, people want to say something and want to be heard. The difficulty is that it is sometimes hard to know what to say, which is why so many opinions are just reposts of the opinions of others [16]. It is hard to know what you believe until you say it out loud, or how to say it confidently and clearly.

In a recent interview [4], the filmmaker Adam Curtis argued that the weakness of early social media-led manifestations such as Occupy and Tahrir Square was that participants had no unified or articulated vision, only processes, networks, channels of dissemination. There was a powerful desire for change, but no vision yet of that better world. What these movements failed to do, according to Curtis, was to harness people's desires with a clear dramatic vision, to excite imaginations with narratives of power that have always been at the heart of politics and history. One answer to this shortcoming is the manifesto, which creates dramatic narratives of power (e.g. "A spectre is haunting Europe" [14]) and performative visions of possible futures to seize the imagination and win converts. One key question that emerges is thus how can we facilitate the creation of compelling narratives in our Manifesto Machine?

Given this backdrop, we sought to build a creative and collaborative environment that gives like-minded individuals the tools and inspiration to draft, design, and disseminate coherent and persuasive manifestos. As Laboria Cuboniks, the artist collective that wrote

'The Xenofeminist Manifesto' (2015), states: 'The whole point of writing something like [a manifesto] is to try to reshape the discursive chessboard' [11]. That is what we are challenging users to do with the Manifesto Machine: to empower artists and activists to overcome barriers to participation (shyness, lack of knowledge, sense of authority) and discover the freedom-within-constraints that manifesto writing offers, with the ultimate goal of supporting activism and changing society as a whole.

Designing for Bold Expression

Our approach to the Manifesto Machine began with the definition of a set of constraints, which we determined were necessary to encourage wider participation and engagement, and to steer the interaction. The main constraints govern: idea generation and text input, canvas, typeface and control panel aesthetics, and publishing. Manifestos usually follow strict templates handed down from well known historical examples: *The Communist Manifesto*, the US *Declaration of Independence*, avant-garde manifestos of Futurism, Dada, Surrealism, etc. Common features of the manifesto might include: a preamble, providing an account of events leading up to the present; a numbered list of tenets, usually complaints or demands; a call (or series of calls) to action; and so on. Drawing on some of these templates for our initial probe, we assembled a stock of keywords and phrases to assist idea generation and guide the writing process. While we do not intend to emphasize the use of stock phrases in successive iterations of the Manifesto Machine, our immediate objective was to sidestep the barrier less experienced authors face in undertaking a new writing project: the blinking cursor in a sea of white.

Initially, we conceived of these elements as fitting inside old-fashioned typesetter drawers (Fig. 1). In the current iteration (Figs. 2, 3, 4), phrases (e.g. 'We affirm', 'We declare') appear in searchable drop-down lists, arranged by rhetorical category (e.g. 'Intentions') on the left of the canvas. The user can drag and drop text elements onto the canvas and position them as desired. Inputting new text elements dims the background and places focus on the text box. Users can also free-type in the canvas and add their own words and phrases to the 'My Words' drawer and enable them to be shared with other users.

Figure 1. Paper prototype fashioned after a 19th century typesetter cabinet, with pull-out drawers for selecting boilerplate phrases.

For the canvas, typeface, and control panel aesthetics, we aimed for a balance between freedom, usability, consistency, and minimum standards for a well designed end product. Sliders allow the user to choose from a curated selection of avant-garde, open-source fonts, and control size, leading, tracking, and kerning. Color is manipulated in the same way, governing the hue, saturation, and lightness for both text and background. There are additional options to reverse or select a random color scheme (opposite complementary colors, based on color theory), and to save, share or adjust screen size. Font manipulations happen in real time with browsing. For the canvas, both portrait and landscape views are possible, with aesthetic choices extending to the entire interface, including control panels, to minimize distraction.
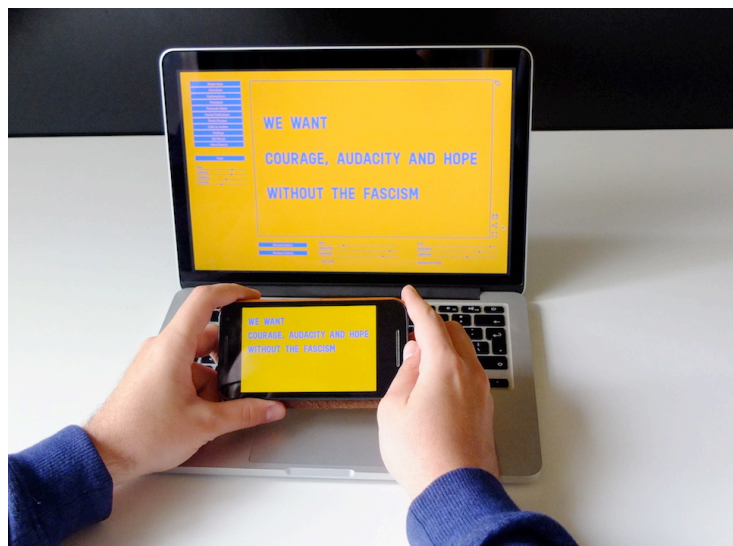
Figure 2. The Manifesto Machine desktop and mobile visualizations.

Figure 3. Initial Manifesto Machine probe, which enables the user to play with text and background color. Color transformations that are applied to the canvas are also applied to the entire interface.
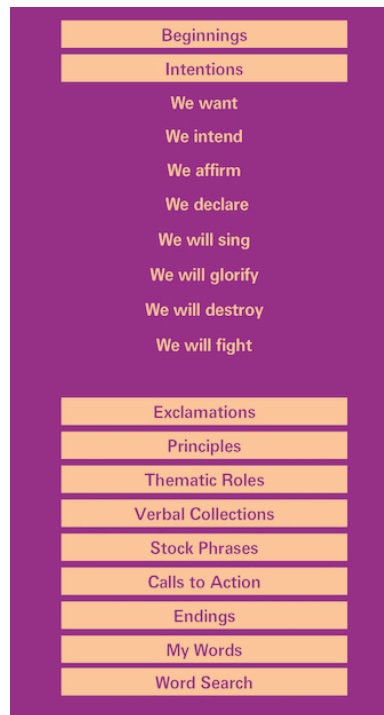

Figure 4. Close-up of drop-down lists.

Discussion

The automation of uncomfortably human actions, actions with heart, risks taking us into the territory of the uncanny – the same phenomenon that creates an empathetic 'valley' between people and humanoid robots [15]. The user might ask: Am I being encouraged to automate my political views? My self-expression? My values and principles? My anger and outrage? Allowing technology to facilitate too much thinking, feeling, or acting on our behalf – for example, re-tweeting a meme to express political dissent – can, over time, have a dampening or deadening effect on human expression. Like Charlie Chaplin's assembly line worker in *Modern Times* (1936), we risk becoming less human and more machine-like.

Figure 5. Charlie Chaplin in assembly line scene from *Modern Times* (1936).

Increasingly, we permit corporate entities such as Facebook and Twitter to do our protesting for us, rather than engaging directly through collective action and mobilization. At risk are our rhetorical skills and our ability to argue and act outside our bubble. Confronting our own passivity and willingness to allow our deepest selves – our values, principles, political beliefs, etc. – to be automated and controlled by corporations, sold for

entertainment, is the first step towards ensuring that the Manifesto Machine can truly function as an effective tool for enabling bold expression.

Our project questions technologies that enhance and automate self-expression, thus functioning on two levels: as both tool and critique. Much of the work still lies ahead of us in deploying the aforementioned medium-fidelity probe within a co-design setting with activist and artist groups for an initial exploration of user experiences with collaborative manifesto writing. With respect to collaboration, we acknowledge that functionalities around group discussion, weighing solutions, and reaching compromise remain to be understood and built into the design. These are insights that can only be gained through interventions with the current and subsequent probes.

**Fig. 6. Early example of a critical take on meme activism
from Jenny Holzer's *Truisms* series [23].**

In terms of critique, we expect that these interventions will offer early insights into the satisfaction and comfort level felt by new authors tasked with putting beliefs into words (and images) in a technology mediated context. For example, does the end product adequately reflect users' true beliefs? How can technology aid expression without overdetermining it? How can a manifesto writing environment play a supporting role without diminishing authorial agency? Is the language of historical manifestos useful for self-expression in the digital age? What other affordances do people require to enable an effective collaborative writing experience that yields meaningful expression aided by clear communication design? Is the manifesto inherently static, or should it be allowed to evolve over time? Does the Manifesto Machine merely lead users in the direction of

shallow sloganeering and inauthentic expression? How do we define meaningful expression in the digital age?

Drawing on the constructive provocation, self-awareness, healthy scepticism, and co-design feedback of Critical Design, Reflective Design, Participatory Design, and similar critical approaches, Words in Freedom aims at facilitating meaningful self-expression without replicating the co-optation for commercial or entertainment value propagated by corporate entities such as Facebook and Twitter. We want to help users rationalize their feelings in such a way as to be able to externalize problems, discuss with groups of collaborators, and propose and share ideas in a participatory process.

Conclusions and Future Work

In this paper we have presented a Manifesto Machine that explores design affordances to enable ordinary users to create eye-catching and persuasive statements of principle. We showcased our earliest efforts – creating a collaborative online environment, importing and combining bold exclamations and calls to action from historical manifestos, and playing with vivid complementary colors – with an emphasis on making manifesto writing easier. And yet, this is only the first step in the process of designing an effective and engaging manifesto studio environment that helps users create and collaborate actively on meaningful expression.

As indicated above, the next step will be a participatory design study, involving a selection of artist and activist groups, which uses the current iteration of the Manifesto Machine as a technological probe for exploring the balance between agency and passivity with regard to technology and sociopolitical expression.

Manifestos are bold proclamations, but they are also ephemeral by nature: they are written for the moment, to be hurled across barricades or pushed into the hands of strangers. Preserving this ephemerality and temporality will be important. Using interaction design to create new possibilities in activist practices, rather than aiming primarily to solve problems, is another essential element to the Manifesto Machine. Thus, additional future work will involve user studies *in situ*, testing how collaborative writing might best be supported (e.g. borrowing from the book sprint methodology), how different forms of dissemination could work, and what kind of media could be used to

encourage participation. We also aim to move beyond the internet, where 'memefestos' are viewed and quickly forgotten, to more public, tangible, analogue forms of output. Following the example of artists such as Jenny Holzer [e.g. 23] (Fig. 6), we have already experimented with a Solari display [17] that has been hacked to receive text (Fig. 7).

Figure 7. An old Solari airport arrivals board becomes a public display for a manifesto.

Acknowledgments

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