
Fictional, Interactive Narrative as a Foundation to Talk about Racism

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Abstract

As a means of exploring the design space for supporting individuals who have had personal experiences with racism, we developed a Participatory Design (PD) method, Foundational Fiction, that addresses some unique concerns with using traditional PD to explore deeply sensitive topics. Challenging the assumption that PD must begin with a solicitation of participants' real lived experiences, we instead created a fictional interactive narrative for participants to work from. In the preliminary analysis, we observe that the use of a shared fiction relieved participants of the requirement to disclose very personal experiences, but nonetheless established a group understanding of what makes racist experiences difficult and supported a generative conversation about how technology might ease these situations.

Author Keywords

Participatory Design, Interactive Fiction, Racism, Microaggressions, Social Justice, Design Justice, HCI.

CCS Concepts

•Human-centered computing → HCI design and evaluation methods; •Social and professional topics → Race and ethnicity;

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Our Positionality

Lead researcher Alexandra To is a mixed-race, Asian-American woman who both studies race and racism through lenses of HCI and critical race theory [35] as well as organizes as a racial justice activist.

The facilitator, Hillary Carey, is a white American woman investigating Design and anti-racist theories. Insights about how white people typically respond with discomfort and rejection to information about race and racial injustice have shaped the way she listens and guides conversations during workshops [14, 42, 43].

It is, in fact, an integral part of the workshop that we acknowledge these positions with our participants before beginning the in-person sessions [32].

Introduction

In this paper, we propose that a fictional interactive narrative can serve as a grounding experience for participants in design workshop to more safely engage with the emotional and psychological reality of racist interactions.

A part of a larger project titled Coping After Racist Experiences (CARE), this work aims to gain insights into the design of socio-technical tools that could address the aftermath of interpersonal racism. For this phase, we conducted six workshops for participants to imagine futures in which they are supported by social tools to prevent, cope with, or recover from interpersonal racism. We modified Participatory Design sessions to mitigate the potential trauma that comes from discussing racism [42]. Specifically, because narrative fiction can be both separate from our own experience and deeply experienced [2, 31], we ground our PD in a fictional scenario rather than asking to share real, personal experiences. We developed a first-person interactive narrative for participants to engage with and discuss as the centerpiece of the workshop.

Our methodology stems from our belief that the design of future technologies needs to center people of color and, at the same time, our recognition that care and sensitivity are necessary to handle discussions of racism. In this way, we propose that practitioners— in addition to considering methods that include agents who are more than human— should work to ensure that those who have historically marginalized are included and afforded agency in our approaches to more holistic design solutions [9, 11, 16, 35].

Conducting Workshops Focused on Racism

The need for Foundational Fiction for PD

Focus groups that directly discuss race and racism have been conducted in other fields [24, 38, 41]. Yet we found

few references in the PD and HCI literature for techniques considering race when planning HCI research, aside from two community-based projects [29, 46] and strong calls for intersectional considerations [22, 37, 47]. Some recent work in PD describes approaches for working with “marginalized communities,” but this work rarely reflects on race within the research approach [4, 28]. We believe this may be due to the difficult challenges of talking about race and racism.

While PD has been exploring the use of Design Fiction in collaborative work [5, 8, 10, 25, 39], our use of fiction is not for speculation or to present a new concept. Our fiction offers one shared, relatable story to connect to diverse participants - closer to Dindler & Iverson’s use of Fictional Inquiry [15]. Our purpose for the narrative is to protect participants from being required to reveal their own painful experiences; providing them with agency in the process of self-disclosure, which we refer to as Foundational Fiction.

Talking about Racism

Modern racism takes many forms, ranging from overt hostility (e.g., hate speech, violence) to more subtle and even unintended discrimination. The result of which is often cumulative adverse impacts on mental, physical, emotional, and practical well-being [18, 33, 40]. For people who experience racism, talking about it is essential, but daunting. In some cases, discussions are met with denial, dismissal, or even outright hostility [1, 13, 40, 45]. Therefore asking a group of strangers in a PD session to self-disclose may exacerbate these risks. Because racism is experienced differently by people from different groups [40], just knowing that another person belongs to a racial minority group does not signal them as safe to discuss vulnerable experiences. Therefore, it was crucial to structure our workshops in a way that would provide safety for a diversity of participants.



Figure 1: Participants created layers of sticky notes: pink describe key moments in the story, orange identify emotions, yellow describe pain points, and blue represent current and future technological solutions.



Figure 2: As the final step, participants drew individual storyboards, illustrating how one of the concepts could work within the context of a racist interaction

Design Methods

Constructing the Interactive Fiction

Fiction has shown to be incredibly useful at relaying both socially complex and sensitive experiences [3, 31]. The fictional context provides space for participants to read stories about traumatic experiences without being personally vulnerable. A story provides a safe psychological distance from disturbing situations [12, 21, 23, 31].

We created an interactive fiction about a college student who experiences a racial microaggression (a version is available here: [44]). We built the immersive narrative in Twine [17, 27], an open-source interactive, narrative platform. Participants in our workshops were given a link and asked to complete the task of reading through the story in advance of the session.

Our story uses a first-person perspective, which enables participants to see themselves as the character [26] and to connect with the character through shared subjective experience and interpersonal closeness (e.g., through “I-sharing” [20, 36]). The interactivity (participants can choose their responses to different moments in the story) is powerful for their engagement with it.

The first-person experience introduces your character, Sam, and follows them through a typical day. Sam attends a meeting at a cafe with their professor, lab mates, and a visiting professor. As the group is sharing updates, the visitor says three microaggressions to your character: “*Your English is so advanced. You’re so articulate. Where are you from? Well, where are your parents from?*” We aimed to write the narrative’s focal occurrence of racism in a way that could resonate with most racial minority groups. For example, “*Your English is so good,*” is often directed toward people from Asian and Hispanic backgrounds, while “*You’re so*

articulate” often targets people from African and Hispanic backgrounds [40].

Designing the Workshop

Our dual goals in designing the workshop were to care for the well-being of our participants and to encourage fruitful ideation among them. We worked to foster a supportive, respectful environment. Based on design and social justice work, our facilitation script was explicitly transparent about the context of our work, and set ground rules for collaboration and valuing different opinions [9, 19, 30, 45].

To use the fictional story as a tool for brainstorming new technology, we drew on the concept of a Future Workshop [6, 34], in which participants create a shared understanding of problems of the present state, then envision a better future, and then prototype it. Additionally, Brandt & Messeter’s description of Landscape Games [7] provided the structure of using a sequence of phases to build a common vocabulary and establish a shared understanding of the story. In both of these methods, participants typically discuss and define the critical attributes of a current, shared experience (e.g., of an organizational process). In our case, the fictional narrative became the common incident (before, during, and after the visiting professor’s offensive questions). Throughout the workshop, participants could refer to moments in the fictional story for ideation, or share their personal experiences if they wished (self-disclosure).

Preliminary Evidence

In Winter 2020, we conducted six workshops with 26 racially diverse participants (21 females; ages 18-56) living in Pittsburgh, PA, USA. In our ongoing analysis, we found that participants highly related to the narrative openly shared their personal experiences, and generated many ideas envisioning future technologies for coping with racism.

Online Pre-Workshop:

30 min - Participants consent, play through the story, and respond via survey measures

In-Person Workshop:

15 min - Introduction

30 min - Identify key events Before | During | After

10 min - Identify emotions

– Break –

10 min - Role-play

10 min - Identify needs

15 min - Ideation

10 min - Storyboarding

5 min - Wrap-up & resources

Self-Disclosure Statements Shared per Stage

Over the course of the study, participants voluntarily shared many personal stories relating to race and racism.

Study Intro: 6

"Before" in Narrative: 4

"During" in Narrative: 67

"After" in Narrative: 10

Role-play Activity: 24

Relating to the Narrative

The fictional narrative rang true to participants. They had a high recall of the plot, as evidenced by their ability to create notes to describe what occurred in the story. They each connected in specific ways to different aspects of the narrative. In response to the microaggression in the story, we heard comments like, “*Yeah, that’s happened to me 4,000 times*” and, “*I find for brown people like me, people make a lot of assumptions about where I’m from.*” In one workshop, a student referred to the description of international flags on the door to Sam’s apartment, saying, “*I felt jealous of Sam’s roommate situation, I was like, ‘that sounds lit.’*”

Self-Disclosing Vulnerable Experiences

Although optional, participants shared many personal experiences with racism. Like any workshop of strangers, they were quiet in the beginning and often did not talk about their racial backgrounds until discussing the “during” scene of the story, when the microaggression occurs.

We believe that beginning with the fictional story allowed them to warm up and “read the room” before sharing their own experiences. They were not directly asked to talk personally, but as the activities built, every participant shared several of their own instances of racist interactions.

This signals to us that the risk of sharing personal stories was low enough that the discussion felt safe. In all six workshops, the number of statements disclosed about personal experiences with racism increased during the discussion of the fictional offense.

Ideation for Coping With and Preventing Racism

As hoped, we collected many ideas. The 26 participants generated 122 ideas and 20 storyboards. In an earlier study on this topic, conducted by the second author [45], it was found that people had a deep mistrust of social tech-

nology because of backlash, and uncertainty is a key motivator for seeking social support. These insights are reflected in the ideas generated. Themes from ideation included: automatic detection and disruption of racist behavior, reflective tools that replay what happened, AI as emotional comfort, and dedicated online spaces to share racist experiences publicly. Participants individually created vivid storyboards to illustrate one of their favorite solutions in context (e.g., Figure 2). We were pleased by their willingness to draw, and by the variety of concepts they chose.

Future Work

We continue to explore how different technologies can support people who experience racism, and how to promote participant agency through the design process. As a next step, we will analyze the design patterns in our participants’ ideas and embed some concepts into the fictional narrative. We will use the new story to evaluate how people could use the new technology in the context of racism and how they might feel if they had access before, during, or after the fictional microaggression. Additionally, we will continue to study Foundational Fiction for PD as a tool for supporting complex, and potentially traumatic, conversations among participants in collaborative settings, to get a deeper sense of their emotional experiences of different aspects of the workshop.

As HCI and Design move toward projects that shape sociopolitical spaces, it will be valuable to continue exploring workshop structures that reduce potential harm for participants when discussing difficult topics.

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