



Rachel Clarke,
Newcastle University

The *Interactions* website (interactions.acm.org) hosts a stable of bloggers who share insights and observations on HCI, often challenging current practices. Each issue we'll publish selected posts from some of the leading and emerging voices in the field.

Rethinking the Participatory Design Conference Experience

I read an article recently that suggested with the growth of online and hybrid conferences in response to Covid-19, there were more opportunities for everyone. The focus of the article was on celebrating the enabling potential of technology to make this happen. But after spending the past two years attending online conferences and now serving as general cochair for the 2022 Participatory Design Conference (PDC), I think it's a mistake to focus on what technology can or cannot bring to the table in trying to make conferences more equitable.

Technology, in all shapes and sizes, offering all sorts of novel interactions for online conferences and meetings, was at the front of our brains as we hastily integrated and abandoned new apps while juggling alternative ways of working and domestic life. Many conferences took on this challenge, recognizing that our reliance on the face-to-face conference model, while benefiting many, also excludes many interesting scholars and practitioners. Extortionate prices for flights, accommodation, and attendance; being away from family; care responsibilities; language; access to existing networks; CO2 emissions—all are key issues that have always existed but recently became more apparent. In organizing PDC 2022 with cochairs Yoko Akama and John Vines, we recognized these challenges before the pandemic. We also felt there were other approaches to reconceptualizing what conferences could look like if they were more decentralized, encouraging a greater respect for a diversity of place-based responses to particular themes before working on the technology.

PDC PLACES

PDC 2020 was hosted in Colombia, despite the event having to quickly become online only. This showed what could be done with a more localized approach to engaging a global network of scholars and practitioners doing and discussing PD while drawing from a strong tradition of political Latin American activists and theorists.

PDC Places is a new initiative for PDC 2022 where distributed face-to-face and hybrid gatherings will take place across 15 different locations around the globe before, during, and after the conference program in August. As general chairs, we were keen to find ways of addressing and reaffirming our commitments to equity and sustainability and a more distributed place-based approach to PD as a diverse set of practices and concerns, beyond Europe and the U.S., despite technically hosting part of the conference in Newcastle upon Tyne, U.K.

We've been lucky to have the extraordinary expertise of Reem Talhouk and Andy Dearden leading the way in helping take this vision forward through a lively network of scholars, practitioners, and industry professionals. We initially received

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18 expressions of interest to run PD events around the globe, which created a lot of discussion between potential hosts and Places chairs to define how we can practically make this vision happen. We're now working on consolidating opportunities for meaningful connection across Places hosts, including creating a flexible program and branding strategy that can be personalized and work with different languages.

TIME ZONES, LANGUAGE, AND FACILITATION

Some of the ways we are trying to build these connections is carefully planning for time zone scheduling, multilingual translation, and facilitation. We've spent hours mapping time zones, creating "touch points" for when different countries can reasonably connect with one another online and without people feeling the need to wake up in the middle of the night. One of the challenges of global online conferences is people not sharing the same time zone. Most conferences take place in one time zone that best suits the conference hosts, which makes a lot of sense. But time zone scheduling has enabled us to rethink and plan for running hybrid and online sessions, being mindful of when different countries are likely more able to connect across Europe and Africa, Australasia, and the Americas to avoid the limits of time zone silos.

We're planning for a day of hybrid multilingual events to include keynotes and panels. It was our intention to spread these events throughout the conference, but working with Newcastle University's School of Modern Languages, our plan now is to have several different



**PDC
2022**
Participatory Design Conference

**PDC Places:
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Participatory Design Conference **PDC Places: Brasil**

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14–15th September 2022



languages and focus on one day due to the complexities of translator scheduling, setup, and costs. We are, however, also hoping that more-informal translation can take place. One of our workshop chairs, Angelika Strohmayer, attended a conference recently where people provided more-intimate whispered translations encouraging more-informal interpretation, which is in the spirit of generosity and the kind of conference atmosphere we hope to create.

It's also important to recognize the importance of creating connection through careful facilitation between global communities. Nowhere is this more important than in facilitating hybrid online and face-to-face dialogue. Facilitation is a craft not always appreciated, but we've learned a lot on how important facilitation and chairing sessions is to making any discussion work well and making the most of our time together, whether this be online, face-to-face, or in a hybrid environment. We're hoping we can provide guidance and share practice and experience from the past two years that supports panel and paper chairs to embrace this approach.

ONLINE PLATFORM

And finally, yes, the technology. We

have started to design a bespoke online platform that bolts together different videoconferencing, scheduling, and networking tools that run on low bandwidth, mindful of places where intermittent online access still presents lags and outages. We have already used these platforms in our lab during large-scale global gatherings, including MozFest, IFRC Climate Red, and ServDes at RMIT. We'll have all the usual things that the PD community has nurtured over the years—presentations for full papers, exploratory papers, situated actions and exhibition, workshops and doctoral colloquia, beyond academia, panels, and awards—but we are also encouraging people to be creative and experiment with hybrid formats. There will also be representation from our PDC Places communities and activity to further bring to life events happening across the globe. There has been so much discussion about how the online experience has diminished the conference experience as a whole. Many of us have felt this, but there are also people doing some really creative things with the technology too, not necessarily creating better experiences than being face-to-face, but aiming to create alternative experiences with what they have at hand.

The technology is important for helping us achieve these things, but we are also very excited to welcome people to Newcastle city itself as part of the conference experience with our unique urban, rural, coastal landscape. Some of our workshops will be hosted at the Urban Sciences Building at Open Lab, and our situated actions and exhibition program will have a combination of online content, short films, live performances, and a visual art exhibition in a repurposed church. Rather than have a significant number of presentations, though, we will focus on making the most of our time together for focused discussion where, for those who can make it, we will see you in person very soon.

PDC 2022 will take place online from August 19–26, with events in Newcastle upon Tyne, U.K., from August 30 to September 1, 2022. PDC Places sessions will take place from June to November, 2022 (<https://pdc2022.org>).

 **Rachel Clarke** is a design researcher and senior lecturer in interaction design at Open Lab, Newcastle University. Her work focuses on the politics of participatory design practice, international development, and smart urbanization in more-than-human worlds.
→ rachel.clarke@ncl.ac.uk