

“Ideas are a Dime a Dozen”: a Position Paper Against Position Papers (and Surveys)

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1 I have a great idea...

Game programmers hate telling people what they do. The invariable response is “hey, I have an idea for a great game! It’s totally new, so you have to promise not to steal it. You see, it works like this...”. These discussions about “great ideas” also plagues movie producers, screenwriters, and a host of other creative professionals. Everybody has ideas, and everybody thinks that their ideas are solid gold. Get real. Your ideas are not new, they’re not interesting, and unless you turn them into a working product, they’re not worth anything.

The same is true of “position papers” in academia. I have yet to see a position paper which puts forward any truly new ideas. Some papers may bring a new point of view to researchers unfamiliar with a particular area – but this ignorance of the researchers could be resolved by spending a few hours talking to practitioners in the area¹.

These papers are a sign of our discipline’s relative immaturity. Consider the same occurring in well-established areas of research – “I propose that we should mix titanium and gold together to create a new metal. Titanium is strong and gold is pretty, so the result will probably be a fantastic metal for sports cars.” Unless the author backs up his conjecture with solid evidence, there is no chance of this paper being accepted to a chemistry or material sciences conference.

Ideas are misleading – it is very easy to gloss over (or simply not realize!) the practi-

¹As an academic with degrees in three distinct areas (soon to begin a fourth), I am dismayed by the lack of communication between university departments. This is a serious barrier to interdisciplinary research – due to my varied academic history, I can attest that gathering degrees from different fields is an extremely inefficient way to perform interdisciplinary research.

cal implementation details that make or break a project. For example, I had a great idea to track people’s movements using the accelerometers in modern cell phones. Acceleration (from rest) gives us velocity, and velocity gives us position... this sounds great until you spend a few hours working with the device and realize that the accelerometer data is nowhere close to accurate enough for the task.

2 Reading is hard!

Survey papers are another way of avoiding real work. A survey does not add anything to the sum of human knowledge – all academics in the field should already be familiar with the papers discussed in the survey. If any academic learns anything new from a survey paper, then this is a sure sign that they have not been reading enough papers on their own².

3 Abandon them entirely?

There is still a place for position papers and surveys. Position papers may be useful to spark discussion in a panel discussion. Surveys are great tools for undergraduates students doing research projects and academics from other fields. I am not suggesting that these entities are entirely without merit. However, they should be clearly marked as publications which do not advance the state of knowledge. They should be rated as “academic service”, on par with organizing a conference or editing a journal.

With that said, let’s get back to work³.

²Everybody should spend an hour a day reading papers, even – actually, *especially* – graduate students.

³The astute reader will note that this paper, just like the position papers it attacks, contains no evidence to support its ideas and relies purely on rhetoric.