

Active Co-construction of Meaningful Experiences: but what is the designer's role?

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ABSTRACT

This talk discusses how to strike a good balance between making the user an active co-creator of system functionality versus making a too strong, interpretative design that does it all for the user. It is easy to fall into the trap of being insensitive to users as actors instead seeing them as passive users. It is equally easy to fall into a postmodernism trap where it is assumed that users will always appropriate technology in ways that are unexpected by the designer, and thus, basically the designer can abdicate.

Author Keywords

Design, social construction, affective interaction, social navigation

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

INTRODUCTION

“Rather than experience as something to be poured into passive users, we argue that users actively and individually construct meaningful human experiences around technology.”

(Sengers et al., 2004)

While this quote probably feels like a truism to most, its translation into design ideas that allow for these kinds of experiences is not an easy one. While there exists a plethora of user-centred design methods, such as the Scandinavian design model, participatory design, ethnographically inspired design approaches, activity theory, new interesting areas for design keep popping up, requiring new ways of understanding and redefining user-centred design. The

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recent debate on pro-active versus user-centred ubiquitous computing is one example of where the user-centred design needs to be re-instantiated and slightly reformulated to fit with the problem at hand (see panel here at NordiCHI 2004). Affective computing, as defined by the artificial intelligence researchers in the field, is another design area needing a user-centred perspective that makes sense with respect to emotional interaction.

In the work I and my colleagues have done, we have attempted to explore new paths for user-centred design from a social construction perspective. One such path has been Social Navigation, a means by which an interface will have surfaces that display aggregated or individual traces of other user activities, in effect restructuring the interaction through the activities of other users (2002). Recently, we have applied these ideas to the construction of ‘seams’ in mobile settings – the bridges between network coverage gaps, breaks in functionality, imprecise positioning, and errors in recording and representation. We propose that social navigation and a ‘seamful design’ approach helps users take advantage of seams, appropriating and adapting system functionality for their own uses and interpretations (Chalmers et al., forthcoming).

Another path in our research has been to design for social construction of the meaning of emotional expressions (Fagerberg et al., 2003, Höök et al., 2003, Sengers et al., 2004). In affective computing, a constructively oriented system may well use biosensors and similar, but the interpretation is offered to the user who can use it to construct new contexts. Emotions in such systems are not labelled and handled as discrete formalised units, but are fluffy open-ended expressions and input mechanisms.

In my talk, I will use the systems we have built as examples when discussing how to strike a good balance between making the user an active co-creator of system functionality versus making a too strong, interpretative design that does it all for the user. It is easy to fall into the trap of being insensitive to users as actors instead seeing them as passive users. It is equally easy to fall into a postmodernism trap where it is assumed that users will always appropriate technology in ways that are unexpected by the designer, and thus, basically the designer can abdicate. Dourish et al point out, that we should not assume

a “real world baseline”, in which interaction involving new media, or a system involving a combination of old and new media, has to conform to traditional media (1996). But this does not mean that the designer lacks a role in designing for good user appropriation of the media. How can we design for good appropriation of media, a sound user-centred perspective, for active interpreting users, but not abandon our responsibilities as designers? Is it at all possible to determine if the design we produce is ‘bad’ and should be altered given this open, flexible perspective on end-user involvement and understanding?

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