Designer Experience: Exploring Ways to Design in Experience

Mika P. Nieminen

Aalto University School of Science

P.O. Box 19210

FI-00076 Aalto, Finland

mika.nieminen@tkk.fi

Mikael Runonen

Aalto University School of Science

P.O. Box 19210

FI-00076 Aalto, Finland

mikael.runonen@tkk.fi

Marko Nieminen

Aalto University School of Science

P.O. Box 19210

FI-00076 Aalto, Finland

marko.nieminen@tkk.fi

Mari Tyllinen

Aalto University School of Science

P.O. Box 19210

FI-00076 Aalto, Finland

mari.tyllinen@tkk.fi

Abstract

User-Centered Design (UCD) under the umbrella of user experience (UX) has gained momentum as the de facto standard to produce successful products and services. Use of products is seen as a highly personal and context-sensitive balancing act that derives its uniqueness from the actions and emotions of the users.

While the definition of UX is still in the making, it is hoped to extend the designing of products beyond functionality toward users' perceptions and emotions. As the practices for designing UX are emerging, we would like to address the UCD challenge from a different perspective. Therefore, in this paper we introduce *designer experience* (DX) as a means to design products at an experiential level, that of beyond contextual or empathic design. We welcome critical discussion on the existence and feasibility of DX, seek out available methodology to reliably invoke it, and collect practical future uses for DX.

Keywords

User-centered design, user experience, designer experience, designing in user's experiential system

ACM Classification Keywords

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

Introduction

User-Centered Design (UCD) has nearly established itself as the de facto standard for the design and development of quality products and services (hereinafter referred to as products). Its rationale is to understand the needs of the users and then provide a good and desirable solution for them. Of late, the term *user experience* (UX) has become an umbrella for all design activities. It aims to maximize a product's impact on the users on a subjective and context-sensitive manner over offering merely the needed functionality [1].

User-Centered Design in General

A good designer knows the users and their environments; she understands their needs; and, by combination of learned designer skills and intuition, she can create for them the best possible product. Unfortunately, the level of skill and use of available methodology ranges from stereotypical and inaccurate

prejudices, copying the competitors' prior solutions to use of state-of-the-art co-design and inspirational tools (as depicted in table 1). Regardless of methods used, the designer wields absolute power over the final design. She makes these decisions based on her personal judgment and designer skills.

Designers aim to narrow the gap between the product and its users, the design intention, and users' product perceptions. At the same time, a good designer understands the impact of her design. This is not only a question of how well the designer understands the people for whom she is designing, she must also acknowledge that the observable person is not a user until there is a product or a service that can be used [2].

We argue that this requires deeper intimacy—a likeness in actions and thinking— between the designers and the future users of their products.

The worst-case scenario is that a designer only recognizes groups of people with common characteristics. As the designer gets closer to the future users by employing various design practices, she eventually becomes able to understand the future users' thinking and behavior about a certain situation on a rational level (q.v. level 5 in table 1). However, this is not the ultimate level of likeness.

Level of Intimacy	Description	Typical Sources	Expected Result
1. Knowing about people	Designer uses human stereotypes and own presuppositions for grounds of inspiration	Generic statistics, public media	If any, positive results by sheer luck
2. Being acquainted with people	Designer has a first-hand description of people's explicit problems, desires, and wishes	Interviews, outsourced user studies	Typical functionality driven made-to-order product
3. Knowing the people	Designer understands the people's problems, wishes, needs, and desires and is not limited to what people are willing to disclose	Discount usability engineering, contextual design, artifact analysis	Typical product with acceptable usability
4. Understanding people as current users	Designer understands the causes behind people's needs and can approximate design's future usage	Rapid ethnography, user participation	Advanced product with high usability and optimized functionality
5. Thinking like the future user	Designer is able to comprehend how the future user would perceive the product, how she would use it, and for what ends	Proper ethnography, generative tools, and inspirational methods	Visibility to user's rational thinking: State-of-the-art innovative product
6. Experiencing like the future user	Key design decisions are made based on the same experiential system as the future users	?	Visibility to user's irrational thinking: Superior and insightful, even radical product

Table 1. Levels of intimacy between designers and future users.

Designer Experience

Often it is said that designers are not users, and they should not design for themselves but for the users. What if a designer could be more like a user? Would it automatically improve the quality of design?

In this workshop, we explore ways to enable the designers to get closer to their target audience and experience like the future users. As a basis for discussion, we propose a new approach called designer experience (DX). With DX we mean the designer's ability to accurately and truthfully immerse herself into the same or similar experiential system (ES) as the future users. We propose that if a designer can reach the same ES as the future user, she may be able to capture a glimpse of the irrational, non-deterministic side of the user. These psychological and experiential aspects are generally seen as the most challenging part of user experience and design for experience.

In method acting, an actor immerses himself deeply to his role's experiential system to create and master the character he seeks to portray. "The method actor creates an organic and imaginative performance by experiencing or living through the role" [3]. By doing so, the actor lessens the impact of his acting education, factual knowledge, and provided script to give more weight to the experiences and emotions invoked by the ES and his own memories. We see value in a similar approach to design, where the designer seeks the best solutions by exposing herself to the future user's experiences—even to the ones that do not exist, as there is no product or a user yet.

DX is a holistic understanding and a state of mind towards the users, their contexts of use, and their competencies during the design process. In table 2 we correlate the most relevant aspects of ESs to the levels of intimacy. This table suggests that social, psychological, and emotional dimensions are more difficult to transfer to the designers.

Understanding how to invoke DX requires understanding the fundamentals of the ESs. The closest comparable fields are designing for user experience or emotional design.

Level of Systemic Mastery:

+ = low
o = medium
X = high

Level of Intimacy\ Aspect of ES	Users and Design Problems	Physical Context	Perception Cognition	Social Context	Psychological and Irrational Needs
1. Knowing about people	+				
2. Being acquainted with people	o	+			
3. Knowing the people	X	o	+	+	
4. Understanding people as current users	X	X	o	o	+
5. Thinking like the future user	X	X	X	o	o
6. Experiencing like the future user	X	X	X	X	X

Table 2. Aspects of User-Centered Design leading to Designer Experience.

Goals and Themes
The goal of this workshop is to bring together researchers and designers in order to explore the existence and feasibility of designer experience or designing in experiential systems. What methodology is available for invoking DX, and what are the relevant research topics and practical future uses for DX?

Existence and feasibility of DX
DX is a multifaceted and multidisciplinary design paradigm.

- Is there such thing as DX, and how does it differentiate from emphatic design, contextual design, or other variants of UCD?

- Is the hypothesis for improved product quality by experiential design valid?

- How attainable or reproducible are ESs?

Ways to invoke DX
Methods and arrangements to emulate user's experiences to the designers enabling the use of a shared experiential system to assess users' irrational needs.

- What are the limits of DX?

- Can DX be invoked by accurate recreation of a user's context of use?

- How can DX be made truthful, if it relies on fabricating the ES?

- How can perceptual and environmental cues be utilized in invoking experiences?

- How can the future users' psychological needs be made accessible to designers?

Research topics and future uses for DX
The usage of the DX paradigm requires changes to both attitudes and methodologies of design activities.

- What are the current technological limitations to research or invoke DX?

- Is DX approachable by design research methodology?

- How can DX be promoted and justified to designers?

Workshop Activities
During the workshop the above themes are addressed. Participants give short presentations of their own position papers, which are then harmonized under the themes via mind maps and affinity diagrams. Results are gathered to posters, which are then presented and debated among all participants.

Citations
[1]   International standard ISO 9241-210:2010(E). Ergonomics of human-system interaction -- Part 210: Human-centred design for interactive systems. 2010.

[2]   Redström, J. Towards User Design? On the Shift from Object to User as the Subject of Design. *Design Studies* 27 (2006), 123–139.

[3]   Krasner, D (ed.). Method acting reconsidered: theory, practice, future. St. Martin's Press. New York, NY, USA, 2000.