

Interfaces

No. 51 Summer 2002

British
HCI
Group
www.bcs-hci.org.uk



Culwin's fluid interaction style

potable yet invincible

also running this issue ...

The Gresham Gathering
HCI Educators go wild in Portsmouth
The Dave Clarke Syndicate
My PhD: Culture in HCI
Teenage chat and email by gender
Cassandra gets XPerienced
AK & The Joy of X
X marks Nielsen's card

Wot! No Pride?



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View from the Chair

Visible and Remembered

People and Computers are different. HCI 2002 at South Bank University in London (www.hci2002.org, September 2–6 2002) has the slogan 'memorable yet invisible'. This is a fine goal for technology, but we want our 16th annual BCS HCI conference to be memorable and visible. We'd especially like BHCIG members to be visible at the conference.

HCI 2002 is the main annual meeting place for the British HCI community, where we will be joined by many colleagues from Europe. For 2002, the European Usability Professionals Association will be incorporated into HCI 2002. This continues the move away from a single industry 'day' in previous years. EUPA 2002 will add practitioner presentations and panels to the main HCI programme. In addition, following on from IHM-HCI2001, there will also be a programme of workshops.

The AGM of the British HCI Group will be held on Thursday September 4th at HCI 2002, at 17.30. All BHCIG members are welcome to attend. Again, while the technology can be invisible, we'd like you to be as visible as possible. We are currently restructuring the executive committee and volunteer structure of the British HCI Group to make us better able to respond to suggestions from members for new activities and initiatives. Once the new structure is in place, we will need more active volunteers from our members to improve the contribution of BHCIG to the cause of usability and user-centred design in the UK and beyond. Our new organisational structure will allow volunteers to contribute to more tightly scoped activities, and thus make effective use of the precious spare time that they offer to BHCIG.

Our first calls for volunteers have resulted in several welcome offers of help, which we are now putting to good use (thank you to all who volunteered). However, to increase the profile of HCI in the UK we really need to make the most of our membership, and on the facing page we list some examples of what you could do. If you are interested in helping, don't wait until the AGM. Please get in touch with me, or a relevant member of the Executive Committee (see the back cover of *Interfaces*).

I hope to welcome as many members as possible to HCI 2002. There is an excellent programme of plenary speakers, tutorials, research and practitioner papers and the usual range of activities that make the BCS HCI annual conference the main focus for the UK HCI community.

Find out more now at www.hci2002.org.

Gilbert Cockton

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Editorial

It's good to be back, believe me. One needs brain surgery like one needs a hole in the head. So I got both, but, touch wood, that's it for the next forty years. Many thanks to Alex Dixon both for putting issue 49 to bed, (while the NHS did the same to me) and for whipping up issue 50 into the remarkable concoction I had hoped it might be.

Many thanks too, to the other members of the British HCI Group exec who rallied round and contributed to this and the previous issue. Long may this continue. First amongst equals is Dave Clarke's second instalment on news feeds, which deserves to be standard teaching material. It's easy to do too, and the live feed from UsabilityNews.com stands out like a beacon of exemplary content in the foggy mire of my own website.

Alistair Kilgour maintains his formidable output with a hot news item from Harold Thimbleby's recent Gresham gathering of the tribes, as well as his ever-reliable Vet's column. His account of Gresham speaks for itself, but his 'Joy of X' deserves further reflection.

Ever since my first fumbings with computers in the mid-80s, 'next year' has been the year of Unix. Can MacOS X succeed where Ultrix, Sunos, Xenix et al did not? Some of my own students face using Macs for videocapture next year. It will be interesting to see how a generation raised on Wintel, and educated in UCD, react to them. Recent usability reviews of Quicktime have not been kind. But as Alistair points out, we can always run Windows under X!

Of our other regulars, Cassandra Hall presents a more eXperiential view of Windows, Martha Hause has sourced another fine My PhD column (from José Abdelnour-Nocera – whose work in cultural factors, as well as activity theory and context, sounds promising). Cover-model Fintan does his thing on CHI and HCI with Pride. Kristine reviews Nielsen & Tahir, as well as supplying (with Kamaljit Nagpal) a pilot

study into email use and gender, for our 'Learning and Doing' column.

Worth reading alongside the latter is a study into teenage use of chat rooms, by Samantha Sai and Jan Noyes. Just as previous generations derided dozy old usability buffers who couldn't make VCRs record, or use mobile phones, so too might a generation reared on instant communication and virtual manners challenge the current priorities of the HCI community.

As Gilbert suggests, these and other debates will take place at HCI2002, the advance programme for which is supplied with this issue. One late decision omitted from the AP is that, following losses due to much reduced numbers at CHI, the committee have decided to limit to around 300 the number of available places at the conference – leading to the possibility that the full-up signs will appear in mid-August. So don't hang around – it's cheaper before 10th July anyway!

In the next issue, due to be with you in late August, you will find a new service – short descriptions of every paper to be presented at HCI2002 (as well as an interview with Jared Spool, a review of a certain triumvirate's *Interaction Design (Beyond HCI)* and other regulars).

Tom McEwan
Editor

Volunteers are needed by the British HCI Group to:

- Write for *Interfaces* and UsabilityNews
- Market and promote BHCIG in the media
- Review for Conferences and *Interacting with Computers*
- Collect information for www.bcs-hci.org.uk
- Organise, support and promote HCI meetings for educators, practitioners, students and researchers.
- Plan for the future growth and influence of usability and user-centred design in the UK and beyond

RIGHT TO REPLY

Make *Interfaces* interactive! We invite you to have your say in response to issues raised in *Interfaces* or to comment on any aspect of HCI that interests you. Submissions should be short and concise (500 words or less) and, where appropriate, should clearly indicate the article being responded to. Please send all contributions to the Editor.

To receive your own copy of *Interfaces*, join the British HCI Group by filling in the form on page 23 and sending it to the address given.

NEXT ISSUE

Interfaces welcomes submissions on any HCI-related topic, including articles, opinion pieces, book reviews and conference reports. The next deadline is **15 July**, but don't wait till then – we look forward to hearing from you.

with thanks to commissioning editors:

Vet's Column: Alistair Kilgour, alistair@realaxis.co.uk
Book Reviews: Kristine Faulkner, Kristine@sbu.ac.uk
My PhD: Martha Hause, m.l.hause@open.ac.uk

Deadline for issue 52 is **15 July 2002**. Deadline for issue 53 is **15 October 2002**. Electronic versions are preferred: RTF, plain text or MS Word, via electronic mail or FTP (mail fiona@hiraeth.com for FTP address) or on Mac, PC disks; but copy will be accepted on paper or fax.

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and copy email submissions to Fiona Dix, *Interfaces* production editor; email: fiona@hiraeth.com



UK HCI Community Meeting

Gresham College, 17–18 April 2002

Around forty participants gathered in the historic Gresham College (www.gresham.ac.uk), discreetly tucked away down an alley off Holborn, to reflect on the nature of HCI, and formulate a community response to the 'International Review of UK Research on Computer Science' commissioned by EPSRC and published last year. (A PDF version is available at www.iet.org/Policy/CSreport/). The date of the meeting was the week before CHI, and for academics at universities on the semester system – nearly all now I guess – the Easter vacation was already a fading memory, so it was not surprising that representation from the usual suspects was patchy. There were quite a few newcomers to HCI recently migrated from other related areas, but this was all to the good, not least in injecting a degree of realism into our discussions of how HCI is perceived in other disciplines and other areas of the academic and research world.

On the first day the focus was on defining HCI, and possibly formulating what Harold Thimbleby described as 'grand challenges' for HCI research – to perform a function and provide a focus for HCI akin to the human genome project in biology or the hunt for the Higgs boson in physics. It was a day for dichotomies and spectral analysis, flavoured with a soupçon of philosophy.

I was reminded at one point of the discussion of 'quality' in Robert Pirsig's once trendy best-seller *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (the *Sophie's World* of the seventies, for the benefit of younger readers), where it is suggested that maybe quality can't be defined, but we can all sure as hell recognise it when we see it.

The same view of HCI was beginning to emerge in one of the groups I took part in – we couldn't exactly define its boundaries, but we were sure there would be unanimous agreement, when we saw a research paper or thesis, as to whether it was really about HCI.

On the other hand, the eclectic (not to say kleptomaniac) nature of HCI was also acknowledged, whereby we might 'grab' papers or topics submitted by accident, and claim them for our own, even though the areas they covered had not previously been thought of as HCI. (Readers of Yeats may recall the sad little poem about a mermaid who found a swimming lad, and 'claimed him for her own'. The consequences were not happy – she 'Forgot in cruel happiness, That even lovers drown'.) And this absorptive property also reminds me of a school chemistry experiment demonstrating deliquescence – the end result of which was a mushy mess.

Dichotomies, bifurcation for the use of: theory v. practice, 'pure' v. 'applied', computer science v. psychology – but when does a dichotomy become a spectrum? We started off thinking of the range from 'craft skills' to 'engineering design' as a spectrum, but maybe that would

better be considered a dichotomy. In any case, the suggestion that we needed to place HCI somewhere on this spectrum was felt to be too restrictive – why do we need to exclude anything? Philosophy's contribution: HCI research is underpinned by a shared set of values – about making technology useful and usable, for the benefit of society as a whole. It should not just (or at all, some would say) be technology-driven. We had to admit, though, that up to now it largely had been – much HCI research has consisted of analysing today's failures, rather than envisaging and facilitating tomorrow's successes.

Alan Dix asserted animatedly that we had in fact been tremendously successful, and we should be proud of the achievements of HCI. However, many felt uncomfortable about claiming any credit on behalf of HCI research for some of the obvious UK successes we could think of – for example, in computer games, virtual reality systems, or mobile technology. One of the paradoxes is that successful design (in the usability sense) often depends on detailed domain knowledge, and on incorporating this knowledge into the interface,

rather than on the use of innovative or particularly powerful interaction techniques or devices. The place of the design process itself within the research agenda was also seen to be problematic, because it is much harder to demonstrate improvement

here than in many other computer science research areas – to compare quantitatively one design methodology, notation, or philosophy with another is very difficult.

The funding councils all pay lip service to the advantages of interdisciplinary research, and this is to the benefit of HCI, but we still come up against practical problems, such as rigid departmental boundaries within universities, when bidding for and running interdisciplinary projects. It's still very hard to get a psychologist appointed to an academic post in computer science, and then, if you do, it's hard to get the involvement of your local psychologist accepted as sufficient to meet the funding council's requirements for interdisciplinary research. 'Real' psychologists, in their view, can only live and work in psychology departments. And although the HCI community is seen as friendly by others (and generally experienced as such by its members), nevertheless there has been a rather destructive tendency for some parts of the community to dismiss the work of other parts as less important, or even trivial, thus reinforcing the external perception that it's all just a matter of 'common sense'.

Usability is certainly part of HCI. How big a part, though, and how our ideas about usability need to be updated, was the subject of lively debate. Peter Thomas, in his Wednesday morning presentation, reviewed responses he had received to a request to define the 'new usability', sent to a range of researchers and designers. (Details are in Thomas & Macredie, 'The New Usability', *ACM Transactions on CHI*, 2001, copies of which were distributed at the workshop.)



A personal impression by Alistair Kilgour



When the technology is peripheral, or ambient, or 'lean-back', and the goal is entertainment, diversion, or social interaction, traditional task-based, work-directed measures are no longer appropriate. Peter suggested 'creative lurking', in pubs, clubs and other public places, as one way of gathering data for this kind of usability, but doubted if any research council would fund this.

The new dawn

On the second day of the workshop we looked specifically at the EPSRC International Review of UK Computer Science Research, with a view to distilling the first draft of a possible response from the UK HCI community. The meeting generally welcomed the report, and felt it represented a very fair assessment of the state of research in UK computer science. Particularly welcome was its strong recommendation for improved support for research in computer science and information technology, and for more emphasis on longer term basic research, not industrially linked. The specific view of the report on HCI was also felt to be sympathetic and positive, particularly the highlighting, as key features of the UK research scene, of:

- strong collaboration between psychology and computer science, and
- the theory-driven (as opposed to gadget-driven) nature of much of the research.

The range of disciplines mentioned in the HCI section of the report includes CSCW, NL, HF, IR, UID, and 'graphics and visualisation', although the last also merits a separate section on its own later in the report, following the HCI section. Several participants regretted the omission of reference in the report to other inter-disciplinary collaborations, e.g. between computer science and social science.

By the time you read this a more complete set of recommendations distilled from the workshop will have been distributed, but it might be worth listing here some of the candidate recommendations coming out of one of the groups I was involved with:

- a return by EPSRC to the 'panel' system in assessing interdisciplinary research proposals

- the establishment of a 'son of PACCIT' long-term interdisciplinary research programme, focused on basic HCI research, with no mandatory industrial involvement
- the establishment of several new directly HCI-related interdisciplinary research centres.

This has been a very personal and selective account of a rich, diverse and sometimes rambling meeting. A follow-up workshop (or maybe panel session) at HCI2002 was mooted, and there was wide support for this, even if, as seems likely, the deadline for feedback to the EPSRC may be past by then. Harold Thimbleby is to be warmly congratulated for his initiative and energy in setting up this meeting, and for setting in motion so effectively the process of formulating a powerful and effective HCI community response to the EPSRC. Even if you were unable to attend the meeting, there will be ample opportunity to contribute electronically to the debate, and to the refinement of the distilled recommendations, over the next few weeks.

<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/projects/GreshamHCImeeting/>

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Forthcoming Events

IV02

6th International Conference on Information Visualisation
10–12 July 2002
London, England
<http://www.graphicslink.demon.co.uk/IV02/>

TAMODIA 2002

1st International Workshop on TAsk MOdels and DIAgrams for user interface design
18–19 July, 2002
Bucharest, Romania
<http://www.ici.ro/chi-romania/tamodia/Tamodia.html>

SAICSIT 2002

Enablement through Technology
Annual Conference of the
South African Institute of Computer Scientists & Information Technologists
16–18 September 2002
The Boardwalk, Port Elizabeth, South Africa
<http://www.petech.ac.za/saicsit2002/>

CSCW 2002

ACM 2002 Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work
16–20 November, 2002
New Orleans, Louisiana, USA
<http://www.acm.org/cscw2002/>

A Pilot Study into E-mail Use

This article describes a pilot survey on e-mail carried out recently at South Bank University. The aim was to understand the frequency of e-mail use and user attitudes to their service providers. 50 questionnaires were returned.

The use of e-mail has increased recently. It is now replacing traditional paper-based communication, the fax machine and even the telephone. It is the darling of current communication methods [4]. Despite its popularity it has many problems and many organisations are struggling to develop controlling policies in response to sometimes disturbing events. For example, in 1995, four female employees claimed they had been subjected to sexual harassment through explicit e-mail messages. Their employers paid out more than \$2 million in compensation to settle the claim [3].

More and more people are now on-line; one of their major uses is e-mail. In the UK 40% of those on-line are women; this is expected to rise to 60% by 2005. Predictions say that 68% of those who come on-line in 2002 will be women [2]. According to David Silver at the University of Washington, there is a difference between male and female e-mail messages. Male messages tend to be basic, supply answers or give responses that close dialogue. Women tend to keep conversations going and ask more questions and are more willing to say they are wrong!

In March 2001 the *Guardian* stated 360,000 e-mails were sent per second in the UK and that this figure was increasing every month by 20,000 e-mails per second [1]. It is evident that e-mail use is increasing rapidly, and with that the need for an e-mail policy becomes vital. Although many companies and e-mail providers have policies, these are sometimes difficult to impose except where a technical fix is available.

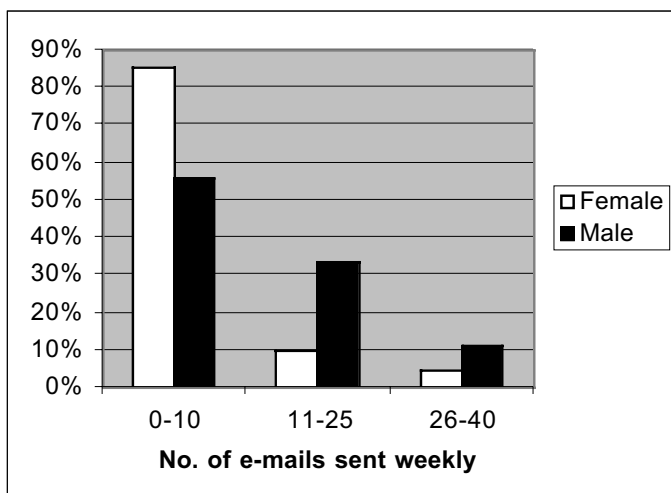


Figure 1. Number of e-mails sent every week by gender

Figure 1 illustrates the sending of messages classified by gender. Women are more active than men at the lower level. At the higher level, men send more e-mails. These results agree with a recent *Guardian* article which states that one in three men spend about forty minutes a day on personal

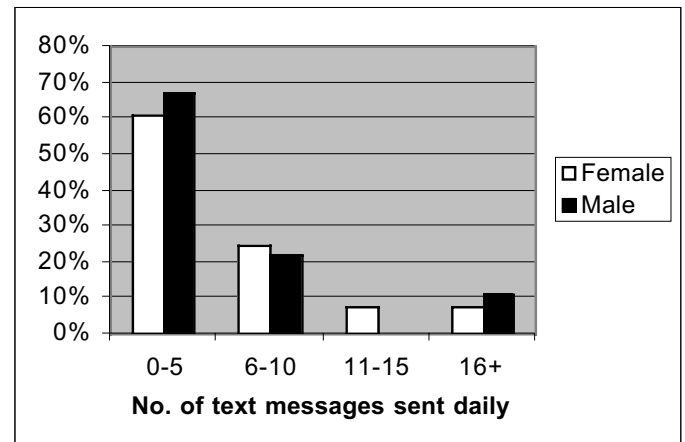


Figure 2. Number of text messages sent daily by gender

e-mails compared with women who spend 25 minutes a day on personal e-mails [5]. This may explain why men are more active at the higher levels of sending e-mail messages. Perhaps women dedicate less time for sending personal e-mail messages, whereas men spend extra time for personal messages, thus sending more e-mails. However, without further analysis into mail length, numbers of mails sent, etc., it isn't possible to draw conclusions. Perhaps men write longer messages, take longer, are slower typists or think longer, for example!

Figure 2 shows that women send more text messages than men. But men send more e-mail messages. The reasons for text messaging being so popular with women are again unclear. It could be that the mobile phones are more difficult for large fingers to operate and this would tend to reduce male text messaging activity.

Age	0-10	11-25	26-40
19-21 n=27	22 55.0%	3 42.9%	2 66.7%
22-23 n=8	6 15.0%	2 28.6%	0 0.0%
24-25 n=4	2 5.0%	1 14.3%	1 33.3%
26-29 n=2	2 5.0%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%
30+ n=9	8 20.0%	1 14.3%	0 0.0%

Table 1. Number of e-mails sent weekly by age

Table 1 shows number of e-mails sent weekly grouped by age. The 19-21 age group are the most active.

Table 2 shows number of text messages sent daily grouped by age. The 19-21 age group are the most active and activity declines with age. Therefore, comparing with number of e-mails sent, it can be seen that activity declines with age in both text messaging and e-mail use. Younger age groups

Age	0-5	6-10	11-15	16+
19-21 n=27	13 41.9%	9 75.0%	3 100.0%	2 50.0%
22-23 n=8	5 16.1%	2 16.7%	0 0.0%	1 25.0%
24-25 n=4	2 6.5%	1 8.3%	0 0.0%	1 25.0%
26-29 n=2	2 6.5%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%
30+ n=9	9 29.0%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%

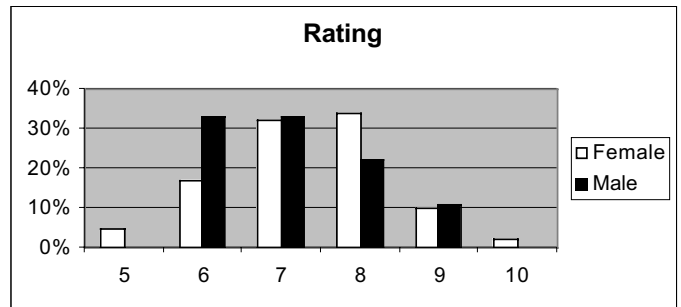
Table 2. Number of text messages sent daily by age

appear to communicate more. But there could be any number of reasons for this level of activity. Until further research is carried out in these areas it is impossible to say. These results concur with those of a recent UK report where people in the 15-25 age range were said to be deserting e-mail in favour of text messaging [6].

Subjects were asked to rate their e-mail provider for junk mail filters. Figure 3 shows 55.6% of men rated them as 'OK' and this was the highest rating given by men! Women rated junk mail filters higher with a total of 67.5% scoring them 'Very Good', 'Good' and 'OK'. Only 32.5% of women rated junk mail filters as 'Poor' or 'Very Poor'. Overall, women rated junk mail filters more highly than men did. Again, we have no reason to explain these differences. Perhaps further research will explain whether men receive more junk mail, are more irritated by it, or are more critical.

Figure 4 shows that females rate their e-mail provider highly at '7' or '8'. 66% of females rated their e-mail provider in this way. Males rated their e-mail provider mainly at '6' or '7'; 66% of males rated their e-mail provider thus.

As this was a pilot study, the amount of data was small, with 50 questionnaires returned. It has to be noted that this survey was carried out with students so the findings may well be typical of undergraduates but not the population at

Figure 4. Overall Rating given to the e-mail provider by gender
NB: No rating was given below 5.

large. As students are automatically provided with their e-mail accounts at university this requires very little effort on their part. They may well be more technologically aware, have more time to spend playing with e-mail communications, without criticism from a boss, and they aren't paying for the cost of being on-line.

The questionnaire was designed as a pilot study, therefore there were bound to be flaws. We hope to extend this work in the coming months.

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Rating of Junk Mail Filters by Gender

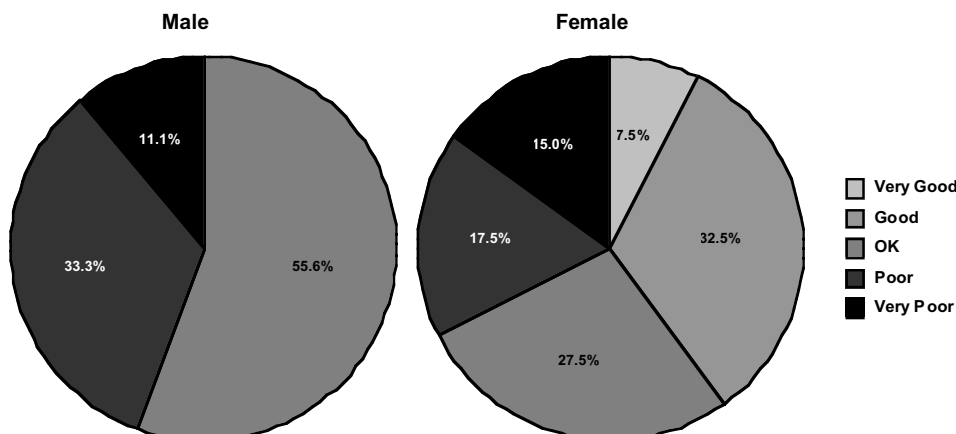


Figure 3. Rating given to Junk Mail Filters by Gender

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Report on the Effective Teaching and Training in HCI Workshop

This two-day BCS HCI Group workshop, the fifth in the series, was held at the University of Portsmouth on March 25–26 2002, and was supported by the LTSN.

Effective teaching and training in HCI is essential if we are to make headway in our ongoing battle against poor interface design, and this workshop provides an annual opportunity to discuss current issues and thrash out possible solutions. I have attended the past four of these workshops, and make a point of coming each year. I find that larger conferences are more formal and structured, whereas these workshops are always friendly, sociable, informative and discursive. They are also attended by academics who might not have the financial resources for attending a larger event.

Over the past years, I have seen several themes repeated: the problems of gaining acceptance for HCI in the academic curriculum, the difficulties of distance learning, how best to manage assessments for increasingly over-worked staff. However, this repetition of themes is not depressing, because each year there seems to be a new perspective and progress is made, either in our understanding of the issues, or in managing to convince our respective faceless bureaucracies to implement them.

This year's workshop, ably organised by Jonathan Crellin and John Rosbottom (University of Portsmouth), with administrative LTSN support from Una O'Reilly (University of Ulster), covered four main areas: distance education, participation, subject issues, and resources. There were attendees from a number of establishments such as the Open University, the University of East London, the University of Bath, and the North East Wales Institute of Higher Education, bringing together a corresponding variety of perspectives and problems associated with the workshop's core subject. All the presentations were interesting and informative, based very much on practitioner experience, although the range of issues covered was diverse. Only a small selection is mentioned below, in order to give a flavour of the workshop.

Alistair Kilgour (Open University) gave a cogent talk on the difficulties of instilling a user-centred approach in computer scientists, and how the best approach seems to be to let them actually see users struggling. We agreed that getting our students to see the point of HCI is often difficult, but it seems HCI is now accepted as part of the curriculum, and industry is aware of the need, although this still seems to be as a second or third year module, in some cases optional, rather than integrated into the development of the computer scientists' degree programmes. Whatever the limitations, I find the fact of the subject's acceptance encouraging, given that this has only taken place recently. Now all we have to do is educate the students, with the associated challenges of

doing this in an integrated manner with students with different expectations, often geographically dispersed and learning at a distance. Easy!

There was a feeling that computer software designers such as Microsoft have taken the usability message on board, but that the web is still a problem area, due to graphic designers being more interested in the aesthetics than the functionality.

Someone (who shall remain anonymous) suggested that graphic designers get to design websites because if computer scientists were given the job it would look horrible and still wouldn't work. A not entirely serious remark, but one which struck a chord.

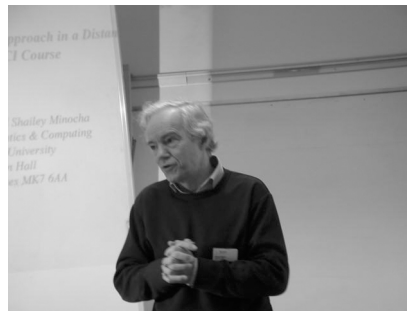
The issues of effective distance education have been topical for some years, both with the widespread adoption of the web as a teaching resource and medium, and the strain on universities to maximise income through reaching a larger student group with the most cost-effective methods. Several papers addressed this theme, looking at issues such as the use of deadlines (some felt that this gave a pace to the studying, others thought that this detracted from the idea of distance education being something that could be done at one's own pace), and how best to support it effectively, through the use of chat-rooms and message boards. Technology is now at a level

which can effectively support web-based teaching, which in the past it has not, and there were several derisory remarks about the current usability of such interfaces. It seems ironic that the very tools we use to teach are often so badly designed themselves.

This led into a wider consideration of ways of teaching, and the issues faced. Students have difficulty in accepting that in HCI there may be no 'right' answer, and they often find it hard to start and apply their knowledge effectively. There is a current lack of suitable methods for the application of

these methods, and they wish for a step-by-step process to follow to ensure the usable quality of their product. Stuart MacFarlane (University of Lancaster) put forward an approach for teaching user needs analysis, which has been used both in his HCI classes and also in other domains by students who have found it useful. It has had the added benefit that members of his department have had to find out about it in order to mark projects in other subject areas that have included aspects of it. Possibly more importantly, feedback from students who have gone on to use it in industry has also been positive.

Julie Horton (University of Northumbria) gave an interesting presentation on the use of rich pictures as a means of exploring problem situations and communicating issues. The informality of the technique seemed to be one of the factors in its success with students. Rich Picking (North East Wales Institute of Higher Education) gave a presentation based



around the use of post-it notes to create affinity diagrams, which again stressed informality as strong success factor. Generally, the use of post-it notes and whiteboards were winners on the technology front by general acclaim, which highlights some of the problems with modern technology.

Kate Dingley (University of Portsmouth) gave an interesting talk about various HCI textbooks and websites, making the relevant point that textbooks in this field have an obligation to be usable, and that HCI principles should apply in their design. Following this, Wiley Publishing gave a presentation regarding the website for the new HCI book by Preece, Rogers and Sharp, making the point that although textbooks serve a particular need, web resources are of increasing importance as a teaching and student resource.

There was much discussion on the best way of teaching HCI, which focused around two issues: that of distance; and that of style. Problem-based learning was just one of the approaches considered in a series of presentations and exchange of views. People were happy to contribute, discuss, and disagree, leading to a more informed and participatory discussion, which was noted for its amicability and respect.

My personal bugbear with these workshops is that we don't consult our users: our student population. We tend to assume and take for granted. I did take a moment to talk to the student volunteers present. They found the workshop to be very interesting from their perspective. They like the lecturers to be transparent in what they want to achieve, because it makes it easier for the students to know what is going on and what is expected. They found it intriguing to see how academics can argue amongst themselves so much, and they also observed that students were not mentioned a great deal, which personally I found worrying.

Overall, I felt that this workshop had a friendly and encouraging atmosphere. The social programme was as important a part of the workshop as the more official proceedings, giving us a chance to catch up with what is going on at other institutions across the UK, as well as the opportunity to exchange horror stories relating to QAA and RAEs. The building we were based in gave an object lesson in how poor design is still a major part of our life.

The building, opened in 1996, is beautiful and light, with



some interesting architectural features, including some spectacular bridges across the atrium. As well as staircases that didn't lead you where you wanted to go, and which stopped in obscure places, and toilets cunningly hidden, to be found only by a process of elimination (I've looked in all the obvious places, I know/hope they exist, so now think laterally...). Oh, and it floods. However, I have a personal theory that the HCI community is made up of people who can't cope anyway, proved by how the group I was with took three attempts to break into the restaurant. We've just come up with a better justification for it than most :-).

The tour of HMS Warrior was sobering, since this was a ship so totally designed for warfare. There was no way of avoiding the fact that this vessel was a killing machine, with each part of it engineered to the highest standard and attention to detail in order to accomplish its task.

By contrast, the ten pin bowling which followed the supremely excellent meal (I still have fond memories of the profiteroles) was hysterical. We were especially amused to see a qwerty keyboard on the touch screen scoring system, given that the benefits of such a layout were completely hamstrung by the positioning. I foresee a rush of student projects based around designing an interface for a bowling alley scoring system... I found the fact that the computer graphics insulted us when we bowled poorly rather disconcerting. I don't mind missing, I do mind the computer taking the mick about it! Just for the record, Gary Wills (University of Southampton) took the prize for best male bowler, scooping a bottle of champagne, with Una O'Reilly taking a box of Thorntons chocolates as best female bowler. Eva Turner (Univer-

sity of East London) won a special prize as person with most potential for improvement.

This has been a highly selective and possibly distorted account of a fun and informative two days. I believe that these workshops serve a very useful and worthwhile purpose. However, the best way to know what these workshops are like is to attend the next one, to be held next Easter, venue to be decided. See you there!

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My PhD The problem of Culture in Human Computer Interaction

José L. Abdelnour-Nocera

One day while browsing through my e-mail list an invitation came from Martha Hause to write some words for this column. I felt very flattered to be given the opportunity to express my current PhD research, or should I say jigsaw? I say jigsaw since it took me one year to make sense of most of the literature and theoretical strands that try to address the issue of context and culture in systems and interface design. As I write this, I'm beginning my second year of research and have a clearer picture of the different perspectives ranging from hermeneutics to traditional internationalisation approaches.

I 'define' myself as a cultural psychologist who has spent the last four years researching the social and cultural implications of information technology use. My first research interests were concerned with how virtual communities build their own cultures in virtual environments. By doing this, I discovered the strong influence that the system and its interfaces have in shaping the group's culture by enabling certain interactions and modes of expression, and inhibiting others. This was the source of my interest in the field of Human Computer Interaction and its relation to issues of social context and culture. Consequently, I was offered a PhD placement at the Open University, supervised by Prof. Pat Hall (Computing), Dr. Hugh Mackay (Sociology), and an interface expert from Thames Valley University, Prof. Lynne Dunckley.

The main objective of my research is to document what and how cultural frameworks shape the process of encoding and decoding (production and consumption) of computer systems and interfaces. This is based on the metaphor of technology as an interpretative flexible text. At the same time, this text is also constrained by the *preferred readings* embedded in technology by its producers and by the cultural resources of its *readers* (users). Equally important is the social process through which users shape technology. As a result we have a two-way flow of

socioculturally determined configurations for interfaces and their systems.

Working from this perspective has two main implications. Firstly, the relationship between computers and users is no longer a symmetrical one: the traditional vision, inherited from cognitive sciences, is that of conceiving computers and users as equivalent abstract information processing entities. This vision is replaced by relocating computers as tools for human action and users as persons within specific cultural configurations. Secondly, culture is no longer seen as a vague national affiliation but as a web of symbols, values, beliefs and practices that is produced, reproduced and transformed in any social aggregate regardless of size and location.

My literature and empirical review covers four main approaches. First is Hofstede's approach. I believe this is largely outdated, since it uses ready-made fixed national culture models that are usually not adjusted to the specific requirements of most technologies.

Secondly, Lucy Suchmann and Terry Winograd have explored the important role of the context contingencies and cultural resources and traditions that shape systems use. This gives an important place to the process of conception of technology as 'an interface to human action'. In the early nineties Jonathan Grudin took this further. He presented the concept of interface as a double layered concept. He gives an illustration in which the 'handle of a cane' is presented as a user interface and the 'cane itself' is the system working as a functional interface between the *visually impaired* person and her world of activities.

Similarly, the third approach applies Activity Theory to computer-mediated activity. This recognises how social factors shape human actions ranging from individual operations to socially defined activities. Here, technical tools are seen as cultural evolutionary and reactive artefacts.

Finally, the semiotic approach tries to solve culturally determined usability problems, by looking at differences between intended and received meanings, by studying the user interface, its producers and users.

One of my main insights after reviewing all these perspectives and empirical experiences is that culture is not a simple phenomenon. To study how culture affects systems use is to break it down in as many cultural spaces as are relevant to each technology. These are some of the spaces I propose: workplace culture, tool-related culture (or study of technological genres and tastes) and the personal background of users. In this latter case we can include various values, beliefs and practices acquired from multiple frameworks such as family, national identity, sub-cultural affiliations, etc.

After a pilot study with foreign PhD students at the Open University, I have realised how difficult it is to obtain cultural evidence. Therefore, at this stage of my research I'm looking for a suitable case study, namely an intercultural setting in which software produced in one culture is used in other highly contrasted cultures. This means I'm spending much of my time now in public relations and networking rather than in academic tasks. Something I never expected to do in My PhD!!

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Syndicating Your Content on the Web: Part 2

Dave Clarke

In the last issue (*Interfaces* 50) I discussed the idea of sharing your content with other websites, via simple feeds. That is, the idea of syndication – information being supplied for re-use and integration with other content. We looked at the many advantages of doing this, and went through a simple example news feed, using JavaScript in the browser as a mechanism for achieving it.

In this second and final part of the article, I will build on the practical example introduced in Part 1, by producing a simple dynamic feed using ASP (Active Server Pages). We'll then look at a real live example, and show how to use the Usability News feed on your own site.

Finally, no article on syndication would be complete without mention of some of the relevant metadata standards that are influential in this area. This is a vast topic and I only briefly touch on it here. Nevertheless, this will act as a useful starting point for further reading.

Updating your news feed

In Part 1, I illustrated how to achieve a simple news feed. Of course, the approach we discussed was based on having a static news.js file on your web site, which was then 'requested and integrated' with the remote page via the browser. This works fine, but what about when we wish to update the news feed? The method outlined would require us to upload a new .js file **every time** we needed to update the feed content, which is not ideal.

A nicer approach would be to dynamically generate the script itself (i.e. generate the .js text file on your web server at set intervals) using some server-side scripting such as PHP, ASP or Java Servlets, or better still stream the JavaScript source back directly. We could then retrieve the necessary live headlines from a relevant information source, and generate the JavaScript source accordingly. This is efficient, in that only the necessary script is sent back the user's browser and also has the advantage that we can pass parameters to customise the results.

Let's try it!

We'll now extend the original news.js file-based example and make it 'dynamic' using a bit of server-side ASP script. To recap, Figure 1 shows the news.js code we used on your site.

We now need to think about how to create this content 'on-the-fly' when requested and stream it back to the client. As an example, let's create a feed that simply sends back a different headline each day, where the headline 'strings' are supplied in an ASP include file, which you can upload to your web site each week. The news.inc include file is shown in Figure 2. Here we've used arrays to store the text for each day, but this could be extended to read these from a text file or a database, and maybe cache them too with a little more work.

```
document.write('<a href="http://www.yoursite.com/newsitem1.html">First headline here</a><br>');
document.write('A summary would be here...<P>');
document.write('<a href="http://www.yoursite.com/newsitem2.html">Second headline here</a><br>');
document.writeln('Dave\'s second news summary would be here...<P>');
```

Figure 1: news.js code

```
<%
    ' This news.inc file contains a week's worth of
    ' news headlines, one for each day, indexed 0 to 6
    dim arrNews(6)
    arrNews(0) = "<a href='http://www.samplesite.com/news.html'>Sunday's Headline
    here</a><br>Sunday's news summary here<P>"
    arrNews(1) = "<a href='http://www.samplesite2.com/news.html'>Monday's Headline
    here</a><br>Monday's news summary here<P>"
    arrNews(2) = "<a href='http://www.bbc.co.uk/sample.html'>Tuesday's Headline
    here</a><br>Tuesday's news summary here<P>"
    arrNews(3) = "<a href='http://www.test.com/another.html'>Wednesday's Headline
    here</a><br>Wednesday's news summary here<P>"
    arrNews(4) = "<a href='http://www.yoursite.com/news.html'>Thursday's Headline
    here</a><br>Thursday's news summary here<P>"
    arrNews(5) = "<a href='http://www.anothersite.com/news.html'>Friday's Headline
    here</a><br>Friday's news summary here<P>"
    arrNews(6) = "<a href='http://www.andfinally.com/news.html'>Saturday's Headline
    here</a><br>Saturday's news summary here<P>"
%>
```

Figure 2: news.inc include file



Syndicating Your Content on the Web: Part 2

```
<% option explicit %>
<!--#INCLUDE FILE="news.inc"-->
<%
dim iDayNo
iDayNo = datePart("w", date())-1 ' get present day number in week between 1 and 7 (Sunday
is 1)
' Now stream back headline(s) for this day
' Don't forget MIME type
Response.ContentType = "application/x-javascript"
response.write "document.writeln('" & parseJS(arrNews(iDayNo)) & "');" & vbCrLf

function parseJS(sText)
dim s
s = sText
s = replace(s,"'", "\"") ' escape any apostrophes
parseJS = s
end function
%>
```

Figure 3: ASP script that uses news.inc

Figure 3 shows the main ASP script that uses this file (and hence would be called from the remote site). This script simply picks up the current day number in the week (1 Sunday to 7 Saturday) and picks out the appropriate element from the array and streams this back to the browser. Note the MIME type **application/x-javascript** in the header – essential for fussy browsers, for example – and also notice the `parseJS()` function to nicely encapsulate the code to parse out any troublesome characters from our news text. Any other special characters you wish to handle could also be placed inside here.

All that's left to do now is supply the script for the remote page to use, which is much the same as we used before:

```
<script language="JavaScript"
src="http://www.yoursite.com/news.asp">
</script>
<noscript>
Sorry, you need a JavaScript capable
browser to get news headlines on this
page</noscript>
```

There you have it – a simple dynamic feed! Of course, this is a little simplistic in that it only copes with a week's worth of content and requires an upload of the news.inc file each week. But from this, it is easy to see how this could be extended to use a backend database, and use parameters maybe, to provide a truly integrated and automated solution.

This general approach is in fact exactly how our UsabilityNews.com site news feed works, which you can try out for yourself in the next section.

The UsabilityNews.com feed...

Do you find the idea of a live news feed on your site, showing up-to-date usability headlines, attractive? We now have such a facility ready to use via our UsabilityNews.com site, which can be utilised very easily by simply embedding just a few lines of code in your web page:

```
<div><font size='2' face='arial'>
<script language="JavaScript"
src="http://www.usabilitynews.com/
newsfeed.asp?cat=1&sh=y&nw=n&total=5">
</script>
<noscript>
Sorry, you need a JavaScript capable
browser to get news headlines on this
page</noscript>
</font></div>
```

Embed this in your page source (e.g. inside an HTML table cell somewhere to create a 'news column') and you will 'instantly' have the latest headlines appear. I've also wrapped the script in a `<div>` block in the above, to illustrate how you can control the look and feel. You could also have applied a style sheet class on the `<div>` just as easily.

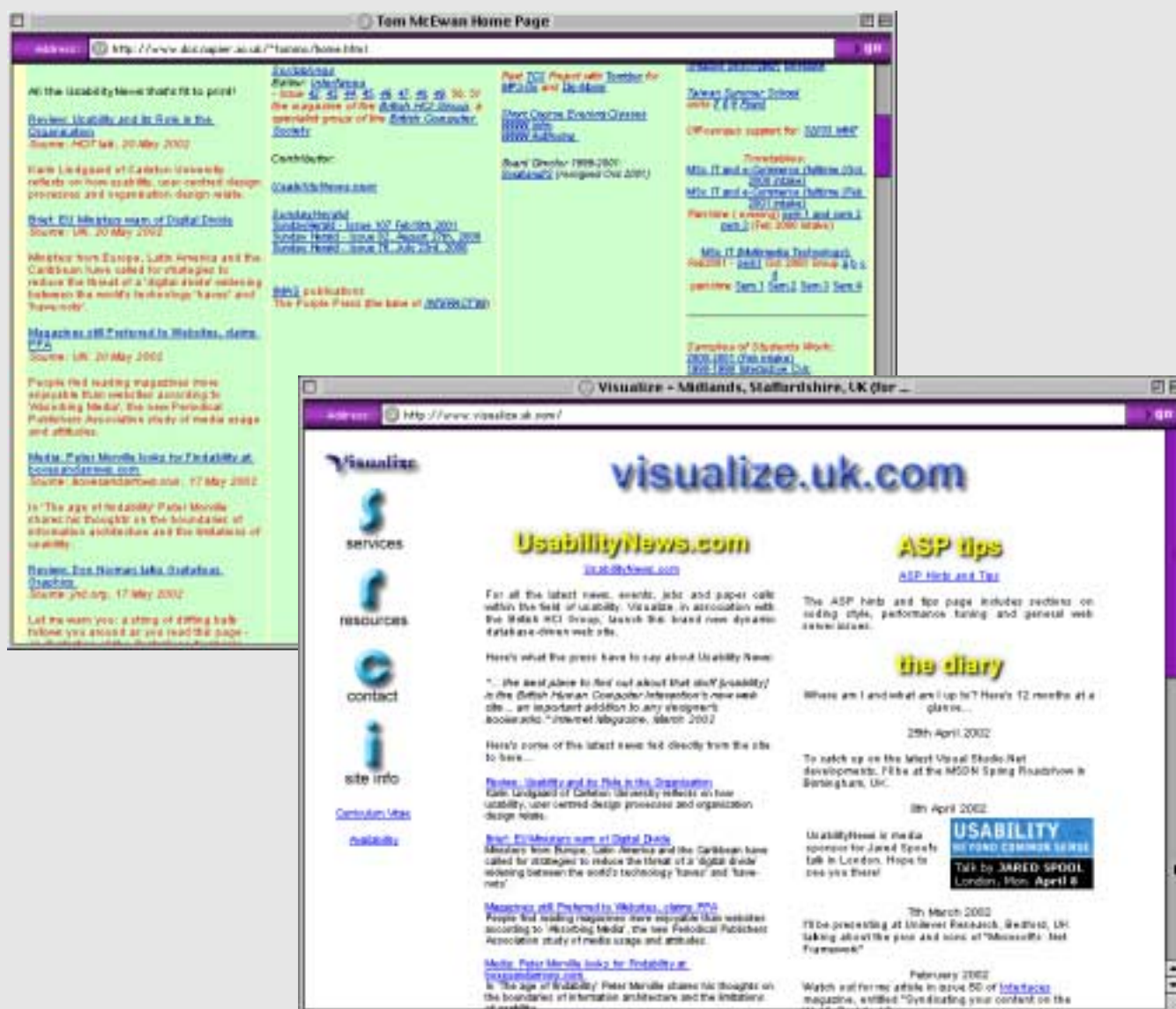
The key part of the code is the URL reference to the UsabilityNews.com site along with some parameters. These parameters, shown in Table 1 (page 13), which can be changed to suit your own needs, allow customisation of the results that are returned. All parameters are optional, and suitable defaults will be used as indicated, if not supplied.

Parameter	Description	Values
CAT	Category of news to return	1 general news (default) 2 jobs 3 events 4 paper calls
BRK	Put a line break before summary	Y (default) or N
SH	Show article sub-header	Y (default) or N
NW	Link opens a new window	Y or N (default)
TOTAL	Number of headlines to return	Range of 1 to 10 (10 is default)

Table 1: UsabilityNews.com news feed parameters

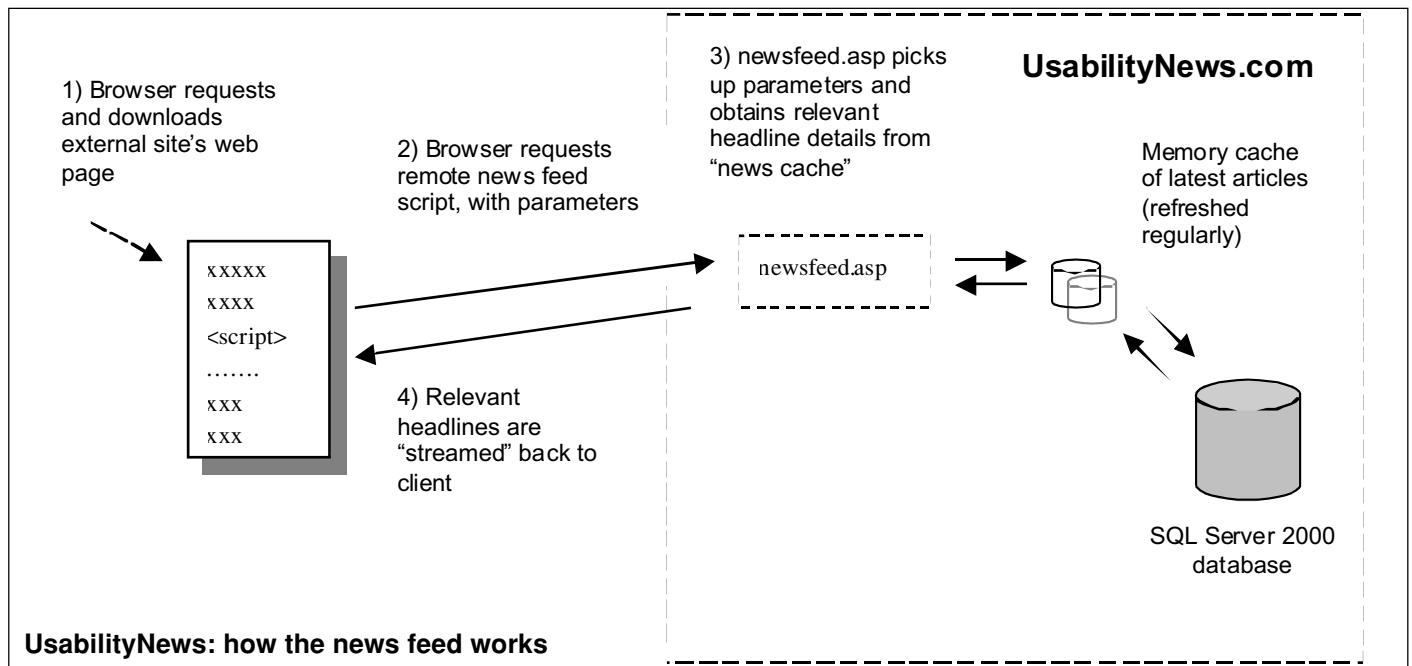
No emails please on my chosen default option for NW (new window)! The jury is still out on when and when not to use new browser windows for links. Rather than force one or the other, I thought I'd leave this as an option for the user interface specialist! My feeling is that links should stay within the same window (for internal or external links) and that if I want a new browser window, I'll request one via my browser with an explicit action (e.g. right-click the link).

Controlled and appropriately sized pop-up windows certainly have their uses though – when the dialogue can afford, and may need the assistance of, another related thread for example (such as on-line help or a glossary definition).





Syndicating Your Content on the Web: Part 2



For further information and instructions on how to use the news feed facility visit: <http://www.usabilitynews.com/help/newsfeed/>. I also use the feed myself on my own homepage at <http://www.visualize.uk.com>.

And finally... what about standards?

As we've already discussed throughout this two-part series, the web is an ideal medium for providing syndication services, with data exchange happening electronically and standardised metadata continuing to play an important role. XML has been by far the most influential, with various XML-based standards and protocols appearing and being proposed.

RDF (Resource Description Framework), for example, which started out initially as a lightweight metadata specification to support information exchange on the Web, has now progressed and is now largely superseded by the Semantic Web:

The Semantic Web is an extension of the current web in which information is given well-defined meaning, better enabling computers and people to work in cooperation. *Tim Berners-Lee*

RDF achieves this through the use of triples, similar to subject, verb and object of a basic sentence. All of this brings true value to the Web and that of information exchange. For example, no longer will 'agents' on the Web be restricted to simple keywords but now have access to what the content 'means'. See Tim Berners-Lee's paper for a fascinating commentary on the subject.

RDF has also been the inspiration for many specific standards related to News Feeds, for example, such as RSS (RDF | Rich Site Summary), which is a popular metadata format for online news content and used by a number of well

known web sites for syndicating headlines – examples include ZDNet, Wired and Reuters Health.

ICE (information and content exchange) is also worth checking out. This complements in many ways content formats like NITF (news industry text format) and also other metadata formats such as PRISM (Publishing Requirements for Industry Standard Metadata) and NewsML.

Further information on the Web

<http://www.xmlnews.org> and <http://www.newsml.org> are excellent starting points for NewsML, PRISM, ICE, NITF, along with <http://www.xml.com> and <http://www.w3.org> for general information on relevant standards.

<http://www.w3.org/RDF/> contains full details on the RDF specification

<http://www.scientificamerican.com/2001/0501issue/0501berniers-lee.html> for his comments on the Semantic Web

<http://www.moreover.com>, <http://www.yellowbrix.com> and <http://www.mastersyndicator.com> are all worth a look for syndication.

<http://msdn.microsoft.com/soap/> is the definitive guide on SOAP for data exchange

<http://www.visualize.uk.com/resources/> for links to ASP, PHP and .Net resources.

<http://www.visualize.uk.com/downloads/interfaces51.zip> to download the dynamic news feed source code used in this article. Simply unzip and place on an ASP-enabled web site.

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Homepage Usability: 50 Websites Deconstructed

Jakob Nielsen and Marie Tahir

New Riders 2002

£30-99

ISBN 0-7357-1102-X

pp 316

I've been looking forward to this book ever since I reviewed Nielsen's excellent *Designing Web Usability*. At first glance it looks like something from the '70s and those first books about home decoration. The cover is extraordinarily retro and very DIY looking. It turns out that it's made up of thumbnails of the fifty sites, colour washed with the colours used for the pie charts, which I'll explain later. The insides too are different. For some reason I couldn't fathom some of the pages are conventional white with black print and others are reversed.

There's a bold red stripe down the outside edge of each page. It is very eye catching especially against the black. But it doesn't make for easy reading. And I suspect that it isn't a book that anyone intended me to read from cover to cover. It's more like a cook book or maybe a de-cook book since what it does is unravel the recipes rather than construct them. I think you're meant to dip and choose the de-recipes you like best or hate the most.

The book is in two parts, the first offers a set of honest, down-to-earth guidelines that would certainly make the web a better place to be if everyone designed by them. The authors have plenty of stats here to back up their persuasive arguments. It's a book designed to attract developers and I think the stats will convince all but the most pigheaded – presumably the ones who according to the sound bites at the back 'jeered' at the last book.

However, there are some bits that amused me though I suspect they weren't supposed to. For example, Nielsen and Tahir tell us that other 'color schemes are less readable than black on white' and promptly go on to illustrate that in the book by switching between black on white and white on black. I'm convinced! No one should do that on a website nor indeed in a book. Glossy black pages with white text are not good for reading on trains. Take it from me. I do up to and sometimes beyond four hours of travel a day and glossy black pages suffer from glare and give you a headache. Even in the ergonomically controlled environment of my studio, the pages still gave me problems and created the sense of ghost images below each line.

The deconstructions though are really interesting. They've done a thorough job. Each homepage is shown on one page and then shown again colour zoned according to how the page is used. There is then a nice, coloured pie chart illustrating how much that page devotes to self promotion, advertising, navigation, content and so on. Even I could understand those charts so the rest of you will undoubtedly find them a breeze.

The authors then go through the page in detail, commenting on the strengths and weaknesses and suggesting improvements. I tell you, it's fascinating and worth the cost

of the book just to see what they have to say about the sites. As I say, the guidelines are sensible but not profound and although there are plenty of stats to back them up there is little by way of explanation. But maybe Nielsen has done his homework and perhaps most developers want something to work and are not so bothered about why.

To be honest, I didn't like it as much as *Designing Web Usability*, which I still admire very much. But I was much amused by the defensive looking poses of Nielsen and Tahir on the back cover. They reminded me of an upmarket Addams family portrait. But maybe the people whose sites they'd criticised were standing behind the cameras.

Yes, buy it. It's oddly priced at £30-99 but order a couple for the library and get one for yourself. I promise you hours of fun, reading through the website deconstructions and trying to improve them. Students should be pointed in the direction of the book but it isn't one for them to buy unless they have money to spare.

Yet again, there are no references! And contrary to the authors' advice in this book, exclamation marks do have their place and here is an example. Nothing gets across to my readers my exasperation like an exclamation mark. Exclamation marks do belong in professional writing as long as they are used when they are needed. The same is true of references.

I know Nielsen is the leading light in web design but I do wish there were references to other writers. I know this isn't aimed at the academic market but developers read things as well and they are surely as curious as I am about what the original sources were or who else to read. I can't believe for one minute that Nielsen is expecting his readers to read nothing but him. It could also do with a glossary, and it is ironic that the authors warn against using jargon and then use lots of webspeak. A glossary would fix that and Nielsen does have a very nice way of explaining things without the dreadful condescending tone that some authors seem to have to adopt.

Incidentally, the last few pages of the book are adverts. I found them interesting. In fact, I found the concept and presentation of this book interesting. It's almost an experiment in doing to a book what books have done to the web. And as another aside, one of the papers at HCI 2002 looks at how people use thumbnails in recognition: 'How People Recognize Previously Seen Web Pages from Titles, URLs and Thumbnails' by Greenberg et al. This book uses thumbnails from the fifty sites at the back. I'd be interested to know what the authors of the paper have to say about that. Any way, as for *Homepage Usability*, you won't be disappointed. Suck it and see.

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A Study of the Language Used in Internet Chat Rooms

The Internet continues to expand on an almost daily basis and its increasing use is exemplified in the growing number of chat rooms. One of the concerns associated with chat room interactions is that often younger children or teenagers are able to communicate with others in an unsupervised manner, and indeed, there have been isolated cases of adults masquerading as minors in order to set up physical meetings with them. The study reported here was a final-year project that was carried out last year. It aimed to find out exactly what type of language is being used in chat rooms in terms of its form, intent and appropriateness, and how this differed across the three age groups of children, teenagers and adults.

One of the features of chat room interactions is user anonymity. Although some chat rooms provide users with the option of completing a user profile with personal details (and even a photograph) that can be viewed by others, it is always possible to retain an anonymous or false identity. This may explain the attractiveness of this mode of interaction. If undesired feelings are elicited or 'enemies' are made, the chat room facilities allow the users simply to log off. Hence, anxiety will be low during these types of interactions as individuals feel uninhibited and lose their fear for social consequences (Bremer & Rauch, 1998). Users may not see a need to be polite to others (Holmes, 1999), and shyness may be overcome to the point where self-esteem is improved (Stiles, Walz, Schroeder, Williams & Ickes, 1996). However, concerns have been expressed that chat rooms may attract individuals who are lacking in the social skills needed for interpersonal interactions, and computer play may become an avoidance strategy that perpetuates isolation and social inactivity (Shiami, Yamanda, Masuda & Tada, 1993).

Design & Participants

A between-subjects design was employed with three conditions each representing the age category of the chat room: namely, 'kids', 'teens' and adults. The dependent variable was a sample of the language used that was analysed according to a general code for analysing verbal responses based on Stiles (1978) (which has been shown to relate to politeness; see Brown & Levinson, 1978) and a specifically developed code for inappropriate language use, e.g. sexual and abusive utterances, and swearing.

Participants were people engaged in chat room communications and were unknown to the experimenter. No record of the time or place of the conversations or personal details relating to the participants was recorded. The only criterion that had to be met was that there were more than ten users in the room at the time to ensure that a sufficient amount of language would be provided.

Procedure

Initially, a small questionnaire survey of local school children was carried out in order to locate the most popular chat rooms used by children and teenagers. Internet searches were carried out to find the adult chat rooms. The three most popular were used in this study:

namely, Yahoo, Excite and Chat-Avenue. Three continuous ten-minute samples were collected for each of the three groups.

Results

A total of 1087 clauses were coded for form (i.e. literal meaning) and intent (i.e. pragmatic meaning); 145 inappropriate clauses were found. These included: 3.61% of the clauses in kids' chat rooms, 18.94% in the teens' chat rooms, and 8.25% in the adult chat rooms.

Verbal Response Modes

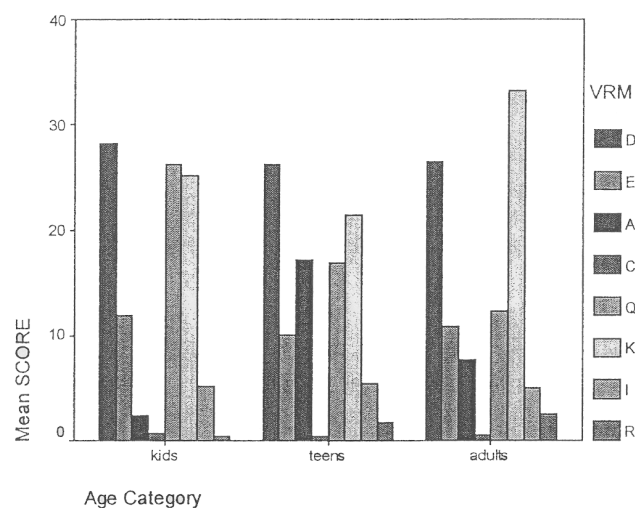


Figure 1: A comparison of verbal response modes (form) by age group

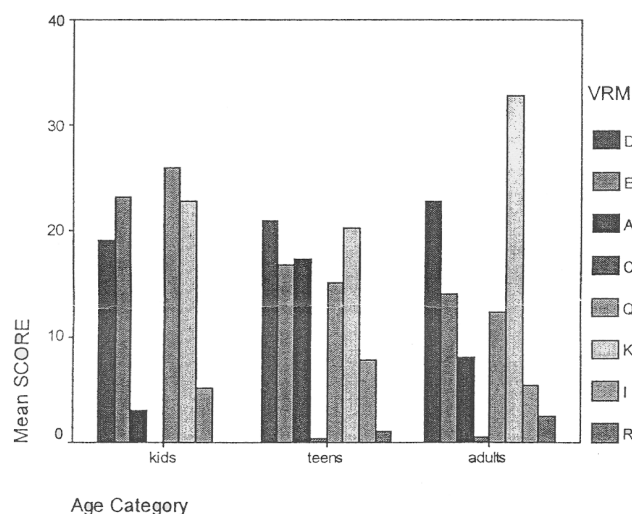


Figure 2: A comparison of verbal response modes (intent) by age group

No significant differences were found for the verbal response modes between the three age groups.

Inappropriate Language

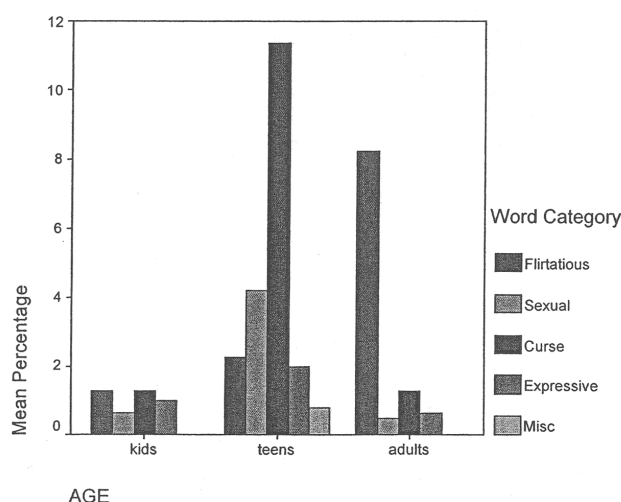


Figure 3: A comparison of inappropriate language by age group

Discussion

Interestingly, no significant differences were found for the form and intent of the language being used in the three types of chat rooms. This was in contrast to inappropriate language which was found to be more prevalent in the teen chat rooms. In the teen chat rooms, sexual words and cursing were significantly higher than in the other two types of chat room. Sexual referred to clauses containing words and phrases relating to sexual experiences, organs, etc. Curses were defined as clauses that aimed to insult the recipient(s). However, it was found that the most frequently used category of clauses in the adult chat rooms was flirtatious, i.e. clauses that do not explicitly use 'bad language', but contain implications of a sexual attraction.

So, what can be concluded from the finding that teenagers were found to swear more than the other age groups? Perhaps, younger children are aware of the swear words, but are not fully familiar with how to use them (see Axia & Baroni, 1985). At the other extreme, teenagers are aware of how to use swear words, but do not fully understand the implications or consequences of such language, e.g. that they are impolite and may be unacceptable in certain situations (Holmes, 1999). Adults, on the other hand, are wholly conscious of both the use and implications of swear words, and therefore, avoid them.

An alternative explanation may involve social influence and social conformity. Perhaps there is some sort of social trend, where teenagers perceive swearing as a form of social acceptance, and peers will be impressed by abusive or sexual language. By adulthood, the inappropriateness of swearing begins to become apparent, and so adults reduce its use. In

addition, adults may have developed a wider range of vocabulary compared to teenagers and so can generate more effective communication and expression.

A final point concerns the virtual nature of chat rooms. The extent to which the teens' chat rooms provide a representative sample of language used in everyday life is not known. Chat rooms could possibly be a holding place for inappropriate impulses of a violent and sexual nature – a place to let off steam in anonymity. Hence, they provide a harmless environment that allows teenagers to channel their impulses. Alternatively, chat rooms may lie at the other, more negative, end of the spectrum, where they feed such impulses, and encourage teenagers to act in an inappropriate manner. This distinction is an interesting one to consider in future chat room research.

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Samantha Sai and Jan Noyes

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Wanted ...

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Usability News is hoping to expand its range of copyright-free pics of users, usability and gadgets. If you have any digital pics you would like to see getting some action, please mail them to Ann Light: editor@usabilitynews.com, and know that you have livened up the British HCI Group's stylish but rarely illustrated news website, www.usabilitynews.com.

Student Volunteers for HCI 2002

HCI 2002 is recruiting student volunteers, whose role includes setting up and taking down the conference, staffing registration, tutorial, plenary and technical paper sessions, and helping wherever needed. SVs will receive many benefits, including free conference registration, travel to and from London within the UK, accommodation and some meals.

If you are a postgraduate student interested in becoming a student volunteer for HCI 2002, go to <http://www.hci2002.org/student-vol.html> for more information and an application form.



Vet's Column *a regular feature to help you rediscover the lessons of yesteryear*

The Joy of X *(In which Alistair Kilgour finally gets a Macintosh to be as user-friendly as Unix. Ed.)*

The 50th edition of *Interfaces* was a wonderful opportunity to indulge in some purposeful, goal-directed nostalgia, and it was great to read Dan's thoughtful and entertaining retrospective on the early history and development of task analysis. Both Dan and Andrew Monk (in his overview of usability elsewhere in the 50th edition) talk about the challenge of helping users to achieve work (as Dan describes it), or goals in the old terminology (which Dan would have us eschew). As Andrew points out, the procedures needed to achieve usability (at least in the domain of software tools) are not rocket science, and there is wide agreement about how to apply them. So is it just that we need to spread the message to the new domains (where the driving force in design does not come from HCI-enabled software engineers)? Or is it that there is much more to HCI than is dreamt of by usability practitioners?

These and other issues about the nature and future of HCI in UK science were debated, sometimes hotly, in the HCI Community Forum organised by Harold Thimbleby, on 17th and 18th April (see report on page 4 of this issue). When listening to Jared Spool's Michaelson lecture in Edinburgh on 7th April I was struck again by the stark contrast between the simplicity of the message, and the reluctance to put it into practice. You could not really believe that some of the web site examples Jared showed had been 'designed' in any sense at all — especially one case with white text on a white background. (I guess the perpetrators would class this as an HTML coding bug.)

The most impressive, and redolent, finding Jared reported was his rediscovery (in the web context) that speed doesn't matter — users consistently rate the most usable sites as the fastest, irrespective of the actual measured speed — and making a bad site faster doesn't help at all. But apart from the detailed and painstaking research behind this finding (which like all such results becomes less surprising the more you think about it, so that you finish up

convincing yourself that it's obvious that it must be so), Jared's core advice to web designers was — watch some users trying to use your site for the purpose for which it is intended. Even one user is better than none.

Why does this seem so hard? I guess it's the old ego thing — everyone clings to the belief that they know how to do it, and are sure they can get it right first time. Graphic designers are just as prone to this as programmers — maybe even more so. And in any case, even if designers would like to do some user testing, they are forced to move on — once the site is up and running, the project is deemed to be complete.

Since we are in the mood for nostalgia, I want to share with you some memories which on the face of it have nothing whatever to do with HCI — though I will try to make the leap later. On a sunny afternoon in spring 1976 I drove to Prestwick airport, south of Glasgow, to release from customs three boxes shipped from Bell Telephone Company — for which my department (CS at Glasgow) had paid the princely sum of \$300. Inside were three RK05 single-platter disk cartridges (5 Mb each capacity if I remember rightly) and some printed manuals. This was Unix version 6. Within a few days my highly gifted colleagues Bill Findlay and Emrys Jones had installed the system on our PDP-11 (that actually took only half an hour, as opposed to half a day for the RSX-11D system — the D was for dinosaur — we had been using up to then), rewritten the terminal driver, and written a driver for our third-party external disk drive, and we were supporting up to 10 simultaneous users, with 48K bytes of memory, and a processor which I guess (though I never thought in those terms in those days) had a clock speed of less than a tenth of a Megahertz.

It is no exaggeration to say that the effect, not just on our department, but also on CS throughout the UK, was revolutionary. By the end of the seventies, every university CS department in the UK, except one, was using Unix. (The one exception

was Edinburgh. The head of department there was Sidney Michaelson — in whose honour the Michaelson lecture series was instigated — who took against Unix for reasons that I was never clear about. It is ironic that it was as a result of attending a seminar given by Jeff Tansley, then a lecturer at Edinburgh, that I initiated moves to obtain Unix at Glasgow. You could argue I guess that the subsequent rise to pre-eminence of the CS department at Edinburgh under Sidney's leadership was in no small part due to his refusal to have anything at all to do with Unix — but that's another story!

It is common among HCI people to mock Unix for its command line interface and cryptic, hard to remember, command names (like 'ls', 'pwd', 'cat', etc.) But Unix was designed for programmers — and for programmers it was (and is) a dream. And even if you are not a programmer, you can see beauty in its design — that's I believe the real key to its appeal.

As with Java twenty years later, there was nothing really new in Unix. But the bringing together of a few simple but very powerful ideas, in a way where each complemented and reinforced the others, was quite breathtaking. To mention just a few: a hierarchical file system, implementing the abstraction of a file as a (potentially arbitrarily large and expandable) sequence of bytes; regular expressions; the operating system as a virtual machine whose instructions could be invoked by any program; and, last but not least, the idea of 'information appliances' thirty years before Don Norman invented the term — small programs that did just one thing, and which could be strung together in a sequence (a pipeline in fact) to perform more complex operations.

I hesitate to suggest that what was made manifest in the design of Unix was the power of patterns — suffice it to say that I witnessed again and again, with colleagues and students alike, that moment of epiphany when you have to say: that's just so right!



We never thought, mind you, in those heady days, that in 2002 there would still be nothing better around.

And that's my flimsy justification for mentioning the history – I recently installed OS X on my iMac and started up a terminal window, and immediately I was transported back in time to the occasion 26 years ago when I first sat down at a VDU and logged in to Unix. The old commands work just as they used to – 'man', 'cd', 'pwd' and all the rest – even 'ed', which invokes the original, world's most cryptic editor – they are all in there. It was like finding the skeleton of a long-lost friend beneath the glamorous facade of a new acquaintance. Two relatively new commands which I was delighted to find as well were 'javac' and 'java' – the Java compiler and run-time system are built in, even if you don't install the developer's toolkit which comes bundled with OS X.

Then there's the new 'aqua' look and feel of the OS X interface. At first it seems a bit chunky, and the animation gimmicks become irritating after the first ten minutes or so (and can mostly be easily switched off), but it does grow on you, and after a few days you become sure that this is most comprehensive and convincing example of an interaction 'style' that Apple or anyone else have produced for a long time. (Mind you I have to admit I have not used or even seen Windows XP, so maybe I am missing something even better there.) It's not just look and feel – it's the combination of extremely meticulous attention to detail in the graphic design, with the complete consistency of behaviour across all – well most – of the functionality. (The new Address Book tool is an example to show that nobody's perfect – the most puzzling and frustrating utility for many a moon – definitely a candidate for the hall of shame.)

My second spooky experience when playing around with (read empirically evaluating) OS X was, after I had discovered the presence of the Java compiler, importing and running some sample Java programs from the M301

OU module I am tutoring – simple animations and a 'pin-ball' game taken from Budd's book (*Understanding Object-Oriented Programming with Java*). Lo and behold, the default look and feel you get when you compile and run a Java program under OS X is aqua! So anyone can develop 'native' applications for OS X just by writing them in Java. And because 'look and feel' is dynamically changeable in Java, you could of course change it to Motif, or Metal, or, if Microsoft would licence it, to Windows look and feel, at the click of a mouse button. Conversely, if Apple would licence it you could equally experience the aqua look and feel on a Windows machine – but I guess they will never do that.

In his article last issue Andrew Monk stressed the importance of style guides in helping uniformity, and reminded us that these are not arbitrary, but represent the distillation of much research and empirical evaluation. With 'pluggable look and feel' Java now offers the user a choice, potentially at least, between a range of alternative interactive style components. I say components, because style is I think wider than 'look and feel'. There are (at least) two major ways, for example, in which Windows and Mac OS differ (or differed), which go beyond just 'look and feel'. The first is that traditionally the Mac has used a one-button mouse, whereas Windows has always assumed a two-button mouse. However, that difference has pretty well disappeared in practice. Although new Macs are still supplied with a one-button mouse, it is common for users to replace this pretty smartly with a two-button (or scrolling) alternative, which is well supported by the software. I have been using a scrolling (two button and wheel) mouse on the Mac for several years, and use the right button for all the things I would use the right button for on Windows, without even thinking about it. This is an area where Apple have learned a lesson from Microsoft, although they are still a bit coy about advertising the fact.

The second difference, which is more subtle in a way, is the position of menus on a window. On the Mac the menu bar for the active window is still at the top of the screen, not at the top of the window – and only one menu bar is ever visible. Although OS X has relaxed this a little bit by introducing window-specific, configurable tool bars, the 'one and only one menu bar' convention is still the major potential stumbling block for a user transferring from one environment to the other. Personally I much prefer the Mac's uncluttered, unadorned window style, but I have never owned or used a Mac with a large screen, and I have observed other users experience quite serious difficulties on the Mac because they were unaware from the subtle changes in the menu bar, which application owned the currently active window.

My third spooky experience of the post-Christmas period was running Windows on a Mac. That is seriously weird. Although I have at least a vague understanding of how it is done, it still seems to me like the most powerful kind of black magic.

Connectix, who produce Virtual PC (and there's even a version for Windows now, so could can run one flavour of Windows on a virtual PC under the control of another flavour) have done a wonderful job of integrating the two environments while ensuring complete compatibility with 'real' Windows behaviour. For example from Windows on a virtual PC you can use your installed Mac internet access settings, and your Mac printer and other peripheral drivers. You can have as many virtual hard drives as you like, which expand dynamically as needed so never get full, and you can increase the amount of RAM allocated to the virtual PC at any time – and you can, if you're a real masochist, run several versions of Windows at the same time (Connectix claim to have got up to 30 on G4).

For the simple tasks I have tried (web browsing, email and word processing) Windows 98 on my 400MHz iMac (with, it has to be said, lots of



RAM) seems as fast as Windows 98 on my real 466MHz (non-Pentium) PC, with the same amount (128Mb) of real memory as allocated to the Virtual PC.

It's hard to pin down why being able to run Windows (at acceptable speed) on a Mac appears so wonderful – I guess in a way it's the ultimate in 'pluggable look and feel'. But it's more than that – there's something quite liberating about using a virtual machine rather than a real one. In this respect, I had to think a bit before deciding to install virus protection software on the virtual version of Windows. Only when I reflected that the data I stored on the virtual PC would be real even if the machine was not, did I decide that on balance it would be a good idea.

While the design of the OS X software might be regarded in some quarters as merely an exercise in putting limpid and languorous flesh on a strong and elegant bone structure, there is no doubt that in the physical design of the new iMacs Apple has once again showed its flair for producing design classics, which

would be objects of extreme desire even if they only ran boring old Windows. In the combination of this physical design with a seductive new look and feel for the user interface, and an industry-strength Unix kernel, Apple are sure of success – both in new (to them) Unix workstation markets, as well as their traditional creative application domains, although as so often in the past, they seem to be in danger of shooting themselves in the foot by being unable to come near to produce the machines fast enough to meet the predictably burgeoning demand.

I guess the HCI conclusion is not just that design is paramount – we all know that – but that outstanding design is about the integration of aesthetic appeal, fitness for purpose, reliability and functionality – all the components in fact which constitute the multiple facets of style. It's twenty years since the first Mac arrived on the scene, and for many years afterwards the Mac interface was a primary baseline to which later innovations were compared, and from which examples were principally

taken, by interface designers, researchers and educators.

Twenty years on we might have expected something a bit more radically different – what we have got is basically still a 2D interface (with its main features not dramatically different from the original), and now, an underlying operating system whose origins go back at least as far as the Xerox roots of the interface. (At least there is now an alternative to the CRT – whose death has been predicted many times in the last twenty years – for the display.) In spite (or maybe because) of the long and distinguished history of its major constituents, OS X still marks a significant step forward (if not quite in the direction we might have expected), and in years to come will once again provide a baseline for comparison, and a rich source of examples, for interactive system designers and educators.

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'I am not alone in seeing the world through wicked windows

Cassandra Hall

November produced 'Echoes' – Pink Floyd's Greatest Hits – and Microsoft's new Windows XP. The silent, presumed defunct, group released its album just before Christmas as a stocking filler for anyone who hasn't just started university. Polls taken at the same time state that Travis is the student's new Pink Floyd. And not a moment too soon. The far from defunct and never silent Microsoft let Windows XP go just in time to put the dosh in the tills. Nothing speeds up schedules like Father Christmas revving up his reindeer to the tune of a crotchety computer industry doing a Christmas Future to MS's Xmas Present.

Oh I remember Floyd. The band who produced the hauntingly beautiful 'See Emily Play' but who couldn't manage it quite so nicely when put on stage. The latter day Floyd, torn apart by disagreements found that recording worked best if they didn't all turn up at once. The very artificial music –

forerunner of today's electronic wizardry which takes away even the necessity to be able to sing – was produced in the studio, in splendid isolation. Now, doesn't that remind you of computer systems where the user is separated out from the rest of it just in case an argument breaks out between the software engineers, the HCI people and the production manager?

And what a surprise, put it together and try to do it in the real world and the punters boo and the hall gets cleared in no time. Computer applications are falling over themselves to do a Gilmour and Walters. They get built piecemeal, divorced from reality, each section working on its own so that playing its own harmony doesn't interfere with someone else's rendering of theirs. The result is a system that requires the memory of an elephant, the constitution of an ox, the hide of a rhino and the patience of a slug if the user is to get anything out of it. Fintan

Culwin might think that you don't notice the real nature of an elephant unless it steps on your tootsie but the real nature of the operating system quite often hits you a bit higher, though in XP's case it's in the pocket as well.

Although technology is seductively enticing, working with it is far from easy and it still promises much more than it delivers and even then at a price that doesn't cause nice to spring to mind. But until we get real humane human computer systems, it is difficult to see how this gap between the real world and what can be done in the lab will ever be fixed. The people in the lab are technical experts, software engineers with complete and breathtaking expertise and control over software but with a vague understanding of what real people are like. They seem to have a vaguer notion of how often people can afford to change their computer systems nor do they seem to

realise what sort of computer systems most will be trying to operate.

Real people have real lives and in London that seems to translate into beer to buy, judging from the last two issues of *Interfaces*. Although Nielsen might lament the sort of stuff they chatter on about in the chat rooms, in fact, that is the stuff of everyday discourse. Very few of even my intelligent and witty friends want to relax by discussing Richard Dawkins' latest theories. They want to talk about stuff closer to their hearts: how good the beer is, who won at footie and what their latest times are when they stagger round the block. The chat rooms echo that reality. They illustrate real people doing real things, even if it is very dull.

As much as I love it, technology, or at least what technologists expect from their users, worries me. The assumptions we make about what people could and should have stored in their heads is scary to say the least. But for me, this is part of a greater picture. The fact that developers act as if people can fill their heads up with meaningless junk is reflected elsewhere. We're a society fascinated by technical recitations of isolated and disparate facts that make the diaspora look positively home-loving.

It's as if society has turned into a mass of Gradgrind wannabes, each trying to outdo someone else with a few more useless facts. I've long ago abandoned those kind of examinations that expect students to learn stuff off by heart. But this doesn't exactly stop them from learning a potpourri of isolated facts – including any typos in the books that the editorial process hasn't managed to eradicate. Having battled their way through the vagaries of so many computer systems, they know the only way forward is to train their memories to hold ridiculous operational detail for the next 40 years.

No wonder no one takes making systems invisible seriously. We measure ability, expertise, prowess, intelligence even – by how much people can recall of a computing system without resorting to the manual. A guy now tries to impress me with Unix commands whereas before he'd have quoted Marvell. To be honest, I still favour the 'tear out pleasures with rough strife' approach rather than *cat yourfile >> myfile pipe*

myplace. In any case, I vaguely remember a Draper paper that argued that the nature of expertise wasn't quite like most of us in HCI insist on arguing that it is. Marvell, on the other hand, is Marvell even with a French accent. Hmmm, casting my mind back to IHMHCI, make that, especially with a French accent...

Remembering isolated facts is not something we are good at. We are pattern recognisers. We generalise, note idiosyncrasies only when they are so quirky that they make some demands on our attention, but society and technology seems to act as if we want our heads stuffed full of nonsense. And there's no need. The system can take care of all that providing we can make the thing bend to our will. Finally, the idiotic rote learning of fact is trivial, unchallenging, it's simply forcing the engine to run as fast as it can without giving it something constructive to do.

At a party, a database expert said: 'You don't know how easy you have it, in non-technical subjects,' and well brought up that I am, I refrained from chucking my champagne over him. As chat-up lines go, it would be a failure. I admire the mathematicians using their formulae and the critics who take Lear apart and reassemble it in a way I didn't think it would ever go. But the technicians reciting facts? Never! My history teacher trying to wean us off learning isolated facts said that the only important thing about a date was to turn up on time. It's a maxim I've lived my life by.

Invisible, transparent systems: oh yes please. My heart breaks every time I listen to typical users tell me their struggles with a system. And I mean typical users. My friends might include technically astute academics and software engineers but they're far from typical. I'm talking plumbers, builders, bus drivers, shop assistants, farm workers. I'm talking people who are too old to have used computers at school but want to be part of the technological revolution. I'm talking people who have better things to do than waste time struggling with miscreant technologies.

I'm sick of those clever, clever studies we all do that don't ask real people to do real tasks, and don't reflect real world states. Follow someone home, watch them try to

understand the vagaries of their mobile phone, their modem, and their video recorder despite the gallons of ink that have been used on it. And actually folks, surprise, surprise, it's a long way off being usable let alone transparent and invisible. It's still there for its own convenience not ours. Let's not kid ourselves. When we produce our theoretical underpinnings, we're underpinning a tiny minority of the technically astute. There are doubtless a mass of households with operating systems that don't, applications that can't and browsers that won't.

All the time we carry out our survey work within the confines of the university we get a distorted view of reality. Those of us in the hallowed ivory halls of real universities are even more out of touch. We think users have 'world enough and time' that real people don't have.

The committee for HCI 2002 say that only just now can we address the problems of transparency and invisibility. But it's not a moment too soon. And make that real transparency and real invisibility – not on-line help and minimalist manuals. Make it systems that work for users and not the other way round. Make it transparent, invisible, seamless and effort free. The guys and gals out there have places to go, monsters to kill and it's time that we stopped acting like a modern-day Marie Antoinette and telling them to rtfm. They bought technology to save time, not to gobble up more of it. And at the risk of sounding like one of those endless Socialist Worker chants of the '80s: 'What do we want? Invisibility. When do we want it? Now!'

So what's that to do with Windows XP? Well, nothing much except according to Microsoft, Windows XP is a 'new version of Windows that brings your PC to life!' I knew there was some sort of problem with the operating system I was using but I didn't realise it was dead. And that explains XP. So it's not Xpensive as some unkind commentators have suggested but Xpired.

CHI2002 contrasted with HCI2002

Fintan Culwin (*runs amok*)

25 things you never knew about Minneapolis and the Elephant (or ... is bigger really better?)

- 1 Minneapolis has the largest shopping mall in the USA; the Elephant has the naffest shopping centre in the UK.
- 2 CHI 2002 in Minneapolis had about 2000 attendees; HCI 2002 at the Elephant will have about 300.
- 3 The London Pride in Minneapolis was served at about 40°F; the Pride at the Elephant will be served at about 90°C
- 4 The Minneapolis mascot is a goose; the Elephant's mascot is an elephant!
- 5 The Mississippi river runs through Minneapolis and is 2350 miles long; the Thames runs near the Elephant and is 340 kilometres long.
- 6 Stelarc demonstrated body art at CHI 2002; most of the local population at the Elephant disport body art.
- 7 The CHI 2002 committee had about 55 members; the HCI 2002 committee has about 25.
- 8 The London marathon has about 32,000 runners; the twin cities marathon only has 8,500.
- 9 The HCI chair ran the London Marathon in 4 hours 16 min; neither of the CHI co-chairs entered the twin cities marathon.
- 10 The HCI social events include opera and Shakespeare; the CHI social events included a visit to an upmarket shopping mall.
- 11 The CHI proceedings come in two volumes weighing 4 pounds; the HCI proceedings come in three volumes weighing 1.5 kilos.
- 12 The CHI conference bag contained about 25 items including a penlight keyring; the HCI conference bag will contain about 10 things including a triangular three-colour highlighter.
- 13 The CHI logo was a splodge of yellow dots; the HCI logo is an elephant and castle, with an elephant's bum as an alternative.
- 14 Tutorials at CHI cost up to \$1,100 per day; tutorials at HCI cost £160 per day.
- 15 Workshops at CHI cost \$90 per day; workshops at HCI cost £50 per day.
- 16 CHI had about 500 presentations in about 12 categories; HCI will have about 100 presentations in about 5 categories.
- 17 Minneapolis is about 12 hours travelling time from the UK; the Elephant is in the UK.
- 18 At CHI you had to buy your own lunch; lunch is included at HCI.
- 19 The CHI conference hotels cost about \$200 per night, excluding breakfast; the HCI student residences cost £35 per night and include a full english.
- 20 Minneapolis and Mississippi are difficult to spell on your expense claims; 'Lahndan' and the 'elepharnt' are easy to spell.
- 21 The Minneapolis Vikings football team throw and carry the ball more than they kick it; Milwall football team kick the ball most of the time.
- 22 The Minnesota Twins baseball team play a version of rounders at the Minneapolis Stadium; Surrey county cricket club play the game of the kings at the Oval.
- 23 There were over 50 student volunteers at CHI; there will be about 12 at HCI.
- 24 The HCI chair's plait is about 25cm long; the CHI co-chairs plaits together were only 0 inches long.
- 25 A pint of Pride in the George costs £1.90; a pint of Pride in the Minneapolis Brit Bar costs \$5.



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