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Culture Class vs. Culture Clash

The events of September 11, 2001, changed the perceptions of many people in the United States. One good result of this terrible day was people's increased awareness of and interest in other cultures, religions, and ways of thinking. In this process, user-interface development was catalyzed toward further maturity of its philosophy, principles, and techniques. We can't go back. Many people who are living outside the United States, or Americans who have traveled extensively abroad, are thankful for an increased global awareness of connectivity, conflicts, and possibilities of mutual cooperation. Much of their hope stems from understanding other cultures better and communicating with people better. User-interface developers may need to go to "culture class" in order to minimize culture clashes in their designs.

Cultures are expressed at work, at home, in schools, and in families through symbols, heroes, rituals, and values. Cultural anthropologists have studied similarities of and differences among cultures for decades. One theorist [8] summarizes the key dimensions of all cultures as follows:

- Power distance: a culture's acceptance of great differences between leaders and followers
- Individualism vs. collectivism: self orientation vs. group orientation
- Femininity vs. masculinity: merged or distinct traditional gender roles
- Uncertainty avoidance: lack of tolerance for ambiguity
- Short- vs. long-term time orientation: the degree to which a culture prefers a long-term view.



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In the minds of most culture and design theorists, many professional designers across all disciplines, and some appreciative users, these dimensions pervade every human activity and every artifact, including user interfaces.

In 1989, in Japan, I heard the first anecdotal evidence of something I had already suspected. A Japanese computer-science researcher commented that he thought Japanese developers preferred software applications from Europe, specifically Scandinavia, to those developed in the United States. Why? To him, European software seemed more “elegant, sensitive, and in tune with Japanese culture” than the “impolite software from the USA, which sometimes turned out to be vaporware due to USA marketing habits.” Cultural affinities and alienation were being expressed. In 1993, after publishing some culturally diverse conceptual designs of dialog boxes [10], I organized an early CHI event, a special-interest group about cultural diversity.

Since that time, many papers, panels, tutorials, conferences, books, and Web sites have been offering user-interface developers interested in learning about culture differences an excellent selection for learning more about the issues, accomplishments, techniques, and tools available. To its credit, CHI has moved its venue internationally, most recently to the Hague, The Netherlands, in 2000. Other conferences, such as those of HCI International, regularly hop among global venues, and the more recently started International Workshop on Internationalization of Products and Services (IWIPS) has featured international venues as well as a precise focus on how to develop (plan, research, analyze, design, implement, evaluate, document, and train) for global markets. Recent discussions of user-human experience design, branding, and interaction-behavior design indicate a growing expansion of user-interface design concerns that can foster a strong intellectual relationship with many disciplines—not only anthropology and other social and cognitive sciences, but marketing, which has analyzed

branding and the characteristics of target markets for many decades.

Still, some developers face an uphill battle to get budgets for culture-oriented research and development accepted, to find and allocate the necessary human resources, and to achieve project success. Why? There are several reasons, but one of the most important is the lack of a clear return on investment information resource that most user-interface developers can access, respect, and use to defend their positions. Such a document would help persuade top management to make the funds, people, and time available to accomplish many desired projects, such as culture-oriented contextual analysis, development of culture databases, and culture-oriented tools. With such documentation, attention to culture differences would move more rapidly from nice-to-have to necessary.

Some companies are focusing on globalization and localization. In the United States, Sapient [7] published an excellent white paper on localization issues beyond translation in 2000, but, significantly, while providing a fine summary and resources, its content had almost nothing about culture differences. Microsoft understood that it must change the menu hierarchy, not just the terms, when it introduced word processing software into Japan in order to match the expectations of that country, and it recently changed the Xbox input device to match smaller Japanese hands [4]. As another example from Europe, mobile device manufacturers have sent user-interface developers with or without cultural anthropologists to distant lands to study why people do what they do and to look for insights into making future products better [9]. Many are learning, many are taking action, but others in companies, large and small, don't quite get it yet.

The situation should change in the near future. Many books on culture issues in user-interface design are now beginning to appear, and more are in the works for later this year and 2003, which will provide data from actu-

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al projects, refinements to theory, and significant heuristics. Attending to culture differences in product development should be a hot topic, become part of best practices, and eventually be incorporated into industry standards.

Newly published research on persuasion [3], trust [1], and cognition [14], and some long-ago published work on intelligence [5] raise further questions about how to understand culture and how it can and should affect user-interface design.

relate to persuasion and establishment of trust in Web sites and Web-based applications? How should culture dimensions relate to established dimensions of intelligence and change your thinking about online help, documentation, and training? How do culture differences relate to new insight about cognition differences? Do these differences change your thinking about user search strategies, mental models, and navigation? All of these questions affect our judgment as user-interface developers.

Can you confidently state, for the target



For example, Cialdini lists reciprocity, consistency, social validation, liking, authority, and scarcity as key factors that persuade us to believe or do something. He readily admits that the factors have different weightings in different cultures. Bailey et al. [1] cites attraction, dynamism, activity, expertness, faith, intentions, localness, and reliability as key factors in developing trust. Bailey has commented in private communication that culture could affect which of these were more important in establishing that trust. Nisbett et al. [14] have established that Western and Asian people form different conceptions given the same perceptual input: Westerners tend to think in isolated objects or concepts; Asians tend to think more in terms of relationships among objects.

Consequently, as user-interface developers, you will have the opportunity to face further challenges. Are our notions of usability culture-biased? How should culture differences

cultures for which you are developing, what is usable, useful, appropriate, beneficial, and harmful in the products and services for which you may have partial or complete responsibility? Global user-interface development in the 21st century is really going to get interesting. Are you ready for the challenge?

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Internet Resources

- Resource Address ACM/SIGCHI Intercultural Issues database www.acm.org/sigchi/intercultural/
- Bibliography of Intercultural publications www.HCIBib.org//SIGCHI/Intercultural
- Cultural comparisons www.culturebank.com
- Culture resources www.webofculture.com, www.acm.org/sigchi/intercultural/
- Glossary in six languages www.bowneglobal.com/bowne.asp?page=9&language=1
- HCI International 2003 Stephanidis Constantine, <cs@csi.forth.gr>
- Internet statistics by language www.euromktg.com/globstats/index.html www.worldready.com/biblio.htm
- International Workshop on Internationalization of Products and Systems (IWIPS) www.iwips2002.org
- Java Internationalization java.sun.com/docs/books/tutorial/i18n/index.html
- Localization www.lisa.org/home_sigs.html
- Microsoft Corporation, Developing Applications for Far East Versions of Windows 3.1, Windows 95, and Windows NT www.eu.microsoft.com/globaldev/fareast/fewinnt.asp
- Microsoft Corporation, planning for and testing global software www.microsoft.com/GLOBALDEV/Non%20mirror/back%20up/gbl-gen/INTREFNEW.HTM
- Microsoft Corporation, general information on going global with Windows www.microsoft.com/globaldev/gbl-gen
- Simplified English userlab.com/SE.html
- Internet users survey (Nua.com) www.nua.ie/surveys/how_many_online
- Unicode www.unicode.org/
- IBM Unicode Glossary www-4.ibm.com/software./developer/library/glossaries/unicode.html 

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