
The Theory Of Experience Orientation

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Abstract

This paper describes the theory of experience orientation, which builds on the division of experiences in two categories: Goal-oriented and Omni-oriented. The theory comes from preliminary studies of user-experiences in a work-context, where I have found this distinction to be beneficial. In this paper I explain the theory behind it and the practical application of such a distinction when designing for an experience.

Author Keywords

Experiences; work-context; users; serendipity

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation:
Miscellaneous.

Introduction

When Dewey [5] divided experiences into two categories – either a singular, meaningful event having it's own beginning and end, or as inchoate experiences, intertwined with other events and constantly interrupted, he did it based on the "level" of the experience, and on whether or not the experience can be interrupted. Determining those factors seems almost impossible and, as Buchenau and Suri [3] mentions, experiences need to be understood holistically. But when we try to analyze and design for an experience we need to treat the experience as a secluded story

with a beginning, middle and ending – and separate from other influences, which are beyond our control. We need such simplification in order to make an experience designable (at least designable to a some extent). At the same time we need to understand how to design for an experience – i.e. not only imagining it, but also making sure that the right experience is elicited by the products, systems or services we create. And experiences are – though often experienced socially – subjective in how they are experienced, because they relate to the personality and mood of the person who goes through the experience. A good experience can be just as good for some as it is bad for others. And a good experience in one context can be a bad experience in another. [11]

The experience as a story

Hassenzahl [7] describes the experience itself as a story, emerging from the dialogue of a person with her or his world through action. In his description, an experience requires actors, props and scenery (context) interacting with each other during the course of time. So to design an experience we need to write the story. What is special about it is that we are not in control of the actors. We can only create the setup for the story, and put in clues that we hope will guide the actors to do certain things. These clues are what Gibson [6] introduced as affordances. Boess and Kanis [2] later called them use-cues, which were product-details created by the designer in order to lay out the path (or several different paths) for the user of a product to follow.

Transcending the material

These details – affordances or use-cues – in the design of the product, is a way to make the product intuitively

readable for the user, as a way to provide the intended experience. You could say that the product becomes the scaffold¹ that allows the story to unfold in the intended manner. And just as when you design a house, you don't start by designing the scaffolds. You create the scaffolds in the manner that best supports the process of building the house – or in this case, the scaffolds that best support the experience you intend to elicit. At best, the person having the experience will be so immersed in the experience that the product itself dissolves. Hassenzahl [7] describes this as “transcending the material”. But before we can write the story and design the scaffolds, we need to understand what experience we should design for. We need to understand the purpose, meaning and character of the experience.

A brief detour

In some cases a detour can be a surprisingly pleasant part of the experience. But if you are in a hurry, a detour is not pleasant. Thinking back to the time when computers were new, they were mainly used for work-related purposes. They were tools to solve a specific task, and the main criterion was to solve the task as quickly and smoothly as possible. No detours. That was when usability [9] became the buzzword. But usability falls short when we are not just looking at product usage as something that should be done easily, but instead something that should give us a deeper experience at an emotional level.

¹ The scaffolding metaphor has been used by, amongst others, Wood, Bruner and Ross [12] as a term describing the process by which an adult assists a child to carry out a task. In this paper I use the scaffolding metaphor to describe how the product supports the intended experience.

The work-related experience

In my research, I particularly look at the professional working experience – i.e. when products become tools. That the experiences in a workday are often goal-oriented will be no surprise – but there are also experiences during a workday that are not. Usability had a strong focus on the goal-oriented experience, but not in a personal sense – as a way to achieve fulfillment from accomplishment or personal growth – but as a way to reach a target as quickly and smoothly as possible. The other type of experience is what I call omni-oriented experience. The type where a detour becomes an interesting adventure. It is not concerned with getting somewhere, but is concerned with being in and experiencing the moment with a sensitivity and openness towards whatever happens. The two types of experiences can be found in all aspects of our lives, although the omni-oriented is typically most dominant when we are off work, and the goal-oriented is most dominant at work. To illustrate the difference between the two, I use the concept of serendipity.

Serendipity

Serendipity can be described as making fortunate discoveries by accident. Finding something you didn't look for. It's the feeling of being surprised when something unexpected, but pleasant, happens. For example when you go to a bookstore looking for a certain book, and meet an old friend there that you hadn't seen for years. Andel [1] defines Serendipity as making an unsought finding. In a goal-oriented experience you are rarely open to serendipity, since finding something you weren't looking for will – in most cases - be a disturbance. In an omni-oriented experience, you are open to serendipity even though it might lead you somewhere else than where you

expected to go. Imagine, for example, a person (X) having a cup of coffee with a friend. In the first scenario X uses an ordinary coffee maker, which basically does everything for him when he has put coffee beans and water in it. He turns it on, goes to sit and talk with his friend, and goes back to pick up the coffee when it is done. In this scenario, both types of experiences are present. When he goes to start the coffeemaker, he is in the goal-oriented experience, wanting to get the coffee produced quickly and effortlessly. But when he sits and talks to his friend, he is in the omni-oriented experience, just "enjoying the moment", not being concerned with where it might lead him or reaching a goal. In the second scenario, X uses a french press coffee maker. He doesn't leave it in the kitchen while he talks to his friend; he brings it to the table before the coffee is actually done. Pouring hot water on the coffee beans might also be done at the table, because it brings out the enjoyable aroma of fresh coffee. By bringing the coffee maker to the table, he brings the coffee maker into the omni-oriented experience, because it adds coziness. It becomes part of the setup he creates for the state of wellbeing in that moment. This setup - framing the state of wellbeing – is part of scaffolding an omni-oriented experience.

Looking at a work situation, it is seen that the tools at a workplace can be designed in a way that guides the worker towards performing a certain task. At the same time it might challenge the worker, which makes the work interesting – but not more than he/she is likely to succeed, making the work pleasant because of the feeling of accomplishment. Csikszentmihalyi [4] describes this as flow – reaching the perfect balance between challenge and skill. But there is another side to it, which is that of wellbeing. The design of a product

can make you feel good because you like the color, because it represents values you believe in, and because it allows for a pleasant social atmosphere at the workplace. That relates to the omni-oriented experience. Although the two types of experience are difficult to separate, the distinction between them provides an operational approach for designing an experience. But in reality they will influence each other – as Norman [10] says, beautiful products work better, because they put the user in a different state of mind. So even the process of reaching a goal can be improved by making the product appeal to the user. And for a product to be attractive – seductive even – it should address both the users emotions and goals. [8]

Practical application of the theory

Ethnographic research – hereby I mean methods such as observations and interviews – is typically a means to learn about the users experiences and ways of doing in the specific context. Making sense of the stories and insights can be quite comprehensive, and I found that the division into goal or omni-oriented experiences will be helpful in that process. Hereby we are able to differentiate and relate affordances and design principles in the use experience to either achievement or wellbeing. So the practical use of the *experience orientation theory* is mainly as a tool to focus the design process – analytically as well as creatively – on the type of experience we are designing for.

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