# A Performative Perspective on UX

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## Abstract

As increasingly more interactions occur in public or social settings, the concept of interaction with technology as a performance of self provides a compelling perspective when evaluating experience. Through a combination of dramaturgical/performative metaphors and phenomenological theory, this paper presents a performative perspective on user experience (UX). Based on concepts from phenomenology, this approach emphasises the importance of subjective individual experiences as the natural focus of analysis. These subjective reports can be organized and analysed using dramaturgical metaphors, where interaction can be understood in terms of characters, props and stages. Thus, this performative perspective on UX combines theory and metaphors to guide the evaluation and analysis of UX.

## Author Keywords

User Experience, Dramaturgical Metaphors, Phenomenology.

## ACM Classification Keywords

J.4 Social and Behaviors Sciences: Sociology

## General Terms

Human Factors.

## Introduction

User experience is a significant aspect of the design and evaluation of interactive technologies. However, as

a relatively new area of research it has lacked a clear and unified theory, methodology and understanding [8]. Given the multidisciplinary nature of user experience research, which incorporates designers, psychologists, sociologists, computing scientists, and researchers from the mixed background of human computer interaction and beyond, it is not surprising that the community is having trouble finding common ground. The diversity of definitions and approaches has led to a rather fragmented community lacking both common understandings and comparability of results. There have been a variety of activities and special interest groups in the community tackling these disparities by discussing appropriate methods for UX [12], developing shared understandings or definitions of user experience [7], and discussing the theory, if any, behind user experience [11]. While some important overarching aspects of user experience have been identified [8] there is still a lack of clear direction in the community as a whole.

This paper presents a performative perspective on UX, combining phenomenology and dramaturgical metaphors in order to understand experience as performance. This performative approach to user experience stems from the embodied interaction tradition [3]. However, where Dourish's embodied interaction builds on the combination of social computing and tangible computing, this performative perspective on UX builds on *social computing* and *whole body interaction*. This slightly different foundation leads to less of a focus on embodiment, and more on *performance.*

## A Performative Approach to User Experience
This perspective on UX is built on a theoretical foundation in phenomenology, where individual subjective experience is the primary and natural focus of inquiry. This approach to UX values experience itself as a subjective phenomenon that is constantly interpreted and reinterpreted by the experiencer. This paper combines the concept of *everyday performance* [4] with theories of phenomenology to understand user experience as a performative experience.

### Performance and Interaction
The idea of interaction as a performance [5] provides a way of understanding interaction as the presentation of self and the experience of interacting in front of others. Previous works in the design and evaluation of *performative* interfaces have looked at a variety of performance contexts, such as musical performances [1] or digital art performances [14]. The work of Goffman discusses in great detail the use of dramaturgical metaphors in understanding behaviour in public settings [4]. An important aspect of this work is the definition of *everyday performance* and how this affects our understanding of action and interaction in public places.

This paper refers to "performance" as in the everyday performance of daily life, where nearly every action of everyday life is considered a kind of performance [4]. As we present ourselves to others in daily life, our actions are like performances of our desired `character,' or the impression we hope to create, and we are constantly adjusting that performance as we gather feedback from others. Goffman describes a wide range of performances, from implicit performances of everyday action and impression management to explicit performances such as giving a formal presentation to an audience or theatrical performance. For example, when running late one might constantly look at the time and fidget while waiting for a train. These actions might be

unconsciously done, but they still communicate a state of agitation and are still considered a performance under this definition. More explicit performances carry with them significantly more *intention* from the performer and more clearly defined performer/spectator roles. For example, giving a presentation is an explicit performance where the presenter stands at the front of the room and talks and the audience gives their attention to the presenter. The roles are predefined and, hopefully, already understood by everyone present.

This approach to UX research uses the term performance to encompass a wide variety of activities, many of which might not be considered "performance" in the traditional sense. This approach considers both intentional and unintentional performances as part of a spectrum from simple performance to *performativity*. If we consider every action in public to be a performance of some kind, then those actions that are carried out with intention and awareness of spectators can be described as *performative*. Indeed, many of the interesting issues in experience and performance revolve around how these actions are hidden or exaggerated, how performativity affects experience and how performance is achieved in everyday settings.

*Theoretical Foundations: Phenomenology and UX*
From the perspective of phenomenology, social life exists within the subjective experience of individuals where an "objective" world or experience is of little importance or interest and arguably may not exist as an object that can or should be studied. Phenomenology stems from the humanistic branch of sociological theory that also includes topics such as ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism. Two key assumptions separate these humanistic sociologies from traditional or

positivist sociological theories [2]. Firstly, humans as social beings are not simply controlled by external forces and factors but are constantly interacting and actively creating their own social reality. Secondly, specialised methods are required to access those experiences, perceptions, and intentions that are central to humanistic sociological inquiries [2]. Within the field of sociology, this meant a shift from the traditional methods working with records, reports, and statistics to the development of participant observation, refined use of the interview technique, and the adoption of ethnographic methods. With respect to UX, adopting this theoretical stance suggests a move away from traditional lab studies of interface accuracy and speed to studies that examine experience, usability, and perceptions as they are developed in the real world.

Simply described by Luckman [10], "the goal of phenomenology is to *describe* the *universal* structures of the *subjective* orientation in the world, not to explain the *general* features of the *objective* world." The subjective orientation of the world refers to the subjective experiences of individuals going through their daily lives. For Schütz, the experience of everyday life was the natural focus of inquiry and the source of information for understanding social worlds, called the *lifeworld* [13]. The lifeworld is simply the world where everyday life is taken as objective and the reality of that experience is taken for granted by the individuals involve. In the lifeworld, individuals take on the natural attitude [9], where one can assume that the world exists outside of our perception and assume that world is objective. The rigorous study of subjective experience relies heavily on the *phenomenological epoché* [9], or the ability to removes one's self from the natural attitude and into the reflective and analytic stance that strips

away, as much as possible, one's own cultural, temporal, and social bias. This attitude is one of reflection, questioning, and interpretation where experiences must be analysed critically through description, reduction, and interpretation [6]. The *phenomenological epoché* allows researchers to look beyond experience as it presents itself in the lifeworld by questioning the lifeworld itself, exploring the natural attitude, and understanding how individuals makes sense of experience in order to go about their everyday lives.

## Conclusions

This performative perspective on user experience begins with theoretical foundations in phenomenology. The application of this theory to user experience research means a significant focus on subjective experience and the analysis of the everyday actions that might be taken for granted by performers themselves but be of great interest to researchers. This foundation highlights the importance of a mixed methods approach, combining traditional ethnographic methods from the humanist tradition of sociology with quantitative usability methods from computing science. Finally, this approach relies heavily on dramaturgical metaphors as a way of understanding performance in everyday life and how interaction with technology fits into existing practices. These metaphors guide data gathering and analysis by organising results in terms of performers, stages, props, and scenarios.

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