Understanding Affective Design in a Late-Modernity Perspective

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ABSTRACT
This poster discusses the advent of emotional/affective interfaces and key areas of late modernity, and it proposes that there could be said to exist some parallels between the development of computer interface design and the development of society as a whole. The poster suggests that research into social and cultural aspects of design may be conducive to understanding the user in a contemporary societal setting. Consequently, the poster explores why and how theories of modernity matter in understanding the practice of designing affective interfaces.

Categories & Subject Descriptors: J.4 social and behavioral sciences

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1. INTRODUCTION
In our view, affective design is an approach that has certain socio-historical underpinnings, and not necessarily a specific technique, or something that can be encapsulated in a ten-bullet how-to-do list of design heuristics. Before going further into our argument, let us first come to terms with the concept of affective design. Affective design, in our view, is both the notion of “affective interfaces” [13,14], and design as an aesthetic discipline that deals with the instilling of certain affects in the user. The focus of affective design, then, is both the interplay between efficiency and affect, (e.g.: can a task be performed better by integrating bodily affect cues?) and the more hedonistic qualities of products, where positive experiences are ends in and of themselves. It is clear though that the former approach lends itself more to a traditional Human Factors approach, whereas the latter signals a more significant shift in the approach to design. Yet both approaches are concerned with affect and emotions and value these as important aspects of use. The change from productivity software – centered around efficacy of the individual user in a work context [1] - to novel forms of applications of computers in everyday life such as pervasive and ubiquitous computing, poses great challenges to the fields of Human-Computer Interaction and Human Factors [8,9]. Some change has already been reflected in the literature, for example by Patrick Jordan [7], who advocates a shift from efficacy and functionality towards experience and pleasure. It is also striking that one of the founding fathers of the field of Human-Computer Interaction, Donald Norman, strongly rooted in cognitive science [12], in the last years has addressed the role of emotions in design [11]. Still, in our view a wider frame is needed to understand the expanding focus on the emerging field of affective/emotional design.

2. A parallel in architecture
We can look to architecture for an example as to why modernity matters. Architecture is an applied art form that employs both a functional perspective and an aesthetic endeavor that ideally aims to provide its users with certain experiences - in that sense it has pronounced parallels to the creation of digital interfaces. In contemporary architecture, societal issues and cultural manifestations are crucial and proactive elements in understanding the ability of cities and buildings to adapt to - and influence on the contextual life-world of individuals. In order to understand the practice of architecture within late modernity, theorists within this field employ an ongoing theoretical discourse – discussing concepts like e.g. urbanity, cultural and social movements or socio-historical changes – consequently gaining insight into the situation of the “users” and ideally developing theories and methods applicable to practice [15].

In the field of affective design as a whole, social theory and a socio-historical awareness seems to be absent. Following this, we propose that the designers and theorists within the field of affective design, HCI and Human Factors consider adopting a similar recognition of the importance of understanding late modernity and its consequences.

3. Bridging the gap
As an applied art form, all design seeks to fulfill a certain function, yet pure functionality seems to fall short of satisfying late-modern individuals with emotional fulfillment. We seem to want pleasurable design “for no rational reason at all” - as when Donald Norman preferred his computer monitor to have colors, not for the functionality, but for the sheer pleasure of it [11]. Our point is: The fact that people “like” or “want” pleasurable products, products that are more than just functional, is not a happy coincidence or part of a commercial venture to sell the emperor’s new clothes. Nor is affective design a surface by-product of creative designers. Rather, it could be seen as a result of the interplay between late-modern institutional factors (e.g. the separation of time-space and the dis-embedding process [5], and a

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new mentality that positively values affect and emotion, thus transcending the enlightenment ideals of the traditional order (i.e. the industrial society and rationality of man). For example, reasons for using a personal computer in post-traditional society is rarely for the sole purpose of solving a specific task, but rather a way to communicate, a way to enter into new social environments, gaming, interplaying experiencing etc. Also the representational side (i.e. the interface) is no longer dull black and white command lines, but alive with colors, animations and sound, seeking to stimulate senses and simulate human behavior at the interface level.

4. A frame for understanding affective interfaces

As mentioned above, we see a clear parallel between the development of the computer interface design and the development of society as such. In short, the transition we seem to witness is from a traditional paradigm focusing on productivity and efficiency to a post-traditional one introducing an increasing awareness around issues of the affective and emotional. The transition is apparent in psychological literature. Notably, the publications of Gardner’s “Frames of Mind” in 1983 [4] and, in more popular form, Goleman’s “Emotional Intelligence” [6] characterize the general concern with these issues. This quite recent preoccupation in psychological theory has had a breakthrough of awareness during the 90s, adopted in such areas as management, education and the sciences.

The awareness is mirrored in theories of the social frame wherein affective design exists. One of the core issues of late modernity, that affective design could be said to be a reaction to, is arguably the increasing societal complexity, a tendency described by theorists of late modernity such as Giddens [6], Luhmann [10] and Castells [2]. All point towards the fact that the post-traditional order brings increasing complexity to all aspects of social life and to the notion of culture. The focus on the affective is arguably one of our attempts to deal with rising complexity. As environmental (umwelt) complexity can only be dealt with by increasing internal complexity [10], our conception of the computer as a simple tool is being challenged by increasingly “fuzzy” and complex theories where emotions and affect are not merely disturbances to rational thought, but indeed necessary resource for sorting-out and knowing [3]. Thus, affective design could be seen as both the product of, and the reaction to the complexity of the post-traditional order and should therefore be viewed in this relation.

The transition from functional to emotional work-cultures is further mirrored in the socio-economic aspects of modernity. The rigid work/life distinction is blurring and work is increasingly “working life”, comprising both the effective (the functional, task-oriented work process), and the affective/emotional (work as a pleasurable, emotional developing activity) [2]. In this context our social practices must be seen as reflexive as pronounced in theories of late modernity. And therefore our “tools” must develop the ability to be adaptive and sensitive to our shifting tasks, interests, communications, and indeed affect and emotions.

5. Re-embedding human sensitivity

To us the current preoccupation of affective and emotional cues in design seem to indicate a will to re-embed human relations into the immediate surroundings. Increasingly institutional and personal relations become dis-embedded across time-space [4]. The new role for the design of artifacts and communication seems to be the re-embedding of human values and human sensitivity into the material world, in order to make our interactions with it less impersonal and strictly functional, and more relational, pleasant and trustworthy. In this paper we have proposed a frame for why a theoretical discourse could inform the practical implications of designing interfaces and digital artifacts that are both helpful and feed our desire for the pleasurable. In conclusion, our poster purposes an analytic and systematized look on how core societal issues and challenges can offer an understanding of the role of affective design in view of post-traditional societal concerns. The challenge is to understand and deal with the issues of post-traditional order and the increasing societal complexity as described in modernity theory. The lessons learned from architecture tell us, that a firmer grip of how that which surrounds us has an impact on our emotional, affective and social lives could be a significant contribution to the various new disciplines within the HCI field.

REFERENCES


