
Designer's Ego vs. User's Ego: An Equalized and Balanced Relationship in Co-design

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Abstract

The growing recognition of user-centered design seems like a trend. Those related terms appear widely in academic literatures and all kinds of media. It seems like people are trying to reverse the hierarchy of the roles that designers and users used to play in the design process. However, the relationship between designers and users are going too far in an unbalanced way. Most of the time while talking about user-centered design, people put all the focus on emphasizing the users thoughts and the voices of designers are often left out. This article addresses the importance of both users opinions and designers' opinions. Later it debates on why they should come into a more equalized status. Last but not least, it focus on how to balance between "designers' ego" and "users' ego" to achieve equality. After all, designers are also humans. Therefore, designers' voices should not be excluded while talking about human-centered design.

Author Keywords

Co-design; user-centered design; co-creation; collaboration; ego.

Introduction

Recent days, the idea of “human-center” is all the rage. Those related terms such as co-design, co-creation, participatory design, user experience and user-centered appear widely in academic literatures, articles, blogs, websites and all kinds of media. It seems like that “human-centered design” will definitely become a trend in the future of design with no doubt.

In the mean time, users’ consciousness and awareness are being encouraged and growing rapidly these days. Try to think of someone who is approximately in middle age and not familiar with technology. In their generation, when people failed to use a product to complete a certain task, most of them would give up and considered themselves as dumb users. On the other hand, for those who were born and raised in the generation when personal computers and smart phones are all over the places, the situation would be completely different. Instead of feeling embarrassed of themselves, most of the time they would blame the product for not being well-designed. The phenomenon could be considered as a evidence of the growing recognition of mindset in design field: users are prioritized beyond everything else. There are no dumb users, only dumb designers [7]. In the past time, designers were seen as experts in design. But now, it is the users that are the experts of their life experiences and future lives. [6] Designers should be empathetic and put aside their “designers’ egos” and work with people.

It seems like the growing recognition of user-centered design reveals the true thoughts of the people, giving the development of design in a direction for a better future that people have been wanted. However, the

relationship between users and designers are going unbalanced. When people talk about human-centered design, they often emphasize on the voice of users. Wouldn’t that resulted in another issue called “users’ ego?” In this article, I would like to discuss on the importance of both users opinions and designers’ thought. Why should they come into a more equal status will be debated later. Last but not least, I will focus on the issue: how to balance between “designers’ ego” and “users’ ego” to achieve an equal status? After all, designers are also humans. Therefore, designers’ voices should not be excluded while talking about human-centered design.

Design mindsets from time to time

Let’s start from looking into the shift of design mindsets. According the Sanders’ article [6], in 1980s, the decade at when the first personal computer was put on sale by Apple, designers did not explore too much about what to design. Instead, they focus on how to design a particular item that customers asked for. The term “users” was not yet been recognized and used by the world. The mindset of design in that time was “design for people.” People served by design were usually referred to customers and consumer, which showed that design was tended to being driven by market. Innovations were driven by technology and the success of an product was defined by their sales potential. The cognitive, emotional and social needs of people were not being taken as the focus either.

The idea of technology- and market-driven design would go downward with no doubt. The satisfaction of pursuing materials could no longer be the only value in the pursuit of human’s well-beings. In *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* written

by Martha C. Nussbaum [5], she addressed the shortcoming of approaches based on merely economic growth and provided a great support in this point of view. There are other aspects of value and quality of evaluating whether a person is having a good life other than economic growth. But unfortunately, it happens to be the dominant approaches used all over the world. Promoting does not automatically improve people's well-beings. No matter what the mindset of design would be taken and embraced later on; definitely it would not be economic-growth-driven.

Over time, when it came to 1990s, the shift of seeing people as users instead of customers and consumers occurred. People started to be aware of the cognitive needs of users and thus it became the major concern since then. The mindset also shifted from "design for people" to "design with people." In designers' perspectives, this change also made a great influence in their work. Besides getting involved in exploring how to design, they moved forward to the very beginning of the design process, what to design. Innovations also changed from just market pull (what people ask for) or technology push (what is invented) to delivering the insights about what people might need or long for in the future. [6] The value of design is no longer merely the pursuit of new technology, but the intention to discover and expose what people really need, creating desirable experience for users. Here comes the age of experience-driven design.

User Experience is not about good industrial design, high-tech or fancy interfaces. It is the aesthetics of experiences – not the aesthetics of products – that transcends the material, creating values and potentials to advance the way of designing future techniques [3].

Philip's Wake Up Light gives a good example. It changes the experience of one waking up, while its form is

rather unremarkable. There is no a bunch of new functions or new technique used in the product. However, the innovation of creating meaningful, valuable and beautiful user experience deserves our attentions. Experience delivered by a product could be a representation and interpretation of technology. As the reason of that, Hassenzahl argues that experience-driven design will advance the way of technological development in the future. This idea happened to hold the same view with Sanders in imagining design for 2044. [6] " In 2044, technology will be seen as a tool to serve people, rather than primarily as a means to produce products for profit."

Why user-centered? (what designer cannot do)

The emphasis of users' point of view is a growing trend that could not be unseen. Users are invited to be involved and contribute in the design process, and this has been called co-design [9].

The first idea is "user knows best for themselves." Users are considered the expertise in their own live experiences. Since the future will be formed by a set of present time, thus the imagination for the lives in future could also be considered as a prediction based on their present lives. For that reason, when it comes to designing their lives for their future, end-users will definitely be the experts in the field. Co-design is practiced using the design-with mindset. [6] Designers/design team should work collaboratively with

someone who really understands, in this case, the users.

Another idea is about the redistribution of power for the unequal situation. In "A Ladder of Citizen Participation" [1], the idea of citizen participation is a categorical term for citizen power. When talking about the have-nots, it is the redistribution of power that enables them to be included in the system. The "nobodies" are trying to become "somebodies" with enough power to make the target institutions responsive to their voices and needs. Although this article focus mainly about the power redistribution in a political way, especially on the issue of giving power back to the minority and marginalized and letting their voices being heard, it could also reflect the inequality of roles played by users and designers in the past. If the participation of the have-not citizens approaches as if it is the participation of the users in the design process, in this case, designers are regarded as the "powerholders" because they make actual decisions in the design process. A designer who refuses to hear the users' voices could be seen as a greedy powerholder who does not give power back to people.

Why designers matter? (what users cannot do)

Have you ever been away from your hometown for a period of time? Have you ever noticed those subtle things after you got back and realize that how strange is that you seldom paying attention on them? People get numb and unconscious if they stay in the same environment or do the same job repetitively for long time. We get used to the circumstances and often miss out something interesting because we know it too well. This is pretty much the same idea as it mentioned in

Button's viewpoint [2]. The essay argues that pure explication from the fieldwork may miss out some practices. However, merely the knowledge from users could be a blind spot since people may get used to what they have been working on and may have no new ideas because of that. They may never have thought about producing a systematic account of what they do, not to mention about coming up a new idea to improve what they have already known how to do. People can use a fresh air. The aspect of outsiders can shed light into the dark corners of their work.

The other viewpoint is about the professionalism. In Arnstein's[1] article, this idea was also addressed in one of the reasons among the arguments against citizen control, the highest level of citizen participation in which people have the full power to decide and control everything related to them. It is incompatible with professionalism where the expertise makes decisions. Speaking of design, designers and design researchers are trained and therefore could be seen as the professionals in that field. Although primary mentioned argument claimed that "everyone is the expert in his/her own life experience," when it comes to design practice where the design could be realized into reality, those trained designers/design researchers know better.

An unbalanced situation

Ever heard of the famous Henry Ford quote, "if you asked users what they wanted, it would not have been a car but a faster horse?" This simple quote, which was not even having any hard proof of it being true, however, draws a battle line between the affirmative and the negative while talking about user-centered design. Those who are against co-design (sometimes

being called “skeptics” of co-design) often cited this quote as the evidence that participation in design should be limited to a narrow set of professionals. [6] On the other hand, for those who are for co-design, this quote was taken as the indication of the tone-deafness to customers’ explicit or implicit needs [8]. It is really interesting to see how the same sentence could be interpreted in such different ways and used against the others. The idea of user-centered design is or might grow into ideological debate. The debate would go on and the unbalanced situation would not getting any better until both sides start putting their egos aside.

We witnessed these changes of design mindset from the designing of things to interactions to systems, and from designing for people to designing with people and by people. [6] Design will definitely play an increasingly large and significant role in the future. However, the idea of “everyone designs” is a little bit too idealistic and moreover, disrespectful for the designers.

This claim seems like a selfless act, but it also implies the thought that the work of designers is not so hard that everyone can do it. In my opinion, this idea shows that designers’ work and professions are somehow unappreciated and belittled. If designers/design researchers stand for the expertise and professionals in the field of design, will there be some similar argues in other field? For example, is it fair to claim that “everyone could make it to be a good chef” or “everyone could be a professional athlete”? Clearly, there are some particular traits and efforts to be skillful chefs or professional athletes, and of course, good designers. A good designer should be innovative and creative, and at the same time also be empathic and sensitive. He/she should always be full of curiosity and

dare to dream big, but at the same time, he/she should be rational and reasonable to put those crazy ideas into reality.

Besides the previously mentioned reason, . There is an old saying in Chinese philosophy, which says “Things will develop in the opposite direction when they become extreme”. The unbalanced and unequal hierarchical relationship between designers and other than designers might be one of the main reason lead to the awakensness of user consciousness. The power of decision-making in design process should be given back to the users, but on the other hand, designers still hold some of the power in the design process. An unbalanced and unequal relationship will always lead to arguments, debates and fights.

Another reason for the standpoint is the division of labour. According to Button’s arguments [2], the author urge designers to take some time to go “into the field”. However, the author argue that designers should not be trained as ethnomethodologists. Instead, the division of labour should be considered as the framework within which design and work studies can collaborate. Not to mention the division of labour between designers and users.

An equalized approach: collaboration

So, how does it work out to achieve an equalized status? My standpoint is collaboration. Both designers and users should take a step backward and stop arguing about whose voices and perspective are more important than the others’.

The most valuable thing that users could contribute is the process of user participation that really matters, not

the idea of users designing everything on their own. My perspective is closest to that of Lee [4]. The article emphasizes the importance of learning how making process of the innovative methods impact designers building contextual knowledge of the target users and themselves. Rather than merely the data that designers collect during the innovation methods such as probes and workshops, these so-called “unofficial but practical activities” – not included in the method descriptions but essential to implement the method at users’ sites – provide more opportunities for more personal access to the users. In that way, designers can really fully involved in the user’s life and gain sensitivity to the users, and most importantly, in the trustworthy way for users. This is how designers could stop making assumptions for the users and instead put themselves in others’ shoes. This is how designers emotionally engaged with the users and when they do so, they also build the relationship because it is real. This is how designers can learn for real from the users.

Another reason for the approach for an equalized and balanced relationship is the magic brought by transdisciplinary collaboration. “Once you manage to work with people who know something that you don’t, you will create unique solutions. Some of them will be loved.” Said by Mikko Annala, experiment specialist of Demos Helsinki [demo] in a seminar held in the INTRO course 2016 of Aalto University, this argument encouraged a bright and promising future of multidisciplinary work.

As a designer coming from interdisciplinary background myself, there was so much to learn to get across another field you barely knew. There was a fun fact that I found out when I was in bachelor of computer

science department. Surrounding by students and classmates who were trained as and most of them were going to be engineers, I found out that some of them with really outstanding techniques were usually called nerds instead of geniuses. Most of the people would not appreciate their works because they paid little attention in users’ feelings and creating good experiences. Their problem is that they are all too smart to deal with a product that is difficult for other to use. After all, a product not being used and embraced by users is not a good design, even if it won a lot of prizes [7].

When it comes to working collaboratively in industry, there are always obstacles and boundaries between engineers and designers. Since in most of the cases, designers and users come from different background. It would always be some differences and gaps between those people with different background. It could be a struggle, but it could also be some magical collision and brilliant outcomes. It is necessary to narrow the gap and stand in their shoes. Put away all the prejudice and egos. Stop using jargons and speak their languages. The communications will be improved and the outcome will be surprisingly outstanding.

Conclusion

As a human, we all have our opinions, our beliefs and our biases. We have to accept the fact that we are all different and embrace the variety among each one of us. For designers and users, both of them should take a step backward, put aside their egos, stop arguing the privilege of their perspectives and collaborate with mutual respect. There is no point debating whose opinions come first. Designers should be empathic and take the responsibility to shape the future for people and realize their collective dream. On the other hand,

users should respect the professions of designers and trust them to have their jobs done right.. After all, designers are also humans. Designers' voices could not be excluded while talking about human-centered design.

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