

Gender Sensitive Design Practices

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INTRODUCTION

To what extent and in what ways do companies take gender into account in their design decisions? In the past, commerce has been criticized for designing for the dominant group in society—the notorious young, white, able-bodied, highly educated male—to the exclusion of user groups who do not fit these criteria. It has been argued that by designing for everybody, designers in fact unconsciously follow the male norm in society. The question of this article is the following: Which dominant design methodologies can be found in practice when designers make products aimed to include women? The ways in which gender gets drawn into the design process for a large diversity of ICT products will be reviewed, such as for games, Web sites, mobile phones, and computer parties.¹

BACKGROUND

When designers develop a new product, user representations, or images of the end users of their product, are (un)consciously produced with the help of implicit or explicit techniques (Akrich, 1995). Implicit techniques are based on statements made on behalf of potential users, whereas they are directly involved when explicit representation techniques are used. The implicit techniques are by far most popular amongst designers. Designers, for instance, refer to commonly held beliefs about the way men or women are; in other words, they rely on stereotypes. Almost as important is the implicit representation technique called the I-methodology, in which the designer uses himself or herself as exemplary for the user. In some cases, explicit user representation techniques are used, for example, by testing the product on potential users or by allowing user feedback after the product has been introduced. Each of these dominant gender-sensitive design practices as

distinguished by reviewing multiple case studies on design practices will be described and discussed for their effects on gender.

Relying on Stereotypes

For many designers who aimed to include women as end users of their products, an important goal was to define in what ways girls are different from boys. Many designers were convinced that some things just belong to women's or girl's products, "like fashion and beauty" (Hestflatt, 2003, p. 101). Some founded these beliefs on generally held convictions about "the way women are with ICT," or stereotypes (Hofman, 1995). In some cases, they started with a literature study on gender differences, using books and reports that have been extensively criticized by feminists for the way they dichotomize and naturalize perceived biological differences between men and women (Rommes, Stienstra, & Oudshoorn, 2003). Many designers looked at comparable products and the way they target women. Most often, popular print magazines aimed at girls or women were used as sources of inspiration. As a result, the interfaces of these girl games "[have] similar aesthetics to the girls magazines that inspired them, with lots of colour (especially pink!), cartoon images, and non-rectangular windows" (Stewart, 2003, p. 15). The result was that they repeated rather than transformed existing stereotypes.

By relying on stereotypes about women, designers attempted to construct an image of their future users as different than the audience they had been designing for before. Hence, no matter what the precise target group was—older women or girls, highly educated women or women living in disadvantaged areas—the same general beliefs about what women want resurfaced. All women were represented as being neither interested nor skilled in technology, and as preferring user-friendly (i.e., simplified) interfaces. Moreover, women were, ac-

cording to the designers, not into technology for fun, but for directly useful applications (Rommes et al., 2003; Stewart, 2003).² Also, women were supposed to be interested in open play forms without many rules, in community building, and in interaction. Last but not least, women prefer feminine content, such as fashion, horoscopes, and relationships, presented with feminine aesthetics. Seeing how often these images about women are repeated in ICTs, these are very persistent general ideas about what women are or what they like that seem to resurface whenever designers design a product for women (Lagesen, 2003; Shade, 2000).

There is a positive and a negative side to the focus of companies on the ways in which women are different from men. On the one hand, a focus on what women want could serve to strengthen and give value to feminine-connotational skills and preferences (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998). On the other hand, by developing a product based on “typical women’s interests,” designers run the risk of reinforcing and reinscribing perceived gender differences rather than “transforming gender” (Sørensen & Stewart, 2002, p. 28). Moreover, designers’ beliefs about women do not often conform to the skills, preferences, and experiences of most women.

The I-Methodology

In virtually all product design processes empirically described in the literature, be it computer games, Web magazines, or mobile phones, the I-methodology was used (Akrich, 1995; Gansmo, Nordli, & Sørensen, 2003; Oudshoorn, Rommes, & Stienstra, 2004). In other words, the designers based their design decisions on what they would like to use themselves. The use of the I-methodology has been considered problematic in the context of gender-sensitive design because most designers are male and run the risk of making a design that men will like.

However, in some cases, the I-methodology was used in a reflective way as several companies consciously asked women to join the design team. The project leader of a game for girls argued for the inclusion of women in the project team by suggesting that the female project members “would surely know what seven-year-old girls like and prefer. They have been there themselves” (Rommes et al., 2003, p. 197). In several other projects, the introduc-

tion of more female employees happened less consciously but still had some effects. For example, Gansmo, Nordli, et al. (2003) found a positive aspect of having a female developer of a computer game: “the only female character...has been made a bit more visible in the game because the female developer thought it was important” (p. 129). In some cases, the fact that a woman was responsible was the main reason a project to include women started at all (Lagesen, 2003; Pitt, 2003).

There are two aspects that need to be taken into account when reflective I-methodology is used. First, the division of tasks between men and women in the design process is often done in stereotypical ways. This unequal distribution may lead to, for example, having female-connotated content in an interface with masculine-connotated preferences. Moreover, in many cases, women have less to say about the design because they are not placed in responsible positions or are junior recruits and have no direct input into the development of the site (MacKeogh, 2003). Hence, if women are introduced in the design process as a way of introducing a more reflective form of I-methodology, the hierarchical position in which a person is introduced is relevant.

Second, not every woman is representative of the women that the designers aim for. Even in cases where female designers are similar to the end users in relevant areas, such as in their age, sexual identity, race, interests, or preferences, the mere fact that they are part of and socialized in a design team with its own (masculine) culture, have access to the latest technology and to a network of skilled computer users, and are interested and skilled in the use of technology makes them very different than potential end users (Rommes, 2002c).³ It may very well be that education in participatory design techniques is more relevant in deciding whether someone knows what (female) end users want than the mere fact that someone is of the same sex as the targeted end users. All in all, even the reflective I-methodology needs to be used with care.

User-Participatory Design Techniques

The inherent problems of using implicit representation techniques may by now be clear. As an alternative, explicit user-representation techniques such as testing products on potential users or participatory

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