The Hunt for the Lost User

From sources of errors to active actors -- and beyond

- Kari Kuutti
- Department of Information Processing Science, University of Oulu

The message of the talk

- The idea of what is a user of a technological system has a strong influence in the systems to be designed
- This idea has undergone a number of changes during last decades
- The idea has been a subject of contrast and controversy
- The old ideas do not completely disappear, but sediments of them remain
- Some aspects are still missing

The term "user" is problematic

- Technocentrism -- the use of a computer system is seen as the critical defining factor
- Most of the cases we do not use computer for the sake of using, but to do purposefully something else -- should this not be seen as the starting point of definition?

Different times -- different views on users

- Users as components in organizational systems
  - Management Information Systems
- Users as sources of errors
  - Ergonomics/Human Factors -> Human-Computer Interaction
- Users as partners in social interaction
  - Computer-Supported Cooperative Work
- Users as consumers

1970s: Users as components in organizational systems

- Management Information Systems
- Based on system-theoretical organization science
- Users seen as rational parts of organizational machinery
- Countercurrents (towards the end of the period)
  - Decision support systems - top managers as users
  - End-user-computing - local development for local needs
  - Participatory design -- preserving the skills of users in design, improving workplace democracy
- What happened
  - The mainstream MIS got confused with the problem of social system

1980s: Users as sources of errors

- Human-Computer Interaction
- Influences from two directions:
  - Ergonomics/Human Factors
  - Information Processing Cognitive Psychology
- Humans seen as information processors
  - Limited abilities when compared to machines
  - Search for a good fit between humans and systems to prevent errors
- Countercurrents
  - Bannon: From human factors to human actors (1991)
  - Usability-movement: criticism against the inability of "theoretical HCI" to answer practical problems
- What happened
  - Usability-movement took over, and discussion about users died down

1990s: Users as partners in social interaction

- Computer-Supported Cooperative Work
- Drawing from social sciences, in particular anthropology and (micro)sociology
- User are seen as partners and participants in social interaction in cultural environment
- Countercurrents
  - None this far -- should we be concerned?
- What happened
  - Perhaps nobody in the practice has yet noticed
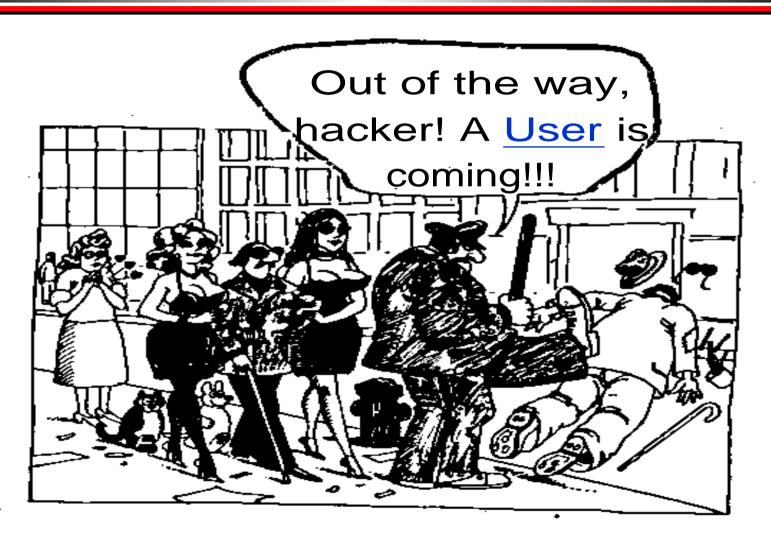
2000s: Users as consumers?

- Marketing and design
- Increasing demand to design systems for consumer markets
  - Computer games and other multimedia products
  - Smart products
  - Wireless services
- Turning to design professions as sources of inspiration and practical help
  - Architecture
  - Industrial deisgn
  - Fashion design
- Design professions have their own view on users
  - Users are rarely seen as clients but often as consumers
  - Users not only rational, but emotional and pleasure-seeking

Is something still missing?

- Users as learners?
- Users as creators and constructors of their own environment?

User found?

Perhaps...

(Saul Greenberg)