



Culture: Wanted? Alive or Dead?

Aaron Marcus,

President, Aaron Marcus and Associates, Inc. (AM+A), [www.AMandA](http://www.AMandA.com)

Is culture dead as a topic of interest to usability and user-interface usability and design professionals? One European anthropologist/ethnographer wrote recently that “culture is dead” and only of interest to people in the USA (who seemingly have little or no understanding of other cultures around the world). On the other hand, another (USA) usability/design professional recently stated that she thought cross-cultural issues were one of the most important and potent trends in product/service development. Who is right?

Recent social-political events in Europe and throughout the Middle East suggest that it is not only people in the USA but also in Denmark or France, and elsewhere, who may not fully grasp the extent of culture differences in values, signs, heroes/heroines, and rituals. These differences of belief and action are the ways in which different groups manifest their cultural norms and indicate the boundaries of acceptability and preference.

Examples of insight regarding culture are to be found, but are perhaps less numerous than cross-cultural blunders. Only a few years ago, media news coverage cited Prof. Kaipeng Peng at the University of California/Berkeley, who explained how a dispute between China and the USA had been resolved by knowing the culture differences of the two negotiators and figuring out a path of action that could result in solving a dispute about returning an advanced USA air force jet that had made an emergency landing on Chinese territory. In Alexander Stille’s insightful essays within the book *The Future of the Past*, appears an essay entitled “The Culture of the Copy and the Disappearance of China’s Past,” a marvelous examination of the dramatically different attitudes toward the concepts of “the original” and “the copy” that exist between Western and Chinese. These differences manifested themselves clearly when European sculpture restorers came to assist the Chinese in repairing the finds from the famous 10,000 warriors unearthed in Xian, China, some decades ago.

In 2005, *Fortune* magazine cited Microsoft’s Bill Gates as promoting anthropological and ethnographic study of its products to improve customer-centered, if not user-centered design (the difference is between those who buy and those who use products, who may be the same in some situations). The existence of an Anthropologists in Design Internet-based discussion group is another indicator of the rise of “stock value” in this profession, where, in decades earlier, anthropologists crept nervously and more invisibly around the edges of CHI, UPA, HFES, HCI International, and other usability and user-interface design professional conferences, seemingly hesitant to announce themselves and uncertain of the importance in which their profession was held. Today, anthropologists, ethnographers, usability analysts, and designers of all persuasions contribute to the lively Anthropologists in Design discussions that cross all platforms, vertical markets, development theories, and professional practice.

Some professionals, admittedly pooh-poo culture in favor of simply social, ethnographic, group analysis and the issues of which models, techniques, tools, and information resources to emphasize. They criticize Geert Hofstede’s methods and data in developing culture dimensions. They may not know of Shalom Schwartz’s alternate extensive data collections and theories.

Other professionals of the post-modern persuasion critique culture itself as a constantly changing construct of those in power and not the fundamental, unchanging basis of thought that Nisbett and others ascribe to influencing even our essential principles of logic, thought, or cognitive functioning. They criticize those who thought Aristotelean logic was "universal." How naïve, they might comment. As for changing cultural paradigms, let us not forget that Hofstede's references to fundamental characteristics of Confucian cultures were, clearly, not always Confucian, at least not until after Confucius or his followers helped to instill a paradigm shift in Chinese culture.

What all the controversy, opposing and/or alternate theories of what's right, and the appearance of at least three books recently all entitled fully or partially *Cultural Intelligence* suggest is that considerations of culture differences, *and similarities*, are far from dead and seemingly very much alive. In fact, it seems likely that the discussion of models, techniques, and tools will result in even deeper probes to discover how products and services can, should, do function within groups to help people live "better" lives, however that is defined or defended.

We have, I think, barely begun to discover the startling and currently unresearched assumptions about metaphors, mental models, interaction, and appearance. Already crossing my desk are proposals from India and China for entirely new metaphorical foundations for computer-based products and services that are quite unlike those that have emerged from Seattle, Silicon Valley, Helsinki, or Tokyo, among other centers. We have an interesting and challenging time ahead of us as we explore the full meaning of cross-cultural user-experience development.

Bibliography

- Aykin, Nuray (2004). *Usability and Internationalization of Information Technology*. Mahway, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Hofstede, G. (1997). *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind, Intercultural Cooperation and its Importance for Survival*. New York: McGraw-Hill, ISBN 0-07-029307-4.
- Murphy, Richard McGill. (2005). "Getting to Know You: Microsoft dispatches Anthropologists into the field to study small businesses like yours. Here's why." *Fortune Small Business*, 1 June 2005. http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fsb/fsb_archive/2005/06/01/8261971/ (checked 8 February 2006).
- Marcus, A. (2002) "Globalization, Localization, and Cross-Cultural Communication in User-Interface Design," in Jacko, J. and A. Spears, Chapter 23, *Handbook of Human-Computer Interaction*, Lawrence Erlbaum Publishers, New York, 2002, pp. 441-463.
- Marcus, A., and Baumgartner, V. (2004). "Mapping User-Interface Design Components vs. Culture Dimensions in Corporate Websites," *Visible Language Journal*, MIT Press, 1-65, 2004.
- Marcus, A., and Gould, E. (2000). "Crosscurrents: Cultural Dimensions and Global Web User-Interface Design," *Interactions*, ACM Publisher, www.acm.org, Vol. 7, No. 4, July/August 2000, pp. 32-46.
- Marcus, A., and Baumgartner, V. (2004). "A Practical Set of Culture Dimension for Evaluating User-Interface Designs" in *Proceedings, Sixth Asia-Pacific Conference on Computer-Human Interaction (APCHI 2004)*, Royal Lakeside Novotel Hotel, Rotorua, New Zealand, 30 June-2 July 2004, 252-261.
- Nisbett, Richard E. (2003). *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently...and Why*. New York: Free Press.
- Schwartz, S. H. (2004). Mapping and interpreting cultural differences around the world. In H. Vinken, J. Soeters, & P Ester (Eds.), *Comparing cultures, Dimensions of culture in a comparative perspective* (pp.43-73). Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill.
- Stille, Alexander (2002). *The Future of the Past*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Geroux.

Aaron Marcus is President of Aaron Marcus and Associates, Inc. (AM+A), Berkeley, California, www.AMandA.com, a pioneering user-interface design and usability analysis firm. He is Editor-in-Chief of UPA's *User Experience (UX)* (tm) Magazine and writes the regular "Fast Forward" column for ACM/SIGCHI's *Interactions* Magazine. He can be reached at Aaron.Marcus@AMandA.com

