Social Interfaces: The Future of User Assistance

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Microsoft Bob, Apple's Knowledge Navigator, "Clippit" the Microsoft Office Assistant, and 2001's HAL computer: four examples that offer very different insights into the potential of social interfaces. Social interfaces seem to offer an incredible opportunity for online user assistance and may be the future of user assistance. However, creating successful social interfaces could require large-scale changes in how we work and who we are.

Changing how we work

Social interfaces present a fundamental difference in how users access online assistance and how we develop it. Rather than relegating user assistance to online help or documentation, social interfaces promise to completely integrate instructional information with user tasks. In many cases, users might be able to discuss their tasks and goals with the application. In other situations, users might be able to request that the system perform certain tasks (*e.g.*, checking e-mail, searching the Internet) or provide in-depth supporting information when explaining new concepts or products.

Behind the scenes, social interfaces must rely on a combination of many technologies: voice recognition, artificial intelligence, object-oriented programming, and natural language searching. On-the-fly translation technologies could even be added to globalize products. When these technologies have matured and the average user has access to the required hardware and software, social interfaces may allow us to converse, interact, and collaborate with software applications. As computer users, we may no longer be burdened with finding our own answers and correctly articulating our questions. As developers of social interfaces, we might be expected to anticipate user problems and questions. Rather than spending the bulk of our time helping users understand and resolve errors, we could be making sure these errors never happen.

Changing who we are

To create a usable social interface, technical writing, programming, and technical support departments might merge, overlap, and combine into an integrated, team-based development environment. A broader base of technical skills would be required of all team members to create a larger common body of knowledge. For example, a social interface's ability to sense and solve user problems would require skills from a number of fields: task analysis (human factors), audience analysis (technical communication), instructional design (training), error handling (programming), and problem identification and resolution (technical support).

Development processes, job roles, and job titles that are now used in more "creative" fields such as the film industry might become more commonplace. New skills such as character development, storyboarding, creative writing, and non-linear organization could be expected of the (technical) writer.

Topics to Discuss During an Idea Market

During an Idea Market, I plan on exploring the following questions.

- Are we professionally and technologically ready for social interfaces?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of social interfaces?
- Would all users benefit from and prefer a social interface?
- Would social interfaces replace traditional print and online documentation?
- Who would develop social interfaces?
- Do successful real-world social interfaces

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