
Mobile UX: Breaking the Glass to Richer User Experiences

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Overview

Apps are changing the world. If you work for a bank, an airline, an art gallery or even a local coffee shop, you'll probably have helped create an app to connect and transact with your customers and visitors. As users, we consume these bite-sized chunks of digital goodness voraciously, with some estimates putting total app downloads to date at over 100 billion.

People find apps effective, satisfying and enjoyable. Meeting their needs, filling dead time, solving their problems. So, why are we organising a course that argues for some new thinking?

We celebrate the success that is apps, services and the ecology of mobile devices; but, we want to ask the question: what do the current approaches to mobile interaction overlook? Is there more to user experience than can be expressed through today's heads-down, glass blunted and me-centred reality?

We have both have had the great fortune to work and collaborate with research labs, practitioners and industry. The aim of this course is to connect the great app innovation that is out there with the sorts of alternative thinking that have been brewing in university and industry labs for several years.

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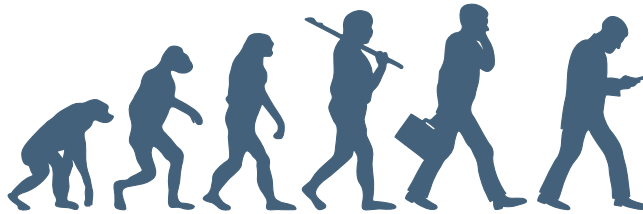


Figure 1: Will humankind evolve further over time to retreat from the physical and embrace the digital? Or, do we designers need to rethink the tools we are developing?

It seems obvious how things should develop in the mobile market—more apps, better screens, longer battery life, faster and faster networks, drawing us more and more towards the tempting pool that leads us to digital worlds that offer so much. We want to help undermine this certainty by challenging attendees to step back and look at alternative perspectives; changing the future but starting now.

Learning outcomes

After the course, attendees will be:

- Challenged to think differently. Instead of simply following the default framing of mobile interaction design, they will be urged to take a more critical look at existing “heads-down” apps, and instead let their designs be shaped by how people actually live their lives
- Able to think about how they could put together existing technologies in new ways, allowing them to design the experiences of the future with what they have right now.

- Inspired to take a closer look at the people and places around them, and focus their energy on the *human* in human-computer interaction.

Intended audience

The course will appeal to a broad audience, with particular highlights for:

Industrial and academic researchers, who will be challenged to take another look at the attitudes they currently have toward user experience, and encouraged to move away from simply making another touchscreen app.

Students, who will get a fast insight into the hot research topics in user experience, and will find the pointers to existing research particularly helpful in grounding their own work.

App and device developers, who will be inspired to create new types of services; provoked to think of novel, interesting interaction styles; and, prepared for the ever more rich user experience opportunities that are still to come.

Schedule and activities

Introduction: Scene setting, celebrating how far mobile user experience has come, but questioning the wisdom of the current screen-based focus.

Activity: Imagining the future, based on what we have now. What do participants think the world of mobile UX holds?

New directions: The core of the course will be focused on a number of primary areas of interaction, looking at potential alternatives to the ways we currently experience our mobiles. This part of the session will be structured as three “provocations”:



Figure 2: Provocations. *Left:* We are built to manipulate, shape, and rearrange the world physically. How can we inject real sensations into UX, making full use of the deftness of our bodies? *Centre:* Margaret Atwood, at CHI 2014, succinctly dismissed eye-worn displays. But, what is the real answer to the heads-down present? *Right:* Isolated, self-centred mobiles make the interaction all about “us”. How can we bring others—and the world around us—into our everyday interactions?

Provocation 1: From touch screens to feeling alive. Touch screens are a fantastic development, but they dull our senses, providing none of the rich sensations that our bodies are capable of receiving. We will argue that touch screen dominance has blinded us from thinking about what real sensation, feeling and physical manipulation can offer; and, point towards a more human-centred view of “touch”.

Provocation 2: From heads-down to face-on. Many commentators have pointed out how people sleep-walk down the streets, with their head and eyes fixed to a screen. Here, though, we will show how the problem is more complex than this, and not just about what we might bump into, but what we miss, instead. We will explore some of the other options for interaction (such as speech or body-worn displays), and

discuss whether they really are the answer to the heads-down present.

Provocation 3: From private and isolated to public and performance. Mobiles are an ever-present support that can gently reassure and provide for us. However, despite the enthusiasm for digital “crowds”, groups of people using mobiles are quiet, subdued and withdrawn. Here, we will explore how to move away from seeing mobiles just as personal, private devices, and look at ideas that promote more public and extravagant uses of our gadgets.

Activity: Imagining the future, based on the new directions we have seen in the course. Given what we have discussed, what can participants now imagine?

Conclusions: Drawing the material together, summing up, and any further questions from attendees.

Instructors

Simon Robinson is a researcher in the Future Interaction Technology Lab at Swansea University. His work so far has focused on mobile technologies that allow people to immerse themselves in the places, people and events around them, rather than just in their mobile devices. In the past few years his emphasis has turned toward developing similarly face-on user experiences for people living in resource-constrained communities in regions such as India and South Africa. More at simon.robinson.ac.

Matt Jones is a professor and Head of the College of Science, Swansea University. His research focuses on human-centred computing with a particular emphasis on mobile and ubiquitous computing, and resource-constrained communities. His work in these contexts has been recognised by an IBM Faculty Award and, from 2014, by a Royal Society Wolfson Research Merit Award. More at undofuture.com.

Additional resources

The course draws primarily on material from the instructors' book, "*There's Not an App for That: Mobile*

User Experience Design for Life" [1], co-authored with the late Gary Marsden.

This book is comprehensive, and covers a wide range of ideas and designs from many researchers, labs and companies, globally, over the past decade.

An accompanying (and growing) website provides additional material and resources, including videos and an example module syllabus outline (see changetheworldUX.com).

Acknowledgements

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Thank you, Gary, for everything.

References

- [1] Simon Robinson, Gary Marsden, and Matt Jones. 2015. *There's Not an App for That: Mobile User Experience Design for Life*. Morgan Kaufmann, Burlington, MA, USA.