

Reflections on the State of HCI as it reaches 17

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I have four children, the eldest at 17, is the same age as the HCI Conference! At 17, daughters can be nice things to have; my daughter and I have endless conversations about the world, politics, relationships and education, and (very) occasionally the conversation turns to computers. Her view, not surprisingly, is that computers are about as interesting as microwave ovens. She cannot understand why anyone would want to study them, neither does she afford the home PC any significant amount of her time – in fact, she brags that she was able to go all the way through high school without ever logging on to the school system. Contrast that with the youngest of my children, a boy aged 7. When he was three he remarked that it would be cool if the computer printed out toys; at 7 he designs new screens and animates displays on the PC.

My eldest child has been heard to comment about how the world has changed since she was little (at 17 you can feel quite old!) She has noticed that her brother is completely at ease programming things, tweaking things, saving things, designing things on the numerous interactive devices that we have around the house; she, on the other hand displays a vague reluctance to meddle too much with game pads, interactive TV and GUI interfaces.

Marc Prensky (2001) describes these differences eloquently, referring to those of us who have adapted to the digital age as Digital Immigrants and those who are born into it as Digital Natives. My eldest, is probably one of the last digital immigrants, my youngest is almost certainly a digital native. Given that we as a community are almost certainly older than 17, we are probably also digital immigrants and for us one of our challenges is to begin to understand these natives, currently in school, but destined to be in the work place.

The upsurge in interest in designing for children is a welcome step forward, but there may be wider issues that need to be considered by the research community. One observation from my own work is that children readily and commonly attribute human characteristics to computers. They expect them to know things, to read things, and to think. This is probably in part due to the Microsoft blue sea into which they were born, where computers say they are sorry and where agents appear when they make mistakes. For us immigrants, our route to the blue sea was by a dense forest and possibly via a desert or two, and with that journey we gathered an understanding of the computer environment that our native population is not likely to have.

So, as the conference approaches the age of consent, we as a community need to take on these responsibilities; do we design interfaces that teach our natives to swim or do we throw them lifebelts. Does this mean that we need to de-humanise the computer?

Marc Prensky (2001) Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants

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