

NordiCHI 2006: Learning From a Regional Conference

NordiCHI 2006, Oslo in October. Something new was in the air. Smiling, people remarked on it, not sure what it was. Not even the pleasantly surprised organizers could put their finger on it, but HCI research seemed to have changed in some subtle way.

Background. Most specialized HCI conferences focus on a particular topic, but several are regional. The individuality found in local SIGCHI chapters is also reflected in regional conferences. CHINZ is organized annually by the New Zealand SIGCHI chapter. CHINZ is held "in cooperation with" SIGCHI. So, for the last few years, were the alternating IHC (Brazil) and CLIHC (Latin America) conferences organized by chapters in Brazil, Chile and Mexico. OZCHI (Australia) and APCHI (Asia-Pacific) are not formally tied to SIGCHI. They have more of an ergonomic focus; OZCHI was inspired by the first CHI conference, which also had a greater ergonomic focus. NordiCHI has been organized since 2000 by four HCI groups; one is the Finnish SIGCHI chapter, two are prospective chapters. Starting with 2002, NordiCHI proceedings are in the ACM Digital Library.

Prior to NordiCHI 2006 I had attended two regional HCI conferences: the first Brazilian IHC in 1998 and the first NordiCHI in 2000. (I also attended the first local chapter meetings in Boston and Austin a decade earlier.) Regional conferences seemed to me to serve strong community-building and member-support functions. Little work from any one region is present at CHI, where acceptance rates range from 15% to 25%. Regional conferences can showcase more local work and of course reduce travel costs for local participants. Higher acceptance rates enable researchers to get constructive feedback, some of it on work in progress, from people who understand their context. Understanding that the goals differ, I have lower expectations for polish and major advances at regional conferences, and higher expectations for enthusiasm and interaction.

NordiCHI 2006 accepted 28% of papers, 27% across all submission venues. Although almost half of the 37 long and 28 short accepted papers were from outside Nordic countries, the conference had a strong Nordic flavor. Some was in a greater emphasis on collaboration, both in the work and in the approach to discussing it, but collaboration is prominent in North America now too. Something else was going on.

The sessions were infused with a cheerful energy and the calm confidence that solid, important work was being presented and discussed. The research was firmly within the CHI scope of topics, methods, and evaluation criteria, yet it felt different. What was it, and why did people seem pleasantly surprised? I watched the crowd of about 350 people and had some thoughts.

In the 1980s, CHI matured in North America as Participatory Design matured in the Nordic countries. The two influenced one another, but CHI was oriented toward commercial mass-market software and PD toward in-house or consultant-based development. Participatory Design was a far-sighted critique of approaches in Management Information Systems. When I worked in Scandinavia from 1989 to 1991, my colleagues were impressed with CHI but couldn't embrace the narrow focus on user interface and interaction issues: Getting the functionality right was always critical in their projects.

As computer use spread in the Nordic countries, many organizations—telecommunications companies, medical centers, government agencies, and so on—needed help with CHI-style interaction and interface issues. Talented young researchers and developers were hired and creatively adapted and applied CHI knowledge. Many of them were at NordiCHI; a few had been my students a decade ago in Norway.

NordiCHI intellectual and organizational leadership differs from that of CHI in two ways. First, it is younger. Early Participatory Design researchers did not fully embrace HCI and were not present at NordiCHI, whereas CHI founders of the same generation remain an active, graying presence at CHI.

Second, researchers and practitioners at NordiCHI are wrestling with HCI issues, but each is doing so within a specific domain: telecom, medical, government, financial, and so on. They aren't striving for results or techniques that are universally or very broadly applicable to the same extent that CHI researchers are. Universals are great when they apply, but they can't address many problems. The quest for broad truths may have diminishing returns when the most useful have been found and more design is in support of fine-grained activity that is contextually constrained. The future may lie in domain-specific results, the pursuit of which does not mean abandoning science for application.

Many in CHI have argued for more domain-specific work. But often it is to search in a domain for results that might generalize, a temporary sojourn in one or another domain by a researcher who retains a domain-independent core. I saw research that seemed stronger for not having such a core.

In conclusion, a greater emphasis on domain-centered work is plausibly the future of our science as well as our practice. NordiCHI may be an insightful critique of CHI today, just as Participatory Design critiqued MIS twenty years ago. As then, the critique is of an approach developed by the previous generation.

An American graduate student of the CHI persuasion who was in Europe dropped in on NordiCHI. He said, "This was a cool conference. I'll come back."

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