



Aaron Marcus and Associates, Inc.
California California and New York



1144 65th Street, Suite F
Emeryville, CA 94608-1053 USA

Tel: 510-601-0994
Fax: 510-547-6125
E-mail: Mail@AMandA.com
Web: www.AMandA.com

Design Lunch Summary:

Interactionary

Date

10 June 2001

AM+A Contacts

Luke Ball, Designer/Analyst
Phone: 510.601.0994x32
Email: luke@amanda.com

Experience Intelligent Design

User Interfaces
Information Visualization

Event Description

As part of AM+A's ongoing series of design lunches, Luke Ball and Eugene Chen organized a California-office-only version of a design exercise called "Interactionary." The game, originally envisioned and organized by Microsoft's Scott Berkun, was a highlight of both the CHI2000 and CHI2001 conferences. Luke and Eugene, who had been present at CHI01, endeavored to bring all the fun and educational qualities of the event to AM+A on a smaller scale.

Concept

Interactionary is a game-show-type exercise that allows two teams to work on a design problem, live on stage. Each team works one at a time, and is given ten minutes to work through the problem. Viewers can compare and contrast the different techniques and approaches used as they watch the different teams. The goal is to capture some of the intangibles of brainstorming and designing that are difficult to capture in more traditional formats, while allowing the audience to watch different teams of designers approaching a problem with a finite set of variables and a very compacted time frame. The merit of the game is twofold: making the session fun without being silly, and providing educational value without being didactic.

Scoring and Judging

The competing teams are scored by a panel of judges (all in good fun, of course!) on the merits of their "performance". Like CHI01, we used a system of four categories for scoring: teamwork, process, user focus, and design. Each category was worth ten points, and each panelist scored every team. The four categories:

Teamwork considered how well the team worked together, and how they organized their time and approach.

User Focus considered the attention paid to the user's needs and any accessibility issues.

Process considered the "methodology" they used for evaluating the problem, using the whiteboards, and evaluating design alternatives.

Design considered the feasibility and quality of their final solution.

After a team was ready on stage, the problem was read out loud to them and the audience. Then we started the clock, and gave the team two warnings, with five minutes and one minute remaining. We recommended that teams use their last minute to describe to the judges their final design idea.

Logistical Miscellany

The exercise involved the California office only so as to avoid teleconferencing, which would likely dilute the event. One critical issue was that Luke and Eugene badly wanted to participate, but were also needed to devise the questions and generally coordinate the event. Also, to maximize the educational qualities of the game, the teams (there was no audience, save the judges) would need to watch each other. To address both these issues, four questions were prepared, two of which would be chosen (two of the questions came from Scott Berkun and two were devised by Luke and Eugene); this way, two questions could be chosen randomly from the four, in order to prevent Luke or Eugene from giving too much forethought to any given challenge. Unlike CHI2001's Interactionary, no "twist" was added to the problem; there were enough x-factors existing to prohibit extraneous difficulty/explanation.

The teams were divided as follows:

Judges

Sam Ackerman
Joe Dobrowolski
Angela Gross
Morris Older

Team 1

Luke Ball (captain)
Claudia Dollendorfer
Kathleen Donahue
Darren Kennedy
Kent Miller

Team 2

Eugene Chen (captain)
Karen Brown
Junghwa Lee
Larry Guan

The teams consisted of AM+A's Designer/Analysts, while the Judging Team came from the administrative side of the company. The teams (after having their newfound affiliations declared to them) took approximately three minutes to confer and decide a strategy, then Luke and Eugene flipped a coin to see who would go first. Team two won the toss and elected to go second.

What happened

Team One (“Team Crab”)

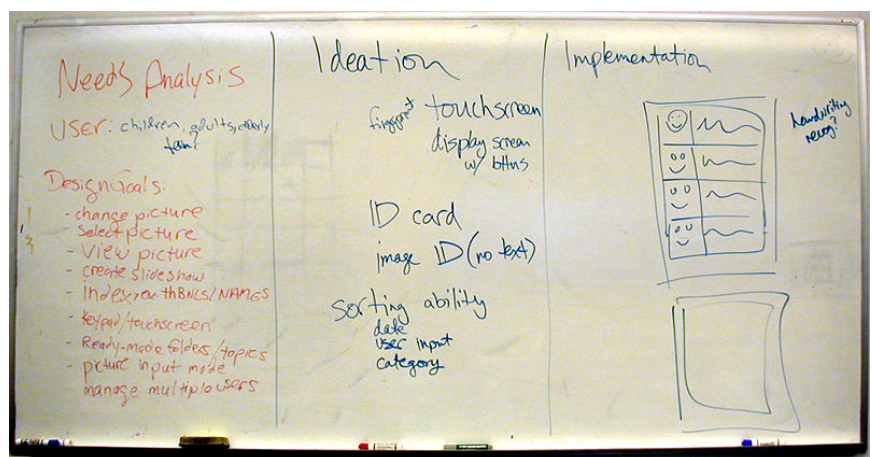
The Problem: Design a digital picture frame for a family home. Must support hundreds of pictures and multiple users. Functionality must include:

1. being able to add/delete pictures, and
2. being able to create/edit slideshows.

Team One chose to follow a simple process, and to not divide the team into roles, purely for simplicity’s sake. The steps of the process they chose were: Needs Analysis, Ideation, and Implementation, loosely imitating AM+A’s formal process. This lack of more specific steps and roles proved to be very disadvantageous.

The Needs Analysis phase began with listing the parameters of the challenge, including listing the users for the product, several design goals, and anticipated decision points along the way. With this established (it took about five minutes!), the group (being led mostly by Luke and Kent) began Ideation: coming up with possible design directions and original solutions to the problem. This step, too, went significantly longer than desired. With just under one minute left, very few final decisions had been made; sketching took place for all of half a minute, and the group was left with about 20 seconds to describe an incomplete (though thoroughly explored) design.

The partial solution involved a touch screen that allowed users to group photos without much text-entry, and to visually choose the current user with a screen of portraits (though that description may be more than the judges were told). The white board that resulted looked like this:



Team Two (“Team Bergers”)

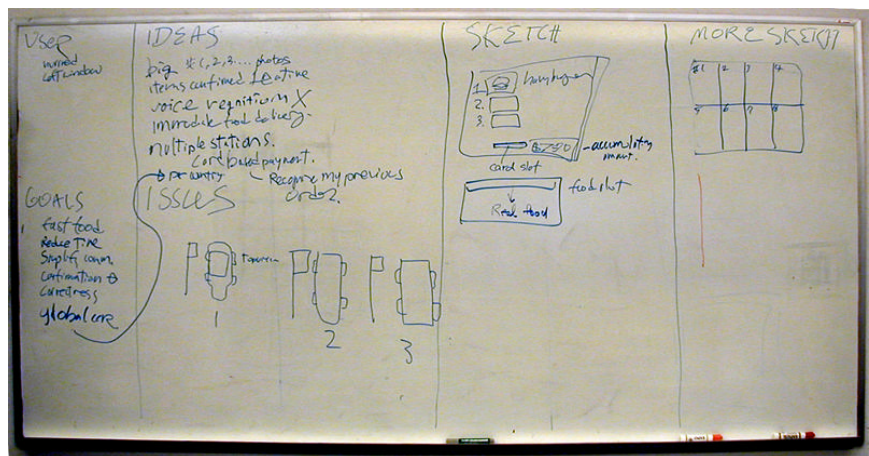
The Problem: McDonalds is redesigning their drive-thru window terminals. Design an interface that improves the user experience by...

1. reducing order time,
2. simplifying the communication, and
3. providing confirmation to the customer

Team Two went significantly farther than team one in dividing roles: they broke their four members out into facilitator, sketcher, documenter, and user interviewer. Karen immediately broke off from the group and began interviewing audience members for several minutes about their needs and wants from such a product; meanwhile Eugene, Junghwa, and Larry brainstormed and sketched at the whiteboard, incorporating Karen’s user feedback as it was made available. This seemed to make a big difference; not only did they get more user input, but the division of roles created less clutter and redundancy around the whiteboard.

The team’s process was also focused more on sketching while they worked. This fact gave them many other touch points for explanation, and allowed the group to keep a consistent and meaningful mental picture of the work in progress. There was enough time left at the end for explanation, and Karen did a great job of “selling” the design to the judges.

The resulting design featured multiple drive-up lanes (like a bank) that each housed a screen, which in turn provided visual confirmation of each order to the user. The white board that resulted looked like this:



Reflection

The final scores were as follows:

	Teamwork	User Focus	Process	Design	Total
Team One	5.5	7.0	6.5	3.5	22.5
Team Two	7.5	8.5	7.75	5.75	29.5

After completion of the formal competition, an interesting discussion ensued about the discoveries made from the game, and how they related to AM+A process and everyday practice.

Challenges

There were several factors that made the circumstances for this exercise less than ideal. First, the two teams had two different questions, and one team was able to go after watching the other. This problem (coupled with the captain's advanced knowledge of the questions) arguably counteracted many of the virtues of Interactionary. Secondly, like the actual CHI event, one uncontrolled variable was the size of the teams. Perhaps three teams of the three might be more effective in the future for the AM+A version. Lastly, the size and layout of both the AM+A conference room and whiteboard proved to be slightly prohibitive to this event; people's views were blocked, physical movement was blocked, and traffic jams resulted.

Lessons Learned

For the event planners, be sure to leave time to come up with good questions. The quality of the design challenges largely dictates the effectiveness of the event. The challenges should ideally be:

- User-Interface-centered, but not mired in commonly-addressed limitations and workarounds (e.g. not web design)
- specific enough to avoid pointless digressions and tangents (probably 2-4 specific design goals)
- open and nontraditional enough to allow for originality and innovation

One problem we encountered – easily dealt with – was not giving teams enough time (or context, really) to define team strategy or explore the group dynamic. Next time will also be easier, since everyone will have tried the exercise once before. Also, using a 15-minute design period might have allowed for a slightly more forgiving first experience with the game.

Successes

First and foremost: if this game is to be judged on popularity alone, it was a total and utter success! Everybody who participated enjoyed themselves and would like to do it again. However, under a more pragmatic lens, the exercise still stands up as a victory; viewing AM+A processes at work on a “macro” scale in a “micro” time-frame certainly offered many insights into how things are done (and not done) here. One employee insightfully suggested that Interactionary might prove to be a valuable tool for project scoping at launch meetings and initial brainstorming sessions.

Notes

Mad props to Scott Berkun who handed us some super-clutch questions in the eleventh hour! Without his last-second aid, the event surely would not have worked.

Large portions of the Event Description section (Concept and Scoring) were paraphrased from Scott Berkun’s original documentation. For more information on the original Interactionary events, visit his webpages on the subject: <http://www.uiweb.com/dsports/interactionary2001.htm> (2001) and <http://www.uiweb.com/dsports/interactionary.htm> (2000)