

Observed risk awareness in user centred design

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Abstract

Observational research on product usage aims to support design practitioners in designing safe and usable products. It is assumed that designers benefit from having insight into user-product interaction on the basis of the analysis of observational data. Knowledge of the way in which users tend to understand product characteristics and manipulate products may help them to generate successful design solutions for consumer products. This paper describes a design study in which findings from observational research were presented to novice designers. The outcomes reveal these designers' use of information and their strategies in designing a safe and usable gas lamp. Such evidence may support research and education that aims to develop (novice) designers' awareness of the relevance of information about user activities for designing safe and usable products.

Introduction

This paper addresses a design study to explore the effects of transmitting research findings on user activities to design practice: do designers pay attention to the way in which equipment is handled and do they use that information in solving the problem of how to improve safety? Very little work has been done on the communication of observational data of user activities to design practice. Findings from previous research indicate that designers consider summary results less interesting than in-depth information, such as gathered by thinking-aloud and interview transcripts (Kanis, 2002). Information that links user activities to product characteristics appeared to be the most useful in defining focal points for system properties that should be eliminated or changed. Research by Rooden (2001) indicates that designers may become focused by audio/visual descriptions, which may diminish their productivity in terms of predicting problems in user-product interaction. In Rooden's study designers were asked to consider possible usability problems. Half of them viewed a user trial with a coffee maker, the other half only got the coffee maker. It turned out that the video did not contribute to a wider insight into possible usability problems. From these data, it is uncertain whether designers benefit from the inspection of detailed descriptions of safety and usability problems.