An empirical validation of four different measures to quantify user interface characteristics based on a general descriptive concept for interaction points

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Published: 01/01/1996

Citation for published version (APA):
An Empirical Validation of Four Different Measures to Quantify
User Interface Characteristics Based on a General Descriptive
Concept for Interaction Points

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Abstract

The main problems of standards (e.g., ISO 9241) in
the context of usability of software quality are, that
they can not measure all relevant product features in
a task independent way. We present a new approach
to measure user interface quality in a quantitative
way. First, we developed a concept to describe user
interfaces on a granularity level, that is detailed
enough to preserve important interface character-
sistics, and is general enough to cover most of
known interface types. We distinguish between diffe-
rent types of 'interaction points'. With these kinds of
interaction points we can describe several types of
interfaces (CUI: command, menu, form-fill-in; GUI:
desktop, direct manipulation, multimedia, etc.). We
carried out two different comparative usability stu-
dies to validate our quantitative measures. The re-
sults of one other published comparative usability
study can be predicted. Results of six different inter-
faces are presented and discussed. One of the most
important result is that the dialog flexibility must
exceed a threshold of 15—measured with two of our
metrics—to increase significantly the usability.

1. Introduction

The main problems of standards (e.g., DIN 66234,
ISO 9241) to quantify software quality of usability
are, that they can not measure all relevant product
features in a task independent way [9]. To measure
interactive qualities four different views on human
computer interaction currently exists (see also [1], p.
651; [15]).

(1) The interaction-oriented view: usability quality
is measured in terms of how the user interacts
with the product ("usability testing"). This view
is the most common one. All kinds of usability
testing with "real" users are subsumed in this
category [6].

(2) The user-oriented view: usability quality is
measured in terms of the mental effort and atti-
tude of the user ("questionnaires" and "inter-
views").

(3) The product-oriented view: usability quality is
measured in terms of the ergonomic attributes of
the product itself (quantitative measures).

(4) The formal view: usability is formalised and si-
mulated in terms of mental models (formal
concepts). Karat [8] describes formal methods
in the context of "theory-based" evaluation.

The interactive qualities of user interfaces currently
are quantified in the context of interaction-oriented
view and user-oriented view, but these both appro-
aches are time consuming and more or less expen-
sive [7].

2. A descriptive concept of interaction
points

We present a new approach to measure user interface
quality in a quantitative way. First, we developed a
concept to describe user interfaces on a granularity
level, that is detailed enough to preserve important
interface characteristics, and is general enough to
cover most of known interface types (command lan-
guage, CUI, GUI, multimedia, etc.). Different types
of user interfaces can be quantified and distinc-
tioned by the general concept of "interaction points".
Regarding to the interactive semantic of "interaction
points" (IPs), different types of IPs must be discrimi-
nated (see also [3]).

An interactive system can be distinguished in a dia-
log and an application manager. So, we distinguish
between dialog objects (DO, e.g. "window") and
application objects (AO, e.g. "text document"), and
dialog functions (DF, e.g. "open window") and
application functions (AF, e.g. "insert section mark").
Each function $f \in F$, that changes the state of an
application object, is an application function. All
other functions are dialog functions (e.g., window
operations like move, resize, close). The complete set
of all description terms is defined in Figure 1 and Table 1.

A dialog context (DC) is defined by all available objects and functions in the actual system state. If in the actual DC the set of available functions changes, then the system changes from one DC to another. All dialog objects (functions, resp.) in the actual DC are either perceptible (PO, PF) or hidden (HO, HF). Four different mapping functions relate perceptible structures to hidden objects or functions.

**Figure 1.** The interactive space (IS) consists of the object space (OS) and the function space (FS); OS and FS can be distinguished in perceptual and hidden objects and interaction points (IPs); each IP corresponds to an implemented function.

**Table 1.** The interactive space (IS) consists of the object space (OS) and the function space (FS); FS can be distinguished in perceptible and hidden interactive functions (PF and HF).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IS := OS x FS</th>
<th>[interaction space]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DC ∈ IS</td>
<td>[dialog context]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OS := PO ∪ HO</td>
<td>[object space]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FS := PF ∪ HF</td>
<td>[function space]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PO := PDO ∪ PAO</td>
<td>([perceptible) representations of objects]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HO := HDO ∪ HAO</td>
<td>([hidden) objects]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PF := PDFIP ∪ PAFIP</td>
<td>([perceptible) representations of functions]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HF := HDFIP ∪ HAFIP</td>
<td>([hidden functions]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PDFIP := {(df, pf) ∈ HDFIP x PF: pf = δ(df)}</td>
<td>([perceptible) represented DFIP]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAFIP := {(af, pf) ∈ HAFIP x PF: pf = α(af)}</td>
<td>([perceptible) represented AFIP]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IP := DFIP ∪ AFIP</td>
<td>[interaction points]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DFIP := PDFIP ∪ HDFIP</td>
<td>[IPs of dialog functions]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFIP := PAFIP ∪ HAFIP</td>
<td>[IPs of application functions]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>δ := mapping function of a df ∈ HDFIP to an appropriate pf ∈ PF.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>α := mapping function of an af ∈ HAFIP to an appropriate pf ∈ PF.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PDO := {(do, po) ∈ HDO x PO: po = μ(do)}</td>
<td>([perceptible) represented DO]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAO := {(ao, po) ∈ HAO x PO: po = ν(ao)}</td>
<td>([perceptible) represented AO]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>μ := mapping function of a dialog object do ∈ DO to an appropriate po ∈ PO.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ν := mapping function of an application object ao ∈ AO to an appropriate po ∈ PO.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Each interaction point (IP) is related to at least one interactive function. If both mapping function's $\delta$ and $\alpha$ are of the type $1:m$(any), then the user interface is a command interface. If both mapping function's $\delta$ and $\alpha$ are of the type $1:1$, then the user interface is a menu or direct manipulative interface where each $f \in FS$ is related to a perceptible structure $PF$ (see Figure 3). The perceptual structure (visible, audible, or tactile) of a function (PF) can be, e.g., an icon, earcon, menu option, command prompt, or other mouse sensitive areas.

The intersection of PF and PO is sometimes not empty: $PF \cap PO \neq \emptyset$. In the context of graphical interfaces icons are elements of this intersection, e.g., PDFIP "copy" $\equiv$ PDO "clipboard", PAFIP "delete" $\equiv$ PAO "trash". Each interaction point (IP) is related to at least one interactive function (see Figure 2).

One important difference between a menu and a direct manipulative interface can be the "interactive directness". A user interface is 100% interactively direct, if the user has fully access in the actual dialog context to all $f \in FS$ [10]. Good interface design is characterised by optimising the multitude of DFIPs (e.g. "flatten" the menu tree; see [11]) and by allocating an appropriate PDFIP to the remaining HDFIPs.

Figure 2. A schematic presentation of the I/O interface, the dialog and the application manager of an interactive system with a menu tree of two levels.

Figure 3. An actual dialog context (DC) of the text processing program MsWord with the representation space of the interactive object (PAO: text document; PDO: clipboard), and the representation space (PF: marked by circles) of the interactive functions (PAFIP: text entry point, undo; PDFIP: menu options).
3. Quantitative measures of user interface characteristics

To estimate the amount of "feedback" of an interface a ratio is calculated: "number of PFs" (\(\#PF = \#PDFIP + \#PAFIP\)) divided by the "number of HFs" (\(\#HF = \#HDFIP + \#HAFIP\)) per dialog context. This ratio quantifies the average "amount of functional feedback" of the function space (FB; see Formula 1). We abbreviate the number of all different dialog contexts with \(D\). A GUI has often a very large number of DCs. To handle this problem we take only all task related DCs into account. Doing this, our measures will give us only a lower estimation for GUIs.

The average length (\(\text{lng}\)) of all possible sequences of interactive operations (\(\text{PATH}\)) from the top level dialog context (DC, e.g., 'start context') down to DCs with the desired HAFIP or HDFIP can be used as a possible quantitative measure of "interactive directness" (ID, see Formula 2). The measure ID delivers two indices: one for HAFIPs and one for HDFIPs. A \(\text{PATH}\) has no cycles and has not more than two additional dialog operations compared with the shortest sequence. An interface with the maximum ID of 100% has only one DC with path lengths of one dialog step. We abbreviate the number of all different dialog paths with \(P\).

To quantify the flexibility of the application manager we calculate the average number of HAFIPs per dialog context (DFA; see Formula 3). To quantify the flexibility of the dialog manager we calculate the average number of HDFIPs per dialog context (DFD; see Formula 4). A modeless dialog state has maximal flexibility (e.g., "command" interfaces, or Oberon [17]).

Let us apply the five measures to our example in Figure 2. The average amount of functional feedback is: FB = 100% * \((4/4 + 6/8) / 2 = 87.5\%\)

The average amount of interactive directness is:

\[
\text{ID}_{\text{HAFIP}} = 100\% \times \left( (2^1 + 5^2) / 7 \right)^{-1} = 58.3\%
\]

\[
\text{ID}_{\text{HDFIP}} = 100\% \times \left( (2^1 + 3^2) / 5 \right)^{-1} = 62.5\%
\]

The average amount of flexibility is:

\[
\text{DFA} = (2 + 5) / 2 = 3.5 \text{ and} \\
\text{DFD} = (2 + 3) / 2 = 2.5
\]

To interpret the results of our measures appropriately, we need empirical studies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functional feedback:</th>
<th>(\frac{\text{FB}}{100%} \times \frac{1}{D} \sum_{d=1}^{D} \frac{#PF_d}{#HF_d} ) (1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interactive directness:</td>
<td>(\frac{\text{ID}}{100%} \times \left{ \frac{1}{P} \sum_{p=1}^{P} \text{lng}(\text{PATH}_p) \right}^{-1} ) (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application flexibility:</td>
<td>(\frac{\text{DFA}}{1/D} \sum_{d=1}^{D} \frac{#HAFIP_d}{#HAFIP_d} ) (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialog flexibility:</td>
<td>(\frac{\text{DFD}}{1/D} \sum_{d=1}^{D} \frac{#HDFIP_d}{#HDFIP_d} ) (4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. The empirical validation

We carried out two different comparative usability studies to validate our measures [12] [2]. A third external comparative study [5] was used for a cross validation. All three investigated software products have the same application manager, but two different dialog managers each.

4.1 Results and discussion of experiment-I

We [12] compared an old, ascii-based CUI-interface (menu, as in Figure 3) of a relational database management system with a new GUI-interface (desktop). The main result of this empirical investigation was, that the mean task solving time with the GUI is significantly shorter than with the CUI interface (see Table 2). How can we explain this difference? Our first interpretation of this outcome was the supposed different amount of 'transparency' [16]. One aspect of 'transparency' is 'feedback' (see [4], pp. 318-321).

Interesting is the fact, that the GUI supports the user with less "functional feedback" (FB = 66%, Table 3) on average than the CUI (FB = 73%). This amount of FB of the CUI is caused by 22 small DCs with FB
The GUI has only 14 DCs with FB = 100%. The amount of functional feedback seems not to be related to the advantage of GUIs. There must be another reason.

The "interactive directness" is not quite different between both interfaces (CUI: ID = 24.7% for AFIPs and 23.2% for DFIPs versus GUI: ID = 22.5% for AFIPs and 25.5% for DFIPs, see Table 3). Only the two measures of "flexibility" show an important difference between both interfaces (CUI: DFA = 12.1 and DFD = 10.1 versus GUI: DFA = 19.5 and DFD = 20.4, see Table 3). We interpret this result to the effect that flexibility must exceed a threshold to be effective (DFD, DFA > 15).

Table 2. Overview of the three empirical validation studies and their outcomes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experiment</th>
<th>Interface type, type of dialog structure</th>
<th>Application type, No. of data points, Statistical result of the mean comparison</th>
<th>Dependent variable, Result of the dependent variable, Mean ± standard dev.</th>
<th>Interface type, type of dialog structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>CUI, hierarchical, Relational database, N = 12, [12]</td>
<td>Task solving time, CUI: 683 s ± 556 s</td>
<td>GUI: 418 s ± 437 s (p = .002)</td>
<td>CUI: Relational Task solving time, CUI: 683 s f 556 s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>GUI, hierarchical, Relational database, N = 12, [12]</td>
<td>Task solving time, GUI: 418 s ± 437 s</td>
<td>CUI: Relational Task solving time, CUI: 683 s f 556 s (p = .002)</td>
<td>GUI: Relational Task solving time, GUI: 418 s k 437 s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>Multimedia, hierarchical, Information system, N = 12, [2]</td>
<td>Task solving time, MMhier: 582 s ± 228 s</td>
<td>MMhier ≤ MMnet (p = .085)</td>
<td>Multimedia, Information Task solving time, MMhier: 582 s f 228 s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>CUI, hierarchical, Simulation tool, N = 20, [5]</td>
<td>Target discrepancy, CUlhier: 49 % ± 15 %</td>
<td>CUlhier = CUlnet (p = .784)</td>
<td>Simulation tool, Target discrepancy, CUlhier: 49 % f 15 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>CUI, net shaped, Simulation tool, N = 15, [5]</td>
<td>Target discrepancy, CUlnet: 48 % ± 18 %</td>
<td>CUlhier = CUlnet (p = .784)</td>
<td>Simulation tool, Target discrepancy, CUlnet: 48 % f 18 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. The results of the quantitative measures ID, FB, DFA, and DFD the six different user interfaces. P is the number of all different dialog PATHs for an AFIP or a DFIP; D is the number of all different DCs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experiment</th>
<th>Interface type, dialog structure</th>
<th>P(AFIP)</th>
<th>ID(AFIP) %</th>
<th>P(DFIP)</th>
<th>ID(DFIP) %</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>FB %</th>
<th>DFA</th>
<th>DFD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>CUI, hierarchical</td>
<td>434</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>362</td>
<td>23.2</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>GUI, hierarchical</td>
<td>547</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>570</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>20.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>Multimedia, hierarchical</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>Multimedia, net shaped</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>40.7</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>46.3</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>CUI, hierarchical</td>
<td>720</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>693</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>363</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>CUI, net shaped</td>
<td>490</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>1053</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>389</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.2 Results and discussion of experiment-II

If our interpretation of the outcome of experiment-I is correct then we cannot find a significant performance difference for dialog structures that remain under the assumed threshold of 15. To control the factor of feedback we carried out this second experiment with a multimedia information system that has 100% functional feedback for both interfaces [2].

We picked out a multimedia information system with a hierarchical dialog structure where DFA and DFD are clearly under 15. We implemented a comparable system with a net-shaped dialog structure where DFA and DFD had nearly the same ratio of flexibility as in experiment-I:

\[
\frac{\text{DFAGUI}}{\text{DFACUI}} = 1.6 \quad \text{and} \quad \frac{\text{DFAMMnet}}{\text{DFAMMhier}} = 1.2
\]

\[
\frac{\text{DFDGUI}}{\text{DFDCUI}} = 2.0 \quad \text{and} \quad \frac{\text{DFDMnet}}{\text{DFDMhier}} = 2.6
\]

As we predicted, we cannot find a significant performance difference between both types of dialog structures (see Table 2). To make sure that our results are not biased by our own expectations, we carried out a cross validation study. To do this, (1) we need the outcomes of an external independent comparison study between two different interfaces and (2) the possibility to apply our quantitative measures to all DCs of both interfaces. The empirical investigation of Grützmacher [5] fulfills both conditions.

4.3 Results and discussion of experiment-III

The study of Grützmacher [5] was carried out to investigate research questions in the context of how to control a complex domain with a simulation tool. One independent factor was varied: the dialog structure (hierarchical versus net-shaped). This simulation tool was implemented on a mainframe computer system with character oriented terminals (IBM 3270 terminals).

The dependent variable was not 'task solving time' but 'target discrepancy' as a performance measure. The sample consists of 20 users with the hierarchical dialog structure and 15 users with the net-shaped structure. The main result was that the factor 'dialog structure' did not show a significant difference. Given our interpretation of the last two experiments we expected a value for DFA and DFD under 15.

With the generous support of Grützmacher we were able to analyze all 752 dialog contexts for both interfaces.

For the hierarchical CUI we got the following results (see last two rows in Table 3):

DFA = 2.0 and DFD = 1.9

and for the net-shaped CUI:

DFA = 1.3 and DFD = 2.7

These results for DFA and DFD of both CUI interfaces give us a sufficient evidence that the following assumptions seem to be correct:

(1) We can measure the dialog flexibility in a task independent and quantitative way, and
(2) the values of DFA and DFD must exceed the threshold of 15.

5. Conclusion

Using the four quantitative measures for "feedback", "interactive directness" and "flexibility" to measure the interactive quality of user interfaces, we are able to classify the most common types: command, menu, desktop (see [13]). The command interface is characterized by high interactive directness, but this interface type has a very low amount of visual feedback. Especially graphical interfaces (e.g., multimedia) can support users with sufficient interactive directness. GUIs are characterized by high dialog flexibility.

The presented approach to quantify usability attributes and the interactive quality of user interfaces is a first step in the right direction. The next step is a more detailed analysis of the relevant characteristics and validation of these characteristics in further empirical investigations. In the context of standardization we can use our criteria to test user interfaces for conformity with standards.

A more detailed description of all introduced terms and further applications are given in Rauterberg [14].

Acknowledgements

We have to thank the following persons for their generous support: Dr. Karl Schlagenhauf and Raimund Mollenhauer at ADI Software Inc., Karlsruhe (D), Andreas Grützmacher and Prof. Eberhard Ulich at the ETH, Zürich (CH).

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