UX as Disruption:
Managing Team Conflict as a Productive Resource

Emma J. Rose, University of Washington Tacoma, Tacoma, WA, USA
Josh Tenenberg, University of Washington Tacoma, Tacoma, WA, USA

ABSTRACT

Over the past 30 years, there has been an ongoing shift in software from a system-centered to user-centered approach. When user-centered approaches are introduced to teams and organizations, conflict often emerges. Conflict could be dismissed as idiosyncratic differences among team members. In this paper, the authors account for conflicts as a clash of worldview between occupational communities: engineers and UX designers. They define the engineering worldview as the application of science and mathematics to structure sociotechnical processes to solve concrete, pre-specified problems, from an external perspective. By contrast, the UX worldview is a human-centered exploration, through iterative cycles of design and inquiry, of the contingent and context-sensitive ways people mediate activities with technologies and systems. Interpersonal conflict in teams symbolizes a conflict between sharply contrasting ways of seeing the world. By considering the root causes, project managers can productively leverage the expertise of both communities by managing expectations, relations, and artifacts.

Keywords: Boundary, Negotiating Artifacts, Engineering, Managing Teams, Team Conflict, User Experience

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Another daily stand up meeting, another argument between the software engineer and the user experience designer. The project manager is ready to throw up her hands. The team is working towards the same end goal: to release a great piece of software. However, it feels like every conversation turns into a battle.

UX Designer: Based on our research, the user, who is represented by the persona “Tom,” needs a way to save his work and continue later.
**Software Engineer:** Really? If it was me, I’d just do it in one sitting. This would mean we have to add a log in system and manage different roles and access levels. It’s a whole new feature. Adding that at this point in time is going to require a bunch of rework.

**UX Designer:** When we observed people like Tom in the field, we could see that interruptions are part of their workflow. If Tom can’t save his work that means he might lose a lot of time re-entering the same information. It’s frustrating for him.

**Software Engineer:** I’m still not convinced that you can say that’s necessary. First of all, people have gotten used to how it works. And how can you say this based on talking with what, 8 people? What about the business team? They have never mentioned a save feature. It’s nowhere in the requirements. And again, it feels really late to be adding an entirely new feature.

**UX Designer:** Well, that might be because this is the first time we’re actually looked at how people use our current system.

**Software Engineer:** It seems like if the users needed that feature – we would have heard about it before now. I’m just not convinced.

**Project Manager:** OK, let’s see if we can figure out a compromise that doesn’t set us back on the schedule.

This scenario may be familiar to professionals who have worked on software projects, especially in organizations where user experience (UX) practices are new. Projects can be disrupted for a myriad of reasons including the introduction of new processes, personality conflicts, and poor project management. However, we argue that the introduction of UX processes and the resulting tensions that occur signal something other than idiosyncratic project strife. In this article, we argue that introducing UX can disrupt existing processes within technical teams due to a clash of worldviews between UX practitioners and software engineers. Understanding the root cause of this clash and skillfully managing the resulting disruption can be a productive strategy for organizations.

To examine this disruption, we first contextualize the ongoing shift in software development from a system-centered to a user-centered approach as UX practices are increasingly integrated into product development teams. Although this dichotomy between development approaches has been previously noted (Johnson, 1998; Spinuzzi, 2003), it has been treated more as an objective feature of design work than a historical product of two distinct occupational communities: engineers and UX designers. We then examine the different worldviews embodied by these two communities by describing how those both inside and outside these communities represent the work of these different communities. We privileged sources that were created by the community for the community, including professional and accreditation organizations. On one side, we see technical rationality as the engineering worldview: engineering as grounded in mathematics and the sciences, narrowly scoped problem solving, objective and third person, socio-politically neutral and context-independent. On the other side, we see the UX worldview: UX as human-centered, expansive and all encompassing, subjective and first-person, a moral imperative that is politically charged, contingent and contextual. We then argue that community worldviews shape the perception, values, and norms of individual members of these communities. When members from these different communities come into contact within project teams, conflict is often a result, especially when UX is new to these teams. Yet these conflicts need not lead to negative consequences. The process and outcome of negotiating design decisions can have the potential to be productive, rather than adversarial. We conclude by outlining strategies that can help project managers negotiate these different worldviews. By successfully managing these disruptions, project managers can support teams and therefore organizations as they transition towards a more user-centered approach to developing software.
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