Software design that puts the user at the center

With some help from Microsoft, young Israeli app developers are coached to consider consumers rather than code

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An application that helps you wear your phone from constantly checking your cell phone, a mini-social network designed for a single apartment building and a competitive basketball game between cities that aims to promote recycling. These were just some of the projects developed by students at the Media Innovation Lab of the Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya. They will be presented tomorrow at MilAB's Annual Innovation Event and exhibition. MilAB is part of the Sammy Ofer School of Communications.

Clashers, an app for finding and sharing music among passersby, was chosen to represent the IDC at the Microsoft Research Design Expo 2013 in July. This year nine schools from around the world competed in the annual design contest, held at Microsoft headquarters in Washington state. (The last Israeli school to be selected as a finalist was Jerusalem’s Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, in 2004.)

Clashers allows users to identify other app users up to 100 meters away, to look at the songs they are listening to, hear them on YouTube and, if they wish, to store them in Clashers. The app is available for free download from Google Play. [https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.clashers]

"It's pretty rare for a company [Microsoft] to invest money and effort to promote research in industry, and it definitely doesn't happen enough in Israel," says Oren Zuckerman, founder and co-director, with Guy Hoffman, of MilAB. "Research whose result is not necessarily the development of a commercial product is almost nonexistent in local industry," says Zuckerman, adding, "in the United States, by contrast, many bodies are involved in promoting research and knowledge. This is part of our agenda."

So how does this manifest itself?

"One of the most significant things for us is design that focuses on the user, or more specifically, the human being (human-centered design)," Zuckerman says. "We try to teach our students to understand the needs of the user, through a guided process."

"Shouldn't this be obvious?" Hoffman: "What seems obvious to us is not at all obvious if one looks at what's going on in the world, and certainly in Israel. We take students who are studying, for example, computer sciences, and insert them into a design process."

"They are totally unfamiliar with this way of thinking; they're used to thinking about what the problem is, and the best way to solve it. We tell them: Think totally differently. Make sketches, prepare a storyboard. Tell a story. During an entire semester we talk to them about narrative, about how to create a story. It completely messes up the way they think about technology. Suddenly it's not about electronic circuits or code, but thinking about the person. To a designer, it's clear that when he thinks about a chair, he isn't going to think only about the material, but about the person who's going to be sitting on it."

"Zuckerman: "If you ask representatives of the local startup industries who should be founding startups, they'll say businessmen, techies or marketing people. The idea of a product that includes components of design, psychology, user experience, user behavior and communication is secondary for them."

"We believe that you have to reverse the equation: The product has to lead the process more than the business or the technology. Everyone talks about this, but when you come to an investor, he wants to know where the businessman is," says Zuckerman.

"Ruth Kikin-Gil, a design strategist at Microsoft who mentored the MilAB students over the course of the year, stresses the importance of all three components of product design: business, technology and experience.

"If you remove one of these components from the equation, you'll get something that isn't whole," she explains. "You can't make something that's not economically feasible, whose technology doesn't work or that offers a poor user experience. You need a balance between these three elements to create a product that's truly whole."

In addition to the interactive experience having been diverged ages in response to human needs, one of the most salient characteristics of the projects on display at the expo is the tension and the blurring of boundaries between the digital world and the physical world.

"As we believe technology must come to the physical world rather than going to the technology," explains Zuckerman. "One of the things that pleasantly surprised us was how the young generation – the Facebook generation, for whom much communication is no longer face-to-face – is still involved with the physical world, with intimate communication, with the search for depth and authenticity, things that we might not have thought engaged young people whose average age is 25."

"Hoffman says that the students expressed much nostalgia for simpler times. "They seek face-to-face encounters, chance meetings, things that are less planned and less digital, that are less weighed down with information," he says. "Many of today's startups deal with giving coupons to people who log into the wireless network at some bar, to streamline a process, to save some 10 percent here and there. Thankfully we haven't seen that here; here there aren't so many things connected to efficiency or advertising, which you see a lot of in high tech. Israel is the only country in the world in which the question "how to make something" is always "how to make money.""

Zuckerman: "If you look at the development of successful products on the Internet, like Tumblr, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, their founders never dealt at the start of the process with how they planned to make money. They dealt with the question of how to make an amazing product."