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Extremes of User Experience and Design Thinking: Beards and Mustaches

The characteristics that differentiate us human beings, and at the same time unite us across different regions of the world, is a matter that fascinates me.

Recently, I took a half-hour journey to a nearby Austin, Texas, hot-rod show to entertain my grandchildren. On the way, to keep the grandchildren interested, I happened to search on my phone through the Internet for the world's longest beards and mustaches on men, and hair on women (about 18 feet long was the Guinness record for women, as I recall). We enjoyed looking at these hirsute oddities.

So, it was not without previous demonstration of interest that, just after my son dropped me off at a downtown stop to catch the No. 100 bus to the airport, a fellow came up to me and asked if I was at the outbound stop headed to the airport or the inbound stop. The inbound stop was just around the corner, and it was understandably confusing to a non-native. I could not help myself, and immediately became social, extroverted, and interested in his unusual beard and his unusual subset of humanity. I complimented him on his outstanding growth and mentioned that I had just been searching the world for images of long beards and mustaches to show my grandchildren.

There began a 10-minute conversation with Patrick Dawson of

Patrick Dawson, a winning participant in the Annual Austin Men's Beard and Moustache Competition.

Seattle. He was just now returning after participating in the Annual Austin Men's Beard and Moustache Competition, which had taken place Saturday night. Had I only known! This was Patrick's second visit to Austin for purposes of this competition, sponsored by the Austin Hair Club (!?) There were two competitions that day. The first, the open competition, was open to a maximum of about 250 competitors and took place at the Mohawk Arena, which was filled to capacity with about 1000 spectators. The three winners in each of the categories (goatees, beards, mustaches, mutton chops, etc.) compete in the evening competition, which features lots of booze and

rowdiness. Patrick had won second place for goatees and first place for mustaches in the open competition and had placed first for "partial beards and goatees" in the evening competition. He had a precious trophy to prove his achievement in his travel bag.

There is even a women's competition, called the Whiskerina, featuring an award for the most creative strap-on beard made out of whatever they choose to use. I can imagine the creativity.

Patrick told me more during the half-hour sojourn to the Austin Airport. There is also a World Beard and Moustache Competition that takes place every two years. The last one was held in October 2015 in Leogang,

There is even a women's competition, called the Whiskerina, featuring an award for the most creative strap-on beard.

Austria, south of Salzburg. Guess what? Patrick won first place for his goatee last year! Guess what again? The next World Beard and Moustache Competition will take place in Austin during Labor Day weekend, September 1–3, 2017. Ladies and gentlemen, mark your calendars!

Patrick gave me permission to publish his photo and said he was very happy to participate in these competitions, which do not award money, just fame and honor, and also raise money for worthy charities. He said the last one raised \$10,000. Not bad for some whiskers.

I felt gloriously happy that I had been able to meet him, learn these strange, exotic details, and enjoy my short time with him. His braided goatee made me nostalgically long for my 24-inch hair braid of the 1970s. Sigh...

What did this teach me about user-experience design? First of all, that the exotic differences of human interests, preferences, expectations, values, signs, and rituals is more fabulously complex than one could ever imagine. At the same time, it seemed heartening that people from all walks of life, all kinds of countries, and all kinds of cultures, could find shared enthusiasms and gather to honor the best of their breed or brood, while at the same time working toward humanitarian goals. It reinforced, for me, the necessity, if one is dedicated to “knowing thy user,” to do thorough research in the target community, to develop adequate personas and use scenarios, and to thoughtfully consider the language, concepts, images, and activities of these groups when seeking to develop outstanding user experiences.

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