

User Interfaces; Who Cares?*

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According to Michael Stonebraker's experiences, if you select a group of well-known experts in database research and ask them to identify the domains where meeting user's requirements is of primary importance and at the same time more significant advances are needed and more research should be promoted, user interfaces comes out as number one in the list. This has been the case over the last decade.

Despite such a strong incentive, research on user interfaces seems to remain marginal within the database community. Part of this community considers that this is a domain for development, not for research. Often researchers feel that the specification of an user interface is not much more than assembling widgets in some order. Significantly, the VLDB 94 program offers no contribution on user interfaces.

This panel will try to investigate the reasons for such a gap between discourse and practice, and look for remedies.

It will start by setting the scene:

- what is the current state of the art in user/DBMS interfaces?
- what is the expected progress in terms of traditional evolution? (what advances can be expected through a more efficient usage or combination of known techniques (more artificial intelligence? more deduction? more fuzziness? more ...?))

Second, it will discuss novelties which depart from traditional evolution:

- which novelties will stem from a change in the nature of data? (i.e., multimedia support)?
- which new functionalities will have to be introduced because of new approaches to database management? (for instance, functionalities for support of cooperative/federated work)?
- what impact, if any, on database interfaces can be expected from changes in interface development technologies (user interface management systems, graphical libraries, GUI standards, ...).

Finally, the panel will try to reach some consensus on some basic issues:

- what is the specificness of database user interfaces with respect to application interfaces or other similar software?
- is there any room for research on user interfaces in the database community?
- can we turn user interfaces into a scientific discipline, or an engineering discipline (as software engineering, for instance)?
- what can effectively be done to promote research leading to more frequent contributions from this area to VLDB?

*Panel sitting is subject to confirmation

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Proceedings of the 20th VLDB Conference
Santiago, Chile, 1994