

# Toward Crowdsourced User Studies for Software Evaluation

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## Goal

This work-in-progress paper describes a *vision*, i.e., that of *fast and reliable software user experience studies conducted with the help from the crowd*. Commonly, user studies are controlled in-lab activities that require the instruction, monitoring, interviewing and compensation of a number of participants that are typically hard to recruit. The goal of this work is to study which user study methods can instead be crowdsourced to generic audiences to enable the conduct of user studies without the need for expensive lab experiments. The challenge is understanding how to conduct crowdsourced studies without giving up too many of the guarantees in-lab settings are able to provide.

User studies are experimental and observational research methods for the measurement of an artifact's properties as perceived by its users (we specifically focus on software artifacts, such as Web applications). They are, for instance, used to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of different visualization techniques, to understand if theoretical principles hold in practical settings, to measure if requirements are met by a given software design, or to validate and test usability. Over the last decades, user studies have increasingly found their way into software engineering practice, and today it is almost impossible to find successful applications that do not consider the perception of their users. Facebook and Google, for example, can rely on an unprecedented user base to test new features on the fly and to adjust them according to observed performance or preferences. The problem is that not everybody has access to such a user base, e.g., because the own application has only a small target user group or because the application is still under development.

Streamlining the necessary methods, involving the crowd, and providing user study support as a service while keeping study outputs reliable can thus make user studies significantly more accessible, to the benefit of everybody. The focus of this work is on how to crowdsource different user study methods conceptually and technically, i.e., on how to design effective tasks for user studies, gather and analyze data, guarantee quality and achieve representativeness. The question which method suits which research question is outside of its scope.

## A Success Story

The idea for this proposal stems from a concrete experience with a crowdsourced user study (Roy Chowdhury *et al.* 2014) in which we used Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk, <https://www.mturk.com>) to validate the effectiveness of a research prototype. The prototype was a recommender system for a graphical mashup modeling environment (Yahoo! Pipes) that was able to provide modelers with on-the-fly recommendations of model patterns; if a recommendation was accepted, the respective pattern was automatically woven into the model under development. The study wanted to assess if recommending model patterns indeed provides benefits in terms of reduced modeling time, reduced number of user interactions, and reduced thinking time (time between two user interactions). For this purpose, it was necessary to enroll a number of participants, to split them into a control group (without recommendations) and a test group (with recommendations), to provide them with the recommender system (a plug-in of Yahoo! Pipes) and a modeling scenario to develop, to log their user interactions, to reward them for their work, to collect data, and to run a set of statistical hypothesis tests to verify the claims of the work.

Despite the typical difficulties of crowdsourcing (e.g., worker selection, quality control, reward tuning, the implementation and provisioning of MTurk-external software for activity logging), we were able to enroll 30 participants, to validate the prototype in few days and to achieve statistical significance. The same prototype was also tested in two in-lab studies that confirmed the results obtained with the crowd (Roy Chowdhury *et al.* 2014), incepting the idea of a more general theory of crowdsourced user studies.

## State of The Art

A wealth of literature exists on user studies in the area of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI). For instance, Lazar *et al.* (2010) provide an excellent introduction to HCI research methods, such as surveys, diaries, interviews, usability tests, etc. and the respective experiment designs and statistical data analysis requirements. Albert and Tullis (2013) more specifically focus on measuring user experience and define a set of metrics, e.g., for performance measures, self-reporting, or comparative analyzes. In (Albert *et al.* 2009), the same authors elaborate on how to conduct remote, online user experience studies, while Brush *et al.* (2004) re-

port that their participants (local and remote) even explicitly preferred remote follow-up studies over local ones. Bakshy et al. (2014) describe PlanOut, a domain-specific language that separates experimental design and application logic in online experiments.

The idea of crowdsourcing user studies was discussed among the first by Kittur et al. (2008) in 2008, soon after the emergence of the first crowdsourcing platforms. While the potential for crowdsourced user studies (in particular, surveys) was thus identified early, the authors however pointed out some crowd-specific limitations, such as the impossibility to make between-subject studies (it's typically not possible to control which worker performs which task) and the difficulty to measure subjective or qualitative properties (there is no ground truth for opinions that can be used to assess correctness). Nevertheless, Difallah et al. (2015) report an increase of survey tasks published on MTurk in the last years, underlining the importance of this kind of method.

As for the differences between in-lab and crowdsourced user studies, the success story described previously (Roy Chowdhury et al. 2014) (a complex study with different user measurements and the coordination of multiple study steps) produced similar development time, user interaction and thinking time measures across in-lab and crowdsourced experiments. Other researchers also compared these two types of experiment settings (Heer and Bostock 2010; Liu et al. 2012; Nebeling et al. 2013) concluding results in both settings with lower costs and more diversity in crowdsourced setting and some differences in demographics and user behavior between the two. Building on these experiences, understanding how to level out these differences is the object of this proposal.

## The Research Questions

The research questions that ask for answers to lay the foundation of principled, crowdsourced user studies are:

- *Which user study methods can be ported from the lab to the crowd?* A wealth of user research methods exist, ranging from attitudinal, qualitative methods like interviews and focus groups to behavioral, quantitative methods like clickstream analysis and eye tracking. Behavioral, quantitative methods can of course be automated more easily. The question is how much crowdsourced user studied can be pushed into the area of attitudinal, qualitative methods.
- *Which user experience questions can be answered reliably?* A method may be used to answer one or more research questions. For example, an interview can provide insight into preferences and values, while A/B testing allows one to compare two features. If a method is crowdsourced, can it still answer the same questions? How do we guarantee significance and representativeness?
- *Which assumptions, limitations and theories govern crowdsourced user studies?* User studies assume, for instance, that participants can be recruited according to predefined profiles, an assumption that not necessarily holds if the study is crowdsourced. If not, which implications does this have on the expressiveness of the study?
- *Which software instruments can assist crowdsourced user studies?* Crowdsourcing heavily leverages on micro-task platforms. Are these suitable to support crowdsourced user studies? Or could dedicated extensions or alternatives mitigate existing shortcomings (e.g., the impossibility to select workers) or even open up new opportunities?
- *How can the data exposed by software artifacts be protected?* While privacy is regulated by laws and technically easy today, the problem that may prevent potential experimenters to crowdsource their study is the need to publish assets, e.g., data or graphical designs, that may still be under development and/or require protection. How do we crowdsource a user study that guarantees data protection?

We do not yet have answers to these questions – in line with the vision style of this submission. We have some anecdotal, positive experiences with own user studies of research prototypes and task designs and are sure the HCOMP audience, too, has some to share. The intuition is that the crowd may indeed represent a viable alternative in some types of studies. Which ones, we will try to answer systematically.

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