The Design Revelation: Understanding Design in Everyday Life

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# Introduction

Why is a door a rectangle? Why does it swing on one side, while the other side stays constraint to a fixed position? Why can doors cause confusion, leading to someone feeling lost or even trapped within the compartments that they found themselves in? These are all questions asked in the opening dialogue of “The Design of Everyday Things” by Don Norman. Norman opens his title by delving into the processes behind the conception of a product so that it may be better suited for human use. The principles of design discussed can equate to a better understanding of human interaction with an object and how these two plays together. However, this is not always the case. Take a computer for example – how long did it take for someone to learn how to use it without prior help, instruction, or knowledge about computing? For the designer it might have been as simple as using a bicycle. However, for the average user it could be equivalent to being forced to pilot an aircraft without prior knowledge. The user is going to crash, and it is going to be hard. Design is a crucial process that must be untaken so that the user can avoid this crash. Taking into consideration the concepts discussed in Norman’s book, the principles described can be replicated and utilized on everything, including everyday objects such as modern computers. By delving into principles of designs put forth by Norman, a valid critique about a computer’s design can be analyzed and developed.

# “The Design of Everyday Things” Review

Before giving my critique of an everyday thing, development, and review of Norman’s book *The Design of Everyday Things* can help clarify and highlight some of the key aspects. Norman helps provide some background context and examples to help illustrate a better understanding of how the world and design work together. The first major aspect comes in the form of an informal explanation of what design encapsulates, stating that it “is concerned with how things work, how they are controlled, and the nature of the interaction between people and technology” (Norman, 2013, p. 25). What this essentially boils down to is the relationship that design has with the development process, and its crucial role in how humans not only interact with it but also appreciate it. Essentially, this evolves into a specific form of design known as Human-centered design (HCD). This puts the needs, capabilities, and behaviors of humans in the foresight of design so that it can better accommodate and provide for its intended purposes (Norman, 2013, p. 25). Norman does a good job in explaining this concept throughout the entirety of the book, always making sure to tie everything back to HCD in some form. It helps highlight just how important this concept is in the field of design as it works in conjunction with other key aspects. One of which is understanding the role that designers play in the development process. Norman (2013) elaborates that while engineers are tasked with finding a solution to the problem, designers are the ones that need to understand the underlying footwork – the real problem – that is causing the need for a solution in the first place (pg. 195). It is a pivotal statement that provides the groundwork for what the first statement declares. Design is a tool that is used so that humans can better interact with the world without the worry of something going wrong.

However, humans are imperfect, and design can be imperfect as well. The bad design leaves people more prone to error, and error can have devastating results. This is another key aspect that Norman delves on, being the topic of whether it was human or design error. Instead of blaming everything on the human, which is known to err, Norman states that the design of the object should be at fault, not the human. Whether it was a slip, a mistake, or a combination of both, design should try to mitigate as much damage as it can. However, even this approach can have issues. Norman (2013) states that “Hindsight is always superior to foresight” (pg. 168). Regardless of what measures are considered, there is almost a surefire way to accommodate each possible outcome, and Norman knows this. Instead, Norman shifts the conversation to incorporate a new mindset when designing in general. “Fail often, fail fast” is what Norman highlights when talking about design and its potential failures and how designers should approach the notion of failing. It is a key aspect that should be taken at full force instead of avoided. For Norman, to fail is to learn, and to learn is to improve upon from the experience (Norman, 2013, pg. 69). A failure is a learning tool, just as much as everything else is. Norman’s purpose within this book is to demonstrate just how crucial design is as a tool in everday life. Norman’s critique of doors in the beginning is a means of understanding that even the mundane influence how we interact with the world. Design is everywhere, and Norman is showing the reader how to become more critical of its use.

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# Application and Critique of My “Everyday Thing”

Computers are something of a technical marvel of the contemporary age. Within just the last three decades, the presence of technology has greatly increased and influenced how humans interact with the world. For comparison, today’s devices are various times more powerful than those that were used to take a man to the moon. Putting that into perspective, the complexity of today’s computers is not an overestimation of how technology has evolved. Therefore, what these complex creation needs are basic design structure materials to help alleviate the complexity issue. Signifiers in the form of icons and keys are crucial in the computer design because it provides context for what they do. They keep the human-centered design by providing context in what their execution will do. Combined with rapid feedback using a monitor, lights, and sound emanating from the computer provides needed support within the design. However, without a proper conceptual model, the computer would most likely not be as well used by the average person as it is today. It is highly reliant on the signifiers and understanding of the affordances that it provides. The mapping is unnatural at first due to the QWERTY layout which requires years to learn. However, given time, these issues begin to diminish over time, so it is not a problem in the long run. Overall, the application of these conceptual models provides much-needed support in the design of modern computers.

# Conclusion

Why is a door a rectangle? Norman will state that it is because a human can have an easier time accessing a rectangular door than a spherical one. This is a result of HCD, which over years of testing and observation, lead to the development of rectangular doors. In the same sense, our everyday thing known as a computer has had the same type of treatment. Even when their complexities are vastly different, a computer is still able to be accessible to the average person because of its human-centered design. Through years of experimentation, designers have selected the best conceptual models, standardizations, and constraints so that the use of computers could be as painless as possible. While there are issues still prevalent with the complexity of technology, designers will continue to work towards making the best optimal design for humans. This human-centered design is why we will keep using our rectangular doors for years to come.

# References

Norman, D.A. (2013). *The design of everyday things* (Revised and expanded).  Basic Books.

{Additional References}