The Paradox of the Active User

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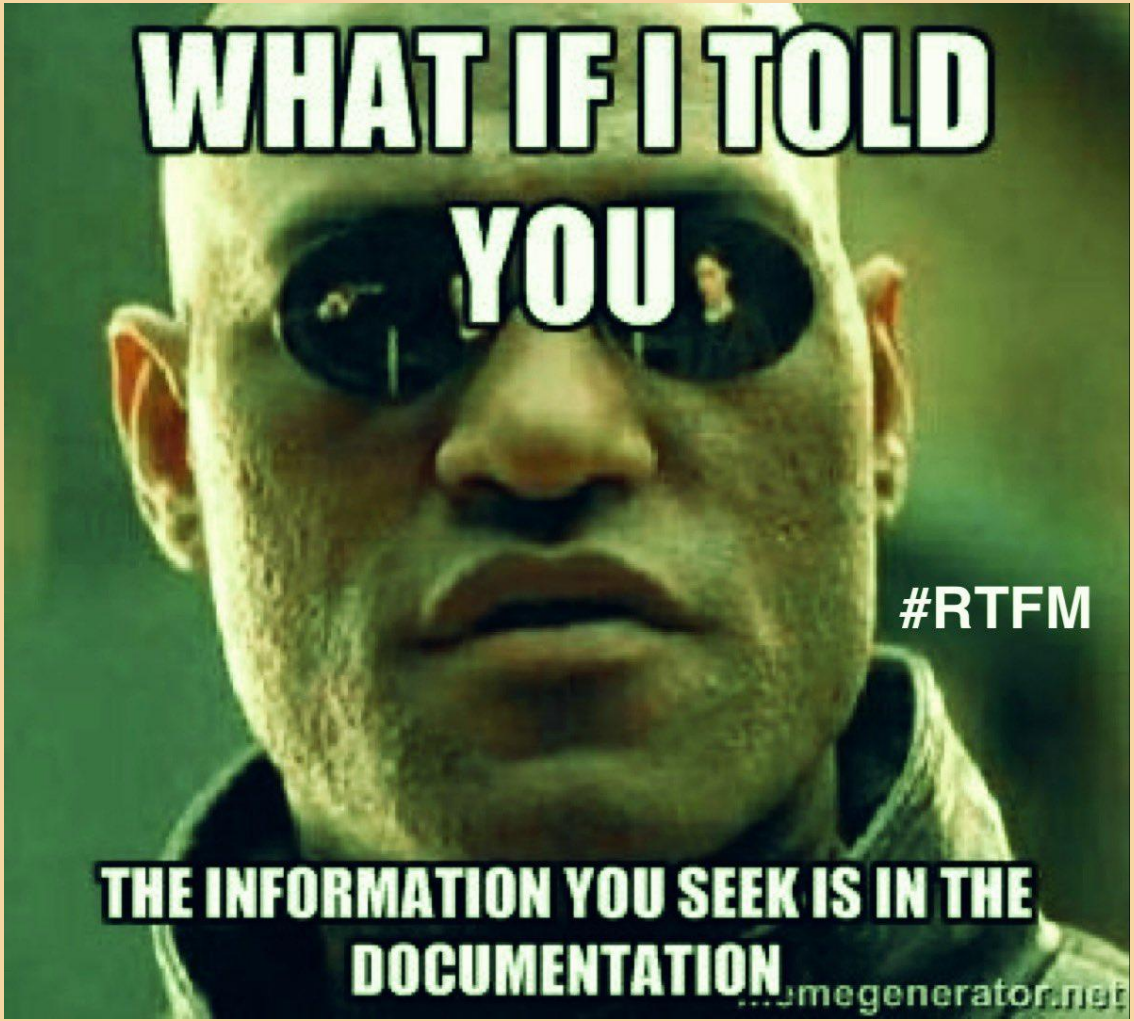

WHAT IF I TOLD YOU
#RTFM
THE INFORMATION YOU SEEK IS IN THE DOCUMENTATION

What is the Paradox of the Active User?

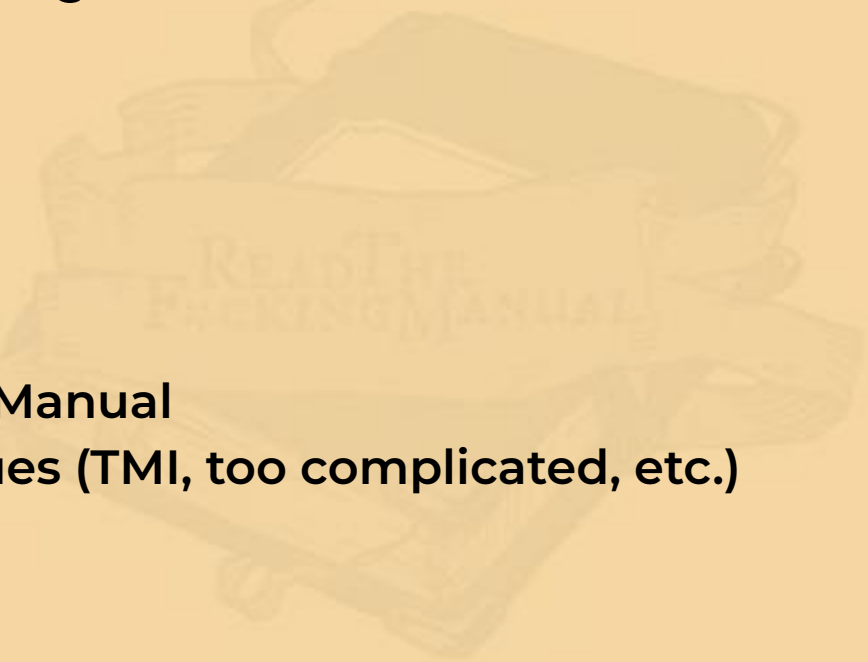
Users, generally, will not read documentation before engaging with products.

Instead, users dive into using the product, experimenting as they go.

The Paradox lies in the time lost from misuse;

...due to actively avoiding important documentation.

Why Do Users Do This?



It’s Natural!

- Save Time
- Frustration
- Can’t Find The Manual
- Readability Issues (TMI, too complicated, etc.)
- Ego

Origins of the Concept

Concept defined by Mary Beth Rosson & John Carroll (1987)

- “Interfacing Thought: Cognitive Aspects of Human-Computer Interaction”

Two Natural Behaviours of the Active User

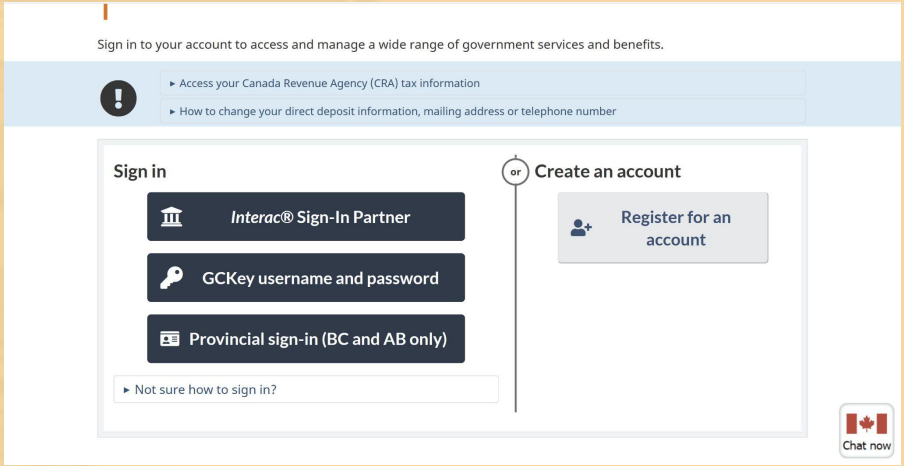
- Production Paradox: Users only focus on the end product
- Assimilation Paradox: Users use prior knowledge even if not applicable

Great Quote by Rosson & Carroll:

“We must remember to not build products and services for an idealized, rational user because people don’t always behave rationally in real life.”

Example 1: My Service Canada Hellsite

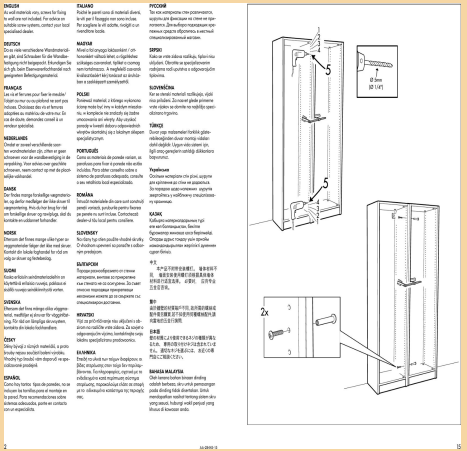
- The My Service Canada website is awful for a lot of reasons, however one of them is a lack of clear instructions on its use. Even the ‘help’ boxes tell you little that is helpful
- People are also already likely in a state of frustration for having to use the site, eg. getting EI after losing their job.
- Solution: List all requirements, and explanations for, each service and login type up front, so users know what and how these services can be accessed



Example 2: Toyota Interference, THULE Bike Rack

- User Goal: Leave the Driveway, with Rear-hitch Bike Rack.
  - Assumption: “I know how to drive a car. I don’t need to read the manual.”
- Design Implementation: Rear-view Camera is obstructed by rack.
  - Result: The Toyota computer thinks that there is something in the way.
  - Car engages “Pre-Collision System” (PCS) then “Parking Support Brake” (PKSB)
  - Displays “BRAKE”! … and won’t reverse.
- Proposed Iteration:
  - Display pop-up (Tooltip!)
  - Ask user if they would like to turn off PCS.

Example 3: Assembling Furniture



Buying & assembling furniture is something we have all probably
Done or at least attempted to do

.

Question: Who actually reads the entire manual?

Consumers have a tendency of assembling the furniture without reading the instructions. This causes missed steps, extra pieces where they should not be any, items being assembled incorrectly, or pieces being broken to name a few.

Consumers believe that the idea of not reading the instructions saves time and energy. However, in some cases, it causes stress, bruised egos, which leads to frustration.

Solution: QR Code showing small videos of someone explaining as they assemble. The consumer should be able to pause or fast forward the videos.

Example 4: The Unbeatable Tutorial

- Video games are a classic arena where the Paradox of the Active User likes to play.
- Game developers are aware of this, so they design the first level with a baked-in tutorial.
- Driver, a PlayStation game from 1999, had a difficult opening level set that served as the game's tutorial.
- While there's logic in making a tutorial mandatory before the user can access the full game, it needs to be user-friendly.

Takeaways: Dealing with the Active User

Users skip manuals/tutorials to get tasks done faster.

This often costs more time later.

Users resist “learning-first” approaches.

Designers should:

- Structure designs from the users’ view
  - Allow users to get started—they will just go ahead anyway.
  -
- Make Guidance Accessible
  - Teach the product through contextually relevant tooltips

References:

- Carroll, J.M. and Rosson, M.B. (1987). The paradox of the active user. In J.M. Carroll (Ed.), Interfacing Thought: Cognitive Aspects of Human-Computer Interaction (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).

- Yablonski, John (2024). Onboarding for Active Users. Link: https://lawsofux.com/articles/2024/onboarding-for-active-users/