Reflections on Required Reading

# Human Computer Interaction - brief intro by John M. Carroll

Human Computer Interaction by John M. Carroll was a vague but interesting read. It was a good introduction to the basics of human computer interaction but would have been a more enjoyable read with more detail or exploration into the topics John M. Carroll mentioned.

One aspect I found interesting was how human computer interaction has expanded in popularity and research. Being taught and used in all sorts of fields ranging from psychology to cognitive science to communication, human computer interaction seems to have developed and expanded in many areas which will be very beneficial to the field. As stated later in the paper, the development and focus in human computer interaction has gone from simple word processors and spreadsheets to everyday life. It has become an important part of everybody’s life, whether it is social, medical, occupational or educational.

The main thing I have learnt from this brief intro is that human computer interaction burst into many different directions. For example, John M. Carrol mentioned that throughout the 1990s human computer interaction made up or inspired a number of design communities. Human computer interaction is a bigger research and development area than I originally realised.

# Personas by Lene Nielsen

The most interesting part of Personas by Lene Nielsen for me was discussing the differences between making a persona out of a stereotype and making a persona based on actual data. I have not thought about this in depth before, however it makes a lot of sense. This could broaden into a lot of research for different groups of people to ensure the best interface is being used. For example, from the reading it states Dorte ‘dislikes reading user guides’. In my opinion, this means that Dorte would prefer a system of recognisability rather than remembrance.

Similar to last week, this area is being widely used outside of computing, as stated ‘being used in many other contexts, including development of products, marketing, planning of communication, and service design’. However, it is more likely that this kind of development developed from these areas into HCI and technology. Marketing and product development have been around for much longer than technology or the need for developers to focus on users’ needs.

The fiction-based perspective still being a popular method to an extent is surprising. Assuming the user’s level of competency is dangerous in my opinion. If the developer is wrong, they can assume the total opposite of what a user is capable of or how that user can be efficient with the computer system. On the other hand, making ‘extreme characters’ would be useful in some regard in my opinion. To make an extreme of a character in the correct way could make the system easy to use for the desired user. If the developer makes an extreme character of an elderly person, they would assume the character would not understand technology that well and they would design a system without noise, flashes and one that is easy to follow.

# Scenarios by Lene Nielsen

I am slightly surprised by this statement: ‘Even though it seems natural that there should be a link between personas and scenarios, they have often been viewed as separate methods’. I would have expected a much more professional and rigorous workflow in the designing world for this not to be an issue. If designers view personas and scenarios as two completely separate entities, this would just make things more complicated and possibly push the design in two completely different ways depending on the scenario and persona.

Out of the Scenarios part by Lene Nielsen, the most interesting part to me was events deciding the foundation of the system design. This may seem obvious when I step back and think about it, but there are so many scenarios I have been in where the designer has added too many functions or aesthetic aspects which just confuse the user.

Checking personas regularly every 1-2 years should almost be a certainty. In the field of technology, there is always something changing. As this is the case, why wouldn’t users of software change. Therefore, designers must know what changes they are dealing with. Personas should be updated if necessary. This whole process may be costly to companies, but could be beneficial. If their system is outdated, they will lose customers.

The experiment with the actors portraying a persona to help designers become immersed and understand the daily lives of the personas was very interesting, I have not heard of this method before. I can see where this would be useful, the designer is able to see different aspects of the persona. However, the quality of this would surely fluctuate depending on the actors and whoever is leading the actors. It is the actors who are giving their opinion on the persona, if the actors do not have a good understanding of the persona then the designer will only get the details the actors portray. This could leave the actors to missing out crucial details.

# Design Rationale: the Argument Behind the Artifact by Allan MacLean, Richard M. Young and Thomas P. Moran

One of the most interesting points of this piece of reading was that ‘the product of user interface design should be not only the interface itself but also a rationale for why the interfaces is the way it is.’ I thought this was a point which should be obvious but does not always come to mind. When looking at some interfaces, you can see they have focussed on aesthetics but not necessarily the reason behind picking them. In this scenario, the interface may look good but the reasoning behind the aspects of the interface may not make sense.

Design Rationale also brought up some good points about end users creating their own systems towards their own requirements. The reading basically stated that they are being faced with a design problem, much like a consultant for this would, but with no training or experience in design. This is where the poor design aesthetics and user interactions become apparent.

It was good to read a publication from 1989 about designing systems. This is a relatively old publication in the computing world, it is only 30 years old from when I am reading it. Computing and technology change at a fast pace but some of the points this reading has presented still affects system design to this day such as 'Generating good questions is even more important than generating options, as the questions play a key role in generating as well as structuring options.’

# Accessibility: Usability for all by Mads Soegaard

This was a less interesting read than the other publications in my opinion. Some of the points seemed mute and pointless. For example, “Even so-called ‘fully able-bodied’ users, sitting in quiet rooms with large monitors, will be hampered if the phone goes and they have to navigate with one hand.” From this quote, I understand the user has a disability to navigate the website but they are causing this problem for themselves. If the website needed two hands to navigate, then the user would put full focus on this. Also, for a website to need two hands to navigate is an extremely poor design in my opinion and I have never come across such a thing. To my knowledge, I have only experienced websites where I can navigate with a mouse or similar input device.

There is an interesting point in “we’re all disabled in many contexts and circumstances”. I have never really thought about this but it does make sense. A new user is disabled in more of a way compared to an experienced user. This point also agrees with another point of “when using mobile phones, we’re on the go, doing other things, with our attention split several ways”. However, this point also matches with the original point where it makes sense but this is the user disabling themselves to a point.

# Effective Video Examples of Paper Prototyping by Paul Andrew

From watching the videos from this article, I got the idea that the method of paper prototyping is mainly for small functions on a system instead of the whole system. It is understandable to use this to save money and time in some cases. For example, if the major employees are busy on a task with a greater priority, I think it would be a good idea to give this task to a junior position or intern. However, I think it would be the wrong way to go if a senior employee spent their time on this instead of implementing a system.

Some of the paper prototypes from these videos were more detailed than website mockups I saw on my placement at a web design and management company. I believe that if you spend too much time on drawing and cutting the paper and then the stop motion, it will not be worth the time spent. You may even take more time than you would if you were to mock up a website through coding.

The client may also want to see features the designers have not displayed in the video. They would be able to do this with a website mockup but not a paper prototype video.

The Hanmail prototype was poor quality and hard to understand, especially compared to the first video. I only understood what was going on in that video because I have technical knowledge. Clients with little technical knowledge may not have any idea what is going on and therefore not like the idea.

My two favourite videos from this article are the first one, Paper Prototype Animation, and the fifth one, Lo-fi Web Prototyping. Both of these videos were very fluid which made it an easy watch but also highlighted key features. In particular, the Lo-fi Web Prototyping video, indicates where the changes in the view has been made with a red colour.

# The 4 Questions to Ask in a Cognitive Walkthrough by David Travis

The cognitive walkthrough is an interesting topic I have not heard of before. I think it is quite a good way to get inside the user’s mind and think about what they would do, how they would do it and why they would do it. For a designer or developer to imagine a user’s first time using an interface can be quite tricky because it would not be a genuine first time using the interface, the designer or developer would know with their subconcious the interface so it is hard to forget that.

The four questions that have to be asked at every step of the task was interesting. The most interesting one is will the customer realistically be trying to do this action? Many times developers try to go for quantity over quality in terms of functionality leading to inferior systems which infuriate users. Instead, developers should aim for fewer functions but with greater quality.

I found the ticket machine in Germany a great example of the different types of users that are likely going to use any given system. The author, David Travis, was able to press the right button and exit. If all users were able to do this then there would be no need for extra ‘documentation’. Even though the system is poorly designed, it is not surprising it has taken three giant red arrows pointing to the red button to fix the system.

# Interaction Design Gone Wild: Striving for Wild Theory by Yvonne Rogers

Parts of Interaction Design Gone Wild were interesting. However, for the most part I believe this reading to be the most monotonous and ineffective of all the documents I have read for this part of the HCI coursework. In my opinion, there was no new ideas which changed my mindset or made me think differently in terms of designing systems with human-computer interaction in mind.

One interesting point mentioned was ‘inventions are assembled and then tried out in the settings for which they are envisioned’. To me, this seems obvious but is also a good point. To make something and test it in the environment for which it was made for is an important process. You need to see if the new invention works in its desired environment. However, it could be a good idea to also test it in an environment which it may end up in but not one it was built for.

Another good point is to ‘work out how, where, and when to display salient information that can be capitalized on as part of a fast and frugal heuristic’. In my opinion, this is a good point leading to a more streamlined heuristic for users.