

What is HCI?

Human Computer Interaction

Luigi De Russis

Academic Year 2025/2026

Hall of Fame or Shame?



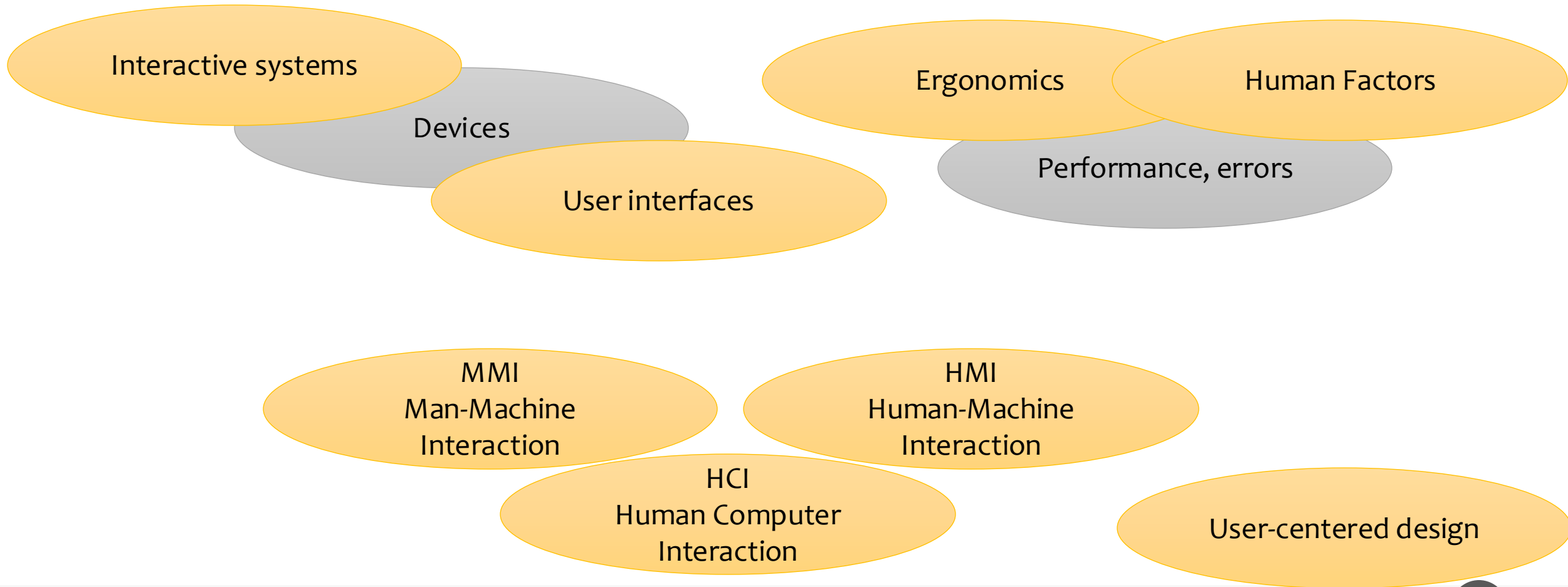
Hall of Fame or Shame?



Goals

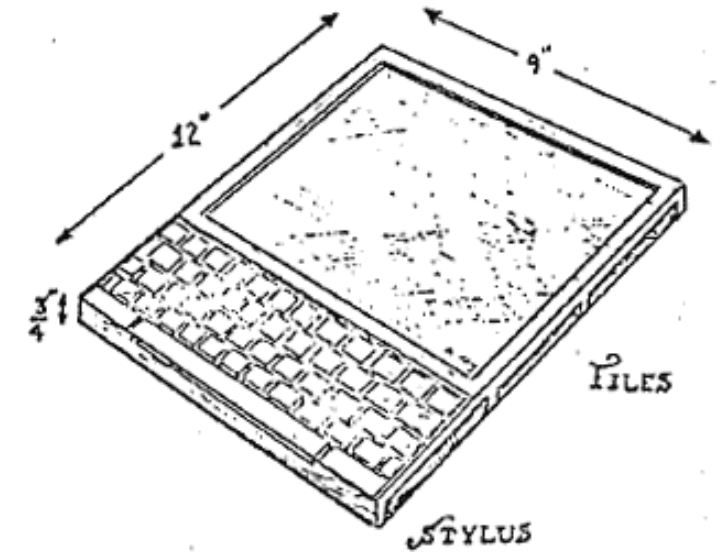
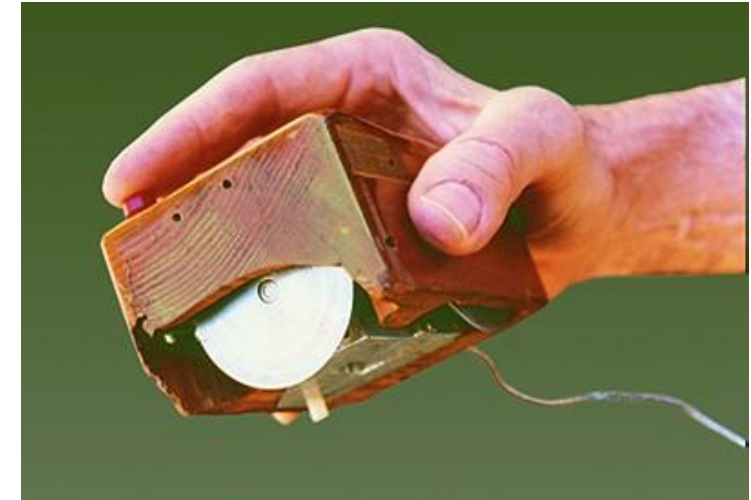
- What is HCI?
- What is usability?
- What are the Interaction Design processes, and how does they relate with Software Engineering processes?
- What is meant by User Centered Design?

Interconnected Concepts, and Evolution



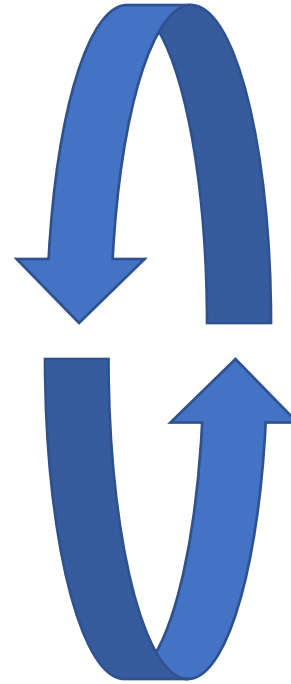
Human-Computer Interaction... In Brief

- A multi-disciplinary field
- Concerned with the **design, evaluation, and implementation** of interactive computing systems for human use
 - and with the study of **major phenomena** surrounding them
- Involves two *entities* (the human and the computer) that determine each other behavior over time
 - framed in terms of humans' **goals** and related **tasks/pursuits**



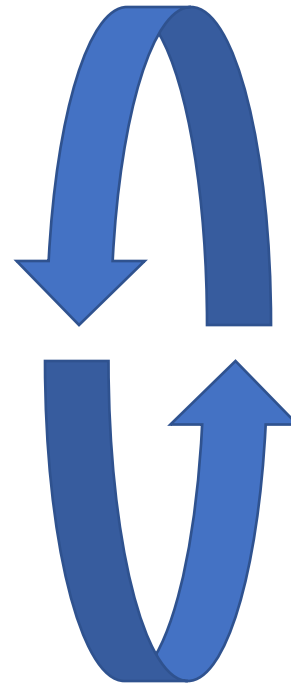
HCI Is Multidisciplinary

- Psychology and cognitive science
 - User perceptual, cognitive and problem-solving skills
- Ergonomics
 - User's physical capabilities
- Sociology
 - Understanding the wider context of the interaction
- **Computer Science and Computer Engineering**
 - **Building the necessary artifacts (HW, SW)**
- Business
 - Satisfying market needs
- Graphic design
 - Produce an effective interface presentation
- Technical writing
 - Documentation, manuals, on-screen content
- ...



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To help us in applying expertise from many different fields:

- Design methods and processes
- Models
- Heuristics
- Best practices
- Conventions
- Experiments and user studies

The Goal of HCI

Ingredients

- The **User(s)**
- The **Computer(s)**
- The **Task(s)** to be accomplished

Goal

- The system must support the user's **task**, with a focus on its **usability**
 - Useful
 - Usable
 - Used

The Ingredients

The human

- Sensory systems
 - Visual
 - Auditory
 - Haptic
 - Spatial
- Acting systems
 - Hands
 - Voice
 - Head, Body, ...
- Cognitive processes
 - Perception
 - Memory

The computer

- Input peripherals
 - Keyboard, mouse
 - Trackpad, trackball
 - Touch surfaces or screens
 - Microphone
 - Sensors
 - Card readers
 - ...
- Output peripherals
 - Screen
 - Audio (voice, sounds)
 - Haptics
 - VR/AR headsets
 - ...

Models of Interaction

A general framework to understand how User and System interact

What Is “Interaction” (in HCI)?

- Interaction is...

Concept	View of interaction	Key phenomena and constructs	Good interaction	Example support for evaluation and design
Dialogue	a cyclic process of communication acts and their interpretations	mappings between UI and intentions; feedback from the UI; turn taking	understandable; simple, natural; direct	methods/concepts for guessability, feedback, mapping; walkthroughs
Transmission	a sender sending a message over a noisy channel	messages (bits); sender and receiver; noisy channels	maximum throughput of information	metrics and models of user performance
Tool use	a human that uses tools to manipulate and act in the world	mediation by tools; directness of acting in the world; activity as a unit of analysis	useful and transparent tools; amplification of human capabilities	compatibility in instrumental interaction; break down analysis
Optimal behavior	adapting behavior to goals, task, UI, and capabilities	rationality; constraints; preferences; utility; strategies	improves or reaches maximum or satisfactory utility	models of choice, foraging, and adaptation
Embodiment	acting and being in situations of a material and social world	intentionality; context; coupling	provides resources for and supports fluent participation in the world	studies in the wild; thick description
Experience	an ongoing stream of expectations, feelings, memories	non-utilitarian quality; expectations; emotion	satisfies psychological needs; motivating	metrics of user experience; experience design methods
Control	interactive minimization of error against some reference	feedforward; feedback; reference; system; dynamics	rapid and stable convergence to target state	executable simulations of interactive control tasks

Taken from: Kasper Hornbæk & Antti Oulasvirta, What Is Interaction? In: *Proceedings of the 2017 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*

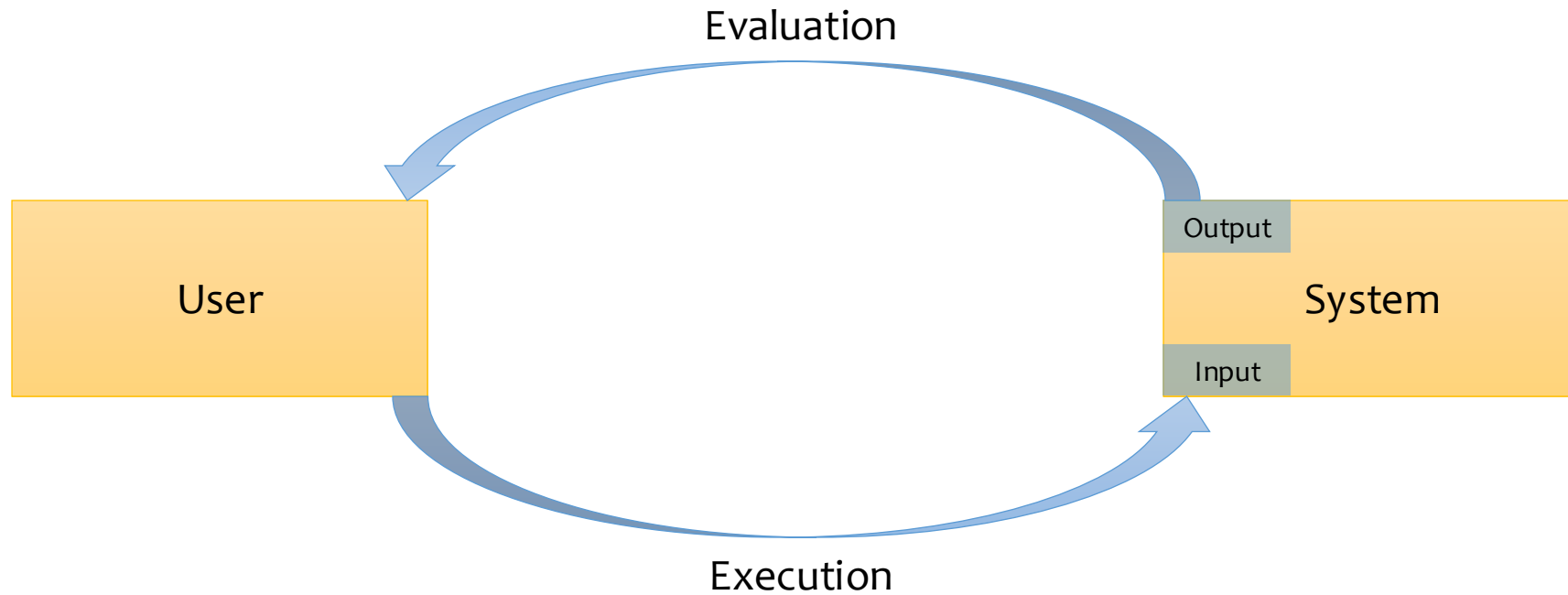
What Is Interaction (in HCI)?

- Interaction...
 - **is not** the idea promoted and repeated in folk notions that a computer and a human are engaged
 - it concerns two entities – humans and computers – that determine each other's behavior over time
 - Their mutual determination can be of many types, including statistical, mechanical, and structural
- **Users**, with their **goals** and **pursuits**, are the ultimate metric of interaction

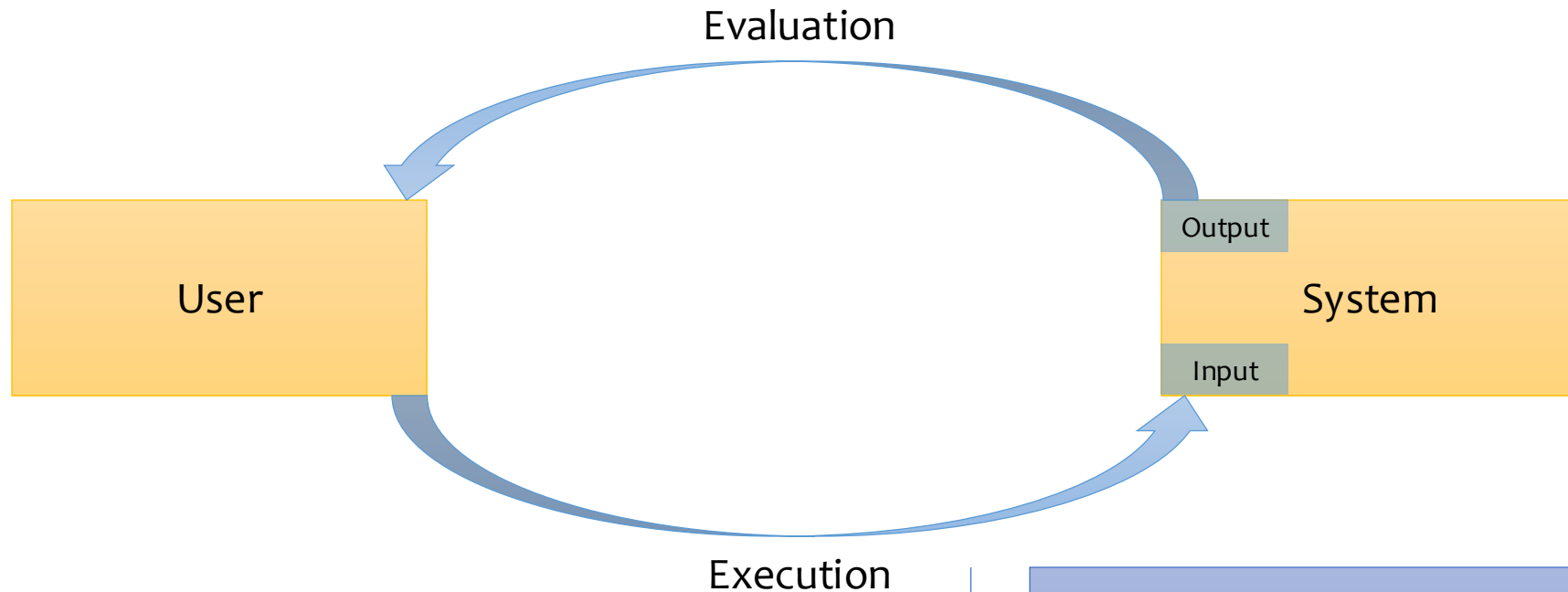
Assumptions

- The **user** wants to accomplish some **goals**, in a specific application **domain**
 - Each domain has a specific jargon, set of possible processes and goals, artifacts and building blocks, ...
- **Tasks** are operations to manipulate the concepts of a domain
 - The goal is attained by performing one or more tasks
- Interaction studies the relation between User and System
 - The system possesses a **state** and “speaks” a **core language**
 - The user possesses a **state**, that includes an **understanding** of the system’s state, some **intention** to perform a task, and “speaks” the **task language**

Norman's Model of Interaction

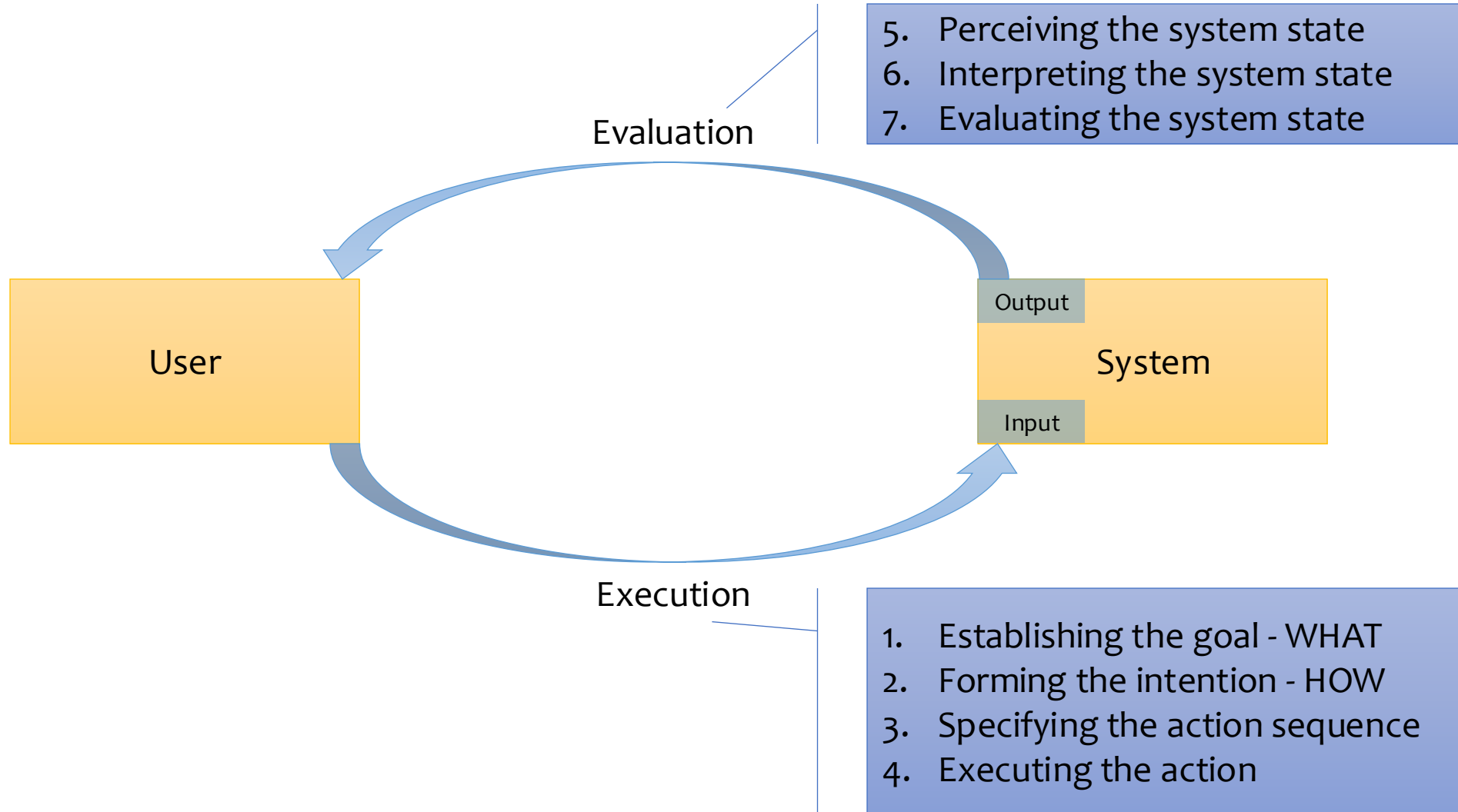


Norman's Model of Interaction

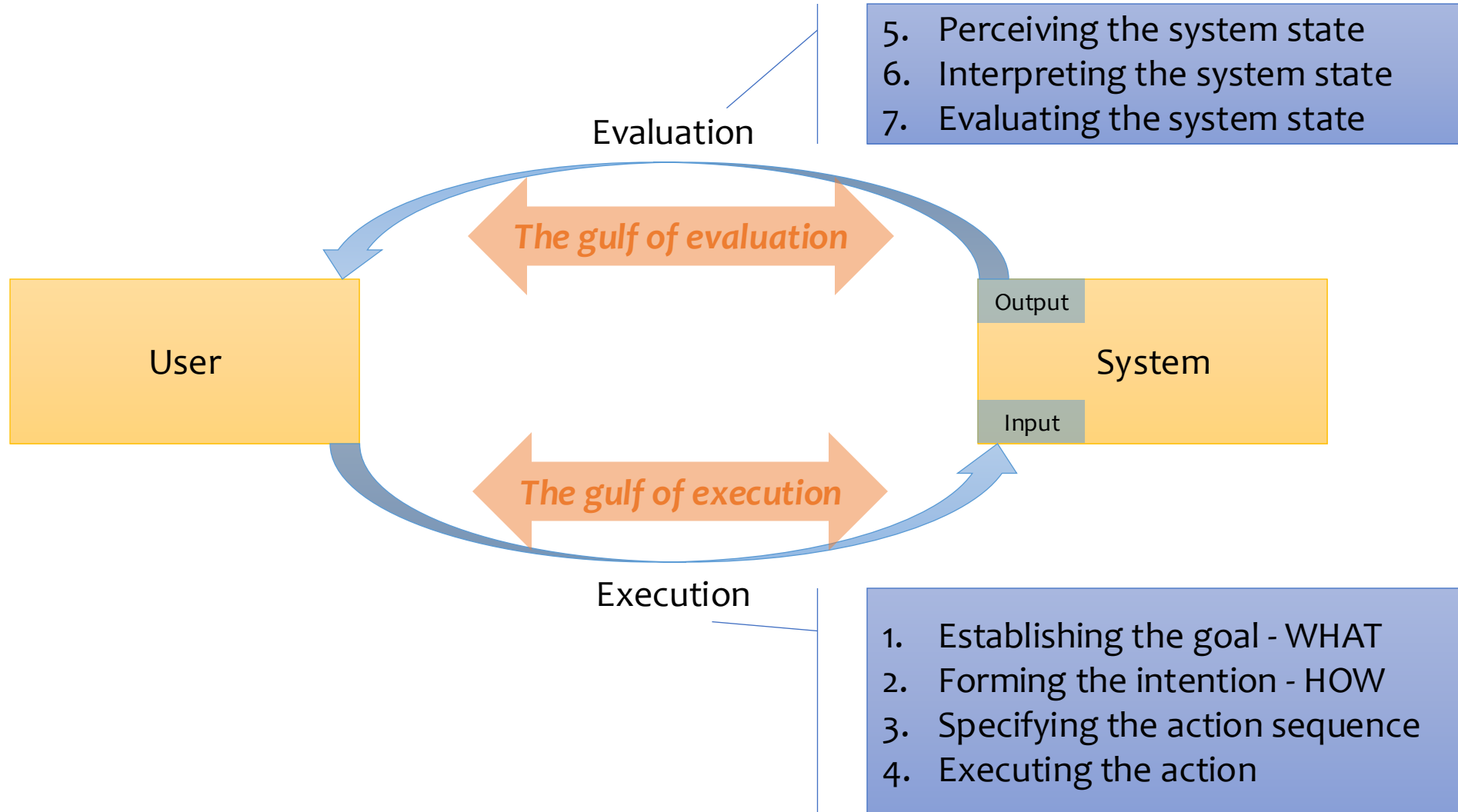


1. Establishing the goal - WHAT
2. Forming the intention - HOW
3. Specifying the action sequence
4. Executing the action

Norman's Model of Interaction

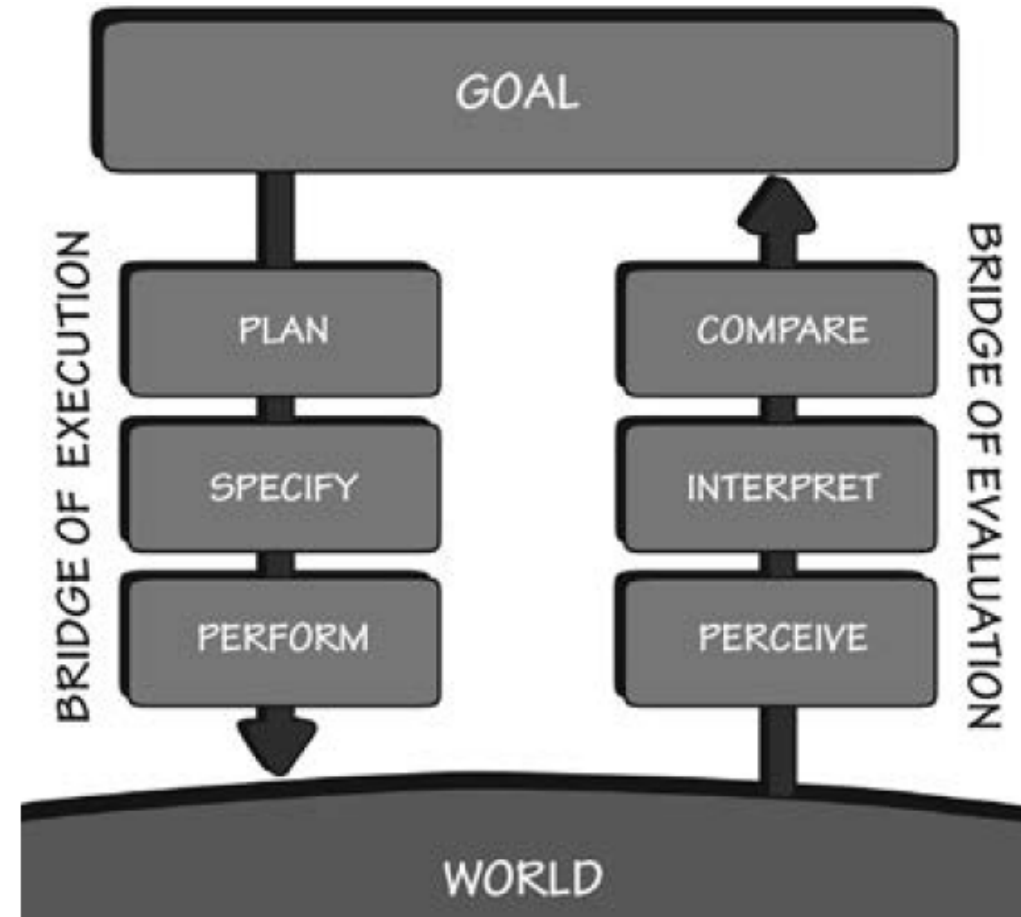
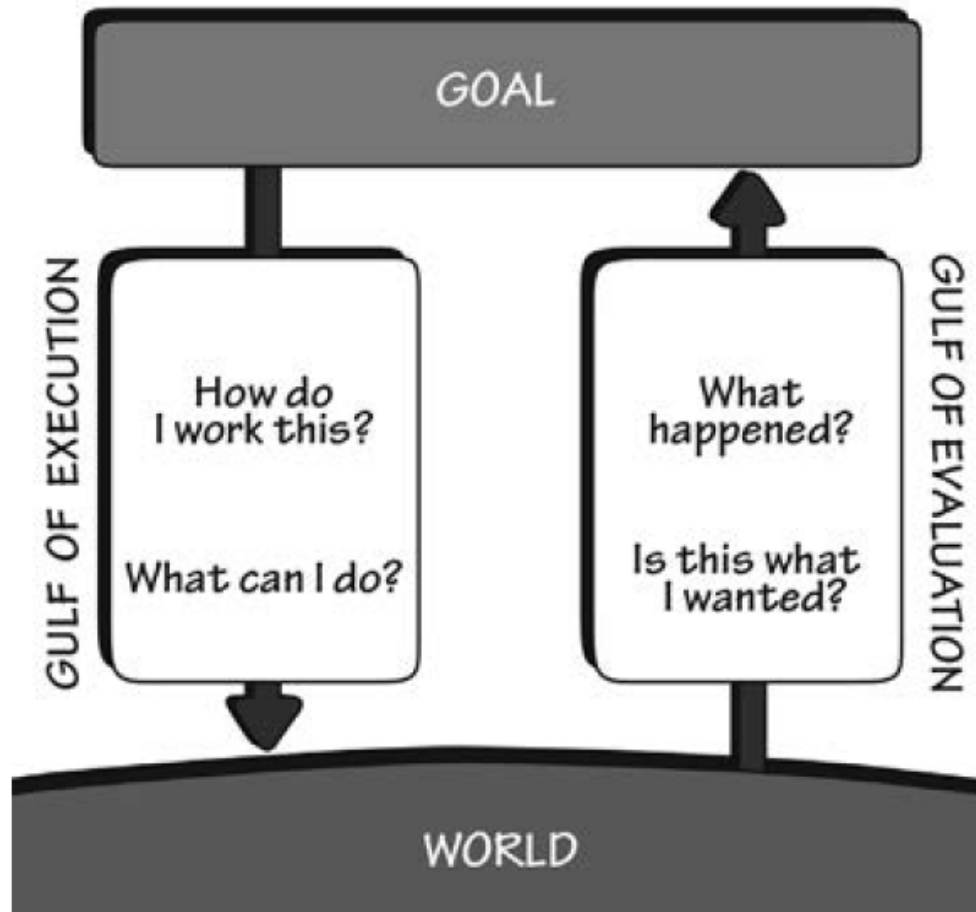


Norman's Model of Interaction

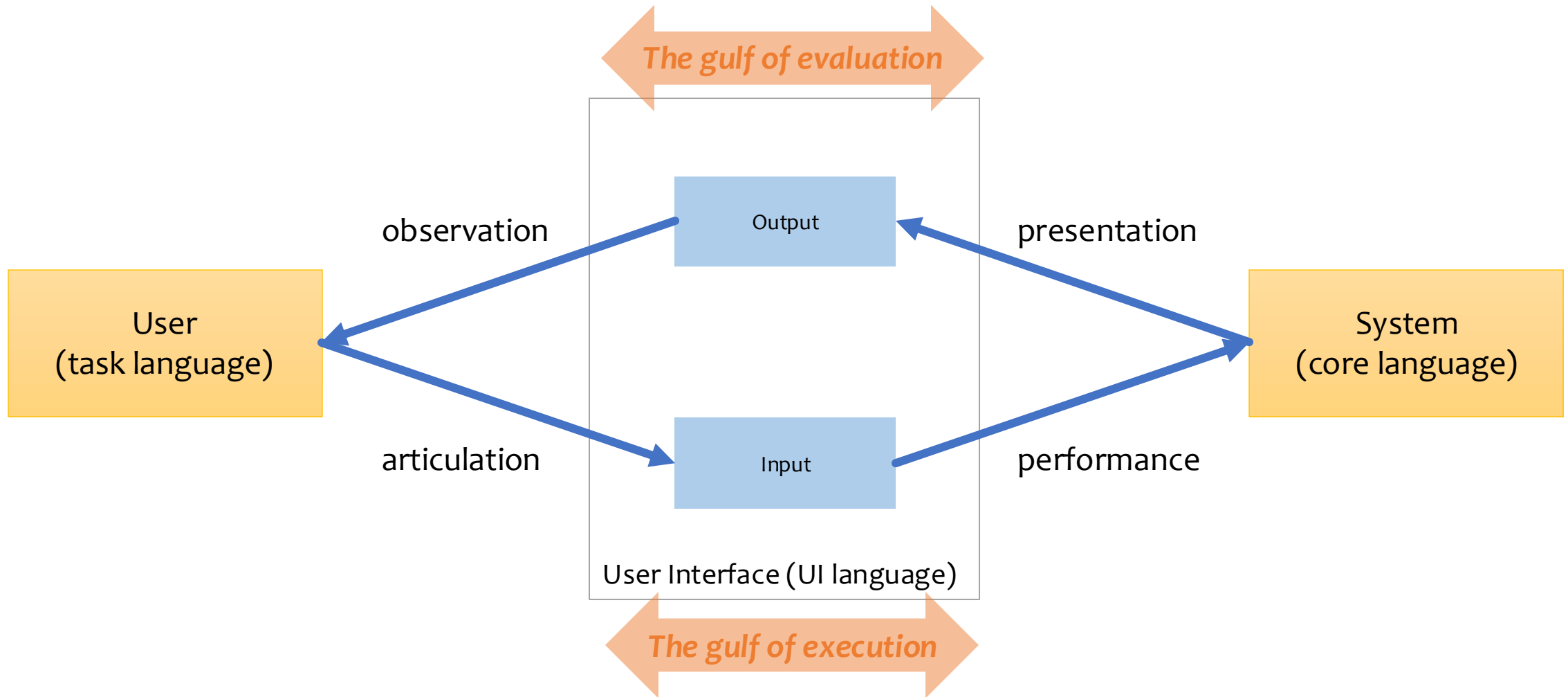


Norman's Diagrams

1. **Goal** (form the goal)
2. **Plan** (the action)
3. **Specify** (an action sequence)
4. **Perform** (the action sequence)
5. **Perceive** (the state of the world)
6. **Interpret** (the perception)
7. **Compare** (the outcome with the goal)



Abowd and Beale Model, with Explicit UI




Human Errors*

in the gulf of execution

Slip

- You have formulated the right action, but fail to execute that action correctly
 - E.g., click the wrong icon, or double-click too slow, ...
- May be corrected by a better interface (spacing, layout, highlights, ...)

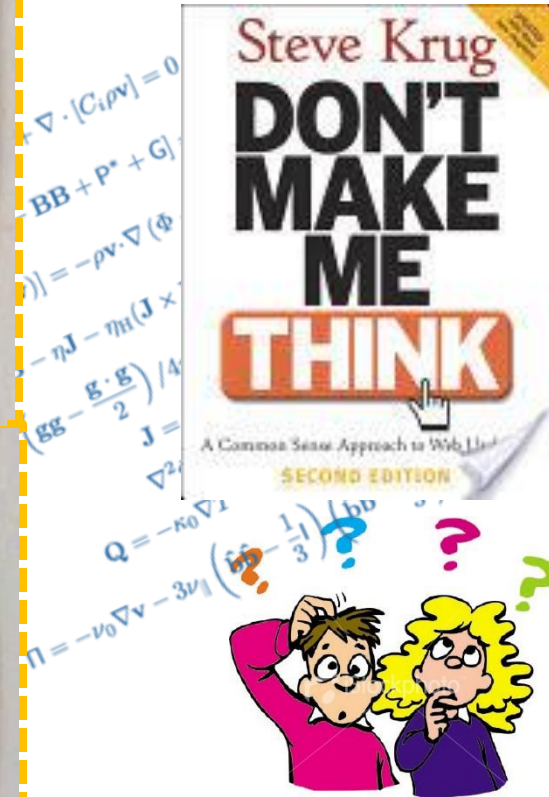
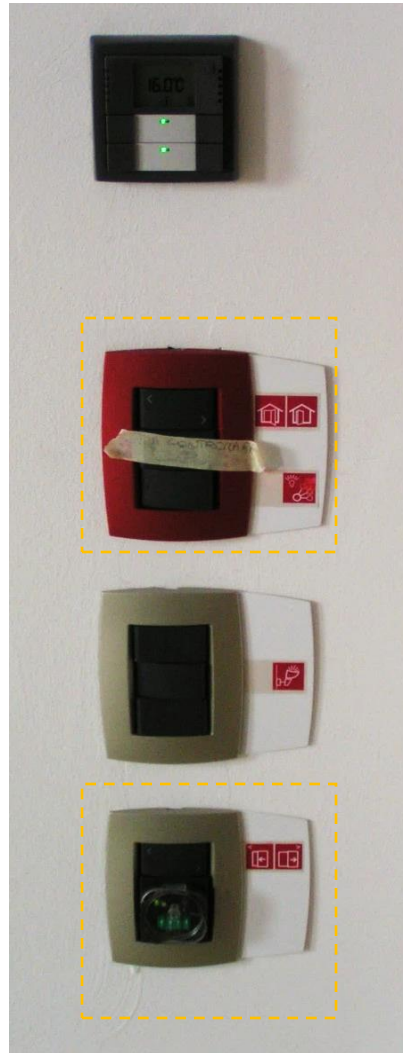
Mistake

- You don't know the system well and you may not formulate the right goal
 - E.g., click  for Zoom, but it means Search
- The user's mental model of the system's state is not correct
- Requires more radical redesign, or additional training

* About Human Errors

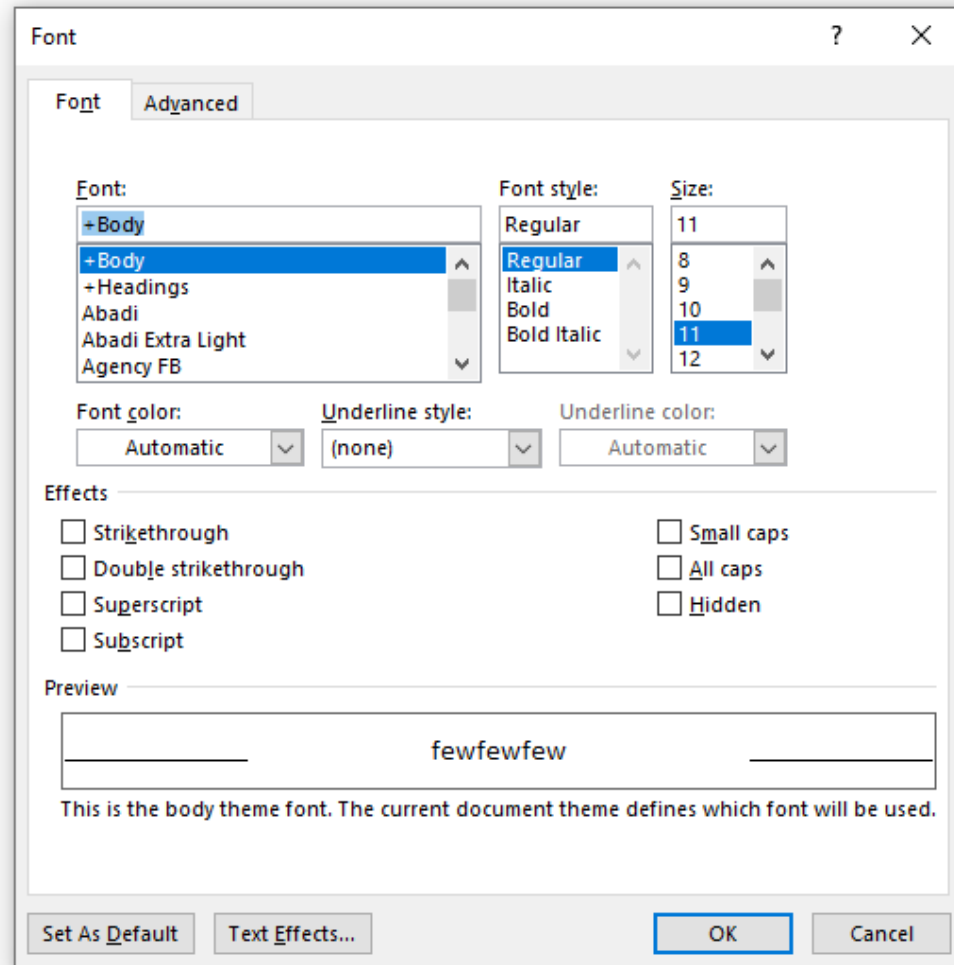
- Human errors should **never** be considered as faults of the user
- Rather, «they are usually a result of bad design» (Norman)
- Humans tend to be imprecise, distracted, not-omniscient
 - System design should anticipate this human behavior
 - Minimize the chance of inappropriate actions (evaluation)
 - Maximize the possibility of discovering and repairing an inappropriate action (execution)
 - Enable users to understand the state of the system and build an appropriate model

Example (articulation): find the right switch

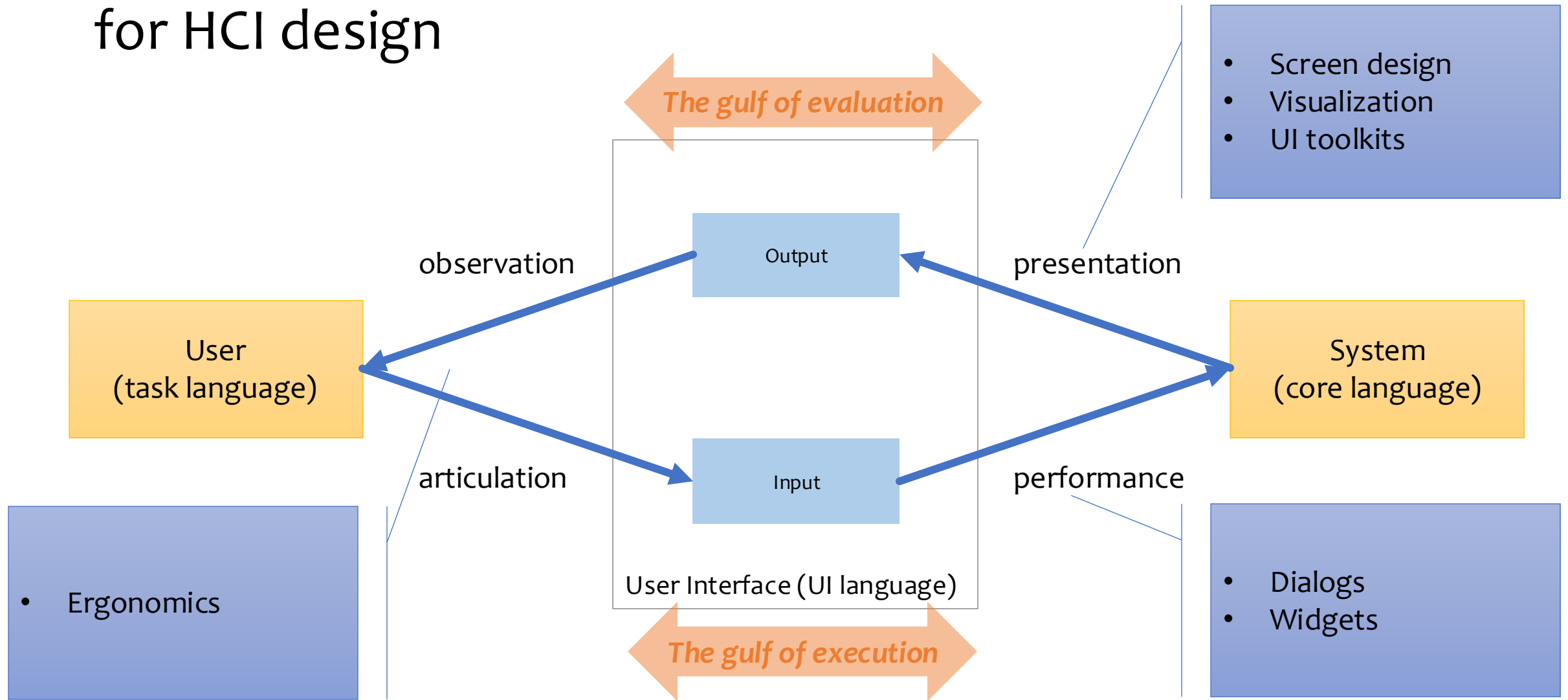


Example (presentation):

Which are the allowed combinations?



Tools, Techniques and Environments for HCI design



Frameworks: Major UI Styles

- Command line interface
- Menus
- Natural language
- Question/answer and query dialog
- Form-fills and spreadsheets
- Windows, Icons, Menus and Pointers (WIMP)
- Mobile
- Point and click
- Three-dimensional interfaces

Design Processes and Frameworks

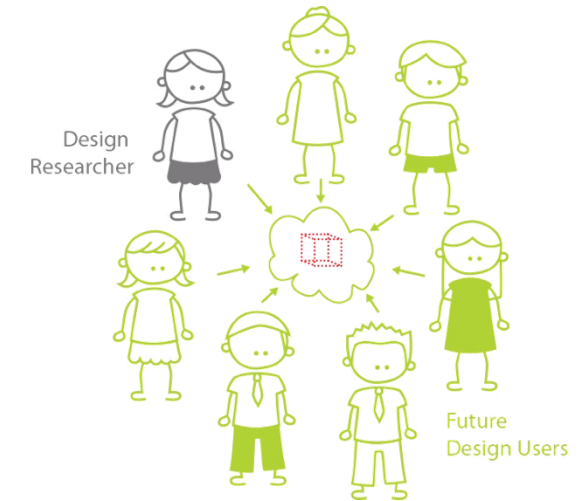
Approaches for shaping the design process

User-Centered Design (UCD)

- Avoid the risk of software project failure
 - Estimated 50% are affected by bad developer<->user/client communication
- UCD takes the needs, wants, and limitations of the **actual end users** into account **during each phase** of the design process
 - User-centered design issues are discovered during the early stages
- Benefits: systems easier to learn, with faster performance, with less human errors, encourage users to discover advanced features, and avoids “building the wrong system”
- Issues: how to find users? How many? How motivated? How to speak their language? How to extract user needs, business needs, organizational implications?

Participatory Design

- One step further than UCD, users are directly involved in the collaborative design of the things and applications they use
- Engage a group of users
 - Discussions
 - Creating scenarios, sketches, dramatizations
 - Creating and testing lo-fi prototypes
 - Continuous meetings, flexible management
 - Highly reliant on the skills of the group moderators/leaders (keep involved, filter ideas, reward participation, work around resistances, ...)
 - More effective with more mature and prepared user populations (less with kids, elderly, disabled, ...)



Agile Interaction Design

- Borrows ideas from Agile development in software engineering
- Key: evolutionary development
 - System is built incrementally in rapid release cycles
 - Rapid prototyping techniques (for hardware, software, and physical objects)
- Focus on low-cost many-iterations prototypes
- Requires fast usability inspection (extreme usability, XU)
- Makers' culture (only if it involves users!)

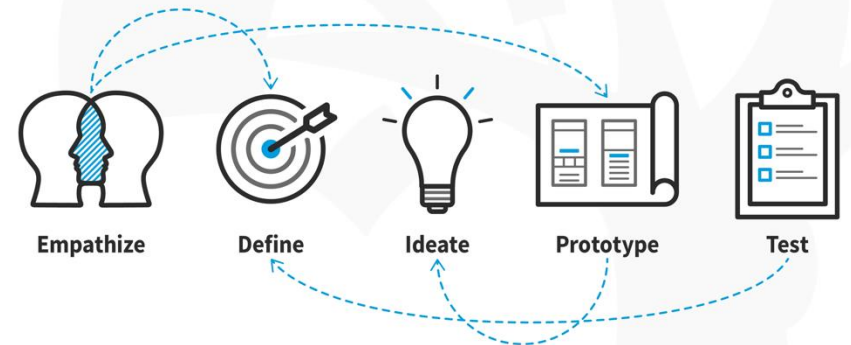
Design Thinking

- “A human-centered approach to innovation that draws from the designer’s toolkit to integrate the needs of people, the possibilities of technology, and the requirements for business success.”

— [Tim Brown, IDEO’s Executive Chair](#)

- A 5-stage, non-linear and iterative, process
 1. **Empathize** – research users’ needs
 2. **Define** – state the found needs
 3. **Ideate** – challenge assumptions and ideate
 4. **Prototype** – create solutions
 5. **Test** – try the solutions out

Design Thinking: A 5-Stage Process



Interaction Design Foundation
interaction-design.org



Service Design

- Describe the contemporary shift from *products* (e.g., a car of a specific brand) to *services*, e.g., the car as a tool for an elderly customer that wants to take an Uber ride to visit a friend
- Focus on the complete experience, including business resources and processes
- Build upon five *key principles*, according to “This is Service Design Thinking”:
 1. **User-centered** – focus on all users
 2. **Co-creative** – include all relevant stakeholders
 3. **Sequencing** – break a complex service into separate processes
 4. **Evidencing** – envision service, not product, experiences
 5. **Holistic** – design across networks of users and interactions

Human-centered Design Process

A process for designing interactive systems with a focus on usability

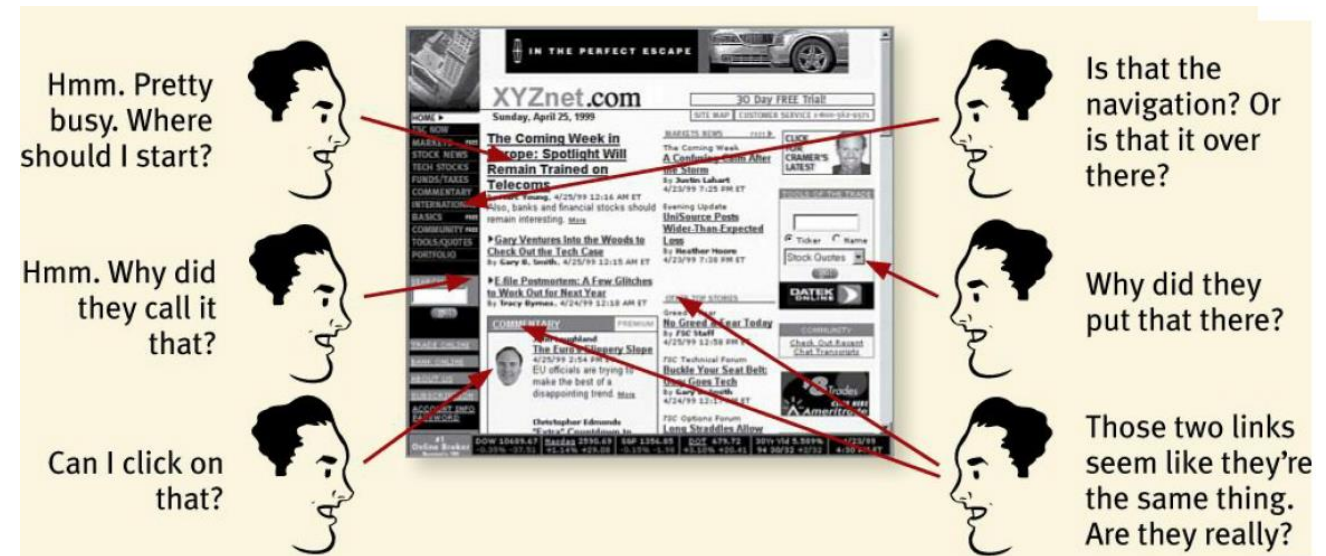
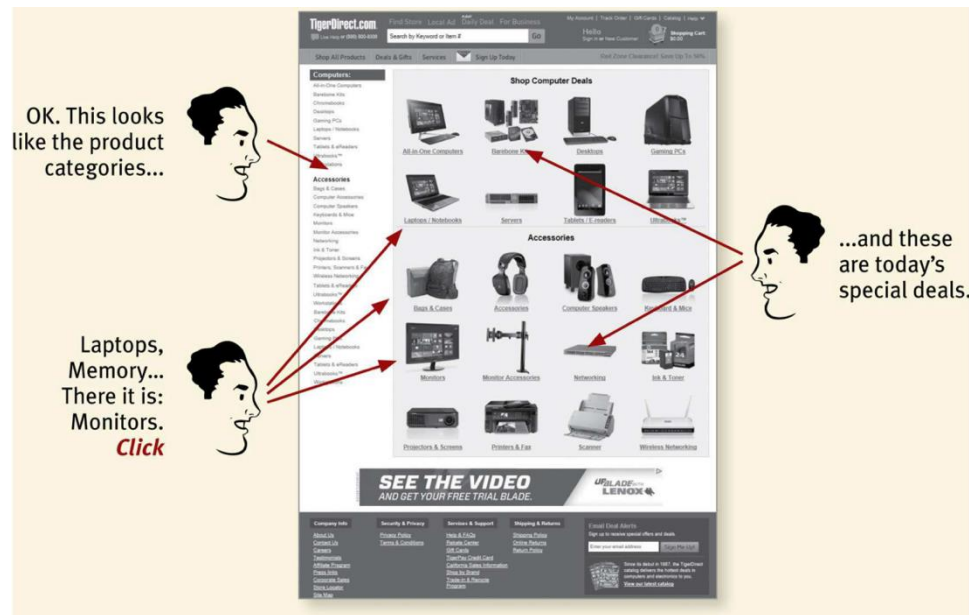
Usability (ISO standard definition)

- **Usability:** “extent to which a system, product or service can be used by specified users to achieve specified goals with *effectiveness, efficiency* and *satisfaction* in a specified context of use”
 - Note 1: The “specified” users, goals and context of use refer to the particular combination of users, goals and context of use for which usability is being considered
 - Note 2: The word “usability” is also used as a qualifier to refer to the design knowledge, competencies, activities and design attributes that contribute to usability, such as usability expertise, usability engineering, usability testing, etc.

Usability

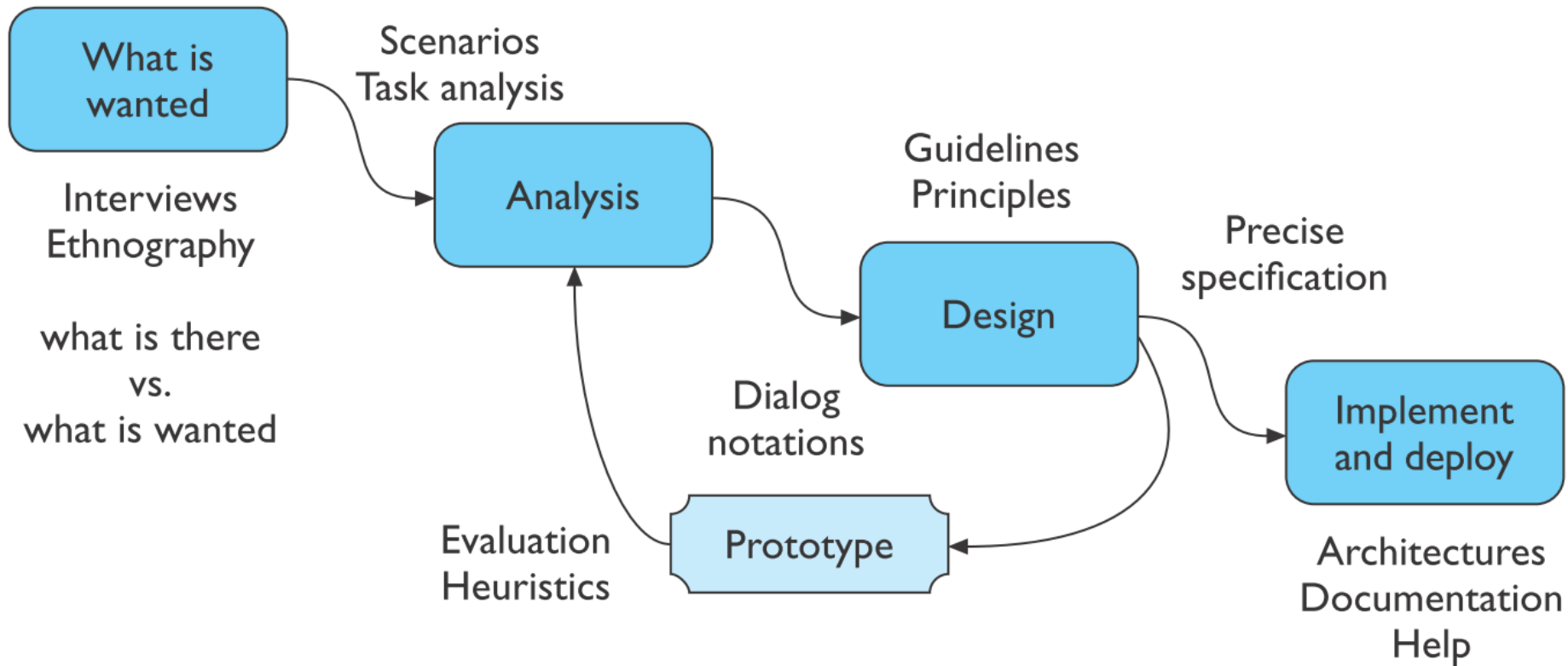
- **Usability:** how well users can use the system's functionality
- Dimensions of usability:
 - **Usefulness:** does it do something people want?
 - **Learnability:** is it easy to learn?
 - **Memorability:** once learned, is it easy to remember?
 - **Effectiveness:** does it allow reaching the goal?
 - **Efficiency:** once learned, is it fast to use?
 - **Visibility:** is the state of the system visible?
 - **Errors:** are errors few and recoverable?
 - **Satisfaction:** is it enjoyable to use?

Usability: Don't Make Me Think



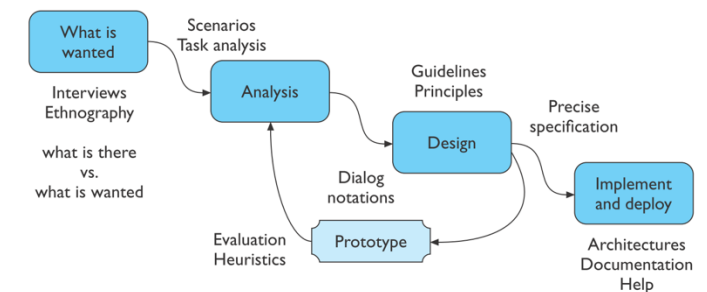
Human-Centered Design Process

(simplified and generic)



Human-Centered Design Process – The Main Steps (1)

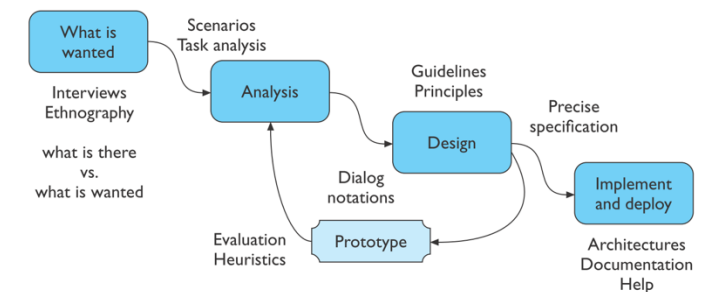
- **Needfinding** – what is needed by people
 - What exactly is needed? How are people currently accomplishing the goal?
 - User observation, interviews, ...
- **Analysis**
 - Formalize and structure the needs
 - Create interaction scenarios, stories, tasks
 - Compare current situation with expected new situation



Human-Centered Design Process – The Main Steps (2)

■ Design

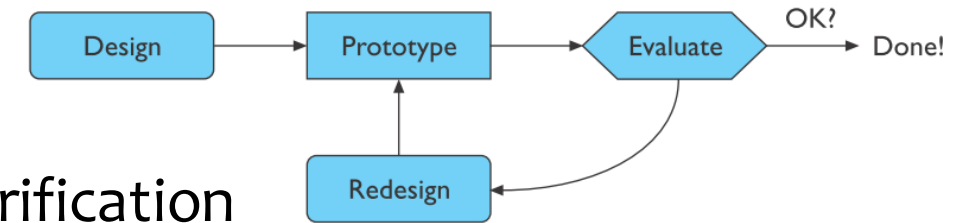
- The main choices to shape the system
- Rules, guidelines, design principles
- Considering different types of users
- Modeling and describing interaction
- Visual layout
- Consider all inputs from cognitive models, communications theories, organization issues



Human-Centered Design Process – The Main Steps (3)

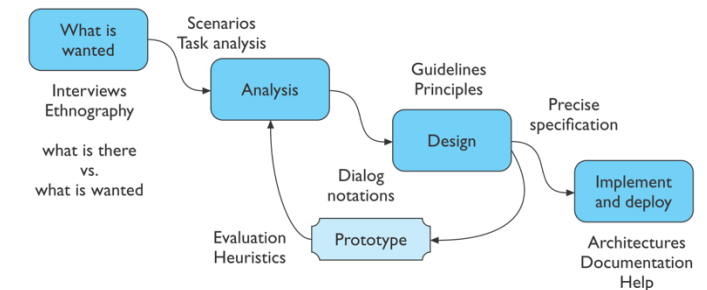
■ Iteration and prototyping

- Design must be supported by intermediate verification
- Evaluate the design in its partial forms:
 - Prototypes
 - Evaluation metrics
- Involving users



■ Implementation and deployment

- Hardware and software implementation
- Documentation

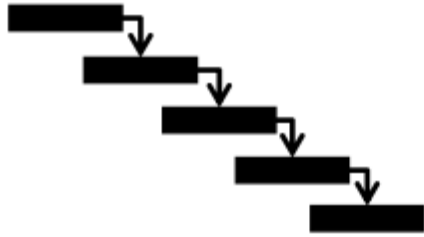


HCI in the Software Process

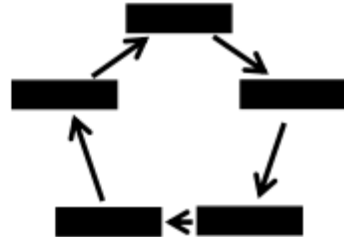
How to include Human-centered processes in Software Engineering

Software Engineering Processes

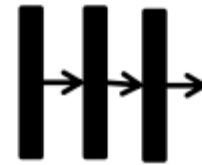
Where / how does HCI fit in?



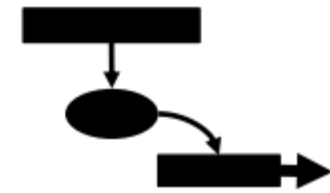
Waterfall



Iterative
waterfall



Agile
(scrum)

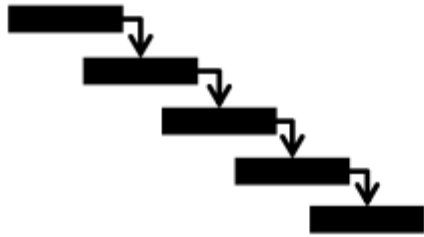


Lean

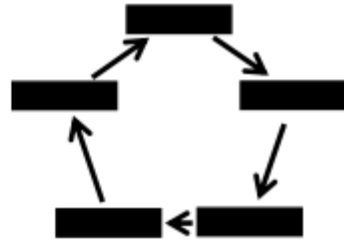
Software Engineering Processes

Where / how does HCI fit in?

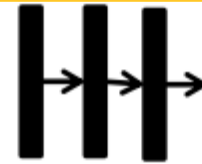
Always a step ahead!



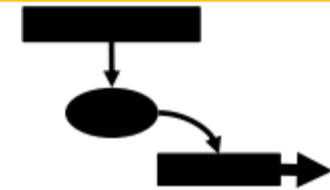
Waterfall



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Lean

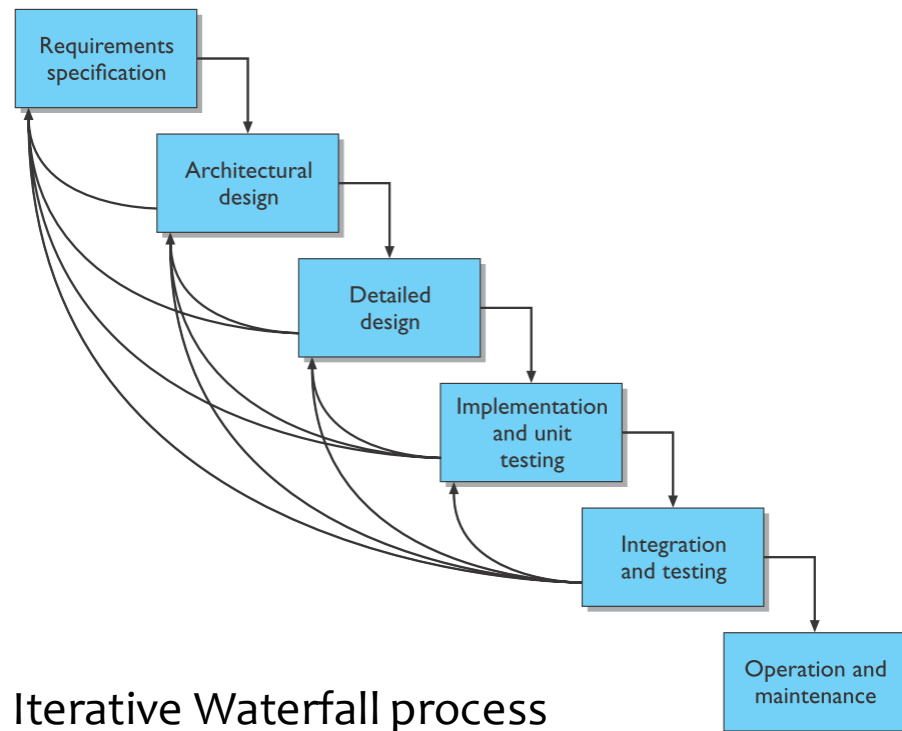
Always a Step Ahead (I)

- Before
 - Every design step
 - Every implementation step
 - Any product iteration (or sprint)
 - ...
- You need a user-centered step
 - Evaluate usability
 - Experiment with users
 - Evaluate alternative flows
 - Evaluate alternative layouts
 - ...

Always a Step Ahead (II)

- Usability, Safety, Performance, are part of Non-Functional Requirements
- User-centered steps are cheaper than development
 - User research about users' needs to decide what to design
 - Heuristic evaluations before testing with users
 - Evaluating prototypes instead of full-fledged products
- Anticipate critical decision points later in the project

Example



- Each step must be
 - Preceded with user evaluation of the design choices and formalized requirements
 - Followed with user evaluation of the result
- Must produce additional artifacts to allow this kind of iteration
 - Prototypes

References and Thanks

- Robert Miller, MIT Course “6.813/6.831: User Interface Design & Implementation”
 - Spring 2018 - <http://web.mit.edu/6.813/www/sp18/>
 - Spring 2011 - <https://ocw.mit.edu/courses/electrical-engineering-and-computer-science/6-831-user-interface-design-and-implementation-spring-2011/index.htm>
- Dix *et al*: Human Computer Interaction
 - Chapters 3, 5
- Norman: The Design of Everyday Things
 - Chapter 2
- Krug: Don't make me think
 - Introduction
- Shneiderman: Designing the User Interface
 - Chapter 4
- Thanks to Fulvio Corno, past teacher of the course, for his work on this slides

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