



[Table of Contents](#)

[Index](#)

Inmates Are Running the Asylum, The: Why High-Tech Products Drive Us Crazy and How to Restore the Sanity

By Alan Cooper

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Imagine, at a terrifyingly aggressive rate, everything you regularly use is being equipped with computer technology. Think about your phone, cameras, cars - everything - being automated and programmed by people who in their rush to accept the many benefits of the silicon chip, have abdicated their responsibility to make these products easy to use.

The Inmates are Running the Asylum argues that, despite appearances, business executives are simply not the ones in control of the high-tech industry. They have inadvertently put programmers and engineers in charge, leading to products and processes that waste money, squander customer loyalty, and erode competitive advantage. Business executives have let the inmates run the asylum!

In his book The Inmates Are Running the Asylum Alan Cooper calls for revolution - we need technology to work in the same way average people think - we need to restore the sanity. He offers a provocative, insightful and entertaining explanation of how talented people continuously design bad software-based products. More importantly, he uses his own work with companies big and small to show how to harness those talents to create products that will both thrill their users and grow the bottom line.



[Table of Contents](#)

[Index](#)

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[Copyright](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Foreword to the Original Edition](#)

[The Business-Case Book](#)

[Business-Savvy Technologist/Technology-Savvy Businessperson](#)

[Foreword](#)

[Part I: Computer Obliteracy](#)

[Chapter 1. Riddles for the Information Age](#)

[What Do You Get When You Cross a Computer with an Airplane?](#)

[What Do You Get When You Cross a Computer with a Camera?](#)

[What Do You Get When You Cross a Computer with an Alarm Clock?](#)

[What Do You Get When You Cross a Computer with a Car?](#)

[What Do You Get When You Cross a Computer with a Bank?](#)

[Computers Make It Easy to Get into Trouble](#)

[Commercial Software Suffers, Too](#)

[What Do You Get When You Cross a Computer with a Warship?](#)

[Techno-Rage](#)

[An Industry in Denial](#)

[The Origins of This Book](#)

[Chapter 2. Cognitive Friction](#)

[Behavior Unconnected to Physical Forces](#)

[Design Is a Big Word](#)

[The Relationship Between Programmers and Designers](#)

[Most Software Is Designed by Accident](#)

["Interaction" Versus "Interface" Design](#)

[Why Software-Based Products Are Different](#)

[The Dancing Bear](#)

[The Cost of Features](#)

[Apologists and Survivors](#)

[How We React to Cognitive Friction](#)

[The Democratization of Consumer Power](#)
[Blaming the User](#)
[Software Apartheid](#)

[Part II: It Costs You Big Time](#)

[Chapter 3. Wasting Money](#)

[Deadline Management](#)
[What Does "Done" Look Like?](#)
[Shipping Late Doesn't Hurt](#)
[Feature-List Bargaining](#)
[Features Are Not Necessarily Good](#)
[Iteration and the Myth of the Unpredictable Market](#)
[The Hidden Costs of Bad Software](#)
[The Cost of Prototyping](#)

[Chapter 4. The Dancing Bear](#)

[If It Were a Problem, Wouldn't It Have Been Solved by Now?](#)
[Consumer Electronics Victim](#)
[How Email Programs Fail](#)
[How Scheduling Programs Fail](#)
[How Calendar Software Fails](#)
[Mass Web Hysteria](#)
[What's Wrong with Software?](#)

[Chapter 5. Customer Disloyalty](#)

[Desirability](#)
[A Comparison](#)
[Time to Market](#)

[Part III: Eating Soup with a Fork](#)

[Chapter 6. The Inmates Are Running the Asylum](#)

[Driving from the Backseat](#)
[Hatching a Catastrophe](#)
[Computers Versus Humans](#)
[Teaching Dogs to Be Cats](#)

[Chapter 7. Homo Logicus](#)

[The Jetway Test](#)
[The Psychology of Computer Programmers](#)
[Programmers Trade Simplicity for Control](#)
[Programmers Exchange Success for Understanding](#)
[Programmers Focus on What Is Possible to the Exclusion of What Is Probable](#)
[Programmers Act Like Jocks](#)

[Chapter 8. An Obsolete Culture](#)

[The Culture of Programming](#)
[Reusing Code](#)
[The Common Culture](#)
[Cultural Isolation](#)
[Skin in the Game](#)
[The Process Is Dehumanizing, Not the Technology](#)

[Part IV: Interaction Design Is Good Business](#)

Chapter 9. Designing for Pleasure

Personas

Design for Just One Person

The Elastic User

Be Specific

Hypothetical

Precision, Not Accuracy

A Realistic Look at Skill Levels

Personas End Feature Debates

It's a User Persona, Not a Buyer Persona

The Cast of Characters

Primary Personas

Case Study: Sony Trans Com's P@ssport

Chapter 10. Designing for Power

Goals Are the Reason Why We Perform Tasks

Tasks Are Not Goals

Goal-Directed Design

Personal and Practical Goals

Personal Goals

Corporate Goals

Practical Goals

False Goals

Computers Are Human, Too

Designing for Politeness

What Makes Software Polite?

Case Study: Elemental Drumbeat

Chapter 11. Designing for People

Scenarios

Daily-Use Scenarios

Necessary-Use Scenarios

Edge-Case Scenario

Inflecting the Interface

Perpetual Intermediates

Vocabulary

Reality Bats Last

Case Study: Logitech ScanMan

Bridging Hardware and Software

Less Is More

Part V: Getting Back into the Driver's Seat

Chapter 12. Desperately Seeking Usability

The Timing

User Testing

Multidisciplinary Teams

Programmers Designing

How Do You Know?

Style Guides

Focus Groups

Visual Design

Industrial Design

Cool New Technology

Iteration

[Chapter 13. A Managed Process](#)

[Who Really Has the Most Influence?](#)

[Finding Bedrock](#)

[Making Movies](#)

[The Deal](#)

[Who Owns Product Quality?](#)

[Creating a Design-Friendly Process](#)

[Chapter 14. Power and Pleasure](#)

[An Example of a Well-Run Project](#)

[A Companywide Awareness of Design](#)

[Benefits of Change](#)

[Let Them Eat Cake](#)

[Alan Cooper](#)

[Index](#)

 [PREV](#)

[< Day Day Up >](#)

[NEXT !\[\]\(e50091943b385fe16d3277389202856f_img.jpg\)](#)

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[< Day Day Up >](#)





[< Day Day Up >](#)

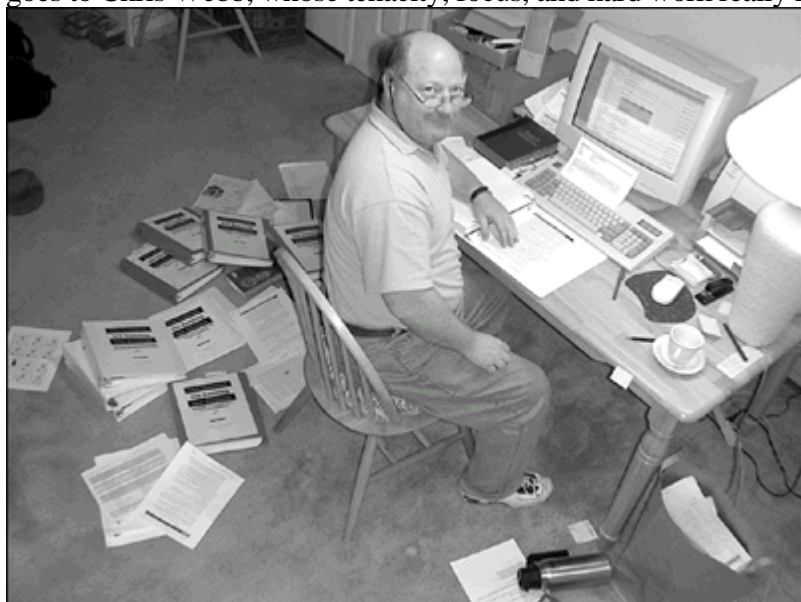


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Getting the illustrations done turned out to be one of the more interesting production challenges. Chad Kubo, the masterful creator of the images, did a remarkable job of interpreting my vague ideas into crisp and memorable images. They add a lot to the book. The illustrations could not have been done at all without the tireless art direction work of Penny Bayless and David Hale. Still others helped with the many production tasks. Thanks to Brit Katzen for fact checking and research and Mike Henry for copy editing.

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Introduction

Run for your lives—the computers are invading. Awesomely powerful computers tackling ever more important tasks with awkward, old-fashioned interfaces. As these machines leak into every corner of our lives, they will annoy us, infuriate us, and even kill a few of us. In turn, we will be tempted to kill our computers, but we won't dare because we are already utterly, irreversibly dependent on these hopeful monsters that make modern life possible.

Fortunately, we have another option. We need to fundamentally rethink how humans and machines interact. And rethink the relationship in deep and novel ways, for the fault for our burgeoning problems lies not with our machines, but with us. Humans designed the interfaces we hate; humans continue to use dysfunctional machines even as the awkward interfaces strain their eyes, ache their backs, and ruin their wrist tendons. We all are, as the title of this book suggests, the inmates running the techno-asylum of our own creation.

This book is a guide to our escape. Or rather, Alan Cooper reveals that the door to the asylum lies wide open. We are free to leave any time we want, but mad as we have all become, we never noticed until now. The secret lies in redefining the way we interact with our computers in a larger context.

Alan Cooper is not merely a fellow inmate; he is also a heretic whose ideas will likely infuriate those who would want to keep us locked up. These are the engineers who built the systems we hate and who still believe the way out of this mess is to build better interfaces. But the very notion of interface is itself an artifact of an age when computers were scarce and puny, and barely able to interact with their human masters. Interface made sense when the entire interaction took place across the glass-thin no-man land of a computer screen. Now it is an utterly dangerous notion in a world where computers are slipping into every corner of our lives. Computers no longer interface with humans—they interact, and the interaction will become steadily deeper, more subtle, and more crucial to our collective sanity and ultimate survival.

Alan Cooper understands the shift from interface to interaction better than anyone I know. His ideas come from years of experience in helping design products that slip elegantly and unobtrusively into our lives. He has walked his talk for years, and now he has finally found the time to turn his practice into a lucid description of the challenge we face, and a methodology for escaping the asylum we have so lovingly built. Read on and you will find your freedom.

Paul Saffo
Director
Institute for the Future

Foreword to the Original Edition

[The Business-Case Book](#)

[Business-Savvy Technologist/Technology-Savvy Businessperson](#)

The Business-Case Book

I intended to write a very different book from this one: a how-to book about the interaction-design process. Instead, in May 1997 on a family visit to Tuscany, my friends Don McKinney and Dave Carlick talked me into this one. They convinced me that I needed to address a business audience first.

They knew I wanted to write a how-to design book, and—although they were encouraging—they expressed their doubts about the need for interaction design, and they wanted me to write a book to convince them of its value. Their argument was intriguing, but I was unsure that I could write the book they wanted.

Late one night on the veranda of our shared ochre villa overlooking Firenze, I was having an earnest conversation with Dave and Don. Several empty bottles of Chianti stood on the table, along with the remains of some bread, cheese, and olives. The stars shone brightly, the fireflies danced over the lawn, and the lights on the ancient domes of the Tuscan capital twinkled in the distance. Once again, Dave suggested that I postpone the idea of a how-to book on design and instead "make the business case for interaction design."

I protested vigorously, "But Dave, I don't know how to write that book." I ticked off the reasons on my fingertips. "It means that I'd have to explain things like how the current development process is messed up, how companies waste money on inefficient software construction, how unsatisfied customers are fickle, and how a better design process can solve that."

Dave interrupted me to say simply, "They're called chapters, Alan."

His remark stopped me dead in my tracks. I realized that I was reciting an old script, and that Dave was right. A book that made "the business case" was necessary—and more timely—than a book that explained "how to." And both Dave and Don convinced me that I really could write such a book.



[< Day Day Up >](#)



Business-Savvy Technologist/Technology-Savvy Businessperson

The successful professional for the twenty-first century is either a business-savvy technologist or a technology-savvy businessperson, and I am writing for this person.

The technology-savvy businessperson knows that his success is dependent on the quality of the information available to him and the sophistication with which he uses it. The business-savvy technologist, on the other hand, is an entrepreneurial engineer or scientist trained for technology, but possessing a keen business sense and an awareness of the power of information. Both of these new archetypes are coming to dominate contemporary business.

You can divide all businesspeople into two categories: those who will master high technology and those who will soon be going out of business. No longer can an executive delegate information processing to specialists. Business is information processing. You differentiate yourself today with the quality of your information-handling systems, not your manufacturing systems. If you manufacture anything, chances are it has a microchip in it. If you offer a service, odds are that you offer it with computerized tools. Attempting to identify businesses that depend on high technology is as futile as trying to identify businesses that depend on the telephone. The high-tech revolution has invaded every business, and digital information is the beating heart of your workday.

It's been said, "To err is human; to really screw up, you need a computer." Inefficient mechanical systems can waste a couple of cents on every widget you build, but you can lose your entire company to bad information processes. The leverage that software-based products—and the engineers that build them—have on your company is enormous.

Sadly, our digital tools are extremely hard to learn, use, and understand, and they often cause us to fall short of our goals. This wastes money, time, and opportunity. As a business-savvy technologist/technology-savvy businessperson, you produce software-based products or consume them—probably both. Having better, easier-to-learn, easier-to-use high-tech products is in your personal and professional best interest. Better products don't take longer to create, nor do they cost more to build. The irony is that they don't have to be difficult, but are so only because our process for making them is old-fashioned and needs fixing. Only long-standing traditions rooted in misconceptions keep us from having better products today. This book will show you how you can demand—and get—the better products that you deserve.

The point of this book is uncomplicated: We can create powerful and pleasurable software-based products by the simple expedient of designing our computer-based products before we build them. Contrary to the popular belief, we are not already doing so. Designing interactive, software-based products is a specialty as demanding as constructing them.



Having made my choice to write the business-case book rather than the how-to design book, I beg forgiveness from any interaction designers reading this book. In deference to the business audience, it has only the briefest treatment of the actual nuts and bolts of interaction-design methodology (found primarily in [Part IV](#), "Interaction Design Is Good Business"). I included only enough to show that such methodology exists, that it is applicable to any subject matter, and that its benefits are readily apparent to anyone, regardless of their technical expertise.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Alan Cooper'.



[< Day Day Up >](#)





[< Day Day Up >](#)



Foreword

I recently met with a senior executive at one of the world's largest technology companies. His official title is Vice President for Ease of Use, and he is responsible for a great number of software products, large and small. He is a brilliant and accomplished fellow with roots in the formal Human-Computer Interaction community. He is steeped in the ways of "usability"—of testing and observing behind one-way mirrors—as is his company. But he came to talk about design, not testing, and about personas, not users. He said that his company has completely ceased all postdevelopment usability testing and has instead committed to predevelopment design efforts. He further asserted that all of his staffers trained in the art of in vitro user observation were being retrained to do in situ ethnographic research.

This executive and his company are emblematic of the sea of change that has occurred in the industry in the five short years since *The Inmates* was first published. The book has served as both a manifesto for a revolution and a handbook for a discipline. Countless midlevel product managers have sent me email describing why—after reading *The Inmates*—they purchased a copy of the book for each of their departments' senior executives. Meanwhile, software builders and universities alike have used the three chapters in [Part IV](#), "Interaction Design Is Good Business," as a rudimentary how-to manual for implementing Goal-Directed design using personas.

I am deeply grateful to all of the managers, programmers, executives, and usability practitioners who have used the ideas in this book to help bring usability out of the laboratory and into the field and changed its focus from testing to design. Because of their efforts, the entire landscape of the usability profession has changed. Today, most of the organizations I have contact with have one or more interaction-design professionals on their payrolls, who have an ever-increasing influence over the quality and behavior of the software products and services being created. It's gratifying to know that this book has contributed to their success.

I recall giving a keynote presentation at a programmer's conference in 1999, shortly after this book was first published. That talk had the same title as the book, and I opened by asserting that "inmates are running the asylum, and you are the inmates." You could hear a pin drop as the more than 2,500 engineers in the audience grappled with that accusation. In the silence that engulfed the auditorium, I went on to present the basic premise of this book, and an hour later, that crowd of *Homo logicus* was so sufficiently convinced that they honored me with a standing ovation. Surprisingly, most programmers have become enthusiastic supporters of design and designers. They know that they need help on the human side of software construction, and they are very happy to be finally receiving some useful guidance. They recognize that any practice that improves the quality and acceptance of their programs doesn't threaten them.

In the past, executives assumed that interaction design was a programming problem and delegated it to programmers, who diligently tried to solve the problem even though their skills, training, mindset, and work schedule prevented them from succeeding. In the spirit of problem diagnosis, this book takes pains to describe this failure, which is necessarily a story of the programmer's failure. Some of them took offense at my descriptions, imagining that I was maligning or blaming programmers for bad software. They are certainly the agents by which bad software is created, but they are by no means culpable. I do not blame programmers for hard-to-use software, and I'm very sorry to have given any programmer a contrary impression. With few exceptions, the programmers I know are diligent and conscientious in their desire to please end users and are unceasing in their efforts to improve their programs' quality. Just like users, programmers are simply another victim of a flawed process that leaves them too little time, too many conflicting orders, and utterly insufficient guidance. I am very sorry to have given any programmers the impression that I fault them.

The intractability of the software-construction process—particularly the high cost of programming and the low quality of interaction—is simply not a technical problem. It is the result of business practices imposed on a discipline—software programming—for which they are obsolete. With pure hearts, the best of intentions, and the blessing of upper management, programmers attempt to fix this problem by engineering even harder. But more or better engineering cannot solve these problems. Programmers sense the growing futility of their efforts, and their frustration mounts.



[< Day Day Up >](#)



Part I: Computer Obliteracy

[Chapter 1](#) Riddles for the Information Age

[Chapter 2](#) Cognitive Friction

Chapter 1. Riddles for the Information Age

[What Do You Get When You Cross a Computer with an Airplane?](#)

[What Do You Get When You Cross a Computer with a Camera?](#)

[What Do You Get When You Cross a Computer with an Alarm Clock?](#)

[What Do You Get When You Cross a Computer with a Car?](#)

[What Do You Get When You Cross a Computer with a Bank?](#)

[Computers Make It Easy to Get into Trouble](#)

[Commercial Software Suffers, Too](#)

[What Do You Get When You Cross a Computer with a Warship?](#)

[Techno-Rage](#)

[An Industry in Denial](#)

[The Origins of This Book](#)



[< Day Day Up >](#)



What Do You Get When You Cross a Computer with an Airplane?

In December 1995, American Airlines Flight 965 departed from Miami on a regularly scheduled trip to Cali, Columbia. On the landing approach, the pilot of the 757 needed to select the next radio-navigation fix, named "ROZO." He entered an "R" into his navigation computer. The computer returned a list of nearby navigation fixes starting with "R," and the pilot selected the first of these, whose latitude and longitude appeared to be correct. Unfortunately, instead of "ROZO," the pilot selected "ROMEO," 132 miles to the northeast. The jet was southbound, descending into a valley that runs north-south, and any lateral deviation was dangerous. Following indications on the flight computer, the pilot began an easterly turn and slammed into a granite peak at 10,000 feet. One hundred and fifty-two passengers and all eight crewmembers aboard perished. Four passengers survived with serious injuries. The National Transportation Safety Board investigated, and—as usual—declared the problem human error. The navigational aid the pilot was following was valid, but not for the landing procedure at Cali. In the literal definition of the phrase, this was indeed human error, because the pilot selected the wrong fix. However, in the larger picture, it wasn't the pilot's fault at all.

The front panel of the airplane's navigation computer showed the currently selected navigation fix and a course-deviation indicator. When the plane is on course, the needle is centered, but the needle gives no indication whatsoever about the correctness of the selected radio beacon. The gauge looks pretty much the same just before landing as it does just before crashing. The computer told the pilot he was tracking precisely to the beacon he had selected. Unfortunately, it neglected to tell him the beacon he selected was a fatal choice.



Communications can be precise and exacting while still being tragically wrong. This happens all too frequently when we communicate with computers, and computers are invading every aspect of our modern lives. From the planes we fly to just about every consumer product and service, computers are ubiquitous, and so is their characteristically poor way of communicating and behaving.

There is a widely told joke in the computer industry that goes like this: A man is flying in a small airplane and is lost in the clouds. He descends until he spots an office building and yells to a man in an open window, "Where am I?" The man replies, "You are in an airplane about 100 feet above the ground." The pilot immediately turns to the proper course, spots the airport, and lands. His astonished passenger asks how the pilot figured out which way to go. The pilot replies, "The answer the man gave me was completely correct and factual, yet it was no help whatsoever, so I knew immediately he was a software engineer who worked for Microsoft, and I know where Microsoft's building is in relation to the airport."

When seen in the light of the tragedy of Flight 965, the humor of the joke is macabre, yet professionals in the digital world tell it gleefully and frequently because it highlights a fundamental truth about computers: They may tell us facts, but they don't inform us. They may guide us with precision, but they don't guide us where we want to go. The flight computer on Flight 965 could easily have told the pilots that "ROMEO" was not an appropriate fix for their approach to Cali. Even a simple hint that it was "unusual" or "unfamiliar" could have saved the airplane. Instead, it seemed as though the computer was utterly unconcerned with the actual flight and its passengers. It cared only about its own internal computations.

Hard-to-use computers affect us all, sometimes fatally. Software-based products are not inherently hard to use; they are that way because we use the wrong process for creating them. In this book, I intend to reveal this bad process by showing its effect and describing its cause. I'll then show how to change the process so that our software-based products become friendly, powerful, and desirable. First, I'll use this chapter to show how serious this problem really is.



[< Day Day Up >](#)



What Do You Get When You Cross a Computer with a Camera?

Here is a riddle for the information age: What do you get when you cross a computer with a camera? Answer: A computer! Thirty years ago, my first camera, a 35mm Pentax Model H, had a small battery in it that powered the light meter. I merely swapped in a new one every couple of years, as I would a wristwatch battery.

Fifteen years ago, my first electronic camera, a 35mm Canon T70, used two AA batteries to power its rather simple exposure computer and its automatic film drive. It had a simple on/off switch so that the batteries wouldn't wear down needlessly.



Five years ago, my filmless Logitech, a first-generation digital camera, had a similar on/off switch, but it also had the smarts of a rudimentary computer inside it. If I forgot to turn it off, it automatically shut down after one minute of inactivity. Neat.

One year ago, my second-generation digital camera, a Panasonic PalmCam, had an even smarter computer chip inside it. It was so smart that its on/off switch had evolved into an "Off/Rec/Play" switch. It had modes: I had to put it into Rec mode to take pictures and Play mode to view them on its small video display.

My newest camera, a Nikon COOLPIX 900, is a third-generation digital camera and the smartest yet. In fact, it has a full-blown computer that displays a Windows-like hourglass while it "boots up." Like some mutant fish with extra heads, its on/off switch has four settings: Off/ARec/MRec/Play. "ARec" means "automatic record" and "MRec" means "manual record." As far as I can tell, there is no difference. There is no "On" setting, and none of my friends can figure out how to turn it on without a lengthy explanation.

The new camera is very power-hungry, and its engineers thoughtfully provided it with a sophisticated computer program that manages the consumption of battery power. A typical scenario goes like this: I turn the evil Off/etc. switch to "MRec," wait about seven long seconds for the camera to boot up, then point it at my subject. I aim the camera and zoom in to properly frame the image. Just as I'm about to press the shutter button, the camera suddenly realizes that simultaneously running the zoom, charging the flash, and energizing the display has caused it to run out of power. In self-defense, it suspends its capability to actually take pictures. But I don't know that because I'm looking through the viewfinder, waving my arms, saying "smile," and pressing the shutter button. The computer detects the button press, but it simply cannot obey. In a misguided effort to help out, the power-management program instantly takes over and makes an executive decision: Shed load. It shuts down the power-greedy LCD video display. I look at the camera quizzically, wondering why it didn't take the picture, shrug my shoulders, and let my arm holding the camera drop to my side. But as soon as the LCD is turned off, more battery power is available for other systems. The power-management program senses this increase and realizes that it now has enough electricity to take pictures. It returns control to the camera program, which is waiting patiently to process the command it received when I pressed the shutter button, and it takes a nicely auto-focused, well-exposed, high-resolution digital picture of my kneecap.

That old mechanical Pentax had manual focusing, manual exposure, and manual shutter speed, yet it was far less frustrating to use than the fully computerized, modern Nikon COOLPIX 900, which has automatic focusing,



[< Day Day Up >](#)



What Do You Get When You Cross a Computer with an Alarm Clock?

A computer! I just purchased an expensive new clock-radio for my bedroom, a JVC FS-2000. It has a very sophisticated computer brain and offers high fidelity, digital sound, and lots of features. It wakes me up at a preset time by playing a CD, and it has the delicacy and intelligence to slowly fade up the volume when it begins to play at 6:00 a.m. This feature is really pleasant and quite unique, and it compensates for the fact that I want to hurl the infuriating machine out the window.

It's very hard to tell when the alarm is armed, so it occasionally fails to wake me up on a Monday and rousts me out of bed early on a Saturday. Sure, it has an indicator to show the alarm is set, but that doesn't mean it's useful. The clock has a sophisticated alphanumeric LCD that displays all of its many functions. The presence of a small clock symbol in the upper-left corner of the LCD indicates the alarm is armed, but in a dimly lit bedroom the clock symbol cannot be seen. The LCD has a built-in backlight that makes the clock symbol visible, but the backlight only comes on when the CD or radio is explicitly turned on. There's a gotcha, however: The alarm simply won't ever sound while the CD is explicitly left on, regardless of the setting of the alarm. It is this paradoxical operation that frequently catches me unawares.



It is simple to disarm the alarm: Simply press the "Alarm" button once, and the clock symbol disappears from the display. However, to arm it, I must press the "Alarm" button exactly five times. The first time I press it, the display shows me the time of the alarm. On press two, it shows the time when it will turn the sound off. On press three, it shows me whether it will play the radio or the CD. On press four, it shows me the preset volume. On press five, it returns to the normal view, but with the alarm now armed. But with just one additional press, it disarms the alarm. Sleepy, in a dark bedroom, I find it difficult to perform this little digital ballet correctly.

Being a nerdy gizmologist, I continue to fiddle with the device in the hope that I will master it. My wife, however, long ago gave up on the diabolical machine. She loves the look of the sleek, modern design and the fidelity of the sound it produces, but it failed to pass the alarm-clock test weeks ago because it is simply too hard to make work. The alarm clock may still wake me up, but it behaves like a computer.

By contrast, my old \$11 noncomputerized alarm clock woke me up with a sudden, unholy buzzing. When it was armed, a single red light glowed. When it was not armed, the red light was dark. I didn't like this old alarm clock for many reasons, but at least I could tell when it was going to wake me up.



Because it is far cheaper for manufacturers to use computers to control the internal functioning of devices than it is to use older, mechanical methods, it is economically inevitable that computers will insinuate themselves into every product and service in our lives. This means all of our products will soon behave the same as most obnoxious computers, unless we try something different.





[< Day Day Up >](#)



What Do You Get When You Cross a Computer with a Car?

A computer! Porsche's beautiful high-tech sports car, the Boxster, has seven computers in it to help manage its complex systems. One of them is dedicated to managing the engine. It has special procedures built into it to deal with abnormal situations. Unfortunately, these sometimes backfire. In some early models, if the fuel level in the gas tank got very low—only a gallon or so remaining—the centrifugal force of a sharp turn could cause the fuel to collect in the side of the tank, allowing air to enter the fuel lines. The computer sensed this as a dramatic change in the incoming fuel mixture and interpreted it as a catastrophic failure of the injection system. To prevent damage, the computer would shut down the ignition and stop the car. Also to prevent damage, the computer wouldn't let the driver restart the engine until the car had been towed to a shop and serviced.

When owners of early Boxsters first discovered this problem, the only solution Porsche could devise was to tell them to open the engine compartment and disconnect the battery for at least five minutes, giving the computer time to forget all knowledge of the hiccup. The sports car may still speed down those two-lane blacktop roads, but now, in those tight turns, it behaves like a computer.



In a laudable effort to protect Boxster owners, the programmers turned them into humiliated victims. Every performance-car aficionado knows that the Porsche company is dedicated to lavishing respect and privilege on its clientele. That something like this slipped through shows that the software inside the car is not coming from the same Porsche that makes the rest of the car. It comes from a company within a company: the programmers, not the legendary German automobile engineers. Somehow, the introduction of a new technology surprised an older, well-established company into letting some of its core values slip away. Acceptable levels of quality for software engineers are far lower than those for more traditional engineering disciplines.

What Do You Get When You Cross a Computer with a Bank?

A computer! Whenever I withdraw cash from an automatic teller machine (ATM), I encounter the same sullen and difficult behavior so universal with computers. If I make the slightest mistake, it rejects the entire transaction and kicks me out of the process. I have to pull my card out, reinsert it, reenter my PIN code, and then reassert my request. Typically, it wasn't my mistake, either, but the ATM computer finesses me into a misstep. It always asks me whether I want to withdraw money from my checking, savings, or money-market account, even though I have only a checking account. Subsequently, I always forget which type it is, and the question confuses me. About once a month I inadvertently select "savings," and the infernal machine summarily boots me out of the entire transaction to start over from the beginning. To reject "savings," the machine has to know that I don't have a savings account, yet it still offers it to me as a choice. The only difference between me selecting "savings" and the pilot of Flight 965 selecting "ROMEO" is the magnitude of the penalty.

The ATM also restricts me to a \$200 "daily withdrawal limit." If I go through all of the steps—identifying myself, choosing the account, selecting the amount—and then ask for \$220, the computer unceremoniously rejects the entire transaction, informing me rudely that I have exceeded my daily withdrawal limit. It doesn't tell me what that amount is, inform me how much money is in my account, or give me the opportunity to key in a new, lower amount. Instead, it spits out my card and leaves me to try the whole process again from scratch, no wiser than I was a moment ago, as the line of people growing behind me shifts, shuffles, and sighs. The ATM is correct and factual, but it is no help whatsoever.

The ATM has rules that must be followed, and I am quite willing to follow them, but it is unreasonably computer-like to fail to inform me of them, give me contradictory indications, and then summarily punish me for innocently transgressing them. This behavior—so typical of computers—is not intrinsic to them. Actually, nothing is intrinsic to computers: They merely act on behalf of their software, the program. And programs are as malleable as human speech. A person can speak rudely or politely, helpfully or sullenly. It is as simple for a computer to behave with respect and courtesy as it is for a human to speak that way. All it takes is for someone to describe how. Unfortunately, programmers aren't very good at teaching that to computers.

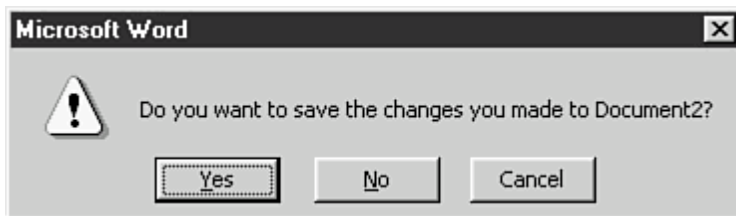


[< Day Day Up >](#)

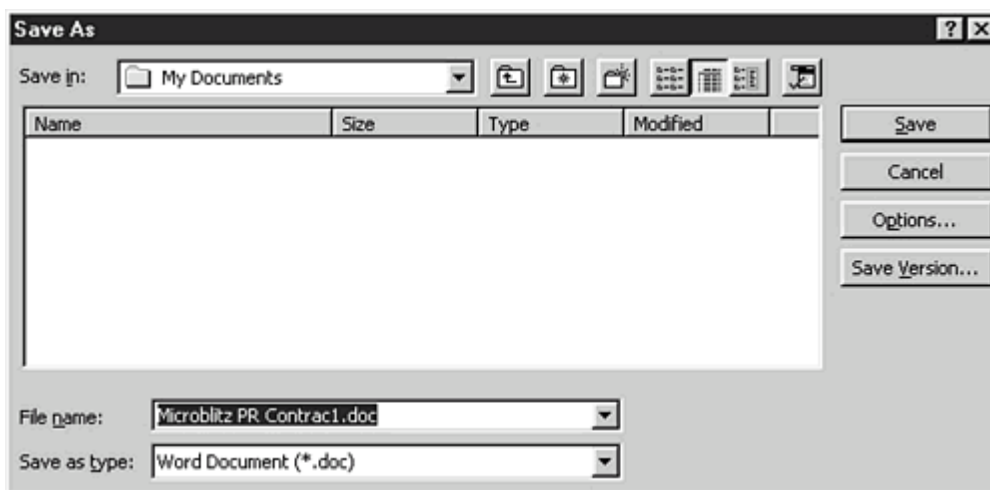


Computers Make It Easy to Get into Trouble

Computers that sit on a desk simply behave in the same, irritating way computers always have, and they don't have to be crossed with anything. My friend Jane used to work in public relations as an account coordinator. She ran Windows 95 on her desktop PC, using Microsoft Word to write memos and contracts. The core of Windows 95 is the hierarchical file system. All of Jane's documents were stored in little folders, which were stored in other little folders. Jane didn't understand this or see the advantage to storing things that way. Actually, Jane didn't give it a lot of thought but merely took the path of least resistance.



Jane had just finished drafting the new PR contract for a Silicon Valley startup company. She selected Close from the File menu. Instead of simply doing as she directed and closing the document, Word popped up a dialog box. It was, of course, the all-too-familiar Do You Want to Save the Changes? confirmation box. She responded—as always—by pressing the Enter key. She responded this way so consistently and often that she no longer even looked at the dialog box.



The first dialog box was followed immediately by another one, the equally familiar Save As box. It presented Jane with lots of confusing buttons, icons, and text fields. The only one that Jane understood and used was the text-entry field for File Name. She typed in a likely name and then clicked the Save button. The program then saved the PR contract in the My Documents folder. Jane was so used to this unnecessary drill that she gave it no thought.

At lunchtime, while Jane was out of her office, Sunil, the company's computer tech, installed a new version of VirusKiller 2.1 on her computer. While working on Jane's PC, Sunil used Word to view a VirusKiller Readme file. After viewing the file, Sunil closed it and returned Jane's computer to exactly the way it was before lunch. At least, he thought he did.

After lunch, Jane needed to reopen the PR contract and get a printout to show to her boss. Jane selected Open from the File menu, and the Open dialog box appeared. Jane expected the Open dialog box to show her, in neat alphabetic order, all of her contracts and documents. Instead, it showed her a bunch of filenames that she had never seen before and didn't recognize. One of them was named Readme.doc.

Of course, when Sunil used Word to view the Readme file, he instructed Jane's copy of Word to look in an obscure



[< Day Day Up >](#)



Commercial Software Suffers, Too

Not only are computers taking over the cockpits of jet airliners, but they are also taking over the passenger cabin, behaving in that same obstinate, perverse way that is so easy to recognize and so hard to use. Modern jet planes have in-flight entertainment (IFE) systems that deliver movies and music to passengers. IFE systems are merely computers connected with LANs, just like the computers in your office. Advanced IFE systems are generally installed only on larger airplanes flying transoceanic routes.

One airline's IFE system was so frustrating for the flight attendants to use that many of them were bidding to fly shorter, local routes to avoid having to learn and use the difficult systems. This is remarkable, considering that the time-honored airline route-bidding process is based on seniority, and that those same long-distance routes have always been considered the most desirable plums because of their lengthy layovers in exotic locales such as Singapore or Paris. For flight attendants to bid for unglamorous, unromantic yo-yo flights from Denver to Dallas or from Los Angeles to San Francisco just to avoid the IFE system indicated a serious morale problem. Any airline that inflicted bad tools on its most prized employees—the ones who spent the most time with the customer—was making a foolish decision and profligately discarding money, customer loyalty, and staff loyalty.

The computer IFE system that another large airline created was even worse. It linked movie delivery with the cash-collection function. In a sealed jet airplane flying at 37,000 feet, cash-collection procedures had typically been quite laissez-faire; after all, nobody was going to sneak out the back door. Flight attendants delivered goods and services when it was convenient and collected later when their hands weren't full and other passengers weren't waiting for something. This kept them from running unnecessarily up and down the narrow aisles. Sure, there were occasional errors, but never more than a few dollars were involved, and the system was quite human and forgiving; everyone was happy and the work was not oppressive.

With cash collection connected to content delivery by computer, the flight attendant had to first get the cash from the passenger, then walk all the way to the head end of the cabin, where the attendant's console was, enter an attendant password, then perform a cash-register-like transaction. Only when that transaction was completed could the passenger actually view a movie or listen to music. This inane product design forced the flight attendants to walk up and down those narrow aisles hundreds of extra times during a typical trip. Out of sheer frustration, the flight attendants would trip the circuit breaker on the IFE system at the beginning of each long flight, shortly after departure. They would then blandly announce to the passengers that, sorry, the system was broken and there would be no movie on this flight.

The airline had spent millions of dollars constructing a system so obnoxious that its users deliberately turned it off to avoid interacting with it. The thousands of bored passengers were merely innocent victims. And this happened on long, overseas trips typically packed with much-sought-after frequent flyers. I cannot put a dollar figure on the expense this caused the airline, but I can say with conviction that it was catastrophically expensive.

The software inside the IFE systems worked with flawless precision but was a resounding failure because it misbehaved with its human keepers. How could a company fail to predict this sad result? How could it fail to see the connection? The goal of this book is to answer these questions and to show you how to avoid such high-tech debacles.

What Do You Get When You Cross a Computer with a Warship?

In September 1997, while conducting fleet maneuvers in the Atlantic, the USS Yorktown, one of the Navy's new Aegis guided-missile cruisers, stopped dead in the water. A Navy technician, while calibrating an on-board fuel valve, entered a zero into one of the shipboard management computers, a Pentium Pro running Windows NT. The program attempted to divide another number by that zero—a mathematically undefined operation—which resulted in a complete crash of the entire shipboard control system. Without the computers, the engine halted and the ship sat wallowing in the swells for two hours and 45 minutes until it could be towed into port. Good thing it wasn't in a war zone.



What do you get when you cross a computer with a warship? Admiral Nimitz is rolling in his grave! Despite this setback, the Navy is committed to computerizing all of its ships because of the manpower cost savings. To deflect criticism of this plan, it blamed the "incident" on human error. Because the software-creation process is out of control, the high-tech industry must bring its process to heel, or else it will continue to put the blame on ordinary users while ever-bigger machines sit dead in the water.

Techno-Rage

An article in the Wall Street Journal once described an anonymous video clip circulated widely by email that showed a "[m]ustachioed Everyman in a short-sleeved shirt hunched over a computer terminal, looking puzzled. Suddenly, he strikes the side of his monitor in frustration. As a curious co-worker peers over his cubicle, the man slams the keyboard into the monitor, knocking it to the floor. Rising from his chair, he goes after the fallen monitor with a final, ferocious kick."

The article went on to say that reaction to the clip had been "intense" and that it had apparently tapped into "a powerful undercurrent of techno-rage."



It's ironic that one needs to be moderately computer savvy to even send or view this video clip. The man in the video may well be an actor, but he touches a widespread, sympathetic chord in our business world. The frustration that difficult and unpleasant software-based products are bringing to our lives is rising rapidly.

Joke emails circulate on private email lists about "Computer Tourette's." This is a play on the disorder known as Tourette's syndrome, some of whose sufferers engage in uncontrollable bouts of swearing. The joke is that you can walk down the halls of most modern office buildings and hear otherwise-normal people sitting in front of their monitors, jaws clenched, swearing repeatedly in a rictus of tense fury. Who knows what triggered such an outburst: a misplaced file, an inaccessible image, or a frustrating interaction. Or maybe the program just blandly erased the user's only copy of a 500-page manuscript because he responded with a Yes to a confirmation dialog box, assuming that it had asked if he wanted to "save your changes" when it actually asked him if he wanted to "discard your work."

An Industry in Denial

We are a world awash in high-tech tools. Computers dominate the workplace and our homes, and vehicles are filling up with silicon-powered gadgets. All of these computerized devices are wildly sophisticated and powerful, but every one of them is dauntingly difficult and confusing to use.

The high-tech industry is in denial of a simple fact that every person with a cell phone or a word processor can clearly see: Our computerized tools are too hard to use. The technologists who create software and high-tech gadgets are satisfied with their efforts. The software engineers [\[1\]](#) who create them have tried as hard as they can to make them easy to use, and they have made some minor progress. They believe that their products are as easy to use as it is technically possible to make them. As engineers, their belief is in technology, and they have faith that only some new technology, such as voice recognition or artificial intelligence, will improve the user's experience.

[1] Throughout the computer industry, the term "software engineer" is used synonymously with the term "programmer"; throughout this book, I have done the same.

Ironically, the thing that will likely make the least improvement in the ease of use of software-based products is new technology. There is little difference technically between a complicated, confusing program and a simple, fun, and powerful product. The problem is one of culture, training, and attitude of the people who make them, more than it is one of chips and programming languages. We are deficient in our development process, not in our development tools.

The high-tech industry has inadvertently put programmers and engineers in charge, so their hard-to-use engineering culture dominates. Despite appearances, business executives are simply not the ones in control of the high-tech industry. It is the engineers who are running the show. In our rush to accept the many benefits of the silicon chip, we have abdicated our responsibilities. We have let the inmates run the asylum.

When the inmates run the asylum, it is hard for them to see clearly the nature of the problems that bedevil them. When you look in the mirror, it is all too easy to single out your best features and overlook the warts. When the creators of software-based products examine their handiwork, they overlook how bad it is. Instead, they see its awesome power and flexibility. They see how rich the product is in features and functions. They ignore how excruciatingly difficult it is to use, how many mind-numbing hours it takes to learn, or how it diminishes and degrades the people who must use it in their everyday lives.



[< Day Day Up >](#)



The Origins of This Book

I have been inventing and developing software-based products for 25 years. This problem of hard-to-use software has puzzled and confounded me for years. Finally, in 1992, I ceased all programming to devote 100% of my time to helping other development firms make their products easier to use. And a wonderful thing happened! I immediately discovered that after I freed myself from the demands of programming, I saw for the first time how powerful and compelling those demands were. Programming is such a difficult and absorbing task that it dominates all other considerations, including the concerns of the user. I could only see this after I had extricated myself from its grip.

Upon making this discovery, I began to see what influences drove software-based products to be so bad from the user's point of view. In 1995 I wrote a book [2] about what I had learned, and it has had a significant effect on the way some software is designed today.

[2] About Face: The Essentials of User Interface Design, IDG Books, Foster City CA, 1995, ISBN 1-56884-322-4, <http://www.cooper.com>. In March 2003, my coauthor Robert Reimann and I released a revised second edition of the book. It was completely rewritten, including updated examples and seven brand new chapters. It is called About Face 2.0: The Essentials of Interaction Design, John Wiley & Sons, ISBN 0-76452-641-3.

To be a good programmer, one must be sympathetic to the nature and needs of the computer. But the nature and needs of the computer are utterly alien from the nature and needs of the human being who will eventually use it. The creation of software is so intellectually demanding, so all-consuming, that programmers must completely immerse themselves in an equally alien thought process. In the programmer's mind, the demands of the programming process not only supersede any demands from the outside world of users, but the very languages of the two worlds are at odds with each other.

The process of programming subverts the process of making easy-to-use products for the simple reason that the goals of the programmer and the goals of the user are dramatically different. The programmer wants the construction process to be smooth and easy. The user wants the interaction with the program to be smooth and easy. These two objectives almost never result in the same program. In the computer industry today, the programmers are given the responsibility for creating interaction that makes the user happy, but in the unrelenting grip of this conflict of interest, they simply cannot do so.

In software, typically nothing is visible until it is done, meaning that any second-guessing by nonprogrammers is too late to be effective. Desktop-computer software is infamously hard to use because it is purely the product of programmers; nobody comes between them and the user. Objects such as phones and cameras have always had a hefty mechanical component that forces them into the open for review. But as we've established, when you cross a computer with just about any product, the behavior of the computer dominates completely.

The key to solving the problem is interaction design before programming. We need a new class of professional interaction designers who design the way software behaves. Today, programmers consciously design the code inside programs but only inadvertently design the interaction with humans. They design what a program does but not how it behaves, communicates, or informs. Conversely, interaction designers focus directly on the way users see and interact with software-based products. This craft of interaction design is new and unfamiliar to programmers, so—when they admit it at all—they let it in only after their programming is already completed. At that point, it is too late.

The people who manage the creation of software-based products are typically either hostage to programmers because they are insufficiently technical, or they are all too sympathetic to programmers because they are



[< Day Day Up >](#)



Chapter 2. Cognitive Friction

It's one thing to see that a problem exists, but it's quite another to devise a solution. One key part of problem solving is the language we use. Over the years, I've developed many useful terms and mental models. They have proven vital to framing the problem presented by hard-to-use software-based products. In this chapter I will introduce those terms and ideas, showing how they can help bring the benefits of interaction design to our troubled process.

Behavior Unconnected to Physical Forces

Having just left the industrial age behind, we are standing at the threshold of the information age with an obsolete set of tools. In the industrial age, engineers were able to solve each new problem placed before them. Working in steel and concrete, they made bridges, cars, skyscrapers, and moon rockets that worked well and satisfied their human users. As we tiptoe into the information age, we are working increasingly in software, and we have once again brought our best engineers to the task. But unlike in the past, things haven't turned out so well. The computer boxes are fast and powerful, and the programs are generally reliable, but we have encountered a previously unseen dimension of frustrated, dissatisfied, unhappy, and unproductive users.

Today's engineers are no less capable than ever, so I must deduce from this that, for the first time, they have encountered a problem qualitatively different from any they confronted in the industrial age. Otherwise, their old tools would work as well as they ever did. For lack of a better term, I have labeled this new problem substance cognitive friction. It is the resistance encountered by a human intellect when it engages with a complex system of rules that change as the problem changes. Software interaction is very high in cognitive friction. Interaction with physical devices, however complex, tends to be low in cognitive friction because mechanical devices tend to stay in a narrow range of states comparable to their inputs.

Playing a violin is extremely difficult but low in cognitive friction because—although a violinist manipulates it in very complex and sophisticated ways—the violin never enters a "meta" state in which various inputs make it sound like a tuba or a bell. The violin's behavior is always predictable—though complex—and obeys physical laws, even while being quite difficult to control. In contrast, a microwave oven has a lot of cognitive friction, because the 10 number keys on the control panel can be put into one of two contexts, or modes. In one mode they control the intensity of the radiation, and in the other they control the duration. This dramatic change, along with the lack of sensory feedback about the oven's changed state, results in high cognitive friction.

The QWERTY keys on a typewriter, for example, don't have metafunctions. When you press the E key, the letter E appears on the page. When you press the key sequence ERASE ALL, the words ERASE ALL appear on the paper. On a computer—depending on the context—you may also get a metafunction. A higher-level operation occurs, and the computer actually erases things. The behavior of the machine no longer has a one-to-one correspondence to your manipulation.

Cognitive friction—like friction in the physical world—is not necessarily a bad thing in small quantities, but as it builds up, its negative effects grow exponentially. Of course, friction is a physical force and can be detected and measured, whereas cognitive friction is a forensic tool and cannot be taken literally. Don't forget, though, that such things as love, ambition, courage, fear, and truth—though real—cannot be detected and measured. They can't be addressed by engineering methods, either.

The skilled engineers who manufacture microwave ovens typically consult with human-factors experts to design the buttons so they are easy to see and press. But the human-factors experts are merely adapting the buttons to the user's eyes and fingers, not to their minds. Consequently, microwave ovens don't have much "friction" but have a lot of cognitive friction. It is easy to open and close the door and physically press the buttons but, compared to the simplicity of the task, setting the controls to achieve your goals is very difficult. Getting the microwave to perform the work you intend for it is quite difficult, though our general familiarity with it makes us forget how hard it really is. How many of us have cooked something for one second or one hour instead of for one minute? How many of us have cooked something at a strength of 5 for 10 minutes instead of a strength of 10 for 5 minutes?

On the computer screen, everything is filled with cognitive friction. Even an interface as simple as the World Wide



[< Day Day Up >](#)



Design Is a Big Word

The theme of this book is that interactive products need to be designed by interaction designers instead of by software engineers. This assertion often generates instant antagonism from programmers who have been doing design all along. Furthermore, these programmers fear that by taking design away from them, I'm taking away the best and most creative aspect of their work, leaving them condemned to coding drudgery unleavened with fun. This is absolutely untrue. Their worry stems only from the imprecise nature of the term design.



The entire software-creation process includes design, all the way from selecting the programming language to choosing the color of the delivery truck. No aspect of this lengthy and involved process is more design-filled than the programming itself. Programmers make design decisions at every step of their process. The programmer must decide how each procedure will call each other procedure, how information and status will be shared, stored, and changed, and how the code's validity will be guaranteed. All of these decisions—and the millions more like them—are design decisions, and the success of each one depends on the programmer's ability to bring her experience and judgment to bear.

I draw a simple dividing line through this sea of design. I put the part of the design that will directly affect the ultimate end user of the product on one side. On the other side is all other design. In this book, when I speak of "interaction design," I am referring only to the former. I call the remaining design that doesn't affect the end user program design.

It is not possible to base the dividing line on purely technical criteria. It cannot be expressed in terms that are familiar to engineers because the differentiating factor is human, not technical, and engineering rules aren't applicable to people. For example, the interaction designer typically is agnostic about issues such as which programming language is to be used. However, occasionally the choice of language affects response time, which most assuredly is an interaction issue, and the designer will have something to say.

Almost all interaction design refers to the selection of behavior, function, and information and their presentation to users. End-product interaction design is the only part of the design that I want to take away from programmers and put into the hands of dedicated interaction designers.

The Relationship Between Programmers and Designers

In a technical world dominated by engineers, internal program design has held sway, and interaction design for the end user's benefit has been incorporated only on an after-the-fact, spare-time basis. One of the goals of this book is to reveal the benefits of inverting this priority and making interaction design the first consideration in the creation of software-based products.

Most Software Is Designed by Accident

Mud huts and subterranean burrows are designed—albeit without much conscious thought—by the demands of rock and thatch. Similarly, all software is designed by the arcane demands of programming languages and databases. Tradition is the strongest influence in the design of all of these media. The biggest difference is that the builder-designer of the hut will also be its primary occupant, whereas programmers typically don't use the software they design.

What really happens in most programming shops is that there is no one on staff who has a clue about designing for end users. However, these same clueless people are far from clueless about program design, and they have strong opinions about what they like, personally. So they do what they do, designing the interaction for themselves, subject to what is easiest and most enjoyable to code, and imagine that they are actually designing for users. While it seems to the programmer that lots of design is getting done, it is only lots of program design, and very little end-user design.

Because the lack of design is a form of design, whenever anyone makes decisions about program behavior, he is assuming the role of interaction designer. When a marketing executive insists that a favorite feature be included in the product, she is designing. When a programmer implements a pet behavior in the product, he is designing.

The difference between good design and this kind of inadvertent, mud-hut design isn't so much the tools used or the type of gizmos, but the motivation. The real interaction designer's decisions are based on what the user is trying to achieve. Ersatz designers' decisions are based on any number of other random rationales. Personal preferences, familiarity, fear of the unknown, directives from Microsoft, and miscues from colleagues all play a surprisingly large role. Most often, though, their decisions are based on what is easiest for them to create.

"Interaction" Versus "Interface" Design

I prefer the term interaction design to the term interface design because "interface" suggests that you have code over here, people over there, and an interface in between that passes messages between them. It implies that only the interface is answerable to the users' needs. The consequence of isolating design at the interface level is that it licenses programmers to reason like this: "I can code as I please because an 'interface' will be slapped on after I'm done." It postpones design until after programming, when it is too late.

Like putting an Armani suit on Attila the Hun, interface design only tells how to dress up an existing behavior. For example, in a data-reporting tool, interface design would eliminate unnecessary borders and other visual clutter from a table of figures, color code important points, provide rich visual feedback when the user clicks on data elements, and so on. This is better than nothing, but far from sufficient. Microsoft invests many millions of dollars on interface design, but its products remain universally unloved.

Behavioral design tells how the elements of the software should act and communicate. In our example, behavioral design tells us what tools you could apply to that table of figures, how you might include averages or totals. Interaction designers also work from the outside in, starting from the goals the user is trying to achieve, with an eye toward the broader goals of the business, the capabilities of the technology, and the component tasks.

You can go still deeper to what we call conceptual design, which considers what is valuable for the users in the first place. In our example, conceptual design might tell you that examining a table of figures is only an incidental task; the users' real goal is spotting trends, which means that you don't want to create a reporting tool at all, but a trend-spotting tool. To deliver both power and pleasure to users, interaction designers think first conceptually, then in terms of behavior, and last in terms of interface.

Why Software-Based Products Are Different

Cognitive friction creeps into all software-based products, regardless of their simplicity, and cognitive friction makes them much more difficult to use than equivalent mechanical-age products. As an example, here are the contents of my pants pocket: some coins, my Swiss Army knife, and my car keys. The knife is pure industrial age: You can see how it is built, how it works, and how to work it just by a cursory inspection—by manipulation. When you flip open the knife blade, you can see that it is sharp, and you can imagine the power it has for cutting.



The knife has a grand total of six blades, plus a toothpick and tweezers. The use of all of them is readily apparent. I can easily and intuitively discern how to manipulate the knife because of the way it fits my hand and fingers. The knife is a pleasure to use.

The keyless entry system accompanying my car keys is a different beast altogether. It only has two push buttons on it, so—from a manipulation point of view—it is much simpler than the knife. As soon as my hand grips the smooth, black-plastic case, my fingers naturally and intuitively discover the two push buttons, and their use is obvious: Press to activate. Ah, but there is silicon, not steel, behind those buttons, and they are far harder to work than they seem.

The large button locks the car and simultaneously arms the alarm. Pressing the button a second time disarms the alarm and unlocks the car. There is also a second, smaller button labeled Panic. When you press it, the car emits a quiet warble for a few seconds. If you hold it down longer, the quiet warble is replaced by the full 100-decibel blasting of the car alarm, whooping, tweeting, yowling, and declaring to everyone within a half-mile that some dolt—me—has just done something execrably stupid. What's worse, after the alarm has been triggered, the little plastic device becomes functionally inert, and further pressing of either button does nothing. The only way to stop that honking announcement of my palpable stupidity is to walk to my frighteningly loud car, enduring withering stares from passersby, unlock the driver's door with the key, then insert the key into the ignition and twist it. It really makes me feel like an idiot. If my car merely got robbed it would make me feel violated and sad, but it wouldn't make me feel stupid.

In my previous book, I stated that the number-one goal of all computer users is to not feel stupid. I further asserted that good interfaces should avoid presenting users with ejection-seat levers intermingled with the controls for common, everyday functions. Here is a classic example of a device that really makes users feel stupid by putting an ejector-seat lever right up front. Accidentally setting off the ejector-seat lever initiates a personally embarrassing episode tantamount to showing up at the office having forgotten your pants. My Swiss Army knife just doesn't have the capability of doing that.

The Dancing Bear

On the other hand, if you made me choose between my knife and my keyless system, I'd toss away the knife in a New York minute. Immediately after first using my keyless entry system, I couldn't imagine ever not owning one. It is the single most convenient feature of my car, and I use it more often than any other one. I use it 10 times to every 1 time I use the knife. In spite of its weak and clumsy design, it is still a wonderful thing. It's like the fellow who leads a huge bear on a chain into the town square and, for a small donation, will make the bear dance. The townspeople gather to see the wondrous sight as the massive, lumbering beast shambles and shuffles from paw to paw. The bear is really a terrible dancer, and the wonder isn't that the bear dances well but that the bear dances at all.

The wonder isn't that the keyless entry system works well, but that the keyless entry system works at all. I am very willing to put up with interaction problems in order to gain the benefit of remote entry to my vehicle.



The prodigious gifts of silicon are so overwhelming that we find it easy to ignore the collateral costs. If you are stranded on a deserted island, you don't care much that your rescue ship is a leaky, rat-infested hulk. The difference between having a software solution for your problem and not having any solution is so great that we accept any hardship or difficulty that the solution might force on us.

The difficulty of devising a better interaction isn't what makes the problem so intractable. Instead, it is our almost universal willingness to accept bad interaction as an unavoidable cost. When we see that rusty rescue ship, we don't question its accommodations but just jump on and are glad for what we get.

Software experts are—of necessity—comfortable with high-cognitive-friction interaction. They pride themselves on their ability to work in spite of its adversity. Normal humans, who are the new users of these products, lack the expertise to judge whether this cognitive friction is avoidable. Instead, they rely on the cues offered by the nerds, who simply shrug and say that to use software-based products you have to be "computer literate." Software engineers blame the technology, telling users that difficult interaction simply comes with the territory, that it is unavoidable.

This is not true. Difficult interaction is very avoidable.

Cognitive friction doesn't come from technology, but from the people who control technology. They are masters because they know how to think in ways that are sympathetic to silicon, and they imagine that everyone thinks in the same way. They create technological artifacts whose interaction is expressed in the terms in which they are constructed. Instead of creating an automobile that is all leather and burl wood, they would create one that is all hot



[< Day Day Up >](#)



The Cost of Features

Most software vendors don't know how to make their programs easy to use, but they sure know how to add features, so that is what they do.

Physical objects, such as my Swiss Army knife, are subject to a natural brake on the proliferation of marginal features. Each new blade or accessory costs money for the manufacturer to build into the knife. The maker of the knife knows this, and each proposed new feature must pass a gauntlet of justification before it makes it into a shipping product. In engineering terms, this is called a negative feedback loop, in which intrinsic forces trend toward stability and equilibrium. For example, tire friction in your car creates a negative feedback loop in the steering system, so that when you release the wheel it tends to return to straight ahead.

In the business of software-based products, a different system prevails. Because functions and features are added in intangible software code and not in tangible steel, copper, or plastic, it appears to traditional manufacturing executives that additional features are nearly cost free. It seems to them that software is easy to add, change, and "improve."

Right now I'm listening to Jimmy Buffett on my computer's CD-ROM drive. The small program that plays the disc offers me a plethora of functions: I can move to the previous track or the next track, skip to random tracks, create a custom play list, play for a predetermined time, repeat play, view information about Buffett on the Web, put the album into my "collection," take notes on the various tracks, gather song names from a database on the Internet, examine information about the disc, create a list of favorite tracks, and more. All of these features are really nice, and I wouldn't necessarily delete them, but they all conspire to make the program extremely difficult to understand and use. What's more, when the phone rings and I need to quickly pause the disc, I can't find the pause function because it's buried among all of those other—free—functions. Those functions are not "free" to me. Some hapless engineer thought that he was doing me a favor by adding all of those free features, but I'd rather have a simple player with a quick and easy pause button.

Regarding my car's remote keyless entry system, I seriously doubt that any designer asked himself, "Which and how many functions are appropriate?" Instead, I'm certain that some junior engineer chose an off-the-shelf chip that coincidentally came with two channels. After using one of them to lock and unlock, he found himself with a free surplus channel. The engineer—possibly under the influence of an enthusiastic but ill-informed marketing manager—concocted the rationale that manually setting off the alarm would serve some purpose. He was proud of his ability to provide additional functionality for no apparent cost.

It's cheaper to put an entire microprocessor in your car key, microwave, or cell phone than it is to put in discrete chips and electronic components. Thus, a new technical economy drives the design of the product. Adding physical controls to devices is still governed by the negative feedback loop of manufacturing costs, but the process of adding functions and features in software is not. To software makers, it seems virtually free to add features, so any proposed feature is assumed to be a good investment until proven otherwise. Without a governor, the product rapidly fills up with unwanted features, which means complexity and confusion for the user. All of these features are touted as indispensable advantages and, of course, the main function that really is needed still remains. That bear is in there dancing away.

For desktop computers, the implications of the missing feedback loop are just as debilitating. The software maker imagines that it can add all of the features it wants, and they will be "free" as long as they are controlled through the standard mouse and keyboard. They can crowd the screen with hundreds of obscure icons, buttons, or menu items, all of which must ultimately be controlled by a key press or a mouse click. How is the user supposed to tell the difference between small, insignificant functions and those that have large, negative effects?



[< Day Day Up >](#)





[< Day Day Up >](#)



Apologists and Survivors

Dancing bearware is becoming omnipresent. The incredible power of computers means that few people can afford to ignore them. Even if you don't have a desktop computer, you probably own a cell phone and an ATM card, which are software-based products. It is unrealistic to simply say you won't use computers. They aren't just getting cheaper; they are getting ridiculously cheaper, to the point of ubiquity and disposability. Many familiar products that we imagine as mechanical (or electronic) are no longer made without computers. Cars, washing machines, televisions, vacuum cleaners, thermostats, and elevators are all good examples.

Although the usefulness of an industrial-age device was proportional to the difficulty of manipulating it, this relationship is missing in the information age, and the difficulty of operation increases more rapidly than the usefulness increases. An old-fashioned mechanical alarm clock has always been considered easy to operate. A contemporary, software-based alarm clock can be harder to work than a car.

High cognitive friction polarizes people into two groups. It either makes them feel frustrated and stupid for failing, or giddy with power at overcoming the extreme difficulty. These powerful emotions force people into being either an "apologist" or a "survivor." They either adopt cognitive friction as a lifestyle, or they go underground and accept it as a necessary evil. The polarization is growing acute.



I call the first group apologists, because its members take pains to justify their obeisance to the dancing bear. Like political-party sycophants wearing silly hats and carrying goofy signs, they tout the benefits while downplaying the disadvantages with unabashed partisanship. Virtually all programmers fall into this category, and their vested interest makes their motivation obvious, but it is surprising how many nontechnical users who are abused daily by bad interaction will excuse their oppressors by saying things like, "Oh, it's easy. I just have to remember to press these two keys, then give the system a valid name. If I forget what I called it, the system will let me look for it." They don't see how ludicrous it is for the system to "let them look for it." Why doesn't the computer do the looking, or the remembering? The apologists are the ones who defend the computer because it can accomplish a task that was heretofore impossibly difficult. They point to the bear and exclaim, "Look, it's dancing!"



How We React to Cognitive Friction

Most people, even apologists, react to cognitive friction in the same way. They take the minimum they need from it and ignore the rest. Each user learns the smallest set of features that he needs to get his work done, and he abandons the rest. The apologists proudly point out that their wristwatches can synchronize with their desktop calendar systems, but they conveniently neglect to mention that it has been six months since they used that feature. They will get defensive about it if you press them on the point, but that is what makes them apologists.

My home-entertainment system has literally thousands of features. I'm not an apologist, but I certainly qualify as a gadget freak. I have learned how to use some of its gratuitous features, but they are too hard to use effectively. For example, my television has a feature called "picture-in-picture" (PIP). It superimposes a second, smaller screen showing another channel in the lower-right corner of the main screen. It is all done in software and can be completely controlled by buttons on the remote control. In theory, it is useful for such circumstances as keeping an eye on the football game in the PIP screen while I'm watching a movie on the main screen. When the salesperson demonstrated it to me in the electronics showroom, it seemed quite useful.

The problem is that it is just too difficult to control; there is too much cognitive friction involved in using it, and I cannot master it sufficiently well to make it worth the effort. It's just more enjoyable to watch one channel, as in the old days when one channel was all that the technology could deliver. Nobody else in my family has bothered to use the PIP facility even once, except by accident, and I occasionally come home to find someone watching TV with a PIP screen up. As soon as I walk in the room, he or she asks me to turn it off.

My TV has a 55" screen and a Dolby sound system, and it receives a digital signal from an orbiting satellite, but otherwise my family members and I use it in exactly the same way we used our snowy, tinny, 19" Motorola in 1975. All of those features go unused.

You can predict which features in any new technology will be used and which won't. The use of a feature is inversely proportional to the amount of interaction needed to control it. In other words, the bigger, brighter, sharper screen on my new TV demands no interaction on my part, so it is used 100% of the time my TV is on, and I'm quite happy with it. The satellite system is a very desirable dancing bear of a feature, so I put up with the complexity of source-signal switching to watch the satellite broadcast once a week or so. Nobody else in my family was able to figure out how to view the satellite until I created a plastic-laminated cheat sheet that sits on the coffee table with a checklist of switches, buttons, and settings that must be made to connect up. The PIP system not only uses a complex system of over a dozen buttons, but its interaction is very obscure and its behavior is unpleasant. After the first couple of tries, I abandoned it completely, as has everyone else.

This pattern of cognitive friction abandonment can be found in every office or household with every software-based product.

The Democratization of Consumer Power

Traditionally, the more complex a mechanical device was, the more highly trained its operators were. Big machinery was always isolated from the public and was operated by trained professionals in uniform. The information age changed everything, and we now expect amateurs to manage technology far more complex than our parents ever faced.

As more and more of our tools and systems get silicon brains, they are placed into the hands of untrained amateurs. Twenty-five years ago, trained human operators handled long-distance phone calls at our verbal request. Today, the most complex international calls are handled directly by any untrained amateur pushing buttons.

Just a couple of decades ago, even gas pumps were operated only by trained service-station attendants. Today, every individual is expected to be able to perform the gas-pumping transaction, as well as the associated financial transaction, using a credit or debit card. Twenty years ago, only trained tellers operated banks. Today, you operate your bank by using a gas pump or ATM.

The engineering process doesn't discern between the creation of a complex system that will be operated by a trained, paid professional and the creation of one that is to be operated by an indifferent amateur. The process of engineering doesn't have concepts to deal with that human stuff. It concentrates on the implementation issues: What is it made of? How will it be constructed? What controls will be needed to give input to all possible variables?

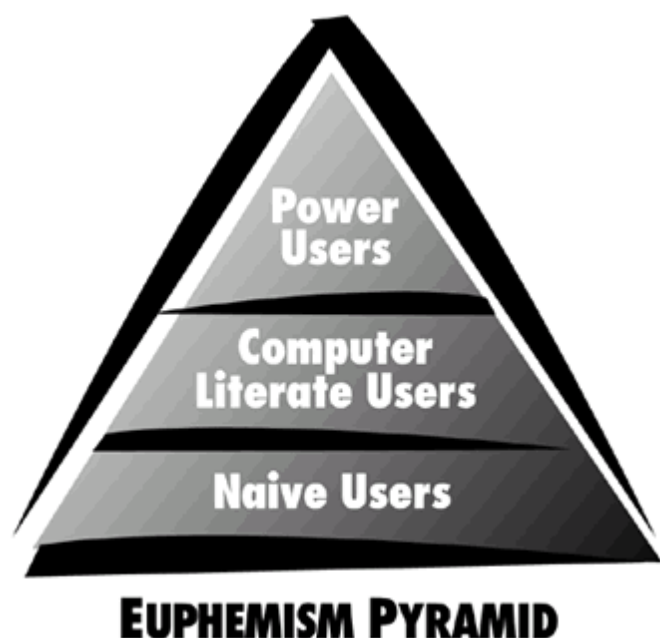


[< Day Day Up >](#)



Blaming the User

Most software is used in a business context, so most victims of bad interaction are paid for their suffering. Their job forces them to use software, so they cannot choose not to use it—they can only tolerate it as well as they can. They are forced to submerge their frustration and to ignore the embarrassment they feel when the software makes them feel stupid.



For years, I've watched as dozens of software-industry executives have drawn on their whiteboards for me essentially the same diagram showing their view of the high-tech marketplace. It shows a pyramid—some draw it inverted—that is divided into three horizontal layers, each with an innocent-sounding phrase as a label. Each executive superimposes an amorphous blob on it showing the portion of the market they are aiming to conquer. But each label is a euphemism—really a veiled slur, like a code phrase you'd hear a bigot use to keep someone out of the country club. The three euphemisms are "naïve user," "computer-literate user," and "power user."

"Naïve user" is industry code for "stupid, incompetent user." And certainly these people are made to feel stupid, but they are not. It is the bad design of the interaction that is at fault. The apologists in the computer industry dismiss naïve users as insignificant, but that flies in the face of good sense. Why would a vendor write off the lion's share of the market? Because it removes the blame for failure from the executives and software engineers and places it squarely onto the shoulders of the innocent users.

The phrase "computer-literate user" really means the person has been hurt so many times that the scar tissue is thick enough that he no longer feels the pain. Computer literacy means that when your program loses your document, you have learned enough not to panic like Jane in [Chapter 1](#), "Riddles for the Information Age," but to begin the slow, manual, utterly unnecessary search for it in the hierarchical file system without complaint. One characteristic of computer literacy is that it is like anesthesia: The patient drifts slowly and gently into unconsciousness. There is little point in constantly whining and complaining about a piece of software that is a fixed and permanent part of your job. Most people don't even realize how hard they are working to compensate for the shortcomings of a software-based tool.

Most apologists consider computer literacy to be a badge of accomplishment, like a Sharpshooter's Medal. Actually, it is more akin to a Purple Heart, an official recognition of having suffered a wound in battle.

Software Apartheid

There's an old joke in Hollywood that you can bump into a stranger in the grocery store and ask how his screenplay is doing. The stranger—without hesitation—will reply, "Great! I've just restructured the second act to tighten up the action!" The same joke is now true in Silicon Valley. You can buttonhole a stranger in line at Starbucks and ask how her Web site is doing. The stranger—without skipping a beat—will reply, "Great! I've just restructured the frames to tighten up the navigation!"

Here in Silicon Valley, we forget how skewed our population is, and we should frequently remind ourselves how abnormal we really are. The average person who uses a software-based product around here isn't really very average.

Programmers generally work in high-tech environments, surrounded by their technical peers in enclaves such as Silicon Valley; Route 128 outside Boston; Research Triangle in North Carolina; Redmond, Washington; and Austin, Texas. Software engineers constantly encounter their peers when they shop, dine out, take their kids to school, and relax, and their contact with frustrated computer users is limited. What's more, the occasional unfocused gripes of the users are offset by the frequent enthusiasm of the knowledgeable elite. We forget how far removed we and our peers are from the inability of the rest of the country (not to mention the world) to use interactive tools without frustration.

We industry insiders toss around the term "computer literacy," assuming that in order to use computers, people must acquire some fundamental level of training. We see this as a simple demand that isn't hard and is only right and proper. We imagine that it isn't much to ask of users that they grasp the rudiments of how the machines work in order to enjoy their benefits. But it is too much to ask. Having a computer-literate customer base makes the development process much easier—of that there can be no doubt—but it hampers the growth and success of the industry and of society. Apologists counter with the argument that you must have training and a license to drive a car, but they overlook the fact that a mistake with a car frequently kills people, but a mistake with software generally doesn't. If cars weren't so deadly, people would train themselves to drive the same way they learn Excel.

The concept of computer literacy has another, more insidious, effect. It creates a demarcation line between the haves and have-nots in society. If you must master a computer in order to succeed in America's job market beyond a burger-flipper's career, then mastering the interactive system's difficulty prevents many people from moving into more productive, respected, and better-paying jobs.

Users should not have to acquire computer literacy to use computers for common, rudimentary tasks in everyday life. Users should not have to possess a digital sensitivity to work their VCR or microwave oven, or to get email. What's more, users should not have to acquire computer literacy to use computers for enterprise applications, when the user is already trained in the application domain. An accountant, for example, who is trained in the general principles of accounting, shouldn't have to be computer literate to use a computer in her accounting practice. Her domain knowledge should be enough to see her through.

As our economy shifts more and more onto an information basis, we are inadvertently creating a divided society. The upper class is composed of those who have mastered the nuances of differentiating between "RAM" and "hard disk." The lower class consists of those who treat the difference as inconsequential. The irony is that the difference really is inconsequential to anyone except a few hard-core engineers. Yet virtually all contemporary software forces its users to confront a file system, where your success is fully dependent on knowing the difference between RAM and disk.

Thus the term "computer literacy" becomes a euphemism for social and economic apartheid. Computer literacy is a



[< Day Day Up >](#)



Part II: It Costs You Big Time

[Chapter 3](#) Wasting Money

[Chapter 4](#) The Dancing Bear

[Chapter 5](#) Customer Disloyalty

Chapter 3. Wasting Money

It's harder than you might think to squander millions of dollars, but a flawed software-development process is a tool well suited to the job. That's because software development lacks one key element: an understanding of what it means to be "done." Lacking this vital knowledge, we blindly bet on an arbitrary deadline. We waste millions to cross the finish line soonest, only to discover that the finish line was a mirage. In this chapter I'll try to untangle the expensive confusion of deadline management.

Deadline Management

There is a lot of obsessive behavior in Silicon Valley about time to market. It is frequently asserted that shipping a product right now is far better than shipping it later. This imperative is used as a justification for setting impossibly ambitious ship dates and for burning out employees, but this is a smoke screen that hides bigger, deeper fears—a red herring. Shipping a product that angers and frustrates users in three months is not better than shipping a product that pleases users in six months, as any businessperson knows full well.

Managers are haunted by two closely related fears. They worry about when their programmers will be done building, and they doubt whether the product will be good enough to ultimately succeed in the marketplace. Both of these fears stem from the typical manager's lack of a clear vision of what the finished product actually will consist of, aside from mother-and-apple-pie statements such as "runs on the target computer" and "doesn't crash." And lacking this vision, they cannot assess a product's progress towards completion.

The implication of these two fears is that as long as it "doesn't crash," there isn't much difference between a program that takes three months to code and one that takes six months to code, except for the prodigious cost of three months of unnecessary programming. After the programmers have begun work, money drains swiftly. Therefore, logic tells the development manager that the most important thing to do is to get the coding started as soon as possible and to end it as soon as possible.

The conscientious development manager quickly hires programmers and sets them coding immediately. She boldly establishes a completion date just a few months off, and the team careens madly toward the finish line. But without product design, our manager's two fears remain unquelled. She has not established whether the users will like the product, which indeed leaves its success a mystery. Nor has she established what a "complete" product looks like, which leaves its completion a mystery. Later in the book, I'll show how interaction design can ease these problems. Right now, I'll show how thoroughly the deadline subverts the development process, turning all the manager's insecurities into self-fulfilling prophecies.



[< Day Day Up >](#)



What Does "Done" Look Like?

After we have a specific description of what the finished software will be, we can compare our creation with it and really know when the product is done.

There are two types of descriptions. We can create a very complete and detailed physical description of the actual product, or we can describe the reaction we'd like the end user to have. In building architecture, for example, blueprints fill the first requirement. When planning a movie or creating a new restaurant, however, we focus our description on the feelings we'd like our clients to experience. For software-based products, we must necessarily use a blend of the two.

Unfortunately, most software products never have a description. Instead, all they have is a shopping list of features. A shopping bag filled with flour, sugar, milk, and eggs is not the same thing as a cake. It's only a cake when all the steps of the recipe have been followed, and the result looks, smells, and tastes substantially like the known characteristics of a cake.

Having the proper ingredients but lacking any knowledge of cakes or how to bake, the ersatz cook will putter endlessly in the kitchen with only indeterminate results. If we demand that the cake be ready by 6 o'clock, the conscientious cook will certainly bring us a platter at the appointed hour. But will the concoction be a cake? All we know is that it is on time, but its success will be a mystery.



In most conventional construction jobs, we know we're done because we have a clear understanding of what a "done" job looks like. We know that the building is completed because it looks and works just like the blueprints say it should look and work. If the deadline for construction is June 1, the arrival of June doesn't necessarily mean that the building is done. The relative completeness of the building can only be measured by examining the actual building in comparison to the plans.

Without blueprints, software builders don't really have a firm grasp on what makes the product "done," so they pick a likely date for completion, and when that day arrives they declare it done. It is June 1; therefore, the product is completed. "Ship it!" they say, and the deadline becomes the sole definition of project completion.

The programmers and businesspeople are neither stupid nor foolish, so the product won't be in complete denial of reality. It will have a robust set of features, it will run well, and it won't crash. The product will work reasonably well when operated by people who care deeply that it works well. It might even have been subjected to usability testing, in which strangers are asked to operate it under the scrutiny of usability professionals^[1]. But, although these

Shipping Late Doesn't Hurt

Ironically, shipping late generally isn't fatal to a product. A third-rate product that ships late often fails, but if your product delivers value to its users, arriving behind schedule won't necessarily have lasting bad effects. If a product is a hit, it's not a big deal that it ships a month—or even a year—late. Microsoft Access shipped several years late, yet it has enjoyed formidable success in the market. Conversely, if a product stinks, who cares that it shipped on time?

Certainly, some consumer products that depend on the Christmas season for the bulk of their sales have frighteningly important due dates. But most software-based products, even consumer products, aren't that sensitive to any particular date.

For example, in 1990 the PenPoint computer from GO was supposed to be the progenitor of a handheld-computer revolution. In 1992, when the PenPoint crashed and burned, the Apple Newton inherited the promise of the handheld revolution. When the Newton failed to excite people, General Magic's Magic Link computer became the new hope for handhelds. That was in 1994. When the Magic Link failed to sell, the handheld market appeared dead. Venture capitalists declared it a dry hole. Then, out of nowhere, in 1996, the PalmPilot arrived to universal acclaim. It seized the handheld no-man's-land six years late. Markets are always ready for good products that deliver value and satisfy users.

Of course, companies with a long history of making hardware-only products now make hybrid versions containing chips and software. They tend to underestimate the influence of software and subordinate it to the already-established completion cycles of hardware. This is wrong because as [Chapter 1](#), "Riddles for the Information Age," showed, these companies are now in the software business, whether or not they know it.

Feature-List Bargaining

One consequence of deadline management is a phenomenon that I call "feature-list bargaining."

Years ago programmers got burned by the vague product-definition process consisting of cocktail-napkin sketches, because they were blamed for the unsuccessful software that so often resulted. In self-defense, programmers demanded that managers and marketers be more precise. Computer programs are procedural, and procedures map closely to features, so it was only natural that programmers would define "precision" as a list of features. These feature lists allowed programmers to shift the blame to management when the product failed to live up to expectations. They could say, "It wasn't my fault. I put in all the features management wanted."

Thus, most products begin life with a document variably called a "marketing specification," "technical specification," or "marketing requirements document." It is really just a list of desired features, like the list of ingredients in the recipe for cake. It is usually the result of several long brainstorming sessions in which managers, marketers, and developers imagine what features would be cool and jot them down. Spreadsheet programs are a favorite tool for creating these lists, and a typical one can be dozens of pages long. (Invariably, at least one of the line items will specify a "good user interface.") Feature suggestions can also come from focus groups, market research, and competitive analysis.

The managers then hand the feature list to the programmers and say, "The product must ship by June 1." The programmers—of course—agree, but they have some stipulations. There are far too many features to create in the time allotted, they claim, and many of them will have to be cut to meet the deadline. Thus begins the time-honored bargaining.

The programmers draw a dividing line midway through the list. Items above it will be implemented, they declare, while those below the "line of death" are postponed or eliminated. Management then has two choices: to allow more time or to cut features. Although the project will inevitably take more time, management is loath to play that trump so early in the round, so it negotiates over features. Considerable arguing and histrionics occur. Features are traded for time; time is traded for features. This primitive capitalist negotiation is so human and natural that both parties are instantly comfortable with it. Sophisticated parallel strategies develop. As T/Maker's Royal Farros points out, when one "critical-path feature was blamed for delaying a deadline, it would let a dozen other tardy features sneak onto the list without repercussion." Lost in the battle is the perspective needed for success.

Farros described T/Maker's flagship product, a word processor named WriteNow, as "a perfect product for the university marketplace. In 1987, we actually shipped more copies of WriteNow to the university market than Microsoft shipped Word. However, we couldn't hold our lead because we angered our very loyal, core fans in this market by not delivering the one word-processor feature needed in a university setting: endnotes. Because of trying to make the deadline, we could never slip this feature into the specification. We met our deadline but lost an entire market segment."

Programmers Are in Control

Despite appearances, programmers are completely in control of this bottom-up decision-making process. They are the ones who establish how long it will take to implement each item, so they can force things to the bottom of the list merely by estimating them long. The programmers will—in self-defense—assign longer duration to the more nebulously defined items, typically those concerned with substantive user-interface issues. This inevitably causes them to migrate to the bottom of the list. More familiar idioms and easy-to-code items, such as menus, wizards, and dialog boxes, bubble to the top of the list. All of the analysis and careful thinking done by high-powered and high-priced executives is made moot by the unilateral cherry picking of a programmer following his own muse or defending his



[< Day Day Up >](#)



Features Are Not Necessarily Good

Appearances to the contrary, users aren't really compelled by features. Product successes and failures have shown repeatedly that users don't care that much about features. Users only care about achieving their goals. Sometimes features are needed to reach goals, but more often than not, they merely confuse users and get in the way of allowing them to get their work done. Ineffective features make users feel stupid. Borrowing from a previous example, the successful PalmPilot has far fewer features than did General Magic's failed Magic Link computer, Apple's failed Newton, or the failed PenPoint computer. The PalmPilot owes its success to its designers' single-minded focus on its target user and the objectives that user wanted to achieve.

About the only good thing I can say about features is that they are quantifiable. And that quality of being countable imbues them with an aura of value that they simply don't have. Features have negative qualities every bit as strong as their positive ones. The biggest design problem they cause is that every well-meant feature that might possibly be useful obfuscates the few features that will probably be useful. Of course, features cost money to implement. They add complexity to the product. They require an increase in the size and complexity of the documentation and online help system. Above all, cost-wise, they require additional trained telephone tech-support personnel to answer users' questions about them.

It might be counterintuitive in our feature-conscious world, but you simply cannot achieve your goals by using feature lists as a problem-solving tool. It's quite possible to satisfy every feature item on the list and still hatch a catastrophe. Interaction designer Scott McGregor uses a delightful test in his classes to prove this point. He describes a product with a list of its features, asking his class to write down what the product is as soon as they can guess. He begins with 1) internal combustion engine; 2) four wheels with rubber tires; 3) a transmission connecting the engine to the drive wheels; 4) engine and transmission mounted on metal chassis; 5) a steering wheel. By this time, every student will have written down his or her positive identification of the product as an automobile, whereupon Scott ceases using features to describe the product and instead mentions a couple of user goals: 6) cuts grass quickly and easily; 7) comfortable to sit on. From the five feature clues, not one student will have written down "riding lawnmower." You can see how much more descriptive goals are than features.



[< Day Day Up >](#)



Iteration and the Myth of the Unpredictable Market

In an industry that is so filled with money and opportunities to earn it, it is often just easier to move right along to another venture and chalk up a previous failure to happenstance, rather than to any real reason.

I was a party to one of these failures in the early 1990s. I helped to start a venture-funded company whose stated goal was to make it absurdly simple to network PCs together. [2] The product worked well and was easy to use, but a tragic series of self-inflicted marketing blunders caused it to fail dismally. I recently attended a conference where I ran into one of the investors who sat on the doomed company's board of directors. We hadn't talked since the failure of the company, and—like veterans of a battlefield defeat meeting years later—we consoled each other as sadder but wiser men. To my unbridled surprise, however, this otherwise extremely successful and intelligent man claimed that in hindsight he had learned a fundamental lesson: Although the marketing, management, and technical efforts had been flawless, the buying public "just wasn't interested in easy-to-install local area networks." I was flabbergasted that he would make such an obviously ridiculous claim and countered that surely it wasn't lack of desire, but rather our failure to satisfy the desire properly. He restated his position, arguing forcefully that we had demonstrated that easy networking just wasn't something that people wanted.

[2] Actually, we said that we wanted to make it "as easy to network Intel/Windows computers as it was to network Macintosh computers." At the time, it was ridiculously simple to network Macs together with AppleTalk. Then, as now, it was quite difficult to network Wintel PCs together.

Later that evening, as I related this story to my wife, I realized that his rationalization of the failure was certainly convenient for all the parties involved in the effort. By blaming the failure on the random fickleness of the market, my colleague had exonerated the investors, the managers, the marketers, and the developers of any blame. And, in fact, each of the members of that start-up has gone on to other successful endeavors in Silicon Valley. The venture capitalist has a robust portfolio of other successful companies.

During development, the company had all the features itemized on the feature list. It stayed within budget. It shipped on schedule. (Well, actually, we kept extending the schedule, but it shipped on a schedule.) All the quantitatively measurable aspects of the product-development effort were within acceptable parameters. The only conclusion this management-savvy investor could make was the existence of an unexpected discontinuity in the marketplace. How could we have failed when all the meters were in the green?

The fact that these measures are objective is reassuring to everyone. Objective and quantitative measure is highly respected by both programmers and businesspeople. The fact that these measures are usually ineffective in producing successful products tends to get lost in the shuffle. If the product succeeds, its progenitors will take the credit, attributing the victory to their savvy understanding of technology and marketing.

On the other hand, if the product fails, nobody will have the slightest motivation to exhume the carcass and analyze the failure. Almost any excuse will do, as long as the players—both management and technical—can move along to the next high-tech opportunity, of which there is an embarrassment of riches. Thus, there is no reason to weep over the occasional failure. The unfortunate side effect of not understanding failure is the silent admission that success is not predictable—that luck and happenstance rule the high-tech world. In turn, this gives rise to what the venture capitalists call the "spray and pray" method of funding: Put a little bit of money into a lot of investments and then hope that one of them gets lucky.



[< Day Day Up >](#)



The Hidden Costs of Bad Software

When software is frustrating and difficult to use, people will avoid using it. That is unremarkable until you realize that many people's jobs are dependent on using software. The corporate cost of software avoided is impossible to quantify, but it is real. Generally, the costs are not monetary ones, anyway, but are exacted in far more expensive currencies, such as time, order, reputation, and customer loyalty.

People who use business software might despise it, but they are paid to tolerate it. This changes the way people think about software. Getting paid for using software makes users far more tolerant of its shortcomings because they have no choice, but it doesn't make it any less expensive. Instead—while the costs remain high—they become very difficult to see and account for.

Badly designed business software makes people dislike their jobs. Their productivity suffers, errors creep into their work, they try to cheat the software, and they don't stay in the job very long. Losing employees is very expensive, not just in money but in disruption to the business, and the time lost can never be made up. Most people who are paid to use a tool feel constrained not to complain about that tool, but it doesn't stop them from feeling frustrated and unhappy about it.

One of the most expensive items associated with hard-to-use software is technical support. Microsoft spends \$800 million annually on technical support. And this is a company that spends many hundreds of millions of dollars on usability testing and research, too. Microsoft is apparently convinced that support of this magnitude is just an unavoidable cost of doing business. I am not. Imagine the advantage it would give your company if you didn't make the same assumption that Microsoft did. Imagine how much more effective your development efforts would be if you could avoid spending over five percent of your net revenue on technical support.

Ask any person who has ever worked at any desktop-software company in technical support, and he will tell you that the one thing he spends most of his time and effort on is the file system. Just like Jane in [Chapter 1](#), users don't understand the recursive hierarchy of the file system—the Finder or Explorer—on Windows, the Mac, or Unix. Surprisingly, very few companies will spend the money to design and implement a more human-friendly alternative to the file system. Instead, they accept the far more expensive option of answering phone calls about it in perpetuity.

You can blame the "stupid user" all you want, but you still have to staff those phones with expensive tech-support people if you want to sell or distribute within your company software that hasn't been designed.

The Only Thing More Expensive Than Writing Software Is Writing Bad Software

Programmers cost a lot, and programmers sitting on their hands waiting for design to be completed gall managers in the extreme. It seems foolish to have programmers sit and wait, when they could be programming, thinks the manager. It is false economy, though, to put programmers to work before the design is completed. After the coding process begins, the momentum of programming becomes unstoppable, and the design process must now respond to the needs of programmers, instead of vice versa. Indeed, it is foolish to have programmers wait, and by the simple expedient of having interaction designers plan your next product or release concurrently with the construction of this product or release, your programmers will never have to idly wait.

It is more costly in the long run to have programmers write the wrong thing than to write nothing at all. This truth is so counterintuitive that most managers balk at the very idea. After code is written, it is very difficult to throw it out. Like writers in love with their prose, programmers tend to have emotional attachments to their algorithms. Altering



[< Day Day Up >](#)





[< Day Day Up >](#)



The Cost of Prototyping

Prototyping is programming, and it has the momentum and cost of programming, but the result lacks the resiliency of real code. Software prototypes are scaffolds and have little relation to permanent, maintainable, expandable code—the equivalent of stone walls. Managers, in particular, are loath to discard code that works, even if it is just a prototype. They can't tell the difference between scaffolding and stone walls.

You can write a prototype much faster than a real program. This makes it attractive because it seems so inexpensive, but real programming gives you a reliable program, and prototyping gives you a shaky foundation. Prototypes are experiments made to be thrown out, but few of them ever are. Managers look at the running prototype and ask, "Why can't we just use this?" The answer is too technically complex and too fraught with uncertainty to have sufficient force to dissuade the manager who sees what looks like a way to avoid months of expensive effort.

The essence of good programming is deferred gratification. You put in all of the work up front, and then you reap the rewards later. There are very few tasks that aren't cheaper to do manually. Once written, however, programs can be run a million times with no extra cost. The most expensive program is one that runs once. The cheapest program is the one that runs ten billion times. However, any inappropriate behavior will also be magnified ten billion times. Once out of the realm of little programs, such as the ones you wrote in school, the economics of software take on a strange reversal in which the cheapest programs to own are the ones that are most expensive to write, and the most expensive programs to own are the cheapest to write.

Writing a big program is like making a pile of bricks. The pile is one brick wide and 1,000 bricks tall, with each brick laid right on top of the one preceding it. The tower can reach its full height only if the bricks are placed with great precision on top of one another. Any deviation will cause the bricks above to wobble, topple, and fall. If the 998th brick deviates by a quarter of an inch, the tower can still probably achieve 1,000 bricks, but if the deviation is in the fifth brick, the tower will never get above a couple dozen.

This is very characteristic of software, whose foundations are more sensitive to hacking than the upper levels of code. As any program is constructed, the programmer makes false starts and changes as she goes. Consequently, the program is filled with the scar tissue of changed code. Every program has vestigial functions and stubbed-out facilities. Every program has features and tools whose need was discovered sometime after construction began grafted onto it as afterthoughts. Each one of these scars is like a small deviation in the stack of bricks. Moving a button from one side of a dialog box to the other is like juggling the 998th brick, but changing the code that draws all button-like objects is like juggling the 5th brick. Object-oriented programming and the principles of encapsulation are defensive techniques whose sole purpose is to immunize the program from the effects of scar tissue. In essence, object orientation divides the 1,000-brick tower into 10 100-brick towers.





[< Day Day Up >](#)



Chapter 4. The Dancing Bear

Even when survivors know that an interactive product makes them feel stupid, they cannot generally point this fact out without appearing to whine and complain, because they are surrounded by apologists. Nobody likes to complain, so survivors feel strong social pressure to join the apologists, make excuses, and blame themselves for their bad performance. But the instincts of the survivors are better than their conscious efforts to compensate. The software does make them feel stupid, and it doesn't have to. If you are one of these people, you might be asking yourself, "Just what does he mean by bad software? It gets the job done, doesn't it?" In the rest of this chapter, I'll describe what I mean by bad.

If It Were a Problem, Wouldn't It Have Been Solved by Now?

The sad thing about dancing bearware is that most people are quite satisfied with the lumbering beast. Only when they see some real dancing do they begin to suspect that there is a world beyond ursine shuffling. So few software-based products have exhibited any real dancing ability that most people are honestly unaware that things could be better—a lot better. Most people using spreadsheets and word processors on modern computers imagine that all the problems that a computer can solve have been solved, and solved adequately if not well. But this is far from the truth. An infinity of information-handling jobs remains unsolved and, in many cases, not addressed at all.

Consumer Electronics Victim

As consumers of software-based products, we are so used to accepting what we are given that we cannot see what could so easily be ours. Engineers make products that perform the tasks comprising the job but, lacking design, the collection of tasks still doesn't achieve the user's goals.

I have owned various videocassette recorders for over 20 years. All of them have had built-in facilities for delayed recording of shows, but none of these machines—even the \$1,500, top-of-the-line model—gives me confidence that I will succeed. The interface the product presents to me is so hard to control, so hard to read, so unclear about terminology and settings, and so filled with hidden switches and modes that my success ratio has been a consistent 40%. More than half of the time, I find that I have recorded three hours of Brazilian soccer instead of the PBS special that I wanted. After years of struggling, I have merely conceded defeat and don't even try to record TV shows anymore. So has everyone in my family. So have all of my friends. We are survivors of dancing bearware.

In frustration, I go to the local Circuit City, my Visa card burning a hole in my pocket. "Here's a grand! Two grand," I shout, "for the salesperson who can bring me a VCR that I can use to record TV shows!" The shiny-suit set gather round and proffer their wares. From bargain-basement VCR to most expensive, there is no difference in interaction. Sure, there is a continuum of available features, but the actual way that I control the device is the same across the board. In other words, after 20 years of product maturation, I am no closer to being able to use the product than before. This is dancing bearware at its worst.

When I point this out to the salesman, he defends the device by saying that it is as good as it gets. He shows me where the brochure claims that it is "easy to use." Bill Gates once observed, with uncharacteristic cynicism, that the way you made software user friendly was by making a rubber stamp and stamping each box with the legend "USER FRIENDLY." Unintentionally, his method has become the computer industry's real method.



Pushbuttons don't map well to a continuum such as time, but a rotating knob does. If that VCR just had a simple rotating knob like my \$11 Baby Ben alarm clock, I could set the time and banish the blinking "12:00" forever. If the device had a second knob to set the future record time, I could manage recording easily, too. As it is, by providing the flexibility to record 10 future shows, the device becomes unusable for recording any one show.

Products that are dancing bearware surround us. They have sufficient features to cover their cardboard boxes with callouts. They have enough options to fill the magazine reviewer's matrix of options with the word "Yes." But they don't make users happy or more effective. Most users can't make use of most of the options and features. Those who do are apologists who joyfully change their work habits to accommodate the idiosyncrasies of the software. They revel in the opportunity to tinker. They laboriously learn how to control new features that they will never actually



[< Day Day Up >](#)



How Email Programs Fail

While vendors wage pitched battles in the software markets, users cower in their cubicles, fearful of wandering into no-man's-land. Email vendors, for example, add feature after feature to their checklists while still failing to address the fundamental needs of electronic communications.

New users of email are entranced by their novel ability to communicate directly, simply, and asynchronously with anyone else. But solving the tasks doesn't necessarily solve the user's goals, and that is why emailing remains in its primitive state. The problem lies in the misunderstanding of what email is really used for. Twenty years ago, getting any email was an important event. Because the medium made it clear that the message was important, the message itself wasn't anything special. In fact, it was just a simple, discrete file of plain ASCII characters with no special characteristics or relationships.

Today, we get a broad mixture of important and worthless emails. Any person who uses email discovers quickly what a powerful and useful medium it is, and her use of it rapidly escalates until she is running a significant part of her life and business on it. Many email users get dozens or hundreds of email messages every day. Most communications are sent either in response to some message, or in expectation of a reply. These sequences of messages, called threads, bounce back and forth between two or more people. On my computer, the ratio of threaded messages to singletons is about 50 to 1. And yet not a single email program available today treats email messages as part of a sequence. [\[1\]](#) They act as though threads either don't exist or are an insignificant attribute of only a few emails.

[1] Some email programs let the user manually construct and manage a thread, but the cure is worse than the disease. Managing the feature is difficult, and threaded conversations are still treated as exceptional.

It is easy to understand that viewing threads instead of messages lets the user clearly see the connections and flow between individual messages and how they form coherent conversations. When examined from a task or feature point of view, all you can see is that you need to either send or reply.

It is not a particularly difficult programming problem to handle email as a series of threaded conversations; it is just that it has never been done that way, and programmers are reluctant to innovate on the user's behalf and managers are fearful of forcing them down that unproven path.

Because the programmers view the software from the point of view of implementation, they see that messages are flowing back and forth and that users can put messages into folders, so the programmers don't see a problem. After they get the bear moving, they declare it a dance and cease any further instruction.

Email is only one example of software products that don't achieve the simple and obvious goals that they should. We are so impressed by the dancing bears that we fail to see the inadequacy of these products. Here are a few other examples.

How Scheduling Programs Fail

In a lawyer's office, advertising agency, accountant's office, or any other consulting business, there is a large and unfilled need for a program that manages the allocation of people to projects over time. This three-sided structure is common to all consulting companies, yet—amazingly—no program exists to provide this service.

From the programmer's point of view, project management is a scheduling issue, with the possible added twist of critical-path analysis, in which the start of one task is dependent on the completion of a preceding task. All project-management programs available today are based on this academically pure assumption.^[2] The problem is that this vision of project management has very little to do with reality.

[2] I'm as guilty as the next programmer. In 1984 I wrote Computer Associates' SuperProject, one of the first project-management programs. It ignored the interaction of multiple projects just as all of its successors have.

One fundamental assumption of project-management programs—that people need help understanding how to perform their projects—is wrong. Most people are pretty good at accomplishing their projects; after all, it's their job. What they really need help with is dovetailing multiple projects into the calendar. Resources—generally meaning people—work on multiple projects simultaneously. They start and finish projects in an unbroken, often overlapping, sequence, while other projects are temporarily waiting for their chance. It is not good enough to allocate people to projects one at a time. They have to be assigned to multiple projects at the same time.

To be useful, such resource-management programs must integrate the three dimensions of the problem: time, projects, and resources. Instead, we get programs that handle only two dimensions—time and resources—and their vendors insist that this is all we really need. Variouslly called "traffic," "project management," or "resource allocation," this critical application segment simply does not exist.

What's more, projects are constantly changing with respect to the plan. Any useful project-management program must be able to flow and adapt to changes as they spring up. A project-management system that doesn't incorporate robust and useful feedback mechanisms—so that the actual people doing the work can tell the system the truth about what is happening now— isn't very useful for real-world management.

How Calendar Software Fails

Virtually everyone uses a calendar for business planning. Many calendar programs are available for sale, yet every one of them ignores the most simple and obvious ways that people want to use calendars. Simply put, a calendar should reflect how people use time to manage their lives. In general, we can divide our time concerns into two types: deadlines and ongoing processes. A deadline is an instant in time when something is due, such as a project milestone. An example of an ongoing process is an overnight business trip. While I'm visiting Chicago for two days, for example, I'll have three meetings with various clients.

Every contemporary calendar program ignores deadlines and ongoing processes, but instead is based on the establishment of appointments. An appointment is a discrete meeting that begins at a certain time. Appointments are an important component of time management, but they are by no means the only one. Not only are other types of calendar entries ignored, but even appointments are misrepresented.

Tracking the start time of meetings is far more important than tracking the end times, yet calendar programs don't differentiate between the two. In the last 30 years, I've initiated and attended thousands of meetings. The starting time of these meetings is extremely important. For most of the meetings, however, the end time is not important, not needed, not specified, and not knowable in advance. Yet in every calendar program I've ever seen, appointments have an end time that must be specified in advance with the same precision, accuracy, and diligence with which the meeting's start time must be specified. The end time is used in precise calculations of availability that cannot possibly be accurate and are a significant distortion of reality. For example, if—using a typical calendar program—you invite me to a meeting at 3:00 p.m., the program will reject your invitation if I have a 35-minute meeting scheduled at 2:30 p.m. In the real world, I can easily duck out of my previous meeting five minutes early.

Also, none of these programs factor in the time it takes me to get to a meeting. If I need to be across town at 2:00 p.m., I have to head out the door at 1:30 p.m. Should I set the appointment in the program for 1:30 or for 2:00? A well-designed program should figure that out and help guide me to get going on time.

There are quite a few other forms of common time-related entries that are not accommodated. On any given day, I can have a dozen or more projects that are current, while at any given instant I will actually work on only one. The typical calendar program refuses to acknowledge this normal behavior and won't let me enter project-level items. I can't get around the dancing bear.

Mass Web Hysteria

The World Wide Web has opened the awesome resource of the Internet to just about anybody with a computer and a modem. The Web is a great tool, and it offers fantastic value. Surprisingly, the most important change the Web has made is to demonstrate just how easy it can be to use software. Many former apologists find the Web so simple to use that they are demanding that all software be that easy. In particular, they like the way browsers don't make them go through the annoying installation process.

Software executives, particularly corporate IT vendors, are eagerly leaping onto this bandwagon. They, too, are swooning in love with browser-based software because they can field their products without inflicting a nasty installation process on the users. Before the Web, all software products required a complex installation process; products that run in a browser do not. This seems to be—for most software executives—a technological leap surpassing the invention of the zipper.

But it is just a sham! There is no reason that any non-Web program—regardless of its technical details—can't have a completely invisible installation process. If your computer required software installation, it would require it with or without the browser. The only reason why nonbrowser programs require installation is that this is the way programmers have always done things. Putting a bunch of questions in the install program made their programming job easier. Early browsers didn't have facilities for asking those questions, so programmers merely shrugged their shoulders and stopped asking them. If further proof were needed, programmers hardly even noticed the setback, while for many users it made the Web the easiest platform they had ever used.

Installation aside, browsers are weak as kittens. Their interaction idioms are prehistoric. Their technical structure is a primitive joke. They are as flexible as an icicle. Any program running inside a browser must necessarily sacrifice enormous power and capability. It infuriates me that software managers are eager to carve the heart out of their applications by porting them to the Web to get the advantage of no installation, when they could have the same installation-free product merely by saying to their developers, "Get rid of the installation process, please!"

Users are demanding browser-based software because they don't know any better. Software developers, however, are going along with it for all of the wrong reasons. The Web is organized like the old Soviet Union, with central computers dictating the actions of powerless desktop machines. Programmers—particularly those in corporate IT departments—own the central computers, so, like the Soviet commissars, they stand to benefit by this move. Instead of getting the no-installation benefit for free, users are paying a huge cost in loss of long-term control over their information infrastructure.

What's Wrong with Software?

Much of my first book was devoted to answering this question in detail. However, I'd like to take a few pages to provide you with a glimpse of some interaction-design principles that are effective in designing better software-based products.

Software Forgets

Every time you use a program, you learn a bit more about it, but the program doesn't remember a thing. Troy Daniels is our media producer. He practically lives in Adobe Photoshop. Yet, every time he opens Photoshop, it has forgotten everything and anything he has ever done with it. It doesn't remember where he keeps his image files, nor does it remember the typical work that he does with them. Controls and functions that he uses constantly are given the same emphasis in the interface as controls that he has never used and likely never will.

Software Is Lazy

Most application programs just don't work very hard for users. This is not to say that they don't work hard, but they often waste enormous effort trying to please users by treating them the way programmers wish to be treated. It's like giving your wife an electric drill for her birthday. Just because you like electric drills doesn't mean that she does. If we could only get the programmers to put their efforts behind something that the user really desires, we could make the user much happier without working the programmer any harder.



Software Is Parsimonious with Information

Just like the ATM that doesn't tell me how much money is in my account, most interactive products are very stingy with information. They also tend to camouflage the process—what is happening—as well as the information relevant to that process. The typical user of an interactive system cannot tell the state of the system until it blurts out a message indicating total failure. For instance, my new clock-radio I described in [Chapter 1](#), "Riddles for the Information Age," fools me by inadvertently concealing its state. The system seems to be working just fine, but it isn't, and there is simply no way of knowing.

If you ever find yourself with a pad of paper taking marginal notes as you work in some program, you know that you are a victim of an information-stingy program. It would be so easy for any program to put lots more helpful information at the user's disposal. For example, a word processor could show the user the state of the document at any time, or a spreadsheet could show the user the state of the spreadsheet at any time.

Chapter 5. Customer Disloyalty

The real benefit of offering a well-designed product or service is the fierce loyalty it generates in your clientele. In this chapter, I'll show how that loyalty can buoy your company through the more difficult passages of business evolution and arm you against your competitors. I'll also show how vulnerable you are without it.

Desirability

Larry Keeley of the Doblin Group has created an intriguing conceptual model of three primary qualities in high-technology business. Keeley calls the first quality capability, and it is what technologists bring to the party. They ask, "What are we capable of? What is possible?" Engineers must know what can and can't be built. A product can't be a success unless it can be built and made to work.

Keeley calls the second quality viability, and it is the contribution of businesspeople. They ask, "What is viable? What can we sell?" Business executives must know what can and can't be created and sold at a profit. A product can't be a success unless it can support a growing company.

Because all successful high-technology businesses need a balance of both of these qualities, the tension between their constituents is strong. Businesspeople are totally dependent on technologists for their ability to create things that work. And technologists are totally dependent on businesspeople to provide them with the tools for their efforts. This makes for an uneasy symbiosis.

Programmers like to add features and functions to their products. They find a creative challenge in making the program's inner workings run at a high level of efficiency. It is an expression of capability, and some technologists can be happy without ever shipping a viable product. If their employing company fails, they merely switch jobs. Their individual success is independent of the success of the business.

On the other hand, businesspeople like to own market share and sell lots of product. They find a challenge in motivating people to buy their product. It is an expression of viability, and some businesspeople can be happy without ever shipping a technically sophisticated product. Most businesspeople would be quite satisfied to sell pet rocks, as long as they sold lots of them.

Although the two sides depend on each other, their divergent goals create a structural weakness in their relationship. It is as unstable as a two-legged stool, and this is where Keeley's third quality comes in, as a balancing third leg for the stool.

Keeley calls the third quality desirability, and it is what designers supply. They must ask, "What is desired? What do people want?" Designers determine product behavior that will make people happy and satisfied. A product can't be a long-term success unless it delivers power and pleasure to the people who must actually use it.

Design takes a product that can be built and performs well, and that can be distributed and sold profitably, and makes it a success by making it into something that people really want. This third leg brings stability and converts an interesting technological achievement into a long-term success.

Although it's possible to draw out something desirable in an existing product, Keeley believes—and I agree—that it is more sensible to first decide what customers will find desirable, and then challenge the engineers and businesspeople to build and sell it. This approach can yield significant advantages to the savvy player. It pulls you out in front of the competition. While they are back in the pack, reacting to each other's competitive moves, wrestling with "possible?" and "viable?" questions, you are out in clear air focusing on your customer's as-yet-unmet needs. Let your competitors fight among one another while you leap directly to providing your customers what they desire most.



[< Day Day Up >](#)



A Comparison

Three well-known high-tech companies illustrate the dynamics of Keeley's tripod model with their varied strengths and weaknesses: Novell, Microsoft, and Apple.

A lack of customer loyalty is what typically brings a company to its knees over the long term, despite the strength of any market need it fulfills. Novell is an excellent example of this. In the early 1990s, the only practical way to network your office's desktop computers together was with Novell NetWare. NetWare—the product—passed the capability test, and Novell—the company—passed the viability test. The need for local area networks (LANs) was enormous, and no other vendor had been able to satisfy it. Some companies, such as Banyan and Corvus, had also solved the technical problem; they, too, met the capability test, but they failed the viability test—their business structures failed. None of these companies made a desirable product, so although Novell prospered, only those customers driven by a powerful immediate need installed a NetWare LAN, and it remained an unloved dancing bear.

Novell grew fat and happy, but NetWare was egregiously designed, and installing, changing, and maintaining it required an expensive, trained specialist. What's more, the network behaved rudely and inappropriately, frustrating users. Novell failed to realize this, probably because millions bought NetWare, but its customer base was motivated by need, not by desire.

In the early 1990s, Microsoft, 3Com Corporation, and even Apple began to ship LAN products that were as capable as NetWare but that didn't force customers to depend so heavily on third-party experts for installation and—especially—maintenance. Novell watched in mute horror while its leadership position evaporated. As soon as there was competition, Novell's customers' lack of loyalty told. Novell's business today consists largely of maintaining those customers who were already technologically committed to the company. New customers went elsewhere.

Novell was a company that was viable and extremely capable. It had powerful technology and adequate business, but suffered from a complete lack of design.



Microsoft's story is easy to tell. Its products are technically competent but rarely innovative. Microsoft prefers to follow in the R & D footsteps of others. [\[1\]](#) But Bill Gates is arguably the most talented businessman of his generation, if not of the twentieth century. He has a remarkable ability to extract success from nearly every venture he makes, despite the obstacles.

[1] An old industry joke says that Microsoft's R & D department is in Cupertino, referring to the Silicon Valley location of Apple's Advanced Technology Group.

Microsoft does little or no design, and its products are famous for making people feel stupid. They are also famous for giving people good value with a robust feature set.

Many businesses and professionals are committed to using Microsoft products, but most of them are driven to that point by economic imperatives and the lack of alternatives. Few other companies can provide a full solution, as Microsoft can. However, don't confuse economic necessity with customer loyalty. Few users are loyal to Microsoft.

Microsoft is a company that is somewhat capable but astonishingly viable. Microsoft has adequate technology and superb business, which makes up for its lack of design in the short term.



[< Day Day Up >](#)



Time to Market

After a vendor has claimed a market by being the first to offer needed functionality, there is little advantage to hurrying to market with something equivalent. You have already lost the time-to-market race, so no amount of raw speed can ever gain that position for you. However, it is quite possible to take leadership from the market pioneer with better design. Design makes your product desirable, and that will make your customers actively seek out your product instead of the competitor's, regardless of who got there first.

The company that first claimed the market had to make certain sacrifices to get there. Chances are that design was an early casualty. This makes that company quite vulnerable to design, even if it is not vulnerable to speed.

Being the first to add extra features, however, is not the same thing. Features do not benefit users the way that good behavior and primary problem-solving abilities do, and adding features won't have the same beneficial effect that better behavior will. In a marketplace of equally poorly designed products, added features will not influence a broad segment of the market. [\[2\]](#)

[2] As Geoffrey Moore points out in his excellent book, *Crossing the Chasm*, the additional features have appeal only to the early adopters, not to the larger marketplace.

Many markets consist of multiple vendors selling similar products, none of which are designed, but all of which compete on features. Every time one vendor introduces a new feature, all of the other vendors add that feature in their next version. These markets are characteristically balkanized into many tiny segments. There is no dominant product or manufacturer. For example, the market for personal information managers (PIMs) is fought over by more than a dozen vendors. The same is true for cellular telephones.

The battle between capability and viability can go on unabated for years with users getting no relief. The only force that can convert a fragmented, feature-dominated market into a more stable, design-dominated market is the imposition of some outside force. The outside force can be the Brobdingnagian business acumen of Bill Gates, or it can be the studied application of design.

But all of Bill Gates's hard work is still not making his products lovable. What's more, the average level of desirability of almost all high-tech products remains about on a par with Microsoft's, despite all of the intelligence, sincerity, and hard work invested in them by their makers. In the next section, I'll show that simple but almost universal flaws in our process for creating software-based products are causing this proliferation of unpleasant, undesirable, dancing-bearware products.

Part III: Eating Soup with a Fork

[Chapter 6](#) The Inmates Are Running the Asylum

[Chapter 7](#) Homo Logicus

[Chapter 8](#) An Obsolete Culture

Chapter 6. The Inmates Are Running the Asylum

Despite the widely varied nature of the products described in [Chapter 1](#), "Riddles for the Information Age," they all share a common frustration-inducing unpleasantness. In this chapter, I'll show that this recurrent pattern is due to the inadvertent hijacking of the industry by technical experts. Despite all of the marketing rhetoric, the form of our products is really determined by the people least equipped to determine it.



[< Day Day Up >](#)



Driving from the Backseat

An article [\[1\]](#) about the spectacular failure of high-tech startup company General Magic is revealing. The author innocently touches on the root cause of the product's lack of success when she says that Marc Porat, the president, "launched his engineering team to design the device of their dreams." There is no irony in her statement. It seems perfectly natural for the engineering team to do the designing, yet that is precisely the cause of the problem. Later in the article, she quotes one of the engineers as saying, "We never knew what we were building. We didn't write specifications until 8 to 12 weeks before we finished." Again, neither the engineer nor the author notes the irony. The article seems to suggest that things would have worked out better for General Magic if only the engineers had drafted those specifications a month earlier.

[1] Michelle Quinn, "Vanishing Act," San Jose Mercury News West Magazine, March 15, 1998.

No matter how early in the development process specifications are drafted, they cannot substitute for interaction design. And no matter how hard they try, programmers cannot consistently arrive at a successful design. Not only are their methods, training, and aptitude wrong for the job, but they are caught in a strong conflict of interest between serving the user's needs and making their programming job easier. Yet, in company after company, software engineers are allowed to control the development process, often from start to finish. Sometimes their control is overt, but more typically it is indirect.

I witnessed this subtle control at a very successful, mid-sized Silicon Valley company. At the meeting was the president, a very savvy, veteran businessman who founded the company, along with the senior programmer responsible for building the product. The president showed us the product and demonstrated its power, which we could clearly see, but we could also see that its power was hard to use and its interface was overly complex. Our design team and I instantly recognized that the programmers had "designed" the product while they constructed it in the way a beaver "designs" his dam while he builds it.

The president complained that a competitor with a weaker product was stealing away market share. He was at a loss to explain why because he knew that his product was more powerful. Although the president had called us in to help him fight off the competition, he had given his senior programmer the authority to take whatever action he deemed appropriate. It was clear to us that the product badly needed some behavioral changes, and we presented our case to them both. To us, it was a simple and straightforward redesign project that would take a few months of effort and would make their product enormously more useful, practical, powerful, and pleasurable—more competitive. However, the senior programmer astonished us by asking that we not actually make any changes to the product's interaction. He considered it just fine the way it was. He felt that the product's market difficulties stemmed only from the company's sales force not being sufficiently well trained in the product's use. He wanted us to prepare some in-house promotional materials so their salespeople could be more effective. He was in complete denial about his product's shortcomings, despite the incontrovertible evidence that an "inferior" product was beating it.

Programmers devote so much of their time and energy to learning about software that it was inconceivable to him that his users would not want to take the time to understand his work. He was willing to accept that the problem lay with his own company, but not with his role within it. He blamed the sales force for not helping the customers learn about the product. He was willing to do the work to solve the problem by accepting the task of developing the new training aids, yet he was utterly oblivious to any hint of his own culpability in the product's fall from grace.

The high-handedness of this engineer was breathtaking. Not only was he blinded by his own pride in his demonstrated ability to build a powerful product, but he was blinding his boss—the president—to his obvious inability to design it in such a way as to make their users happy.



[< Day Day Up >](#)





[< Day Day Up >](#)



Hatching a Catastrophe

My colleague Scott McGregor sent me the following story when I asked him if he knew of any cases where development projects got out of control because of a lack of design. His story is a tragic one, made ever more so by the fact that it is so typical of our industry.

Scott is a very talented man, as his well-written story attests. He is also a skilled designer with a fine pedigree—academic and practical—in both software engineering and design. He joined a small, venture-funded start-up company in Silicon Valley. The original founders of the company also had well-established credentials, including several successful years at Apple. Scott invited me over one afternoon to meet the founders and to pitch my company. The CEO and the vice president of engineering showed our team what they were working on, and we were impressed. The product idea was excellent. It exploited an aspect of productivity software in a very clever way. The product was based on an appropriately small amount of good technology that served a very real marketplace need.

They had everything they needed to succeed—except for design. Here is Scott's story in his own well-crafted words:

Our CEO said we would beat others because we were so fast and spry, and he went on to recommend with pride that we were following a "ready, fire, aim" strategy to reach success before other companies were even done aiming. Of course when we fired, it was obvious that we had shot ourselves in the foot!

Although we met our schedule of delivering our 1.2 release on December 31, we did it by saying that Release 1.2 is whatever is done at 5:00 p.m. on December 31. There was no fixed spec that engineers were building from. Substantial new changes showed up for the first time without any prior warning on December 29.

Earlier, I had suggested that we needed to follow a design method. I said that we should begin by identifying who all the key users and other stakeholders were and write up profiles on them, and then develop statements of their goals and the tasks they would go through to accomplish those goals. Then, from those tasks, I suggested we could come up with proposed visual representations of key objects and interaction behaviors. Once we had done this, we could start building it.

Unfortunately, our management felt all that was a luxury we couldn't afford. We didn't have the time for that. Instead, we visited many customer prospects, and the CEO would relate our grand vision. People loved it, but they wanted to know specifics. But each prospect had a different axe to grind in the specifics. One wanted a product for their sales people, another for independent resellers, a third for customers. One had many documents they wanted to manage, another was interested in Web pages, etc. With each customer contact the definition for 1.2 grew, becoming the union of all imagined product features.

Even more unfortunately, prospects would talk about some new thing they wanted, but didn't talk about features they already had in their existing software or their browsers and which they took for granted. Since these weren't talked about they were never added to the product spec, and they were never built.

Our newly hired vice presidents of sales and marketing could not get the product to install on their systems for weeks. When they did get it to work, it corrupted or lost all their data several times a day. Performance continued to degrade. In a demonstration with no more than 100 data views, performance was acceptable but slow, and that is all the developers ever tested. But real-world use called for over a thousand views, and performance was downright



[< Day Day Up >](#)



Computers Versus Humans

Software is more like a bridge than an edifice. Although it runs on high-technology microprocessors, it must be operated and used by mere mortals. Amid all the attention and excitement about new technology, we overlook the incredible differences between computers and the humans who have to use them.

For example, because computers have memories, we imagine that they must be something like our human memories, but that is simply not true. Computer memories work in a manner alien to human memories. My memory lets me easily recognize the faces of my friends, whereas my own computer never even recognizes me. My computer's memory stores a million phone numbers with perfect accuracy, but I have to stop and think to recall my own.

For software to be robust and strong, it must be written in perfect harmony with the demands of silicon. For programmers to be professional, they must also work in this same harmony.

For users to be happy and effective with software, it must be written in harmony with the demands of human nature. The problem, of course, is that those human demands are so radically different from the demands of silicon.

Clearly, one side of software—the inside—must be written with technical expertise and sensitivity to the needs of computers. But equally clear, the other side of software—the outside—must be written with social expertise and sensitivity to the needs of people. It is my contention that programmers can do the former, but it takes interaction designers to do the latter.

COMPUTERS	<i>Humans</i>
INCREDIBLY FAST	<i>Incredibly Slow</i>
ERROR-FREE	<i>Error-Prone</i>
DETERMINISTIC	<i>Irrational</i>
APATHETIC	<i>Emotional</i>
LITERAL	<i>Inferential</i>
SEQUENTIAL	<i>Random</i>
PREDICTABLE	<i>Unpredictable</i>
RATIONAL	<i>Ethical</i>
STUPID	<i>Intelligent</i>

Computer industry guru Jerry Weinberg says, "Once you eliminate your number one problem, you promote number two." [2] For decades, the computer industry's number-one problem has been efficiency. Computers were—relatively speaking—small, expensive, slow, and weak. We lionized the hacker-gods who could make programs that operated as efficiently as possible so as to maximize the productivity of the expensive mainframe computer. Essentially, it was far cheaper to train people to deal with obscure—but efficient—software than it was to buy more computers. The driving inevitability of plummeting computer costs has utterly obliterated that problem. Today, it is far more expensive to pay for the human costs of adapting to "efficient" software than it is to make the software conform to the expectations of the humans.

[2] Gerald Weinberg, *The Secrets of Consulting: A Guide to Giving & Getting Advice Successfully*, Dorset House, 1985, ISBN 0-932633-01-3.

The solution is obvious: Make the software serve the users. But standing in the way is the culture we've so carefully built over the last 50 years that puts the hacker-gods in the driver's seat. The community of software engineers is



[< Day Day Up >](#)



Teaching Dogs to Be Cats

As a fallback position, software engineers are always willing to learn how to design. I'm constantly asked to "teach me to design." I applaud their open-mindedness, but I despair for its effectiveness. Any software engineer good enough to call herself a professional is well steeped in that literal/deterministic/sequential way that silicon behaves—far too steeped to have much simultaneous effectiveness in the irrational/unpredictable/emotional world of humans. I'm not saying that a programmer cannot become a designer; I'm just saying that it is nearly impossible to do either task well while attempting both simultaneously.

Every software engineer thinks that he is different, that he is the one who can do both. This is simply not true, as the failure of General Magic showed. Bill Atkinson and Andy Hertzfeld headed General Magic's development effort. These two men were the lead software engineers on the Apple Macintosh and are arguably the two most talented, creative, and inventive programmers ever. Their simultaneous design and programming on the Macintosh was a success in 1984 (although Jef Raskin, who did no programming, contributed much of the design). However, things changed quite a bit in the ensuing 14 years, and their methods were no longer viable. In early 1993, I interviewed Andy Hertzfeld at General Magic's engineering headquarters—Andy's living room in Palo Alto—and he described his design/programming philosophy to me. I listened in amazement, knowing that the odds would be severely stacked against him. Who but history could second-guess an engineering talent as towering as Andy's?

There is no doubt that the product General Magic had in mind was, and still is, extremely desirable. There is no doubt that its technology was superb. There is no doubt that Marc Porat's ability to establish strategic partnerships and make business deals was second to none. There is no doubt that the company was well sired and well funded. So what caused its demise? I offer interaction design, or a lack of it, as the smoking gun. Despite its stellar pedigree and awesome talent, General Magic's product was engineered and not designed.

The current thinking in the industry ignores this obvious deduction, as Michelle Quinn's article shows. The balance of the article seems to lay the product's failure on Porat's hubris and ego, but there's not a CEO in Silicon Valley who doesn't have hubris and ego in abundant quantities. They surely cannot be the reason for the company's failure.

Our high-tech culture is so inbred that we have little perspective on our own failures and foibles. You cannot be a successful reporter of high technology unless you are a computer-savvy nerd—an apologist—yourself, so the reporters blame our failures on personal demons, bad luck, and acts of God.



Software programming is not a true profession, like law, architecture, or medicine, so titles in our industry are very unreliable. Several of my friends who are top-notch computer programmers call themselves "software designers," a title that is not truly correct. If you ask Andy Hertzfeld, he will willingly accept the sobriquet "designer."

Many programmers believe themselves to be talented designers. In fact, this is often true, but there is a tremendous difference between designing for function and designing for humans.

Even if programmers haven't acquitted themselves well of the design task, they have at least kept many projects from unraveling completely. When a usurper approaches, they are careful not to let control get into the hands of irresponsible people. Most programmers are extremely responsible, and they often view outside consultants, marketers, and managers as flighty and incompetent.



[< Day Day Up >](#)



Chapter 7. Homo Logicus

With my tongue firmly planted in my cheek, I call programmers Homo logicus: a species slightly—but distinctly—different from Homo sapiens. From my own observations, I have isolated four fundamental ways in which software engineers think and behave differently from normal humans, and I will discuss them in detail in this chapter. Programmers trade simplicity for control. They exchange success for understanding. They focus on what is possible to the exclusion of what is probable. And they act like jocks.



Homo logicus

The Jetway Test

I use a humorous litmus test that I call the Jetway Test to highlight the difference. To perform this test, all you have to do is visualize yourself walking down the corridor of a Jetway as you board an airliner. As you step onto the aircraft, you have a choice of going left into the cockpit or right into the cabin.

To the left, the cockpit is a kaleidoscope of complex controls and gauges, with every surface covered with instruments, knobs, and levers. To the right, in stark contrast, lies the cabin, where everything is gently rounded, smooth, and a calm-inducing shade of beige.

To turn left into the cockpit means that you must learn and master all the complicated technical stuff. You must know what every one of those instruments means. In exchange for understanding all that complexity is the certain knowledge that you are in control and that you are responsible for landing the aircraft at the right place.

To turn right into the cabin means that you relinquish all authority over the flight. In exchange for abdication of control, you get to relax, knowing that you will arrive at the proper destination without dealing with anything more complex than turning the reading light on and off.



The Jetway Test neatly divides the human race into two categories: Those who turn left strongly desire to be in control and to understand how the technology works, and those who turn right strongly desire to simplify their thinking and to have confidence in the success of the flight. Programmers—Homo logicus—always want to turn left. Users—Homo sapiens—always want to turn right.



[< Day Day Up >](#)



The Psychology of Computer Programmers

Because our goal is to create software-based products that are both powerful and pleasurable for human users, understanding the psychology of the user might seem a natural prerequisite. This is, of course, true, but it obscures another more important, but far less obvious, point. Determining the solution and getting that solution implemented are two very different actions. I'd rather have a partial design actually built than have a better design sit in useless, dusty majesty on the shelf. To get our designed products actually created and into the hands of users, a far more important prerequisite is to understand the psychology of the builders—the programmers.

Nothing will change unless we can influence the software developers. Even if the programmers agree that the user should be better treated—and they usually do—that doesn't necessarily mean that they will do what is necessary to actually accomplish this goal. You are not going to get them to change just by asking them. In order to effect a real solution, we need insight into their thinking so that we can figure out how to motivate them to create interaction that is good for users. For the interaction designer, understanding psychology is very important, but it must include the psychology of the software engineer as well as the psychology of the user.

The implication of this is clear: Programmers are somehow different from ordinary people. Their stereotypical behavioral differences have been the subject of jokes for years: the social awkwardness, the pocket protectors, the bookish manner. Those are just the easily noticeable—and easily ridiculed—surface differences. The really substantive differences are not only far subtler, but they have a more profound effect on the cognitive friction-rich interactive products that programmers build.

Many observers of the computer industry have taken pains to point out these differences. Robert Cringely calls programmers "stinking gods among men," referring simultaneously to their superior attitudes and their hygiene habits.

Po Bronson is another shrewd observer and talented writer. He has cast his sharp eye and sharper wit onto the high-tech world. In a parody of Steven Covey, he has developed what he calls the Seven Habits of Highly Engineered People. They are remarkably revealing in their hyperbole:

1.
They will be generous in their selfishness.
2.
Blindness improves their vision.
3.
They'll not only bite the hand that feeds them, but they'll bite their own hand.
4.
They will try very hard to maintain the image that they care very little about their image.
5.
They'll keep fixing what's not broken until it's broken.
6.
"I didn't answer incorrectly, you just asked the wrong question."
7.
They consider absence of criticism a compliment.

Programmers Trade Simplicity for Control

Homo logicus desire to have control over things that interest them, and the things that interest them are complex, deterministic systems. People are complex, but they don't behave in a logical and predictable way, like machinery. The best machinery is digital, because it can be the most complex, sophisticated, and can be easily changed by the programmer.

Controlling humans is less appealing from the programmer's point of view. In the novel *The First \$20 Million Is Always the Hardest*, [\[1\]](#) author Po Bronson has his programmers play practical jokes on humans to demonstrate that they can control them, but the programmers take more satisfaction in making the computers jump to their bidding.

[1] Po Bronson, *The First \$20 Million Is Always the Hardest*, Avon Books, New York, New York, 1997, ISBN: 0-380-73155-X.

The price of control is always more effort and increased complexity. Most people are willing to make a moderate effort, but what differentiates programmers from most people is their willingness and ability to master extreme complexity. It is a satisfying part of the programmer's job to know and manage systems composed of many interacting forces. Flying airplanes is the archetypal programmer's avocation. [\[2\]](#) The cockpit control panel of an airplane is packed with gauges, knobs, and levers, but programmers thrive on these daunting complexities. Homo logicus finds it fun and engaging, despite (because of!) the months of rigorous study required. Homo sapiens would rather ride along as passengers.

[2] All right, I confess: I'm a private pilot. Quintessential programmer-nerd Gary Kildall took me flying for the first time in his Piper Archer in 1979, and in that short flight I became hooked. The computer programmer in me loves all of that pointless complexity.

For Homo logicus, control is the goal and complexity is the price they will pay for it. For normal humans, simplicity is the goal, and relinquishing control is the price they will pay. In software-based products, control translates into features. For example, in Windows 95, the Find File function gives me lots of control over the procedure. I can specify which area of my disk to search, the type of file to search for, whether to search by filename or by file contents, and several other parameters. From a programmer's point of view, this is very cool. For some extra up-front effort and understanding, he gets to make the search faster and more efficient. Conversely, the user's point of view is less rosy because he has to specify the area of the search, the type of file to search for, and whether to search by name or contents.



Homo logicus
wants control—
accepts complexity
as trade-off



Homo sapiens
wants simplicity—
accepts less control
as trade-off

Homo sapiens would gladly sacrifice the odd extra minute of compute time if they didn't have to know how the search function works. To them, each search parameter is just another opportunity to enter something incorrectly



[< Day Day Up >](#)



Programmers Exchange Success for Understanding

Homo logicus are driven by an irresistible desire to understand how things work. By contrast, Homo sapiens have a strong desire for success. Programmers also want to succeed, but they will frequently accept failure as the price to pay for understanding.

An old joke about engineers gives some insight into this need to understand:

Three people are scheduled for execution: a priest, an attorney, and an engineer. First, the priest steps up to the gallows. The executioner pulls the lever to drop the hatch, but nothing happens. The priest claims divine intervention and demands his release, so he is set free. Next, the attorney takes a stand at the gallows. The executioner pulls the lever, but again nothing happens. The attorney claims another attempt would be double jeopardy and demands release, so he is set free. Finally, the engineer steps up to the gallows and begins a careful examination of the scaffold. Before the executioner can pull the lever, he looks up and declares, "Aha, here's your problem."

Understanding the problem with the scaffold was more compelling than staying alive.

When I lecture to groups of computer programmers, I ask for a show of hands of how many in the audience, when they were a child, took a clock apart to see how it worked. Typically, two-thirds of the audience will raise their hands. I then ask how many of them ever got that clock back together again, and all but a few hands will drop. I then ask how many considered this experiment to be a failure, and most of the audience will laugh as they realize that they got full satisfaction out of breaking their clocks. Homo logicus want to understand how that clock works—that is their goal—and they are quite willing to sacrifice a working clock to achieve that goal. Homo sapiens, on the other hand, like to have clocks that work. Their goal is to be able to know what time it is, and in exchange, they will forego knowing what makes the clock tick.



Homo logicus

wants to understand—
accepts failure
as trade-off



Homo sapiens

wants success—
accepts less understanding
as trade-off

Interaction designer Jonathan Korman points out:

Most people cannot understand the degree to which computers fascinate programmers. The difficulties of learning about computers only strengthen the programmer's sense of satisfaction. Their interest runs so deep that it never occurs to them that others might not feel the same way, so they interpret others' frustration as stemming from inability rather than from disinterest.

Programmers' drive to understand makes them instinctively create interaction that closely follows the internal



[< Day Day Up >](#)





[< Day Day Up >](#)



Programmers Focus on What Is Possible to the Exclusion of What Is Probable

Programmers share the mathematician's abstract view of complex systems, so it is not surprising that they look at things differently from most people. Here's what I mean: Imagine that you flipped a coin 1,000,000 times, and 999,999 times the coin landed heads up. To a mathematician, the assertion that "the coin always lands heads up" is false. That single tails-up result disproves the assertion. In mathematical terms, a proposition is true only if it is always true, and this way of thinking is very familiar and reasonable to Homo logicus because, not surprisingly, it's the way computers behave.

On the other hand, most normal people will declare the proposition true because of the preponderance of heads to tails. They also will claim that not only is the proposition true, but it is overwhelmingly, convincingly, indisputably true. The odds are a million to one! In the context of human behavior, million-to-one odds are definitive. They are odds beyond consideration. There's a better chance that I will get hit by lightning, accidentally fall off a bridge, or win the lottery than that the coin will land tails up.

The probability that the proposition is true is enormous, and Homo sapiens live in a world of probabilities. However, there is always that possibility that the proposition is false, and programmers live in the world of possibilities. If it might happen, it is something that must be considered. In the world of software—the world of precisely articulated propositions—enormously remote possibilities are issues that cannot be ignored.



Homo logicus

concerned
with possible cases—
accepts
advance preparation
as trade-off



Homo sapiens

concerned
with probable cases—
accepts
occasional setbacks
as trade-off

Programmers call these one-in-a-million possibilities edge cases.^[3] Although these oddball situations are unlikely to occur, the program will crash whenever they do if preparations are not made. Although the likelihood of edge cases is small, the cost for lack of preparedness is immense. Therefore, these remote possibilities are very real to the programmer. The fact that an edge case will crop up only once every 79 years of daily use is no consolation to the programmer. What if that one time is tomorrow?

[3] They are also variously called corner cases, special cases, and boundary conditions.

Arguably, the single most important difference between amateur programmers and experienced professionals is the journeyman's obsessive emphasis on preparing for edge cases. This fanatic preparation for the possible has the inevitable consequence of obscuring the probable. This results in products whose interaction is encrusted with little-used or never-used controls that obscure the frequently used ones. Users' most common complaint is that software is hard to use because it has too many options all jumbled into the interface without any discrimination.

Programmers Act Like Jocks

Probably the most surprising thing about good programmers is that they act like jocks. I use the term very consciously because it is freighted with overtones of immaturity, egotism, and competitiveness, as well as physical strength and coordination.

The term jock reminds me of high-school physical-education classes. Some teenaged boys are gifted with bigger, stronger musculature and well-coordinated bodies. These boys excel in organized athletics, but they also find that they can dominate the smaller, weaker kids in unofficial contests of strength and agility. These jocks not only dominate on the diamond or gridiron, but they dominate the weaker boys in the locker room and on the school playground, outside of sanctioned competition.

A 6-foot-tall, 17-year-old boy has the strength of a man but lacks the man's maturity. This man-boy is unsympathetic to those who are weaker than he is. He is in the throes of adolescence and is as yet untempered by the strictures of adult society.

His attitude is brutish and simple: Keep up or die. His actions say: "If you can't do what I do, then you are a worthless loser." Any kid on the playground who can't compete physically is rejected and is not considered acceptable. Because the jock has the physical strength to dominate, he does.

An interesting thing happens to this jock dynamic, however. Once out of school and into the real world, the ability to physically dominate another person quickly loses its power and usefulness. In high school, if the jock felt threatened by a chubby kid with glasses, a couple of well-placed fists and the haughty laughter of the varsity team served to put the kid in his place. In the world of business, fists and taunts can no longer be used. It is not acceptable behavior to administer wedgies or snap towels in the conference room, nor is it effective. Although the jock might still have the physical power to dominate another, weaker, person, doing so can only backfire if the weaker person is his peer, supervisor, or manager.

The jocks, who were so immature in high school, find themselves learning a very humbling lesson. When they emerge into the wider world, they find their wings are clipped by society, and they learn to coexist successfully with people of lesser physical ability. Jocks are well represented in business, and they tend to do well in it, overall. They make the transition successfully, if not willingly or happily. They retain their natural sense of competition, but they have now earned a level of maturity and selflessness that makes them good citizens.





[< Day Day Up >](#)



Chapter 8. An Obsolete Culture

Programming is a somewhat alien activity, but it is emotionally very powerful. This power is what makes the job of programming into something more akin to a calling, its jargon more like a distinct language, and the brotherhood of software engineers into a cohesive culture. In this chapter, I will show how the culture of programming influences the nature of software-based products.

The Culture of Programming

I read an interesting story in a Sunday supplement about an American couple who retired to Mexico. They purchased a lot on the outskirts of a large city and hired an American architect to design their dream home. They then hired a Mexican building contractor and turned the blueprints over to him. As construction proceeded, they were flabbergasted to find that the building wasn't turning out the way the architect had specified.

The blueprints showed the front wall of the house containing four windows whose manufacturer and part number were precisely specified. The owners discovered that the actual wall contained three windows from another maker with quite different appearance and size. When they queried the Mexican builder, he shrugged and said, "They're windows. The plan says windows go in this wall. What is the problem?"

The owners and architect were from one culture, sharing one set of values, and the builder came from another culture and valued aspects of the problem differently. No doubt he was able to procure the windows for much less money and effort, and—in his world—these considerations took precedence. The American owners and architect believed that the blueprints implied full and exact compliance. The Mexican builder believed that the blueprints were a suggestion, not a requirement. He believed that his imperatives of thrift and acquisition ease naturally outranked any exactitude in the specifications. He was sincerely trying to fulfill the architect's vision but was applying his own cultural filters—his own values—to the problem.





[< Day Day Up >](#)



Reusing Code

Just as the Mexican builder put construction cost ahead of design considerations, engineers, left to their own devices, will value programming efficiencies more than user needs. The strongest evidence of this is the reuse of code that has been written for some previous project or that can be purchased for some nominal sum from outside vendors. Prewritten code not only saves time, but it has already been proven to be usable by other programmers and to be bug free in operation. One of software's unique properties is that any procedure can be invoked with a single command, but there is no limit to the magnitude of the invoked procedure. In other words, as long as the procedure is already written, all it takes is a single command to employ it. Therefore, any prewritten module of code is a significant boon to programmers. They can plug it into their program as a black box whose inner workings need never be plumbed. The programmer is spared not only lots of coding, but lots of thinking and testing, too. To most programmers, code reuse is more important than almost any other technical consideration. Famous open-source guru Eric Raymond says, "Good programmers know what to write. Great ones know what to reuse."

The primary side effect of code reuse is that large portions of most programs exist not because some interaction designer wanted them to exist, but because some other programmer already did the work on someone else's budget. Much of the software that we interact with exists for the sole reason that it existed before.

For example, our desktop software has so many menus and text-based dialog boxes because all windowing systems—Microsoft Windows, Mac OS, OS/2, Linux—provide prewritten code modules for these functions. Conversely, none of those systems provides much prewritten code for dragging and dropping, which is why you see so few direct-manipulation idioms in software interaction. A dialog box can be constructed in about 6 or 8 lines of easy, declarative code. A drag-and-drop idiom must be constructed with about 100 lines of very intricate procedural code. The choice—for the programmer—is obvious. The benefit for the end user is generally overlooked in this economy.

I see the Mexican-builder story played out in software development all of the time, mostly because of the programmer's compulsion to reuse code. Ed Forman, the head of development at Elemental Software, creates a detailed and accurate sketch of exactly what he wants the screen to look like before assigning it to his programmers. And yet, Ed says, the program that comes back to him is always just a pale shadow of what he drew.

It works like this: Ed's sketch shows dark-gray buttons on a light-gray background. The programmer will begin construction by copying the source code from some other—already working—part of the program. This is a good way to save programming time and effort, apparently benefiting everyone—except that the existing code has an extra dark-gray border around the buttons. The dark-gray border also comes with a text legend. Instead of removing the text and the border to comply with Ed's sketch, the programmer will just leave it there, thus saving lots of code. The code requires some text for the legend, so he just puts something appropriate—from his technical point of view—there.

When Ed finally sees the program, complete with the unwanted border and confusing text legend, he shakes his head in amazement. When he points out the differences to the programmer, the programmer doesn't see a problem. Just like the Mexican builder, programmers believe that their own imperatives of construction simplicity and ease of acquisition—of prewritten source code in their case—take precedence over any suggestions made by others.

Ed is amused as well as frustrated by this, but he is at a loss to explain the phenomenon. His programmers are uniformly intelligent, capable, and deeply concerned about the quality of their products and the success of their company, but they simply cannot resist the siren's song. Sure, they will try to build Ed's vision, but not at the expense of their own implementation priorities.



[< Day Day Up >](#)



The Common Culture

The nature of war and the demands of military training are common in every country. This gives rise to the strong cultural similarity shared by soldiers everywhere, regardless of which ideology they might choose to defend. The same is true in programming shops.

The collective psychology of Homo logicus engenders a common culture of software development. The accepted way that software-based products are built is astonishingly similar, from camera company to auto company to bank to navy, which is why products as diverse as cameras, Porsches, ATMs, and Aegis cruisers all behave in a similar, recognizable, computer-like way.

One aspect of this culture is a reverence for technical skill. This reverence has the effect of elevating the importance of programming skill into areas in which it is no longer relevant, such as interaction design. Thirty years ago, when computers lived in glass houses and were used only by trained programmers, the self-referential design work of programmers was adequate and appropriate. As computers edged out into the consumer market, programmers still did the design, by historical default. Development managers ask, "Why should I pay interaction designers for what I get free from my programmers today?" This is a good question, except that the underlying assumption is incorrect. He is not getting interaction design, free or otherwise, from his programmers. Rather, the interface he gets is one designed to please only the authors: people with atypical training, personality, and aptitude.

This highlights another key point regarding the culture of software development. Although it is founded on the particular nature of programmers, it is propagated by their managers, many of whom—it must be said—are former programmers. Jeff Bezos says that the most vociferous defense of the two-click interface came from the product manager!

The reverence for technical skill has another effect. Most people assume that programming is more technical than design. I won't dispute that, but I strongly disagree with the conclusion typically drawn from it that programming should therefore come before design in the development process. This has the effect of making the user conform to the technology. If the interaction design came before the programming, the technology would conform to the user's goals instead. I have heard high-tech executives say, "We'll bring designers in after the programmers build the functionality." This has the effect of making moot most of the interaction designer's opportunities to contribute.

Programming Culture at Microsoft

It is hard to overestimate the depth and power of the software-development culture. Fred Moody's 1995 book about Microsoft, *I Sing the Body Electronic*, [\[1\]](#) gives an indication of how deeply entrenched the nerd culture is through an examination of this most archetypal software-development shop. The journeyman author and computer-industry-beat reporter spent a year inside Microsoft, observing the creation of a new multimedia product that came to be called Explorapedia. Moody was given unfettered access to Microsoft, and his book paints a revealing portrait of life and culture inside the industry-leading company. As you can tell from its products, Microsoft reveres programming, but has little or no awareness of interaction design. The book provides a fascinating study of what happens in a programming culture.

[1] Fred Moody, *I Sing the Body Electronic*, 1995, Viking, New York, New York, ISBN 0-670-84875-1.

In his introduction, Moody sets the stage:



[< Day Day Up >](#)



Cultural Isolation

In most development shops, the most-experienced programmers take responsibility for the most-demanding parts of the program. In return for this effort, they are given some modicum of immunity from having to field annoying technical-support calls. When users of the program call from the field, they are routed to technical-support personnel or to more junior programmers. On the rare occasion that a user gets through to the senior coder, it is because that user has already demonstrated her expertise to the junior programmer or the tech-support person. The result of this filtering process is that the more senior programmers are, the less contact they have with typical, run-of-the-mill users. By extension, they mistakenly assume that "their" users are representative.

For example, at Sagent Technology—a vendor of datamart-management software in the enterprise-computing market—Vlad Gorelik is the database guru, and his programming expertise is legendary. The only customers he speaks with directly are those who can palaver about "query segmentation," "task partitioning," and "data cubing" at Vlad's exalted level. It is not surprising, then, that Vlad imagines the typical user of Sagent's Information Studio product to be a seasoned database expert.

Conversely, Alice Blair, the Information Studio product manager, spends the lion's share of her time speaking with prospective buyers of the product. She counsels these people on what the product does and explains its basic functions. Consequently, Alice's view of her customer base is skewed toward first-time users and those with only very basic computer skills. It is no surprise that she imagines that most customers need hand-holding.

Kendall Cosby works in tech support at Sagent. He speaks with neither experts nor first timers. Mostly, he works with intermediate end users. Because the product is used as a decision-support tool, he is in constant contact with financial and marketing analysts who know little about computers and databases, yet whose jobs depend on their ability to probe into their datamarts to understand sales trends. Because Kendall's customer isn't very computer savvy, he wants the product to hide or eliminate complex functionality. Of the three, Kendall's customer view is the most accurate, yet because of their roles, Vlad and Alice have greater influence on the product's design.

There's an old story about several blind men encountering an elephant for the first time. One grasps its leg and proclaims that the elephant is "very like a tree." Another touches its side and states that it is "very like a wall." Another grasps its trunk and declares it to be "very like a snake." Like the blind men and the elephant, Alice, Kendall, and Vlad have very different opinions of what their clients are like because they are each confronting a different subset of their users. What's more, they all have clear, empirical evidence to back their deductions. In order to get an accurate portrayal, someone divorced from the day-to-day imperatives of both development and sales is needed.



[< Day Day Up >](#)



Skin in the Game

One strong cultural determinant of software engineering is that it is done alone. Programmers sit alone. Only one programmer can type in code at one time. Code is largely invisible inside a computer, and it is almost never read. Reading someone else's code is less like reading a book than it is like reading someone's lecture notes, written in a private, inscrutable shorthand. Programming is so complex that it takes single-minded focus and lots of uninterrupted time. Programmers have a strong sense of this insularity and of what it implies. Nobody can have significant control over what a programmer does inside his own program. Programmers know that the quality of their code is largely a matter of their own conscientiousness. The boss can demand quality, but the boss isn't going to invest the time and effort required to verify that such quality exists. It can take more time to decipher a programmer's code than it took to write it. Programmers know this, and they know that their personal decisions and actions have more leverage on the final product and the user's satisfaction than any other consideration. Ultimately, they will personally hold the bag for the product's success. They know that they have a lot of skin in the game.

The lonely work of the programmer gives him a strong sense of his power. Some programmers are uncomfortable with the sense of power, but they are even more uncomfortable delegating authority to others with less skin in the game. When marketers, managers, or designers give advice to them, programmers regard the suggestions with a healthy dose of skepticism. If they take the advice and it turns out to be bad, they know the advisor will be long gone and that the blame will fall squarely on the programmer.

Letting programmers do their own design results in bad design, but it also has a collateral effect: The programmers lose respect for the design process.

Programmers have been successfully bluffing their way through the design process for so long that they are conditioned to disregard its value. When a trained interaction designer is finally hired, the programmer naturally treats the designer's work dismissively.

This leads to a general lack of respect for the interaction designer, the design process, and sadly, the design itself. This disrespect reinforces the cultural valuation of the design as opinion and vague advice, rather than as a clear, specific, and unequivocal statement. Because the programmer rightly assumes that his fancy carries equal weight to mere opinion, he feels free to cherry-pick elements of the design from the specification. Instead of seeing the written design specification as a blueprint, he sees it as the op-ed page of the newspaper. Some items are interesting but untrue; others are true but irrelevant. Unfortunately, the programmer is making these decisions on the basis of implementation considerations or on a self-referential basis, so they are frequently wrong.

On the other hand, every programmer has horror stories to tell of good products that failed because of dunderheaded design imperatives from managers who were equally confused about what users might be looking for. I remember one senior executive who hated to type, demanding that all of his company's programs be controllable only by the mouse. I also remember another senior executive who was clumsy with a mouse, declaring that all of his company's programs must be controllable only with the keyboard. These destructive, self-referential designs caused despair to ripple through both companies.



Certainly some programmers are consciously malicious and destructive, but—judging from the many programmers I have met—they as are rare as hen's teeth. Their training and discipline are so tough that it is inevitable, as they reach the peak of their abilities, that they see nonprogrammers as less competent. Software engineers respect others in their own areas, but when a nonprogrammer ventures into the world of programming, as Moody describes, programmers become condescending or even elitist.



[< Day Day Up >](#)



The Process Is Dehumanizing, Not the Technology

Since Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times*, the popular thinking has been that technology dehumanizes us. I disagree with this notion. Before technology, tyrants, barbarians, and warriors dehumanized their victims with fists and stones. It doesn't require sophisticated tools to dehumanize your fellow human—a glance or a kick does it as well. It is not technology that is dehumanizing. It is the technologists, or rather the processes that technologists use, that create dehumanizing products.

Of course, the more powerful the technology, the more damage a bad process can inflict. Conversely, designed properly, that same technology can be a great gift to humanity. High technology can go either way. It's the people who administer it who dictate the effect.

Interactive systems do not have to be dehumanizing, but for this to occur, we have to revamp our development methodology so that the humans who ultimately use them are the primary focus. The single most important process change we can make is to design our interactive products completely before any programming begins. The second most important change is to turn the responsibility for design over to trained interaction designers. In the next few chapters, I will show what can be accomplished by taking these steps.

Part IV: Interaction Design Is Good Business

[Chapter 9](#) Designing for Pleasure

[Chapter 10](#) Designing for Power

[Chapter 11](#) Designing for People

Chapter 9. Designing for Pleasure

As Albert Einstein said, "You can't solve a problem with the same thinking that created it." I've just devoted many pages to identifying that old thinking and showing how it doesn't work. Now it's time to talk about a new method that will work. I've been developing this method, called Goal-Directed design, since 1992, and the designers in my consulting firm use it for all of our projects. It consists of some novel ways of looking at problems, some powerful guiding axioms, and some remarkably effective mental tools. In the next few chapters, I'll present an overview of three of the most powerful of these tools, along with some case studies of how they are applied and the kind of results you can expect.

Personas

The most powerful tools are always simple in concept, but they often must be applied with some sophistication. That is certainly true of interaction design tools. Our most effective tool is profoundly simple: Develop a precise description of our user and what he wishes to accomplish. The sophistication comes from how we determine and use that precise description.

The most obvious approach—to find the actual user and ask him—doesn't work for a number of reasons, but the main one is that merely being the victim of a particular problem doesn't automatically bestow on one the power to see its solution. The actual user is still a valuable resource, and we devote considerable attention to him or her, but we never let the user directly affect the solution.

The actual method that works sounds trivial, but it is tremendously powerful and effective in every case: We make up pretend users and design for them. We call these pretend users personas, [\[1\]](#) and they are the necessary foundation of good interaction design.

[1] For all of you Latin scholars and typographers out there, you will be happy to know that the battle between "personas" and "personæ" rages hotly and daily at Cooper Interaction Design. Designers on the "personas" side argue that pronunciation is less ambiguous, gratuitous ligatures can be eliminated, and the word appears conventional and unthreatening to our clients. Designers on the "personæ" side argue that the pronunciation is easy once you hear it, the opportunity for a gratuitous ligature is like manna from heaven, and that our clients are bright enough to deal with arcane and obsolete phraseology. It sounds to me a lot like programmers arguing about algorithms, so, in this book, I'll stick to "personas."

Personas are not real people, but they represent them throughout the design process. They are hypothetical archetypes of actual users. Although they are imaginary, they are defined with significant rigor and precision. Actually, we don't so much "make up" our personas as discover them as a byproduct of the investigation process. We do, however, make up their names and personal details.

Personas are defined by their goals. Goals, of course, are defined by their personas. This may sound tautological, but it is not. Personas reveal themselves through our research and analysis in much the same way that the sequence of tectonic events reveal themselves to geologists through the study of sedimentary layers: The presence of a fossil defines a stratum, and a stratum defines the presence of a fossil. I'll talk a lot about goals in the next chapter, but we discover them in the same way we discover personas. We determine the relevant personas and their goals in a process of successive refinement during our initial investigation of the problem domain.

Typically, we start with a reasonable approximation and quickly converge on a believable population of personas. Although this iterative process is similar to the iterative process used by software engineers during the implementation process, it is significantly different in one major respect. Iterating the design and its premises is quick and easy because we are working in paper and words. Iterating the implementation is slow and difficult because it requires code.



[< Day Day Up >](#)



Design for Just One Person

If you want to create a product that satisfies a broad audience of users, logic will tell you to make it as broad in its functionality as possible to accommodate the most people. Logic is wrong. You will have far greater success by designing for a single person.

Imagine that you are designing an automobile to please a wide spectrum of people. You could easily identify at least three subgroups: the soccer mom, the carpenter, and the junior executive. Mom wants a safe, stable vehicle with lots of space and big doors for hauling the kids, dogs, groceries, and other stuff. Joe, the carpenter, wants a rugged vehicle with all-wheel drive and abundant room for ladders, lumber, bags of cement, and tools. Seth, the young executive, wants a sporty car with a powerful engine, stiff suspension, convertible top, and only enough room for two.

The logical solution is shown in the illustration. It's a combination vehicle with a little bit of what each driver wants: a convertible van with room for kids and lumber. What a goofy, impossible car! Even if it could be built, no one would want it. The correct solution is to build a minivan for Mom, a pickup truck for Joe, and a sports car for Seth.



Making three different products in software is a lot easier than making them in steel. Whereas there really must be three vehicles, one software product can usually be configured to behave like three different ones (with the caveat that the job of configuring it must not be dumped in the user's lap).

Every time you extend the functionality to include another constituency, you put another speed bump of features and controls across every other user's road. You will find that the facilities that please some users will interfere with the enjoyment and satisfaction of others. Trying to please too many different points of view can kill an otherwise good product. However, when you narrow the design target to a single persona, nothing stands between that persona and complete happiness.

Robert Lutz, the chairman of Chrysler, says that 80% of people in focus groups hated the new Dodge Ram pickup. He went ahead with production and made it into a best-seller because the other 20% loved it. Having people love your product, even if it is only a minority, is how you succeed.

The broader a target you aim for, the more certainty you have of missing the bull's-eye. If you want to achieve a product-satisfaction level of 50%, you cannot do it by making a large population 50% happy with your product. You can only accomplish it by singling out 50% of the people and striving to make them 100% happy. It goes further than that. You can create an even bigger success by targeting 10% of your market and working to make them 100% ecstatic. It might seem counterintuitive, but designing for a single user is the most effective way to satisfy a broad



[< Day Day Up >](#)



The Elastic User

Although satisfying the user is our goal, the term "user" causes trouble. Its imprecision makes it as unusable as a chainsaw is for removing someone's appendix. We need a more precise design tool.

Whenever I hear the phrase "the user," it sounds to me like "the elastic user." The elastic user must bend and stretch and adapt to the needs of the moment. However, our goal is to design software that will bend and stretch and adapt to the user's needs. Programmers have written countless programs for this mythical elastic consumer, but he simply doesn't exist. When the programmer finds it convenient to dump the user into the Windows file system to find the information she needs, he defines the elastic user as an accommodating, computer-literate power user. Other times, when the programmer finds it convenient to step the user through a difficult process with a mindless wizard, he defines the elastic user as an obliging, naïve, first-time user. Designing for the elastic user gives the developer license to code as he pleases while paying lip service to "the user." Real users are not elastic.



Programmers have an expressive taxonomy for describing the construction of software. Good programmers don't toss around gross generalizations about different computers and systems. A programmer would never say, "This will run well on a computer." Which computer? Which model? What operating system? What peripherals? Similarly, designers must never be so vague as to say their program "is designed for the user," or that "it will be user friendly." If you hear someone speaking like that, it is likely a way to justify the imposition of his own self-interest instead.

In our design process, we never refer to "the user." Instead, we refer to a very specific individual: a persona.

Be Specific

The more specific we make our personas, the more effective they are as design tools. That's because personas lose elasticity as they become specific. For example, we don't just say that Emilee uses business software. We say that Emilee uses WordPerfect version 5.1 to write letters to Gramma. We don't just let Emilee drive to work. We give her a dark-blue 1991 Toyota Camry, with a gray plastic kid's seat strapped into the back and an ugly scrape on the rear bumper. We don't just let Emilee go to work. We give her a job as a new-accounts clerk in a beige cubicle at Global Airways in Memphis, Tennessee. This distinctive specificity is very powerful as a design and communications tool. Consequently, all of our personas are articulated with singular detail and precision.

As we isolate Emilee with specific, idiosyncratic detail, a remarkable thing happens: She becomes a real person in the minds of the designers and programmers. We can refer to her by name, and she assumes a tangible solidity that puts all of our design assumptions in perspective. As she loses her elasticity, we can identify her skills, her motivations, and what she wants to achieve. Armed with this knowledge, we can then examine her in light of the software's subject area to see whether she is really an archetypal user. After a designer has some experience, he can usually synthesize a valid persona on the first try.

Giving the persona a name is one of the most important parts of successfully defining one. A persona without a name is simply not useful. Without a name, a persona will never be a concrete individual in anyone's mind.

All things being equal, I will use people of different races, genders, nationalities, and colors as personas. However, I try not to play against type because this can confuse everyone. Stereotypical personas are more effective if the stereotyping lends more credence to the persona. My goal here is not to be politically correct but to get everyone to believe that my personas are real. If my persona is a nurse, I will use a woman rather than a man, not because there are no male nurses, but because the overwhelming majority of nurses are female. If the user is a computer technician, our persona will be Nick, a pimply faced 23-year-old former member of the high-school audio-visual club, rather than Hellene, a statuesque, 5-foot-11-inch beauty who went to Beverly Hills High. I am shooting for believability, not diversity.

To make each persona more real to everyone involved in the product creation, I like to put faces to the names and give each persona an image. I usually purchase, for a small fee, faces from stock photo libraries on the Web. Occasionally, I've used sketched caricatures. You can cut them out of magazines if you want.

A fully realized, thoroughly defined user persona is a powerful tool. Until the user is precisely defined, the programmer can always imagine himself as the user or allow the user to become elastic. A completely defined user persona is key to the suppression of any tendency for the developer to usurp or distort the user persona's role. Long before a single line of code is written, a well-defined user persona becomes a remarkably effective tool for interaction design.

Hypothetical

It is important not to confuse a precise user taxonomy with a real person. Real people are of great interest as raw data, but they are frequently useless—and often detrimental—to the design process. A fine wine helps a successful dinner; raw Cabernet Sauvignon grapes—tiny, tough-skinned, and seed-filled—would ruin it. Many scientists, with a reverence for the empirical, confuse real users with imaginary—but more valuable—design personas.

The other major problem with real users is that, being real, they have funny quirks and behavioral anomalies that interfere with the design process. These idiosyncrasies are not extensible across a population. Just because one user has a distaste for direct manipulation doesn't mean that all—or even a plurality of—users do. The same works in reverse, too. Our real user might be fully capable of getting over some cognitive bump in the interaction road, whereas the majority of other users cannot. The temptation to attribute such capabilities to all users because one very real human exhibits them is strong but must be avoided.

In particular, we see this from company presidents. For example, one president we have worked with hates typing and wants to do all of his work without a keyboard. He has issued a directive that all of his company's software will be controlled only from the mouse. It is reasonable to want to use just the mouse to control the software, but it is not reasonable to shut out all those users who are more comfortable with the keyboard. The president is not a very representative persona.



[< Day Day Up >](#)



Precision, Not Accuracy

As a design tool, it is more important that a persona be precise than accurate. That is, it is more important to define the persona in great and specific detail than that the persona be the precisely correct one. This truth is surprising because it is the antithesis of the goal of interaction design, in which accuracy is always more important than precision. The end result is to have a program that does the right thing, and we are willing to accept some friction in the system to obtain it.

In mechanical devices, moving linkages must be without slack. That is, a piston must move with minimal tolerances in its cylinder. If there were play in the linkage, the piston would quickly slap itself into self-destruction. It matters less that the piston is too short or too long for the cylinder than that it fits without looseness. The same is true of personas. It matters more that the persona is expressed with sufficient precision that it cannot wiggle under the pressure of development than it does that it be the right one.

For example, if we were designing the roll-aboard suitcase, for our persona we could use Gerd, a senior captain flying 747s from Vancouver to Frankfurt for Lufthansa.

On the other hand, we can't extend our persona to include any commercial flyer. Sonia, for example, attends classes at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Daytona Beach and will be a professional pilot when she graduates. She flies every day, but only in small, single-engine propeller planes, and never stays overnight away from home. From a luggage point of view, Sonia is an edge-case pilot. As soon as you blur the definition of Gerd to include Sonia, you make him approximate instead of exact. You get into endless, unproductive discussions about whether Sonia is or is not an airline pilot and what special features her baggage needs.

On the other hand, we could certainly design a roll-aboard by using Francine, a newly minted flight attendant on Reno Air, as a persona. She flies the length of California three times a day, serving drinks and handing out peanuts. Gerd and Francine are dramatically different personas, but their suitcase goals and needs are equivalent.

Programmers live and die by edge cases, and they will bring that awareness to the persona-selection process. They will argue that Sonia has a valid claim on persona-hood because she occupies a pilot seat. But whereas programming is defined by cases at the edge of the paradigm, design is defined at the center. If there is any doubt at all about a persona being very close to the center, that persona should be shunted out of consideration.

In the interest of being precise in the definition of personas, averages have to be ruled out. An average user is never actually average. The average person in my community has 2.3 children, but not a single person in my community actually has 2.3 children. A more useful representative would be Samuel, who has 2 children, or Wells, who has 3. Samuel is useful because he is a person. Yes, he is hypothetical, but he is specific. Our parent of 2.3 children cannot possibly be specific, because if he were, he wouldn't have that impossible average.

Average personas drain away the advantages of the specificity of precise personas. The great power of personas is their precision and specificity. To deal in aggregates saps that power.

Personas are the single most powerful design tool that we use. They are the foundation for all subsequent Goal-Directed design. Personas allow us to see the scope and nature of the design problem. They make it clear exactly what the user's goals are, so we can see what the product must do—and can get away with not doing. The precisely defined persona tells us exactly what the user's level of computer skill will be, so we don't get lost in



[< Day Day Up >](#)



A Realistic Look at Skill Levels

One of the really valuable contributions of personas is that they give discussions of skill levels a refreshing breath of realism. The scope of variation of users' skill levels is huge, and personas make that fact easy to see. The widely held, more-traditional model of user skill levels was shown as the euphemism pyramid in [Chapter 2](#), "Cognitive Friction." At the top of the pyramid are "power users," assumed to be perfectly knowledgeable about computers, but lacking the training to program. The central trapezoid is "computer-literate users," who are imagined to have a fundamental understanding of how computers work, but who don't avail themselves of all its coolest features. "Naïve users" fill the bottom of the pyramid, and they are estimated to be as dumb as a brick and completely clue free.

Here are some examples of personas that shatter the pyramid's false assumptions:

Rupak works as a network installer in Los Angeles. He works with computers all day every day and is very adept at getting them to function, but he doesn't really understand how they work. He survives through his reservoir of superstition and lore, his capacity for rote learning, and his endless patience.

Shannon is an accountant at a health spa in Tempe, Arizona. She is clueless about the Web, email, networks, the file system, and most everything else about computers, but she is an astonishing whiz with the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet program. She can whip out a new spreadsheet—complete with charts and graphs—that shows sales trends in no time at all.

Dexter is the vice president of business development at Steinhammer Video Productions in Hollywood. Dexter has a pager, two cell phones, a pocket computer, and a wireless modem stashed in the pockets of his double-breasted suit as he walks between sound stages. He is a master of technology, and he can solve any problem. His colleagues are always calling him over to help find lost files for them, but he is really too busy for those time-wasting exercises. Clint is holding on line three!

Roberto is a telemarketing representative for J. P. Stone, the mail-order merchant of rugged outdoor clothing. He sits in a carrel in a suburb of Madison, Wisconsin, wearing a telephone headset and using a PC to process phoned-in orders. Roberto doesn't know a thing about high technology or computers, but he is a steady, conscientious worker and has a wonderful ability to follow complex procedures without difficulty. After a few days of training, he has become one of J. P. Stone's most productive and efficient reps. He says, "I like the computer!"

Interestingly, neither Rupak, Shannon, Dexter, nor Roberto comes close to fitting into any of the slices of the pyramid. Even aside from its oppressive stereotyping power, the pyramid is remarkably unrepresentative of the population. Oversimplified models of markets don't help with design problems.



[< Day Day Up >](#)



Personas End Feature Debates

Surprisingly, another extremely important contribution of personas is their value as a communications tool. The cast of characters becomes a design taxonomy with great power to explain our design decisions. Even more, they become a spotlight, showing the programmers, marketers, and managers that our design decisions are obviously correct.

It is vitally important that everyone on the design team not only become familiar with the cast of characters, but that each persona become like a real person—like a fellow member of the development team. Programmers—with their mathematical nature—have a natural reluctance to think about specific user cases, preferring instead to think about general cases. This spills over into their thinking about users, and they are always imagining users in the aggregate, the average, or the generic. They much prefer to speak of "the user" than of Judy, Crandall, Luis, Estelle, Rajiv, and Fran.

Before personas are put to use, a typical conversation between a programmer and a manager engaged in interaction design would go something like this:

Programmer: "What if the user wants to print this out?"

Manager: "I don't think we really need to add printing in version one."

Programmer: "But someone might want to print it."

Manager: "Well, yes, but can't we delay putting printing in?"

The manager cannot win this discussion because she has not advanced an argument with the force of reason. Regardless of its truth, it is stated merely as her amorphous desire to do things differently, and the programmer's logic of what "might" happen is irresistible.

After the cast of characters is developed, we have our taxonomy for expressing precisely who needs what in the program. But programmers are hard to move, and a typical discussion with a client programmer early in the relationship goes like this:

Programmer: "What if the user wants to print this out?"

Interaction designer: "Rosemary isn't interested in printing things out."

Programmer: "But someone might want to print it."

Interaction designer: "But we are designing for Rosemary, not for 'someone.'"

At this point, we are at a standoff. The programmer is still using the term "user" and is still stuck in the world of possibility thinking. However, our invocation of the persona Rosemary is not an amorphous, unformed desire.

It's a User Persona, Not a Buyer Persona

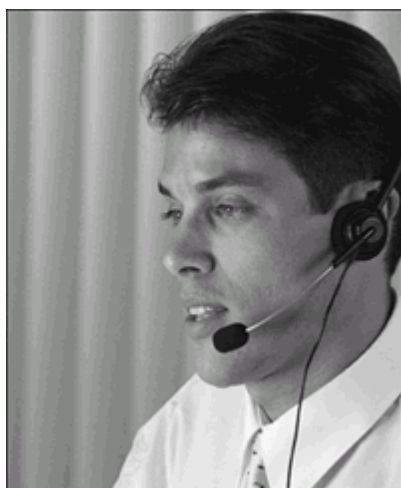
A frequent mistake is to design for someone who is close to the product but is not the actual user. Many products are designed for the writer who will review the product in consumer publications. In the information-technology business, the IT manager who purchases the product will rarely be the one to actually use it. Designing for the purchaser is a frequent mistake in the computer business.

While you cannot ignore the IT manager's needs, the IT manager will ultimately be happier if the product makes the real end user happy. After all, if the end user is happy and productive, it is a success for the IT manager. We have seen a recurring pattern in which clients ignore this advice and pander to these gatekeepers of technology. After these IT managers deploy the software to the real end users, they are besieged with complaints and discover that the users are disinclined to use the product that so beguiled the IT manager. They then turn on the software vendor, demanding that the interaction be made more satisfactory for the end user.

The Cast of Characters

We give every project its own cast of characters, which consists of anywhere from 3 to 12 unique personas. We don't design for all of them, but they are all useful for articulating the user population. Some are defined only to make it clear that we are not designing for them. In one project, for example, our project concerned a technical help-desk management system. We defined three people, two of them in-house help-desk technicians. Leo Pierce was a marketing assistant in the company's product division. He used a computer in his daily work and was occasionally a consumer of help-desk services. Alison Harding was a company technician whose job entailed going from office to office with her aluminum tool case, fixing technical problems for the likes of Leo. Ted van Buren was a help-desk representative who spent his day answering phone calls from people like Leo and dispatching Alison to Leo's office to fix his computer.

Our client, Remedy Inc, was revising its flagship product, Action Request System (ARS), and wanted to make it "easier to use." By developing these three personas (and a few others), we could clearly articulate what the goals of the project really were.



Ted was the main user of the current version of ARS, but he wasn't our primary persona. Although we would make operating the program easier for Ted, we would have failed in our job if that was all we accomplished. Instead, we were making the help-desk system directly accessible to Leo. Formerly, if Leo needed help, he had to telephone Ted, who would dispatch Alison. The full cast of characters articulated very clearly who the players were. This let us communicate to all the engineers that our goal could only be achieved if Leo, the low-tech marketing wonk, could use the ARS system on his own computer to summon technical help without Ted's intervention.



As soon as we could explain this situation in terms of personas, the team members immediately understood that they needed to deemphasize Ted and concentrate all of their efforts on Leo. Ted occupies a role we call a negative persona. His existence helps us to understand whom we are not designing for.





[< Day Day Up >](#)



Primary Personas

Every cast of characters has at least one primary persona. The primary persona is the individual who is the main focus of the design. To be primary, a persona is someone who must be satisfied but who cannot be satisfied with an interface designed for any other persona. An interface always exists for a primary persona. In the Remedy ARS example, Leo Pierce was the primary persona.

Identifying the primary persona or personas is a vital step in the development of a cast of characters. In my experience, each primary persona requires a separate and unique interface. If we identify two primary personas, we will end up designing two interfaces. If we identify three primary personas, we will end up designing three interfaces. If we identify four primary personas, we know that we have a big problem.

If we find more than three primary personas, it means that our problem set is too large and that we are trying to accomplish too much at one time. We create personas to narrow down the spectrum of users for whom we design. It follows that if the number of personas grows too much, we are defeating the purpose of creating personas in the first place.

The cast of characters is not just a convenient phrase; it becomes a physical—as well as logical—design tool. After winnowing down the population, we typically end up with anywhere from three to seven useful personas. We assemble all of them on a single sheet of paper containing their names, pictures, job descriptions, goals, and often telltale quotes. This one-page document becomes a ubiquitous part of our process. We print out copies of the cast of characters and distribute it at every meeting, whether or not the client is present. Every designer at all of our brainstorming meetings and all of our detailed design meetings has a cast-of-characters document in front of him at all times. When clients attend these meetings, extra copies are printed and presented to them. Every deliverable document that we create and give to our clients has a cast-of-characters page in it. Our goal is to make the personas unavoidable. They are so important that we cram them down everyone's throat.

It does no good to have good design and not express it in terms of the user personas. It is simply too easy to slip back into speaking about "the user" and lose the hard-won focus on specific archetypal users.



[< Day Day Up >](#)



Case Study: Sony Trans Com's P@ssport

In 1997, Sony Trans Com approached us with a remarkable design problem. Sony Trans Com is Sony Corporation's Irvine, California, division, responsible for the design and manufacture of in-flight entertainment (IFE) systems. In-flight entertainment—movies, TV shows, and video games in commercial aircraft—is a large and lucrative business. Sony Trans Com had developed a new generation of technology that brought a new level of capability to airline passengers. The most impressive capability of the new system, called P@ssport, was true video-on-demand (VOD). VOD lets Tricia in seat 23A begin watching *When Harry Met Sally* 10 minutes after takeoff, and it lets Anna in seat 16C start the same movie 45 minutes later—and either passenger can pause or rewind the show without affecting the other.

P@ssport pushed the envelope of IFE well beyond the current technical state of the art. Each seat back contained a video screen and a Pentium computer running Windows 95. In the front of the plane was a powerful array of computers with copious memory for content. A fiber-optic cable connected each seat to the array, with connector boxes placed every few rows throughout the plane, making the system blindingly fast and breathtakingly powerful.



Sony had worked on this system for months before it asked us to help design the interaction. Although the engineers were making good progress, their designers were at an impasse. Just about anybody could occupy an airline seat, so they were trying to accommodate everyone from the total computer novice to the computer expert. They had no idea how to please all those constituencies. Neither did we, but we had our powerful design techniques, including personas, and were confident that we could solve the problem.

The Conventional Solution

Sony Trans Com had already designed and built a prototype of the P@ssport system with a conventional interface. It was very consistent with the program's internal structure—that is, it was very implementation model. Basically, it consisted of a deep hierarchical tree of screens through which the user had to navigate, making decisions at each screen. The evident shortcomings of this prototype are what prompted Sony to approach me.

Each screen represented another layer in the hierarchy, and it required six of them to examine each movie selection.



Chapter 10. Designing for Power

Goal-Directed design starts with the definition of user personas and their goals. In the last chapter, I described personas at length. In this chapter, I will give similar treatment to goals, showing how they can be identified and put to use as a potent design tool. The two are inseparable, like the obverse sides of a coin. A persona exists to achieve his goals, and the goals exist to give meaning to a persona.

Goals Are the Reason Why We Perform Tasks

Before the digital age confronted us with cognitive friction, design was mostly an aesthetic thing, and one person's opinion on the quality of a given design was as good as anyone else's. Cognitive friction comes with interaction, and interaction is only necessary if there is a purpose, a goal. In this new light, the nature of design changes. The aesthetic component isn't lessened in any way. It is merely diluted by the larger demands of achieving the user's goals. This means that, unlike in earlier times, the quality of design isn't so much a matter of opinion and is much more amenable to systematic analysis. In other words, in the bright light of a user's goals, we can learn quite directly what design would suit the purpose, regardless of anyone's opinion or, for that matter, of aesthetic quality.

"Good interaction design" has meaning only in the context of a person actually using it for some purpose. You cannot have purposes without people. The two are inseparable. That is why the two key elements of our design process are goals and personas—purposes and people.

What's more, the most important goals are personal ones, held only by the individual. Some real person is interacting with your product, not some abstract corporation, so you must regard people's personal goals as higher than the corporation's. Your users will do their best to achieve the business's goals, but only after their own personal ones are achieved. The most important personal goal is to retain one's dignity: to not feel stupid.

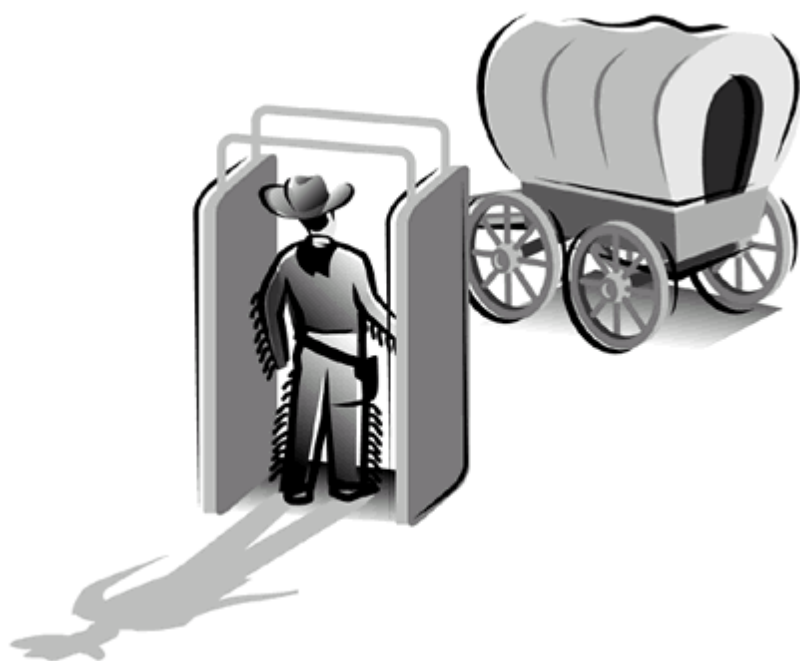
The essence of good interaction design is to devise interactions that let users achieve their practical goals without violating their personal goals.

Tasks Are Not Goals

Goals are not the same things as tasks. A goal is an end condition, whereas a task is an intermediate process needed to achieve the goal. It is very important not to confuse tasks with goals, but it is easy to mix them up.

If my goal is to laze in the hammock reading the Sunday paper, I first have to mow the lawn. My task is mowing; my goal is resting. If I could recruit someone else to mow the lawn, I could achieve my goal without having to do the mowing.

There is an easy way to tell the difference between tasks and goals. Tasks change as technology changes, but goals have the pleasant property of remaining very stable. For example, to travel from St. Louis to San Francisco, my goals are speed, comfort, and safety. Heading for the California gold fields in 1850, I would have made the journey in my new, high-tech Conestoga wagon. In the interest of safety, I would have brought my Winchester rifle. Heading from St. Louis to the Silicon Valley in 1999, I would make the journey in a new, high-tech Boeing 777. In the interest of safety, I would leave my Winchester rifle at home. My goals remain unchanged, but the tasks have so changed with the technology that they are in direct opposition.



This same pattern of directly opposing goals and tasks is easy to find. When the president desires peace overseas, he sends troops armed with guns, planes, and bombs. His task is war. His goal is peace. When a corporate lawyer wants to avoid conflict with a colleague, she argues with him over clauses in the contract. Her goal is accord, but her task is argument.

The goal is a steady thing. The tasks are transient. That is one reason why designing for tasks doesn't always suit, but designing for goals always does.

Programmers Do Task-Directed Design

Too many developers approach design by asking, "What are the tasks?" This may get the job done, but it won't come close to producing the best solution possible, and it won't satisfy the user at all. Designing from tasks instead of goals is one of the main causes of frustrating and ineffective interaction. Asking, "What are the user's goals?" lets us see through the confusion and create more appropriate and satisfactory designs.

Goal-Directed Design

When interaction designers analyze goals to solve problems, they typically find very different—and much better—solutions.

Imagine Jennifer, an office manager in a small company. Her goal is to make her office run smoothly. Of course, she doesn't want to feel stupid or make mistakes, either. Toward those ends, she must make her computer network run smoothly. She must set it up properly, monitor its performance, and modify its configuration periodically to maintain its peak performance. In Jennifer's mind, her job is a seamless blending of these three tasks, contributing to her one goal of smooth running. From Jennifer's point of view, there is really no difference among the three tasks. She doesn't sense a big difference between initial setup and subsequent reconfiguration of the network.

Imagine Clancy, a software engineer, who must write the software that Jennifer uses. In Clancy's Homo logicus mind, Jennifer's software performs three tasks—three functions—and each will be implemented in a different chunk of software. It seems natural to Clancy that each function also has its own chunk of interface. It's only logical. Clancy is considering an interface with a hierarchical list of system components in the left-side pane, and—when a component in that list is selected—its details are shown in the right-side pane. This interface has the advantage of being approved by Microsoft, and it makes sense to programmers. The user will have to click on lots of system components to find out what is happening in the system, but all the necessary information is there for the asking.

Imagine Wayne, an interaction designer, who is charged with making both Jennifer and Clancy happy. In Wayne's designing mind, he knows that the software must represent itself to Jennifer in a way that most closely approximates her goals while ensuring that all of the necessary functions are present. (Jennifer is a primary persona.) Wayne also knows that he cannot specify anything that would create unreasonable or impossible effort for Clancy.

Wayne sees that Jennifer has only a single goal—smooth running—so he designs the interface so Jennifer can see at a glance that things are running smoothly. If some bottleneck occurs, Jennifer's interface clearly shows that one trouble spot in a prominent, visual way and lets her investigate and fix the problem by directly interacting with the onscreen representation of the troubled area. Wayne knows that—to Jennifer—there is no difference between monitoring the system and modifying it, and the interface reflects that perception. The only time that Jennifer ever has to ask about a component in her system is when she has already learned that there is a good reason for her to do so.

From Clancy's point of view, the code to show the performance of a component and the code to configure that component are two separate procedures. They have no connection in task-think. But in goal-think, they are intimately bound. Jennifer would never choose to reconfigure a component unless she were first apprised of a reason to reconfigure it by seeing a reduction in its performance. Further, Jennifer would always want to carefully monitor that component's performance level while she reconfigured it.

Designing for the user persona's goals clearly shows us an alternative way to think about delivering functionality. It frequently provides dramatically better ways to solve prosaic design problems. Here are some examples.

Goal-Directed Television News

On one of our projects, a client was working on an ensemble of applications that supported the creation of a television news show. From the engineer's task viewpoint, news shows are built the way bridges are built: one piece at a time. But we determined that the newscaster's goal wasn't to "build" a news show over time, but rather, it was to always have a news show that got better over time. Each news show is really a fluid and organic beast that begins



[< Day Day Up >](#)





[< Day Day Up >](#)



Personal and Practical Goals

Earlier in this chapter, I stated that the essence of good interaction design is to let users achieve their practical goals without violating their personal goals. Homo logicus, and their apologists, usually find it embarrassing to look too closely at personal goals, so they avoid it. However, the distinction between personal goals and practical goals is critical to success.

I'll use my colleague Ted as an example. He just sent me email complaining about his new television set. He spent an unpleasant hour reading the manual so he could properly set all of the TV's various parameters. He suggested to me that the TV should have provided an on-screen dialog box to step him through the procedure instead of forcing him to read the manual. His solution is fine as far as it goes, but—he is not a designer—he naturally tackled the problem the old mechanical-age way: by focusing on tasks. The on-screen dialogs would simplify the task of setting parameters, but—by examining his goals instead—we use a different approach, which gives us a remarkably better solution.

We start by assessing Ted's goals, and it's always best to start at the top. Obviously, we know that Ted wants to watch TV. He just paid lots of money for a new set, so just as obviously, he wants to be able to take advantage of all of the set's nifty new features. These practical goals are directly related to the task of setting up a new TV set.

But we must never forget that Ted is a person and, as such, he has strong personal feelings that can also be expressed as goals. Ted does not want his new possession to humiliate him; he does not want to be made to feel stupid. Ted does not want to make mistakes. He wants to have a feeling of accomplishment, the sooner the better. He wants to have some fun. These personal goals are vital. From an interaction designer's point of view, they are more important than Ted's practical goals.

Ted's complaint wasn't that he couldn't watch his new TV, or that he paid too much for it, or that he couldn't take advantage of all of those nifty new features. He complained because the TV set made him feel stupid. He didn't say it using those exact words because just saying "It made me feel stupid" makes one feel stupid, but that was clearly his meaning. While interacting with it, he accidentally made mistakes. It took him more than an hour after he plugged it in to have any sense of accomplishment. The parameter-setting process wasn't fun.

While meeting Ted's practical goals, the product's interaction violated Ted's most important personal goals. The specific qualities that make Ted's new TV set a classic example of a new, high-tech, dancing bearware product are not the way it achieves his practical goals, but the way it fails to achieve his personal goals.

Armed with the knowledge that Ted's personal goals are sacred, here's how we would design a very different interface for the TV. First, to quickly give him a sense of accomplishment, we must make certain that the TV works well the instant it is plugged in. It doesn't have to do everything, but it has to do something and do it well. Clearly, putting Ted through the parameter-setting process first fails this instant-gratification test. The software engineers see all parameters as equal, so they lump them together. But we can easily assume some parameter settings, letting the TV do the basic stuff, and delay the need for other, advanced feature parameters until later. We have to unlump the parameters. This is not a technical problem, just a simple reshuffling of interaction priorities.

Our design now fits the definition of a success: Ted could take the TV out of its box, plug it into the wall, and immediately relax in his easy chair to channel surf contentedly, having achieved most of his practical goals without violating any of his personal goals.



[< Day Day Up >](#)



Personal Goals

Let's look at goals in more detail. I've already introduced two types of goals—personal and practical—but there are also corporate and false goals. Personal goals are simple, universal and, well, personal. Paradoxically, this makes them difficult for many people to talk about, especially in the context of impersonal business.

PERSONAL GOALS

Not feel stupid

Not make mistakes

Get an adequate amount of work done

Have fun (or at least not be too bored)

Apologists, in general, are very troubled with "not feel stupid." They are proud, intelligent people, and they thrive on confronting complex situations and mastering them. Hmm, sounds a lot like high-tech, Silicon Valley entrepreneurs to me. For example, as a courtesy, after writing down Ted's new-TV story, I sent it to him (he's an accomplished, independent, high-tech entrepreneur), and he replied:

I wouldn't say I'm made to feel stupid grappling with the 40-page manual. It's more a situation of wanting to be spared the aggravation of spending time on unwanted tasks—indeed, on learning things that might have to be relearned again later. (Will a power outage, for example, require reprogramming, with reference to the manual again?)

Ted is an apologist. To even say the S-word impugns his ability to master the TV set in spite of its difficulty. He'll admit to aggravation, time wasting, or needless redundancy, but not to even the appearance of stupidity, which is why I am reluctant to substitute another word. I use "stupid" precisely because it is so difficult for competent, intelligent, hard-charging, type-A, Silicon Valley software gurus to say it. As they do say, the first step to fixing the problem is admitting that one exists.

Personal goals are always true and operate to varying extents for everyone. Personal goals always take precedence over any other goals, although—precisely because they are personal—they are rarely discussed. When software makes users feel stupid, their self-esteem droops and their effectiveness plummets, regardless of their other goals. Any system that violates personal goals will ultimately fail, regardless of how well it achieves other goals.

Corporate Goals

Businesses have their own requirements for software, and they are as high level as the personal goals of the individual. "To increase our profit" is pretty fundamental to the board of directors or the stockholders. The designer uses these goals to stay focused on the bigger issues and to avoid getting distracted by tasks or other false goals.

CORPORATE GOALS

Increase our profit

Increase our market share

Defeat our competition

Hire more people

Offer more products or services

Go public

Psychologists who study the workplace have a term, hygienic factors, which Saul Gellerman^[1] defines as "prerequisites for effective motivation but powerless to motivate by themselves." The lights in your office, for example, are hygienic factors. You don't go to work because the lights are nice, but if there were no lights at all, you wouldn't bother showing up.

[1] Saul W. Gellerman, Motivation and Productivity; Amacom, New York, 1963, ISBN 0-8144-5084-9.

I have adapted this term as hygienic goals, which I define as goals prerequisite for effective functioning but powerless to motivate by themselves. All of the corporate and practical goals shown in the list are hygienic. From the corporation's point of view they are important goals, but the corporation isn't doing the work; people are, and their personal goals are dominant.

There is a close parallel between corporate and personal goals: Both are the highest expressions of goals for their respective owners. Neither can be slighted. Software that fails to achieve either one will fail.

Practical Goals

Practical goals bridge the gap between the objectives of the company and the objectives of the individual user. The corporation wants everyone working hard to maximize the corporate bottom line. The practical goal of handling the client's demands connects the corporate goal of higher profits with the user's personal goal of being productive.

PRACTICAL GOALS

Avoid meetings

Handle the client's demands

Record the client's order

Create a numerical model of the business

Practical goals have more appeal than the touchy-feely personal goals, especially to sober businesspeople and nerdy programmers. True to their nature, they create software that—although it admirably fulfills the practical goals—fails utterly to satisfy the individual user. A task-based interface can provoke users to make mistakes and obstruct their ability to be personally productive, making them feel bad about themselves and the software.

Of course your software has to have the features built into it to accomplish the goals of the business. The user must perform the tasks necessary to handle clients' demands and process orders, but these are only hygienic, because offering these features without addressing the user's personal goals will fail. If the user fails to achieve her own personal goals, she cannot effectively achieve the company's. It is a simple fact of human nature that happy, satisfied workers are more effective ones. This is truer than ever in the modern information economy, in which the true assets of a company are human and not mechanical. On the other hand, if your software ignores practical goals and serves only the user's goals, you will have just designed a computer game.

False Goals

Most of the software-based products we use every day are created with false goals in mind. Many of these goals ease the task of software creation, which is a programmer's goal, and this is why they get promoted at the expense of the software's user. Other false goals have to do with tasks, features, and tools. They are means to ends, but not ends in themselves, and goals are always ends.

FALSE GOALS

Save memory

Save keystrokes

Run in a browser

Be easy to learn

Safeguard data integrity

Speed up data entry

Increase program-execution efficiency

Use cool technology or features

Increase graphic beauty

Maintain consistency across platforms

A target like "safeguarding data integrity" isn't a goal for a personal mailing-list program the same way it might be for a program that calculates shuttle orbits. A target like "saving memory" isn't very important for personal-computer database-query programs because downloads are small and computers are big. Even a target like "being easy to learn" isn't always a primary goal. For example, a fighter pilot who found it easy to learn to use her weapons systems, but then found them slow and cumbersome to operate, would be at a distinct disadvantage in an aerial dogfight. Her goal is to emerge from combat victorious, not to have an easy time in flight instruction.

Since the invention of the microprocessor, the computer revolution has surfed a wave of new technology. Any company that ignores new technical ideas is doomed. But don't confuse these techniques with goals. It might be a software company's task to use new technology, but it is never a user's goal to do so. As a user, I don't care if I get my job done with hierarchical databases, relational databases, object-oriented databases, flat-file systems, or black



[< Day Day Up >](#)



Computers Are Human, Too

Clifford Nass and Byron Reeves, two professors at Stanford University, study people's responses to computers. By cleverly repurposing classic experiments in social psychology, they observed some remarkable behavior. They have published their findings in a book entitled *The Media Equation*.^[2] They have demonstrated conclusively that humans react to computers in the same way that they react to other humans.

[2] Byron Reeves and Clifford Nass, *The Media Equation; How People Treat Computers, Television, and New Media Like Real People and Places*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, ISBN 1-57586-052-X.

Nass and Reeves say that "people are not evolved to twentieth-century technology," and that "modern media now engage old brains . Consequently, any medium that is close enough will get human treatment, even though people know it's foolish and even though they likely will deny it afterward." To our human minds, computers behave less like rocks and trees than they do like humans, so we unconsciously treat them like people, even when we "believe it is not reasonable to do so."

In other words, humans have special instincts that tell them how to behave around other sentient beings, and as soon as any object exhibits sufficient cognitive friction, those instincts kick in and we react as though we were interacting with another sentient human being. This reaction is unconscious and unavoidable, and it applies to everyone. With deep and amusing irony, Nass and Reeves used as test subjects many computer-science grad students skilled enough to have coded up the test programs themselves. These subjects were highly educated, mature, and rational individuals, and they all strongly denied being emotionally affected by cognitive friction, even though the objective evidence was incontrovertible.

Harvard cognitive neuroscientist Steven Pinker corroborates this thesis in his remarkable book, *How the Mind Works*. He says, "People hold many beliefs that are at odds with their experience but were true in the environment in which we evolved, and they pursue goals that subvert their own well-being but were adaptive in that environment."^[3]

[3] Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, W.W. Norton & Company, 1997, ISBN 0-393-04535-8. I absolutely love this wonderful, eye-opening, literate, amusing, readable book.



[< Day Day Up >](#)



Designing for Politeness

One important implication of the research is remarkably profound: If we want users to like our software, we should design it to behave like a likeable person. If we want users to be productive with our software, we should design it to behave like a good human work mate. Simple, huh?

Nass and Reeves say that software should be "polite" because this is a universal human behavioral trait. (Which actions are considered polite might vary from culture to culture, but the trait is present in all cultures.) Our high-cognitive-friction products should follow this simple lead and also be polite. Many high-tech products interpret politeness to mean that it's okay to behave rudely as long as they say "please" and "thank you," but that is emphatically not what politeness is all about.



If the software is stingy with information, obscures its process, forces the user to hunt around for common functions, and is quick to blame the user for its own failings, the user will dislike the software and have an unpleasant experience. This will happen regardless of "please" and "thank you"—regardless, too, of how cute, representational, visually metaphoric, content-filled, or anthropomorphic the software is.

On the other hand, if the interaction is respectful, generous, and helpful, the user will like the software and have a pleasant experience. Again, this will happen regardless of the composition of the interface; a green-screen command-line interface will be well liked if it can deliver on these other points.

What Is Polite?

What exactly does it mean for software to be friendly or polite? What does it mean for software to behave more like humans? Used-car salesmen wear handsome clothes, smile broadly, and are filled with impressive information, but does that make them likeable? Humans are error prone, slow, and impulsive, but it doesn't follow that software with those traits is good. Human beings have many other qualities that are present only conditionally but that make them well suited to the service role. Software is always in the service role. [\[4\]](#)

[4] Games are a notable exception to this rule. Many games just wouldn't be fun unless facts were hidden, processes were obscured, and goals were unclear.

Most good software engineers are at a disadvantage in the politeness realm. Robert X. Cringely says that programmers



[< Day Day Up >](#)



What Makes Software Polite?

Humans have many wonderful characteristics that make them "polite" but whose definitions are fuzzy and imprecise. Nass and Reeves say that the "four basic principles that constitute the rules for polite interaction [are] quality, quantity, relevance, and clarity." Those are good but a little too vague to be helpful. Here is my list of what improves the quality of interaction, either with a human or a high-tech, software-based product rich in cognitive friction.

Polite software is interested in me

Polite software is deferential to me

Polite software is forthcoming

Polite software has common sense

Polite software anticipates my needs

Polite software is responsive

Polite software is taciturn about its personal problems

Polite software is well informed

Polite software is perceptive

Polite software is self-confident

Polite software stays focused

Polite software is fudgable

Polite software gives instant gratification

Polite software is trustworthy

Polite Software Is Interested in Me

A friend would ask about me and be interested in who I am and what I like. He would remember my likes and



[< Day Day Up >](#)

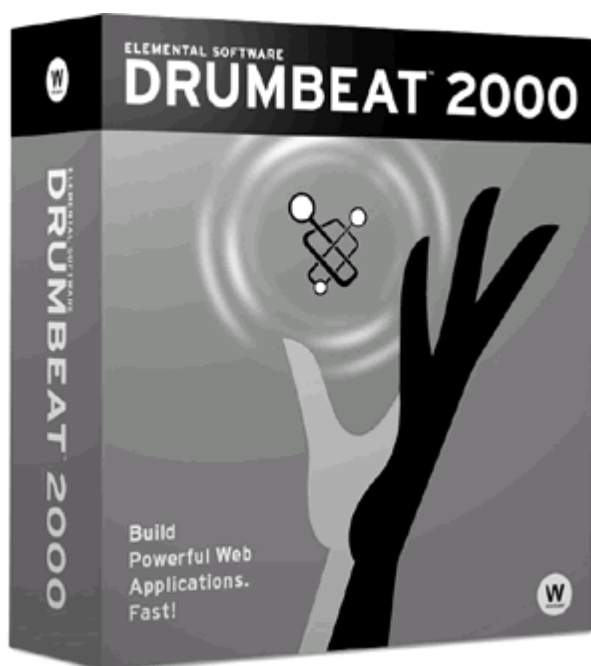


Case Study: Elemental Drumbeat

One of our more interesting design projects was for a small start-up company in San Diego named Elemental Software. Its product, Drumbeat, is an authoring tool for creating dynamic, database-backed Web sites.

The cast of characters we developed for Elemental was indispensable, even though it consisted of only two very simply defined personas lacking even last names. [\[6\]](#) By creating these two personas and understanding their goals, we gained radical insight that changed the entire design philosophy of the product.

[6] Actually, the full cast of characters had more than two personas, but Betsy and Ernie stole the show.



From the beginning, Elemental had set its sights high. Elemental wanted to create a program that was far more powerful than any other competitor's. It also wanted to make its program easier to use than any other. These goals were not at all incompatible. Most of the trouble we had arose because Elemental had acquired an existing product from another company, and we had to build on top of an existing code base. There was constant confusion between what we wanted and what we already had.

The existing product had some powerful features, but it had been constructed with a muddy user vision. None of the features was easy to use, and the effect was a not-very-powerful product. Ed Forman, the new VP of development, took a gamble by bringing in Cooper Interaction Design. He was himself new enough that he hadn't fully earned the trust of his new programming staff, and our presence could have ignited revolution. Ed was an excellent champion, however, and he gave us considerable time with his team to get to know them and to let them hear about our methods.

The Investigation

For our investigation, we interviewed several people, primarily Webmasters. As we proceeded, we saw a clear pattern emerge. The world of Web authoring was neatly divided into two camps. Of course, we defined a representative persona for each camp, and these two became the keys that unlocked the entire Drumbeat puzzle, though not in the way we anticipated.

Chapter 11. Designing for People

In previous chapters, I described personas and emphasized the importance of goals over tasks. Only after we know our user personas and their goals can we begin to examine tasks with confidence that they won't distort the design process. We call our tool for incorporating tasks scenarios. A scenario is a concise description of a persona using a software-based product to achieve a goal. In this chapter, I'll describe scenarios in more detail, along with a few other useful design tools. I'll follow with a case study of how some of these tools, particularly scenarios, work in the real world.

Scenarios

As the design work becomes more detailed, scenarios become more and more effective. We play our personas through these scenarios, like actors reading a script, to test the validity of our design and our assumptions. Not surprisingly, our scenario process has been described as very like method acting, in which the actor must inhabit the character, knowing what he knows and feeling his feelings. We try to think the way our persona thinks. We forget our own education, ability, training, and tools, and imagine ourselves as having his background instead. Because we are designers and not actors, this can be difficult without some specific context and detail, so scenarios are very useful. Knowing that Betsy is trying to create a Web site for an insurance company, for example, we can more easily inhabit her character. This is not as strange as it might sound. After all, programmers inhabit the personalities of their computers. It is common for a programmer to describe the actions of the computer in the first person—to say, "I access the database, then I store the records in my cache." Although she says "I," she is not doing a thing: The computer is doing the work, but by assuming the character of the computer, she can more easily sympathize with the system's needs as she codes.

Scenarios are constructed from the information gathered during our initial investigation phase. Typically, in both interviews and direct observation of users, we learn a lot about their tasks. Goals are stable and permanent, but tasks are fluid, changeable, and often unnecessary in computerized systems. As we develop scenarios, we need to seek out and eliminate tasks whose only justification is historical.

Effective scenarios need to be complete in breadth more than in depth. In other words, it is more important that the scenario is described from start to finish than that it cover each step in exhaustive detail.

It is important to develop only those scenarios that will further the design effort and not to get lost in edge cases. We develop only two types of scenarios, although there might be more than one of each kind. The scenario types are daily use and necessary use.

Daily-Use Scenarios

Daily-use scenarios are the most useful and important. These are the main actions that the user will perform, typically with the greatest frequency. In a bug-tracking application, for example, looking up bugs and filling out newly reported bug forms are typical daily-use scenarios. Any tech-support person performs these two tasks numerous times each day.

In general, most users only have a very limited repertoire of daily-use scenarios. One or two is typical. More than three is rare.

Daily-use scenarios need the most robust interaction support. New users must master them quickly, so they need to be supported by good, built-in pedagogy. That is, instructions for use should be written right on the program. However, because the programs are used so often, no users will remain dependent on that pedagogy for long. They will rapidly demand shortcuts. In addition, as users become very experienced, they will want to customize daily-use interaction so that it conforms to their individual work styles and preferences.

Necessary-Use Scenarios

Necessary-use scenarios include all actions that must be performed, but that are not performed frequently. Purging databases and making exceptional requests might fall into this category. Necessary-use interactions also demand robust pedagogy. However, the user won't ever graduate from them to parallel interaction idioms such as keyboard equivalents. Because of the infrequent use, any user will be willing to conform to the program's way of doing things and won't require customization. This excuses the development team from providing the same level of finish that a daily-use scenario would require. It is like the difference between the luxurious finish on the inside of your new Jaguar and the rough metal finish of the car's engine compartment.

Although most products have a small repertoire of necessary-use scenarios, it will typically be larger than the set of daily-use scenarios.

Edge-Case Scenario

Of course, there is a third type of scenario: the edge case. Programmers will naturally emphasize edge cases, but they can largely be ignored during the product's design. This doesn't mean that the function can be omitted from the program, but it does mean that the interaction needed for them can be designed roughly and pushed way into the background of the interface. Although the code may succeed or fail in its ability to handle edge cases, the product will succeed or fail in its ability to handle daily use and necessary cases.

If a user performs a task frequently, its interaction must be well crafted. Likewise, if a task is necessary but performed infrequently, its interaction, although designed with different objectives, must still be well designed. Tasks that are neither necessary nor frequent simply don't require careful design. Time and money are never available in unlimited quantities, so this is the place to conserve our resources safely and concentrate them where they do the most good. We must provide for all scenarios, but we need to design only for those that are important or that will occur frequently.

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Personas, goals, and scenarios are the heavy hitters in our design corner. Before moving on to a scenario case study, I'd like to mention a few other useful design concepts: inflecting the interface, perpetual intermediates, vocabulary, brainstorming, and lateral thinking.

Inflecting the Interface

You can always make an interaction easier, simply by removing functions and making the product less powerful. Occasionally that is an appropriate tactic, but not usually. The more-difficult design problem demands ease of use without sacrificing functions and power. This is difficult to achieve, but by no means impossible. All it requires is a technique I call inflecting the interface.

Even though a program must deliver lots of functions, not all of them are needed everywhere, by all users, or at all times. For any given use scenario, the user persona will need to use only a small subset of controls and data, although that set might change over time or with the particular problem under study. The interface can be simplified dramatically by placing the controls and data needed for the daily-use scenarios prominently in the interface and moving all others to secondary locations, out of normal sight.

The interfaces of most big programs are offered up like a Chinese-restaurant menu in which hundreds of choices cover page after page. This may be desirable for choosing dinner, but it just gets in the way in high-tech products.

In Microsoft Word, for example, the default toolbar has icons for opening, closing, and printing the current document. These tasks are performed with reasonable frequency, and their presence is appropriate. However, adjacent to them are icons for generating a schematic map of the document and for inserting spreadsheets. Microsoft put those icons in the prime space so we will appreciate how powerful Word is. Unfortunately, most users never need those functions, and if they do, they don't need them on a regular basis. They simply do not belong on the toolbar, an interface idiom primarily for frequently used functions.



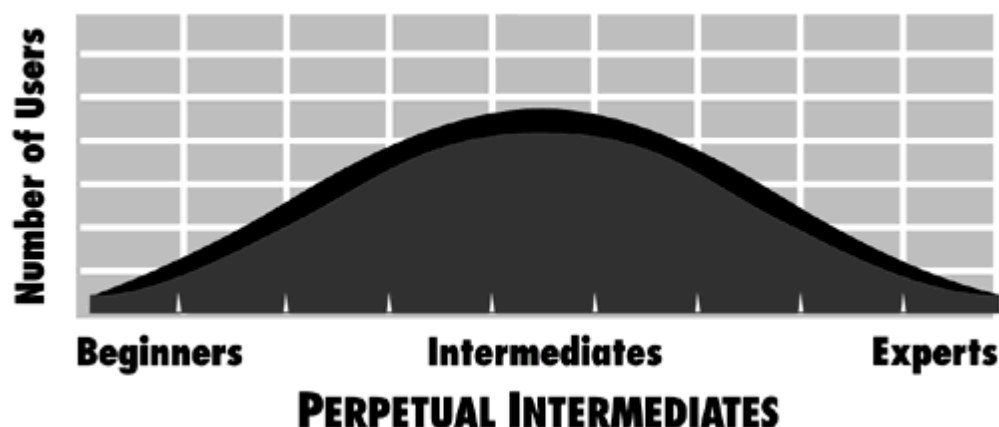
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Perpetual Intermediates

Typically, our most powerful tools help us to understand, visualize, and inhabit the personalities of our users. One mental model that we use routinely is called perpetual intermediates. Most users are neither beginners nor experts; instead they are perpetual intermediates. Remember Rupak, Shannon, Dexter, and Roberto from the discussion of skill levels in [Chapter 9](#)? Although their backgrounds vary widely, all four of them are perpetual intermediates.

The experience of people using interactive systems—as in most things—tends to follow the classic bell curve of statistical distribution. For any silicon-based product, if we graph the number of users against their particular skill levels, there will be a few beginners on the left side, a few experts on the right, and a preponderance of intermediate users in the center.



But statistics don't tell the whole story. This is a snapshot frozen in time, and although most people—the intermediates—tend to stay in that category for a long time, the people on the extreme ends of the curve—the beginners and experts—are always changing. The difficulty of maintaining a high level of expertise means that experts come and go rapidly. Beginners, on the left side of the curve, change even more rapidly.

Although everybody spends some minimum time as a beginner, nobody remains in that state for long. That's because nobody likes to be a beginner, and it is never a goal. People don't like to be incompetent, and beginners—by definition—are incompetent. Conversely, learning and improving is natural, rewarding, and lots of fun, so beginners become intermediates very quickly. For example, it's fun to learn tennis, but those first few hours or days, when you can't return shots and are hitting balls over the fence, are frustrating. After you have learned basic racket control and aren't spending all of your time chasing lost balls, you really move forward. That state of beginnerhood is plainly not fun to be in, and everybody quickly passes through it to some semblance of intermediate adequacy. If, after a few days, you still find yourself whacking balls around the tennis court at random, you will abandon tennis and take up fly-fishing or stamp collecting.

The occupants of the beginner end of the curve will either migrate into the center bulge of intermediates, or they will drop off the graph altogether and find some activity in which they can migrate into intermediacy. However, the population of the graph's center is very stable. When people achieve an adequate level of experience and ability, they generally stay there forever. Particularly with high-cognitive-friction products, users take no joy in learning them, so they learn just the minimum and then stop. Only Homo logicus find learning complex systems to be fun.

Now let's contrast our bell curve with the way that software is written. All programmers qualify as experts because they have to explore every obscure case and unlikely situation to create program code to handle them. Their natural tendency to design self-referentially means that they write implementation-model code that gives every possible option equal emphasis in the interaction. If you graph the suitability of use of the typical implementation-model product, it rises high on the right side for experts. The intermediate users don't get much attention.



[< Day Day Up >](#)





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Vocabulary

During the design process, and particularly during brainstorming, I place a unique emphasis on creating and using a detailed and precise vocabulary. I believe that the technical nuance of designing interactive products is so important that a single misconstrued word can derail an entire project. I have seen different members of a client team use common words such as button or dialog for dramatically different things. I recall a client meeting in which 10 highly paid professionals wrangled for two hours over a disagreement that existed only because the various parties knew different definitions for the same words.

If you don't have words to express an idea, it is nearly impossible to communicate it. Certainly it is impossible to analyze and decompose the idea at a level of technical detail sufficient to implement it in C# or Java.

When the words are fuzzy, the programmers reflexively retreat to the most precise method of articulation available: source code. Although there is nothing more precise than code, there is also nothing more permanent or resistant to change. So the situation frequently crops up in which nomenclature confusion drives programmers to begin coding prematurely, and that code becomes the de facto design, regardless of its appropriateness or correctness.

When there are insufficient or imprecisely defined terms, people's thinking grows more conservative. Without a robust and precise set of terms, new ideas can't be defended well, so they are discarded prematurely.

The terms we select are not those that will be plastered on the outside of the box. We use our vocabulary internally, so we don't care about the marketing palatability of the words. They need only to be precise. Later on, the marketing department will come up with appropriate words that can be used on the buying public. The Logitech ScanBank, for example, was originally called the "shuffler," which was perfectly adequate for us to use in the design process and was never intended for public consumption.

During one project, our own design staff was deadlocked on a problem. As we argued back and forth, it became evident that some of us were using terms differently from others. Our discussion lacked effectiveness because we didn't have a common vocabulary. I insisted that we break down the components of our design into their atomic pieces—which we could all agree upon—and assign them completely new, unrelated names. For no particular reason, I chose the names of Alaskan mountain ranges. We named the four primary chunks of the product St. Elias, Brooks, Alaska, and Wrangell. We all had a good laugh at the incongruity of our new terms, but then we proceeded to achieve instant consensus and move our design process forward very quickly.

Breaking Through with Language

Primarily, using a robust vocabulary makes our communications more effective. However, developing a strong nomenclature sometimes has another—very important—use. Occasionally we find that certain terms have become ossified in a client team's culture. A phrase like Microsoft's "Embrace the Internet" is a good example. It can attain an almost religious significance and be treated with a kind of awe. This awe leads to an inability to deconstruct its meaning and reexamine it in light of new design imperatives. Does it mean embrace browsers, or HTML, or just TCP/IP? The sacred words are the fence around the shrine. It doesn't further our design effort much if we trample our client's sacred beliefs in the process. So we break processes, tasks, and software down into well-defined, discrete chunks and assign them new names that are utterly nonmnemonic. These new names are also typically humorous, too, and the levity helps to break through everyone's serious mien.



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Reality Bats Last

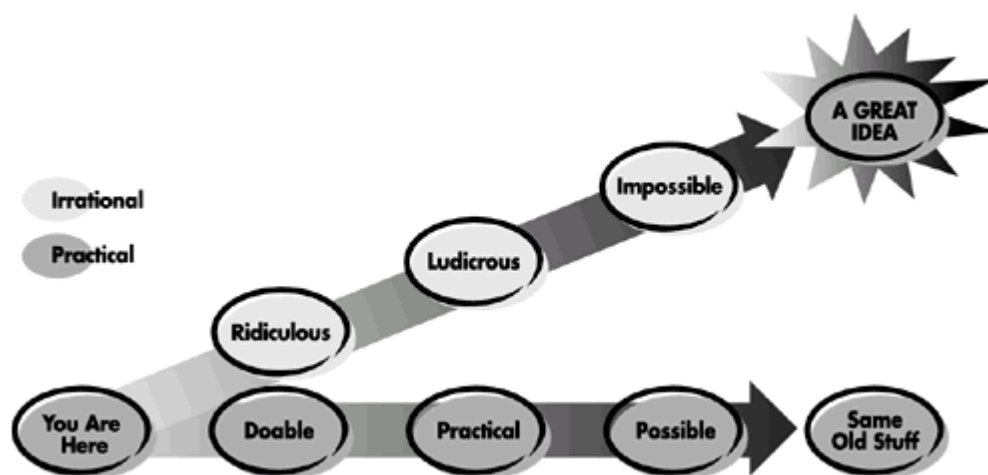
The typical engineering process begins with a recitation of the constraints and limitations. The catechism of things "we cannot do" is stated often and forcefully enough to become doctrine, regardless of its truth. Interaction designers must keep a healthy suspicion of all assumptions about what cannot be done. Time and again, we find ways around such assumed limitations merely because we refuse to accept them at face value.

Of course, sometimes those limits are real, and we cannot get around them, but there is great value in trying anyway. Even if we cannot finesse a constraint, our journey down the dead-end path might shed light on some previously hidden opportunity. This process is based on the "lateral thinking" work of Edward de Bono.[\[1\]](#)

[1] Edward de Bono, Lateral Thinking, Creativity Step by Step, 1970, Harper & Row, New York, New York, ISBN: 0-06-090325-2.

Programmers are princes of the practical. Their pragmatism leaves them little patience for improbable thinking. However, this strength can also be a weakness because sometimes a practical process can't solve the problem. When engineers invent, they arrive at their solution through a succession of practical, possible steps. Because of this, their solution will always be a derivative of the old, beginning solution, which is often not good enough.

Instead, we merely assume that all things are possible and design from there. By sidestepping all those assumed restrictions, we can see goals and personas with more clarity, and we can imagine solutions that could not have been arrived at conventionally.



Engineers are uncomfortable stepping away from their firm foundation of rationality and prefer to cling to their assumed limitations. Because they know that we will eventually confront those constraints, they feel responsible to defend them. They call this "playing devil's advocate." Although I appreciate their concern, the constraints of reality are the one thing that needs no help. Reality never needs an advocate, because it can never be denied. It is always true that reality bats last. Knowing that reality will always get its turn at bat, we know that regardless of what we imagine or design, it will never become real if it is not possible. Only someone without skin in the game would design something unbuildable. What's more, we very often find that constraints are illusory and self-imposed. You cannot see that until you step around them.

Case Study: Logitech ScanMan

Our "pretend it's magic" design tool was particularly effective in one large design project. The scanner division of the Logitech Corporation in Fremont, California, retained us to help design the software for a whole new generation of desktop scanners for the home and small-office markets.



Logitech's new scanner device, code-named "Peacock," uses a new generation of scanning technology and connects to the computer with the USB port. About the size of a rolled-up newspaper, this inexpensive product is small and unobtrusive enough to sit handily on your desktop. You can insert any one-page document into its slot, and a small motor pulls it through to the other side, scanning the image as it goes.

Logitech's company philosophy has long centered on small, auxiliary hardware components given a premium value by the software that accompanies them. This certainly sounds good when viewed from Logitech's engineering point of view. But it's not such a good approach for the user. It isn't goal directed.

Logitech assumed that numerous software features added value to the hardware device. After all—went the thinking—adding features in software is a lot cheaper than adding features in hardware. This reasoning examines the cost-benefit equation from the manufacturer's point of view rather than from the user's.

The predecessor to the Peacock product overflowed with features, and each member of the Peacock team—marketers, product managers, programmers, and senior managers—had pet features that he advocated aggressively at strategy meetings. But if there was ever a product that called out for a featurectomy, it was Peacock.

We rarely find it necessary to eliminate features to smooth out a product's interaction. However, in the case of Peacock, the widely held idea that Logitech added value with lots of software features was erroneous. Our personas and scenarios made it very clear the product's interface was overburdened with unneeded, unwanted, and unused features.

As usual, we began our process by creating our cast of characters. Here's how we arrived at them.

The scanner had a street price of around \$150. For a consumer product, it was quite powerful, with a high resolution and color, but still not in the league of professional flatbed scanners that typically sold for \$800 to \$1,000 [2]. It was



[< Day Day Up >](#)



Bridging Hardware and Software

From an interaction designer's point of view, the divisions between hardware and software are inconsequential because they are inconsequential to a user. The user doesn't care which is more expensive to build. Thus, interaction designers can resolve problems that arise during development of hybrid products.

In the world of engineering, there are hardware engineers who create circuit boards and microchips, and there are software engineers who create program code. Although the fruits of their labor are sold in a common—or hybrid—product, the two factions typically don't work cooperatively. Sometimes they don't even communicate, but instead merely throw completed modules over the fence into the other's backyard.

For historical reasons, hardware engineers dominate most hybrid-product companies, but as the availability of hardware increases to the point of ubiquity, hardware and its engineers assume a less critical role. Conversely, the true value to the user of most products is increasingly due to the unique contributions of the software. This makes for an uneasy truce in most hybrid-product companies.

Hewlett-Packard is a good example of a hybrid-product company dominated by hardware engineers. Its printers are fabulous products with exemplary engineering, but after two decades of refinement, none of my HP printers yet cooperates fully with my computer. They don't bother to tell my computer how much paper is in their feed bins, how much ink is left in their cartridges, or how many print jobs are currently queued up and ready to go. This kind of thoughtless disdain for the human's need for information is the telltale smoking gun of companies dominated by hardware engineers.

Ironically, hardware companies are more experienced at seeking outside help from industrial-design firms to help them make their products more desirable and useful to their users. Software companies tend to go it alone. In any company making hybrid products, when hardware and software engineers don't have designers to mediate between them, the result will be products that fail to please. Most of the examples in [Chapter 1](#), "Riddles for the Information Age," make this clear.

As more and more products are hybrids of hardware and software, the need for a Goal-Directed design increases, because it is agnostic regarding the implementation medium.

3Com Corporation—original maker of the PalmPilot—is a good example of a hybrid-product company where design created a smooth integration between hardware and software. A single tap of the screen and the machine awakens instantly in the exact state it was in when it was last shut down. When hardware is instantaneously responsive to users' actions, it is a clear indicator that the hardware design incorporated the needs of the software. Conversely, my Nikon CoolPix 900 takes seven long seconds to boot up every time I turn it on, and it doesn't even have a disk drive. When hardware is this sluggish, it is clear that the hardware engineers ran the show.

Of course, in the real world of product design, most software companies quite rightly stay out of the hardware world. Designers respect this, even when dedicated hardware would confer significant advantage.

However, if the cost structure of the design problem allows for it, designers should not hesitate to make recommendations about hardware. The Sony P@ssport IFE system in [Chapter 9](#), "Designing for Pleasure," ran on dedicated computers, and the vendor had complete control over all hardware and all software. My designers made several hardware recommendations.



[< Day Day Up >](#)



Less Is More

Those gadget-obsessed, control-freak programmers love to fill products with gizmos and features, but that tendency is contrary to a fundamental insight about good design. Less is more.

When an interaction designer has done a particularly good job, the user will be quite unaware of the designer's presence. Like service in a world-class restaurant, it should be inconspicuous. When the interaction designer has accomplished something really good, users won't even notice it. In an industry that promotes "coolness" as a design objective, it really gets tiresome to find my way so often obscured by interaction artifacts that have obviously taken some poor programmer lots of time and work. Too bad his efforts didn't go into something effective. Many visual designers think that good design is cool, and occasionally it is, but no matter how cool your interface is, less of it would be better. [\[4\]](#) Again, the point is that the less the user sees, the better a job the designer has done. Imagine watching a movie and seeing klieg lights in the corners of the frame or hearing the director yell "Cut!" at the end of a scene. Imagine how intrusive that would be and how it would break the viewer's spell.

[4] In my book, *About Face*, I introduce over 50 powerful design axioms. This is one of them.

Super programmer and software designer Kai Krause is famous for his unique interfaces. Kai has created some of the most powerful and interesting graphical-manipulation software. His products always have breathtakingly beautiful interfaces. They also tend to be inscrutable, kind of like a game. In addition to his programming ability, Kai is a visual designer, and his products reflect the visual designer's willingness to make things obscure—like modern art—for the sake of effect. This works because his user base is other visual designers and hobbyists. It doesn't go over very well outside that world.



In programming, there is always an infinite variety of ways to solve any given problem. Experienced programmers, as they explore their options searching for the optimum solution, occasionally stumble on a technique that allows them to throw out hundreds—or even thousands—of lines of code. This only happens when the programmer has made a valuable conceptual leap forward. When she can toss out lots of code, her program is getting better. Less code means less complexity, fewer bugs, fewer opportunities for invalid interactions, and easier maintainability.

Interaction designers share this sensation. As they explore their options, they discover places where they can dispense with entire screens or discard large and complex dialog boxes. The designer knows that each element of the user interface is a burden on the user. Each button and icon is one more thing that the user must know about, and must work around, to get to what she really wants. Doing more with less is always better.

If the designer is doing well, she is removing interface from a product. She is not designing screen after screen of buttons and gizmos. A product manager from a large software company visited us one day, inquiring about having us redesign a product for them. He told us that he expected the interface to have about a dozen dialog boxes. We explained to him our process and then quoted a price for their design. It was about \$60,000, if I remember correctly. The manager then exclaimed, "But that's outrageous! It's \$5,000 per screen!" I didn't have the heart to tell him that we would probably reduce the dialog box count down to one or two and that the price—when calculated on a per-screen basis—would be a lot higher. He just didn't get it. Paying for design on a per-screen basis is like paying a waiter by the number of trips he makes to each table. A better waiter makes fewer trips, and a better designer always creates lots less interface.

Sometimes being an interaction designer can be so frustrating! If, as a designer, you do something really, fundamentally, blockbuster correct, everybody looks at it and says, "Of course! What other way would there be?"

Part V: Getting Back into the Driver's Seat

[Chapter 12](#) Desperately Seeking Usability

[Chapter 13](#) A Managed Process

[Chapter 14](#) Power and Pleasure

Chapter 12. Desperately Seeking Usability

The explosion of software-based products into the mass market, in either general-purpose computers or appliances, has transformed the user population. Formerly it was a small group of forgiving, technology-loving implementers. Today it is a teeming multitude of impatient, unhappy, nontechnical consumers. Everyone, both inside and outside of the software industry, has heard the users cry in painful frustration and has felt the pressure to do something. Many specialties have stepped forward, eager and willing to fill the vacuum. All of them have a good story, most of them have bright credentials, and many of them have stellar client lists. Collectively, though, they have produced more heat than light, and their solutions lack for nothing except desirable software-based products. The result has been widespread confusion about how to really solve the problem of unhappy users. In this chapter, I'll try to dispel some of the confusion, showing where each specialization can be most effective and how it can dovetail with Goal-Directed interaction design.



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The Timing

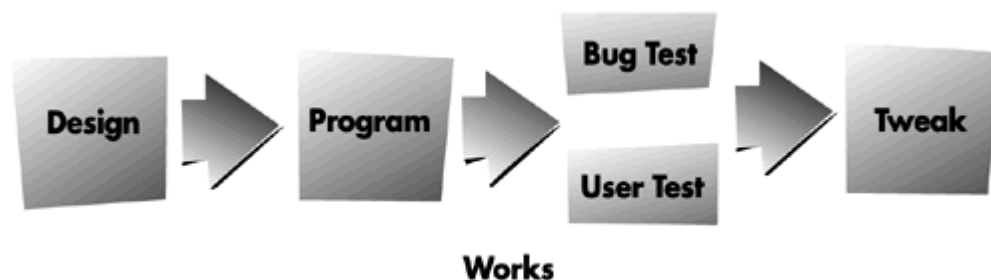
Probably the single most important aspect of design is the sequence of events in the software-construction process. Since the earliest days of software development, the sequence of events has been program, bug test, tweak. First, the programmer writes the program. He then puts it through its paces, looking for any inadvertent errors in its construction. Next, he tweaks the code to correct those errors. Finally, the program is ready to be deployed.



It is only natural that the engineers will accept any new discipline more readily if it does not disturb the established order of activities. One method, called user testing, that has grown to significant proportions in the industry examines empirically how actual users interact with the product. The main reason why empirical user testing has been widely accepted in the high-tech business is that it fits easily into the existing sequence. Most user testing depends on having a working program to test with, so necessarily it must wait until the program is up and running. This places user testing in the sequence conveniently in parallel to bug testing. The programmers are comfortable with this piggybacking of a new form of testing because it doesn't upset their established sequence.



As I've pointed out, writing code is to interaction design as pouring concrete is to building architecture. No matter who does the designing, regardless of the method she might apply, the effect of design will be negligible if the coding is underway. A fundamental premise of bringing design to the software-development process is that it must occur before the programming begins. Obviously, I'm an advocate for Goal-Directed design, but any systematic design process performed in advance of programming will be much more effective than any process that comes afterward.



Putting design before programming means fundamental change in the software-development process. Programmers, who are naturally affected by this, see it in vaguely threatening terms. They have heretofore been first and, by implication, most important. If some other discipline comes first, does that mean the other practitioners are more important? This is not true, and I will discuss it in more detail in the next chapter.

In the software world, I have programmed, invented, tested, documented, designed, sold, shipped, and supported, and I have learned that the most difficult part of the process is the design part. The

User Testing

Any process based on observation must take the back seat to acts of creation. Programmers create. The usability discipline tacitly hands the reins to the programmers, saying, "You build it, and then I'll test to see how well you have done." But in this fast-moving, high-tech world, after it is built, it ships. Post-facto testing cannot have much influence on the product.

To me, usability methods seem like sandpaper. If you are making a chair, the sandpaper can make it smoother. If you are making a table, the sandpaper can also make it smoother. But no amount of sanding will turn a table into a chair. Yet I see thousands of well-intentioned people diligently sanding away at their tables with usability methods, trying to make chairs.

User Testing Before Programming

It is certainly possible to perform user testing before programming begins, but the nature and value of the process changes dramatically. This kind of testing is similar to the pure research that one would expect to find in a university setting. A colleague at a major software company performed a classic user test that simultaneously demonstrates the strength and weakness of this pre-facto user testing. He wanted to determine the effectiveness of the status bar at the bottom of the screen. He had people use a spreadsheet program to perform some innocuous task, and about every five minutes a message would flash across the status bar saying, "There is a \$50 bill taped to the bottom of your chair. Take it!" In a full day of testing with more than a dozen people, nobody claimed the cash.

The insight that users don't pay much attention to what is displayed on the popular-among-programmers status bar is certainly valuable. It doesn't shed much light on the underlying problems, though: What constitutes "status" worth displaying? Should it be displayed at all? Where should it be displayed? Those design problems remain as open as they ever were.

Fitting Usability Testing into the Process

The professional literature is filled with detailed advice on how to perform tests, but it says little about inventing something to test if the product doesn't already exist. In practice, some simulacrum must be created and tested. These generally take the form of either a quickly written prototype program or a "puppet-show" made from paper cutouts or some equivalent, low-tech material.

You can learn a lot about users' reactions from paper puppet-shows, but what gets tested can still be quite inappropriate unless design is done first. Also, the personal presence of the tester inevitably looms large in this form of test, and a word, nod, or glance can easily skew the test's results.

For the most meaningful results, you have to do prohibitively expensive comparison testing by creating two programs to test against each other. Even then, all you learn is that one of the candidates is better than the other. You don't know what is the best you can achieve.

Thoughtful user testing can uncover a designer's incorrect assumptions. Exposing your design work to users and then redesigning iteratively is always better than not doing so. Some new technologies, such as voice recognition, are so untried that the insights provided by basic user testing can be of great value.



[< Day Day Up >](#)



Multidisciplinary Teams

The software engineer's resistance to letting anything upset the familiar sequence of events in the development process has led to a lot of tortuous logic on the part of the design community. One widely proposed solution has interaction designed by teams with representatives from many different disciplines.

The hypothesis is that better results can be obtained by working in a team with equal representation from users, programmers, managers, marketers, and usability professionals. In my experience, this "seat at the table" doesn't work. The goals and concerns of the members diverge, and the one constituent whose goals are most relevant—the user—is often the poorest equipped to articulate his concern. What's worse, the programmers—who always have ultimate control over the software-based artifact anyway—inevitably drive the team, usually from the back seat.

The seat-at-the-table solution still fails to put design in front of programming. It is a buzzword-compliant, polycultural, inclusive, multidisciplinary, and democratic approach, but it still fails to address the flawed sequence, which remains as a virulent cause of bad interaction.

Programmers Designing

The first "volunteers" to address the problems of the new nontechnical users were the programmers themselves. That their culture and tools were wholly inadequate to the task was less relevant than that they were the only available candidates for the job. Like the bystander unlucky enough to be near the scene of an accident, programmers were called upon to deliver first aid to interfaces by the simple virtue of their propinquity. Programmers are nothing if not game, and prideful in their competence, so the difficult challenge of designing interaction appealed to them, and they invested considerable effort. This gave rise to the sardonic joke in the industry that says, "Design is what the programmers do in the 20 minutes before they begin coding."

I've shown throughout this book that the programmers' efforts were ill-fated from the beginning. As Po Bronson says, they consider the absence of criticism a compliment, so their assessment of their own performance is unrealistically positive, and many of them insist on continued ownership of the design role. Like mad kings, programmers are unwilling to relinquish territory after it is occupied, even if the occupation is unpleasant, unprofitable, undesired, and untenable.

Regardless of how much you might teach, test, or design, you are a programmer if you program professionally. In the same way that there is no such thing as being a little bit pregnant, there is no such thing as doing a little bit of programming.

Even though many developers remain unconvinced that a significant problem exists ("the users just need to learn more"), others clearly see the frustration and expense caused by wholesale dancing bearware. The good news is that this latter group is gaining strength, and the willingness of most development organizations to seek outside help is growing.

Most programmers are actually pretty good at design, and many of those who are not are humbly aware of their shortcomings and avoid practicing it. The giant caveat is that when programmers design, their effort is almost always based on the unique personality of Homo logicus. The end result is a difficult-to-use and inappropriate product that other programmers tend to really like.

How Do You Know?

Many usability professionals believe that you cannot know whether an interaction is good unless you test it. That's why they are constantly asking, "How do you know?" But I have noticed something very curious. When they ask, they are not playing devil's advocate. They are asking for the simple reason that they really don't know good design when they see it.

At least four large companies that I work with have a long history with usability professionals. The companies decided to invest in usability. They hired professionals who built their labs, performed their studies, identified likely problem areas, and made a series of guesses about how to improve things. The programmers diligently made changes to their programs, and not much happened, except that the programmers had worked a lot harder. After a few cycles of this, the programmers simply gave up, and so did most of the managers. They could see that it was very expensive and time consuming, yet it wasn't solving the fundamental problem.

Interaction designers rely on their experience, training, and judgment to make an accurate evaluation. They have principles, idioms, and tools for every situation, and they triangulate these tools with other sources of information. How does a radiologist know that someone needs surgery from examining an X-ray? X-rays are so difficult to read that it is hard for a layperson to imagine reading one, but trained doctors do it all the time. How does a judge know whether a defendant is guilty? How does an investor know that now is the time to buy? These professionals might not be right all of the time, but they don't guess.

I have seen well-respected usability professionals blandly take potshots into the dark. They developed sophisticated tests to isolate users' reactions to existing software, and then they studied the tabulated results to find interactive rough spots. When their rigorous, scientific method uncovered a problem area, they would lapse into the most amateurish babbling about solutions: "Well, I guess we could move this control over to this dialog box," or "I suppose that if we added a button here the user could have better control."

It is fine to say, "I don't know" but very self-defeating to guess at answers. What's worst is that any gazing off into space and guessing will cause programmers—the ones with skin in the game—to quietly write you off as a quack.



[< Day Day Up >](#)



Style Guides

The partnership of designer Shelley Evenson and scientist John Rheinfank at Xerox's Palo Alto Research Center in the 1980s yielded some important ideas about visual communications. They created a consistent visual vocabulary, called a "visual design language," for all Xerox photocopiers: green for originals, blue for supplies, red for service areas. Similar nontextual cues are very useful in high-cognitive-friction interfaces, and they are communicated in a "style guide," a book of examples and use suggestions.

Many software engineers and development managers who are frustrated by user-interaction problems would love to have a style guide that tells them what interface their product needs. Many corporations have developed interface style guides for all of their internal software, and several software vendors have them for independent vendors who write compatible software.

Although style guides can help, they really don't address Goal-Directed interaction design problems. These need to be treated on a case-by-case basis. Users with different goals use the various applications, and each product's interaction must address the appropriate goals. A common visual language and consistent controls can help, but they alone don't solve the problem.

Conflict of Interest

If Bill Gates publicly demanded that all vendors other than Microsoft stop innovating in interaction design, those vendors would hoot him from the stage. Yet, Microsoft's interface style guide does just that, and it is one of the company's most potent competitive levers in the industry.

Both Microsoft and Apple sell interface style guides and promote their power and usefulness, and—at first glance—those companies would seem to be the most authoritative sources. However, the platform vendor is in a vicious conflict of interest, and its motivations cannot really be trusted.

Both platform makers use a quiet form of coercion to ensure compliance. If an independent software developer doesn't follow the style guide's recommendations, the vendor won't let the developer claim to be "platform compliant," an important marketing position. Thus, most makers of desktop software are eager to follow their vendors' recommendations.

By insisting that their independent developer communities follow the stated guidelines, however, these companies surreptitiously suppress innovation from the application community.

Meanwhile the platform vendors are free to experiment, evolve, and innovate as much as they desire. They are under no compulsion to follow their own style guides. Of course, no company more flagrantly and frequently violates those guidebooks than Microsoft and Apple.

I'm not advocating that we ignore style guides and give in to interface chaos. I'm merely saying that we should regard the style guide in the way a senator regards a lobbyist, not in the way a motorist obeys a state trooper. The legislator knows that the lobbyist has an axe to grind—that the lobbyist is not a disinterested third party.



[< Day Day Up >](#)



Focus Groups

Many industries have discovered the value of focus groups for learning what customers like and don't like about various products. However useful focus groups are for gaining insight into what customers think about most consumer goods, they are troublesome when used in the software business. The biggest problem is simply that most people, even professional software users, are ignorant of what software is and what it can and cannot do. So when a focus group participant asks for a feature, the request is made from a shortsighted point of view. The user is asking for what he or she thinks is likely, possible, and reasonable. To consciously ask for something unlikely, impossible, or unreasonable would be to voluntarily seem stupid, and people don't willingly do that.

Stanford University scientists Nass and Reeves have studied people's reactions to computers, and they see conclusive evidence that people's own evaluation of their reactions to computers is unreliable. They say, "Many popular methods, especially focus group techniques, rely heavily on the assumption that people can be introspective about [interactive] experiences. This is an assumption that we think is frequently wrong."

Larry Keeley says that "users will reject new ideas if you ask them." This makes focus-group techniques suspect for any significantly innovative products. Today, most software-based products are sufficiently innovative to be un-focus-groupable.

Focus groups can be effective for some product categories, but it is a mistake to trust them for a reliable evaluation of high-cognitive-friction products.



[< Day Day Up >](#)



Visual Design

In About Face, I showed why it wasn't the graphical nature of the graphical user interface (GUI) that made it the dominant form of computer interaction. Rather, it was the tightly restricted interaction vocabulary of the new interfaces that made them so much better than their green-screen predecessors. Good visual design can be an important contributor to the quality of any interface, but many people in the industry still credit it with value that it simply doesn't have.

I was a judge one year in a contest for the design and construction of in-house application software.^[1] One of the top prize winners was a program that managed ticket sales at an annual aviation-enthusiast's convention in Wisconsin. The point-of-sale terminal—the beating-heart of the system—was decidedly nongraphic, showing only a simple textual display that was singularly stiff, rectilinear, and aesthetically primitive. Yet the program was a clear winner because the design paid close attention to the peculiar needs of the all-volunteer sales staff at the convention. These volunteers had a mission-critical but simple job to do, and they had to do it rapidly and with minimal training. GUIs are superb tools for showing managers the big picture of how their business is doing, but the users of this point-of-sale system had no such need because each successive customer who appeared at the head of the line was different and disassociated from every other customer in line. Seeing the big picture wasn't part of the requirement. A simple textual screen was entirely sufficient to make the product an award winner. This lesson is lost on many practitioners.

[1] The seven-year-old contest, held at COMDEX industry conferences, was called Windows World Open and was sponsored by Microsoft, Computerworld, and Ziff-Davis Events.

One of the characteristics of GUIs is their ability to display rich bitmapped graphics. It is feasible to have program interfaces that are as visually lush as the game *Myst*. Consequently, there are numerous visual designers and graphic artists out there who will gladly put attractive bitmapped graphics on the face of your program. But graphic artists rarely address the underlying interaction.



This interface is one of those useless eye-candy programs given away free with new computers and worth every penny you pay for it. Its purpose has something to do with running the phone or the CD-ROM, I'm not exactly sure which. The interface is undeniably beautiful, particularly if you are a gadget-loving technophile, but its use is inscrutable. It is an example of what we call "painting the corpse." The programmers took an interface that was unusable because of deep behavioral design flaws and put a sexy visual cover on it.

Hardware vendors seem to be particularly enamored of this approach—remember, this came free with my new



[< Day Day Up >](#)



Industrial Design

Another profession whose expertise is sought for help is industrial design. This older, well-established profession is skilled at creating objects in three dimensions that fit your vision, your body, and—especially—your hands. In general, industrial designers do excellent work, and their sins are those of omission rather than commission. Industrial designers are trained to create buttons, knobs, and controls that are easy to feel, manipulate, and see. However, they are not specifically trained to satisfy the demands of cognitive friction, or to work with software engineers. Like the buttons in the remote keyless entry system described in [Chapter 2](#), "Cognitive Friction," the buttons are instantaneously recognizable as buttons, even by feel. Their physical use is intuitive, but their logical use—their metause—remains as unclear as ever.

The five remote-control devices on my coffee table, taken individually, are nice enough, but collectively they make my home-entertainment system largely unusable. Although they are sensuously curved and attractive to look at, you are hopelessly lost when you need to change the channel or mute the audio in the dark. The industrial designers who designed them satisfied the demands placed on them by the equipment vendors, but they did not satisfy the interaction needs of the user.

It is easy to see why product managers can mistake industrial design for interaction design. Industrial designers also deal with the interface between people and high-technology artifacts. They also make it easy for people to use these high-tech contraptions. The fact that the buttons are easy to find and press doesn't mean that the user will know which button is the right one to press. That is a problem of cognitive friction, not of industrial design.

Cool New Technology

There is one final pretender to the throne of interaction design, and that is technology itself. Microsoft, in particular, is touting this false panacea. Microsoft says that interfaces will be easy to use as soon as it can perfect voice recognition and handwriting recognition. I think this is silly. Each new technology merely makes it possible to frustrate users with faster and more-powerful systems.

A key to better interaction is to reduce the uncertainty between computers and users. Natural-language processing can never do that because meanings are so vague in human conversation. So much of our communication is based on nuance, gesture, and inflection that although it might be a year or two before computers can recognize our words, it might be decades—if ever—before computers can effectively interpret our meaning.

Voice-recognition technology will certainly prove to be useful for many products. I think it is foolishly optimistic to think that a new technology will be any better at rescuing us than any of the others were. Technology requires design to be a complete solution for real users, regardless of the combination of technologies we use.



[< Day Day Up >](#)



Iteration

It is a commonly accepted truth about software development that the way to get good interaction is to iterate. The devotion to usability testing at most universities and many large software-development companies—particularly Microsoft—led to the spread of this idea. And, yes, iteration is an important element of good design: Keep working on it until it's right. However, many product developers have interpreted this to mean that you can dispense with design and merely iterate across random thrusts in the dark.

In 1986, Microsoft rushed version one of Windows to market, and it was so pathetic, it deservedly became the laughingstock of the industry. Six months later, Microsoft shipped version 1.03, which fixed some bugs. A year later, Microsoft shipped 1.1, and then version 2.0. [\[2\]](#) Each iteration of the product tried to solve the problems created by the previous version. Finally, four years after the first version shipped, Microsoft shipped Windows 3.0, and the industry stopped laughing. Few companies in the industry have pockets deep enough, or the tenacity, to ignore public humiliation for four years to finally get it right. One side effect of this is that the industry sees its de facto leader staggering blindly about until it does get it right, and the industry makes the obvious assumption that that is the correct way to do things.

[2] Microsoft's version-numbering logic is nonexistent. There were at least four major releases of Windows before Windows 3.0. Windows 3.1 was a dramatically different and improved version, with many major changes, and it clearly should have been called Windows 4.0. I'm sure that Microsoft marketing people called it 3.1 instead because they didn't want to squander the market equity already earned by "version three."

But shipping all of those interim versions was very expensive. If Microsoft could have arrived at the quality of Windows 3.0 without shipping a couple of those intermediate releases, it could have saved millions in development and support dollars, earning additional millions in sales much earlier in the product's life (not to mention saving their customers billions of dollars and many headaches). Accepting as true that multiple versions are inevitable is an extremely expensive capitulation of good sense.

Microsoft's strategy is based on simple attrition. In military terms, attrition means that you might be evenly matched with your enemy in quality—or even somewhat inferior—but you have so many soldiers and guns that you merely trade down until your opponent cannot field any more regiments. In software terms, it means shipping a bad product—a real dancing bear—then listening to your clients moan and complain. You tweak what they dislike and ship an updated version. After three or four versions, the overt pain suffered by the users subsides and the quality of the product reaches some acceptable minimum, aided by broad functionality, and does not improve thereafter. Iteration never creates great products.

The attrition strategy is not only expensive and time-consuming, but it is a hateful one because it is abusive of people who use computer technology. Unfortunately, it is working pretty well for Microsoft. Time after time, it has shipped half-baked, ill-conceived, poorly built, undesigned products to the sneers and derision of industry observers, both partial and impartial. But while the industry pundits jeer, Microsoft continues to support its first efforts with 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, and 11th versions. Such products as Windows, ActiveX, Word, Access, Windows NT, and many others have eventually emerged as Goliaths in their respective markets.

The attrition strategy only works if you have a rock-solid brand name, lots of time, the nerves of a poker player, and vast quantities of money. So far, no other players in the computer industry have exhibited those qualities in equal measure to Microsoft.

The real problem with Microsoft's spectacular commercial success is that many smaller companies attempt to emulate



[< Day Day Up >](#)



Chapter 13. A Managed Process

I believe that most managers in the business of creating software-based products don't really have a clear understanding of how to identify the best, most successful products or how to make them. Lacking this awareness, managers take counsel of their fears, but after they do so, they are riding a tiger. Although they are moving rapidly, they are not in control, and if they let go they will only be eaten. In this chapter, I will examine the technical manager's dilemma and show how design can be just the tool for taming the tiger.



[< Day Day Up >](#)



Who Really Has the Most Influence?

How can you know whose advice to follow and whose to ignore? I see executives behaving like car-chasing dogs in the middle of a busy intersection, barking furiously and trying to run in all directions at once. Top management says, "Make it look like Outlook 98." Marketing says, "Match the competition." Sales says, "This customer wants that feature." The programmers say, "Stay consistent with our last version." Who are you to believe?

Product-development managers try their best to say yes to all of these constituents. Programmers have disproportional influence because of their ownership of the code, so their goals tend to be met regardless. However, the one group whose needs always seem to take precedence over others' is the customers. After all, although each constituency is standing there demanding action, the customer is the only one who is also holding a check. No businessperson can fail to be influenced by that!

The Customer-Driven Death Spiral

If you take that check, you begin the transformation into a "customer-driven" company. Although this has a nice ring to it and is widely used, it is a mistake. It puts you squarely on the back of the tiger. Throughout the 1980s, IBM prided itself on being a customer-driven company, and it let its customers drive it right off the top of the mountain. IBM virtually owned the computer business back then—to a much greater extent than Microsoft does now—yet it is just one of the pack today—still large, but a follower and not a leader.

Usually, a new company bases its first product on some technological advance. That first product is designed according to the inside vision of how things should be done. At this stage, what customers the company might have are only loosely committed and will offer only desultory guidance. After the new product is finally delivered, though, the customers become more self-interested because they are investing time and energy into the product. Inevitably, they have requests for changes and additions.

There is a big difference between listening to and following your customers. Listening is good. It means applying your own filter to what you have heard. Following is bad. It means merely doing what your customers tell you to do. This lets the tiger decide where you will go.

After the vendor begins to let its customers dictate what features the product will have, a very serious, but almost unnoticeable, change transforms the vendor. The vendor ceases to be a product company, inventing things to sell to its customers, and becomes a service company, performing jobs on demand for its customers. Everyone inside the company is sensitive to this subtle shift in power, and they correctly respond to it by promoting the demands of the client above all others.

Today, many enterprise-software companies, such as Oracle and SAP—which experienced explosive growth in the early 1990s as their modern, client-server architecture replaced the older, mainframe software—are reliving IBM's customer-driven nightmare. After introducing their new technology, these so-called enterprise resource planning (ERP) companies started listening to their customers. They began to add features that their customers requested, without fitting them into a larger, longer-term plan.

I have heard managers tell me that no change whatsoever is made to their product unless a customer demands it. Each customer does business in a slightly different way, and each one asks the ERP company to make changes and add features to accommodate its particular methods. In a misguided effort to be helpful, the eagerly listening, blindly following, customer-driven vendor complies.

Finding Bedrock

Most companies do very careful planning and thinking on the financial and operational side of the business. On the product side, they imagine that using feature lists is equally rigorous planning, but it is emphatically not. Software development is simply too hard, too expensive, and too difficult to do without careful planning and thinking. In the context of software development, "careful planning" can only mean interaction design, which, as has been established, is quite neglected.

One of the collateral benefits of Goal-Directed design is the cast of characters: the list of specific types of users. This document offers significant help in determining how you should react to your customer's demands for features. You first assess which user persona the new feature would service, and then decide whether or not it is one of your primary personas. If it is, you can seriously consider it. If it is not, you will drop another step farther back from the leading edge, regardless how much money you will get. If a customer walked into your office and offered you \$100,000 to throw out your accounting system or set fire to your filing cabinets, would you do it?

Knowing Where to Cut

When a company is customer driven, this is a clear symptom that the product managers believe in the myth of the unpredictable market. They really don't know whether or not a feature is good or bad, necessary or unnecessary. They turn control over to the customer because, well, why not? They certainly don't know. If the customer says, "Add a left-handed monkey-wrench feature," the product manager figures the customer must know something. The manager believes that it might be the magic feature that will make the product a big success.

The flip side of this is that the product manager doesn't have a clue about what features to cut either. When external forces constrict the schedule, the manager has to cut features, but he has no idea which features are vital and which are mere gravy.



Letting nondesigners cut features is like letting anyone cut wires in an airplane. The cutting is random, or based on some unrelated quality such as the color of the insulation or the distance from your seat—you might or might not cut important wires. One moment you are disabling the reading light in seat 22A, and the next moment the engines quit. But letting designers cut features is like letting the airplane's designer cut wires: He will avoid the ones that are needed for flight and disable all of the nonessential equipment first.

Making Movies

Making movies is exorbitantly expensive, just like writing software. Moviemakers have been making films in Hollywood longer than we've been creating software in Silicon Valley, and we can learn something from them. The actual filming of a movie is the really expensive part. All of those cameras, sets, technicians, and actors can cost many thousands of dollars every day. Good moviemakers keep tight controls on this production phase by investing in detailed advance planning. By putting time and money into creating detailed storyboards and shooting schedules, they save orders of magnitude more money and time during filming.

The process of getting a film made can be broken into three major phases: preproduction, production, and postproduction. In the preproduction phase, the producers have the script written and polished, design sets and costumes, hire the cast and crew, and raise funds. During the production phase, the lights glare, the cameras roll, the directors shout orders, and the actors emote. During the postproduction phase, the film is edited, the soundtrack is recorded, and the marketing campaign is assembled. These phases correspond quite closely to the software-construction process.

During the preproduction phase, the managers do the interaction design for the product, hire the programmers, and raise funds. During the production phase, the CRTs glow, the compilers roll, the managers shout directives, and the programmers emit code. During the postproduction phase, the code is debugged, the documentation is written, and the marketing campaign is assembled.

	Pre-production	Production	Post-production
Film 	Write script, storyboard, production design, casting, raise money	Cameras roll, directors yell "cut", lights glare, actors emote, technicians tech	Editing, soundtrack, marketing
Software 	Interaction design, storyboard, screen sketch, hire programmers, raise money	Programmers code, managers fetch pizza, designers solve minor interaction problems	Debugging, documentation, marketing

Take Time to Save Time

The significant aspect of this tripartite structure is that the purpose of the preproduction phase is to minimize the duration of the production phase. It is excruciatingly expensive to put a film crew to work, and shaving just a few days off a long shooting schedule can pay for weeks of additional pre- or postproduction work. A contemporary film will spend a year or more in preproduction, and then a couple of months in intense filming, and then many more months in postproduction.

What's more, as our films get increasingly technical (what do you get when you cross a film with a computer?), more and more of the production work simply cannot be done without meticulous advance planning. If your leading actor must have a light-saber duel with a computer-generated alien, he must have an imaginary fight with just a blue-screen background, so his every action must be first choreographed down to the slightest step and glance.

Moviemakers know that they only get one chance to do it right, so they never skip the preproduction effort. In the world of software engineering, many managers believe that they can just fix it in the next release, so the pressure for advance planning is reduced. That's an awfully expensive assumption.



[< Day Day Up >](#)



The Deal

Management must make a commitment to bringing design in before programming begins. Analogously speaking, interaction design is architecture, not interior design. Interaction design determines where the concrete for the foundation will be poured as much as it determines which fabric will be most appropriate for the window treatments. This commitment must extend to giving the interaction designers the moral authority to dictate the shape and constitution of the product to the programmers. This will involve significant cultural upheaval, but the programmers will be happier after the change, and you will benefit from shortened programming time and an immensely superior product.

In exchange for this power, the interaction-design community must make two commitments of its own. First, interaction designers need to get some skin in the game. They need to stop standing on the sidelines giving advice to the programmers, while passively letting them take full responsibility for the success of the products. It is not good enough merely to have the right ideas. You have got to get those right ideas applied to practice, and the only time that is going to happen is when the interaction designers put themselves in harm's way. The programmers do it every time they write a line of code.

The second commitment that interaction designers must make is to put their design in writing.

Document Design to Get It Built

One of the really tough lessons that I have learned over the years is that good, even great, design is meaningless unless it gets built. And it will never get built unless it is described at length, with precision and detail, in terms that make sense to the programmers who must build it. It has to be in writing, in exhaustive detail, with supporting evidence and examples. It has to be printed and bound in multiple copies. It must be presented personally to the development team, with the VP of development standing there nodding his head and smiling. Better if it's the CEO.

The designers need to write, storyboard, animate, and sketch their solutions with sufficient completeness and detail that programmers can treat the solutions like blueprints and actually write code from them. Enough situations must be described in detail to give the developers confidence that the solution is robust enough to survive implementation.

The written design is like a written battle plan. Everyone knows his part and what the critical and timely issues are. Everyone can move in synchrony and harmony to create a product that is targeted at a specific user.

Programmers rely on a persuasive technique called "passive-aggressive." Instead of forcing a confrontation that must decide an issue, they avoid attention and quietly take—or don't take—action. It's like a passenger steering a canoe by surreptitiously leaning to one side or another. One of my favorite business axioms, "If it isn't on paper it doesn't exist," is truer than ever in the world of software design. Anything left unwritten is more than likely to be misconstrued or ignored because the motivations of the programmers are so divergent from the motivations of the users. It's not enough not to specify a dialog box, but the designer must explicitly state where the programmer is not to voluntarily insert an extra dialog box. To a programmer, dialog boxes are good things, and he feels like he is doing the user a favor to toss in a couple of extra ones in his spare time. To users, dialog boxes are hateful things that sap their energy and derail productivity.

Interaction designers, like architects, deliver a set of blueprints that describe the product to be built. But although the similarity between blueprints and software design documents is very close, they have great differences, too. Blueprints have a lot of leverage. A single line on paper can indicate a wall of 100,000 bricks. When interaction is



[< Day Day Up >](#)



Who Owns Product Quality?

When everyone has responsibility for product quality, nobody is responsible for product quality. It is far too easy to assume that your colleague will solve the quality problem while you work on something else. The programmers are solely responsible for eliminating all bugs from the code. The sales staff is solely responsible for closing deals. The marketers are solely responsible for packaging and positioning. At the present time, though, no one is responsible solely for the quality and appropriateness of the product. Sometimes they lack the tools to locate and solve the problem. Sometimes they lack the skills to communicate the solution. Sometimes they lack the authority to have their solutions implemented.

As we have seen in the previous chapters, coding compromises the programmers' ability to address users' goals. Product managers already have plenty of work to do, and they cannot focus on the details of a product's behavior. Marketers' lack of a technical background weakens their ability to communicate technically, which undermines their credibility with the programmers. Without a thoroughly documented design, there is little hope of getting it implemented properly and effectively.

The central recommendation of this book is that the interaction designer should be the ultimate owner of product quality. He must be allowed to determine the content and behavior of the program. He must own the feature list and, in large part, the schedule. This person is the advocate for the user and should have the authority to control all external aspects of the product.

In return for all of this authority, the interaction designers have some very significant responsibilities. Unless designers have a combination of authority and responsibility, programmers will not respect the designers and will retake control of the product. Designers must have skin in the game. The interaction-design team's mandate includes designing a feasible-to-build, easy-to-use, attractive product that allows the user to achieve her practical goals without violating her personal goals. What's more, the interaction designers must describe in exhaustive detail, in writing, a narrative description from which the programmers can reasonably be expected to build the design. The interaction designers must provide marketing with a clear, written description of the users and how the product will satisfy their needs. Most important, the designers accept responsibility for the quality of the final product.

Creating a Design-Friendly Process

In the last chapter, we saw how many of the professionals who have offered to help with interaction design have not succeeded. We have examined usability testers, industrial designers, and others who have tried and failed to solve this problem. Currently, there is no group of any size in the industry that can solve it.

As the ranks of interaction designers slowly grow, keep in mind that fostering a design-friendly process is more important than hiring the most talented designer. The most important thing is to make a commitment to take time out for design before you code. Finding the most brilliant designer in the world will do no good if the product is going into beta next week.

For example, many software dynasties have been established on the backs of very young, very inexperienced programmers. They were likely given a free hand with programming issues, and the pairing of immense responsibility with immense authority can often be a crucible for creating greatness. The same forces apply in interaction design. If someone is given the responsibility for product quality, and she is given authority equal to it, she will often rise to the challenge regardless of her experience. If you take a suitable person and give her full control over the quality and behavior of a product, you will have a much, much better product than if you don't. The problem is with the process, not with the people. Of course, all things being equal, it is always better to get an expert with relevant experience. However, if experts are in short supply or not in the budget, using less-skilled practitioners is better than just letting the programmers run loose.

What does it mean to be a "suitable person?" The most suitable would be someone without an interest in the construction of the product and with the detachment to put himself in the user's place. This could easily be a programmer, but certainly not one of the programmers who will have to build this particular program. That imposes too great of a conflict of interest.

Where Interaction Designers Come From

Still, you have to choose someone to do your interaction design. After you start to look for them, you will find frustrated interaction designers already present in almost every high-tech company: technical writers who have programmers coming to them for help thinking things through, product managers with bookshelves full of interface-design books, usability testers who talk about getting involved in development earlier in the process, marketing managers who point out that they purchased the stereo with the fewest buttons, programmers who do very little coding but whom other programmers ask to work with. In fact, after it becomes known within a company that a project will start with a design phase before the coding begins, someone is sure to step forward and ask for the assignment, saying that she wants to be the person held responsible for the quality of product.

When you hire full-time designers, good applicants might or might not bill themselves as interaction designers. You need people with a general understanding of technical constraints and a passion for design, but you can find people like that working in many different environments and with widely varied backgrounds. In hiring people for my design studio, I ask people to respond to a design problem as a test because I know that their resumes can vary dramatically. At my studio, I have several designers with backgrounds in technical writing, software project management, tech support, and graphic design. Many of my designers have degrees in the humanities, but I also have designers with degrees in physics, architecture, computer science, and industrial design.

Experience in tech support or documentation provides designers with perspective in thinking about typical users' needs. Software product managers know about the needs and concerns of programmers in the development process. Graphic and industrial designers have a passion for design elegance and skills to produce it. Designers with a



[< Day Day Up >](#)



Chapter 14. Power and Pleasure

For you to realize the full measure of benefit from using interaction design in your business, it has to be baked into the software-development process as an integral part. It cannot be tacked on afterwards, added as an afterthought.

In the last chapter, I wrote that design needs to be written down before the coding begins. However, in the steaming cauldron of product development, the programmers can still simply ignore the design document, regardless of its quality. This is quite likely in the passive-aggressive culture of software engineering, in which the developer treats any design input as advice, to be complied with when possible and as workload permits.

It must be made emphatically clear to everyone on the project that the design is a blueprint that must be followed and is not merely a suggestion. Unless the commitment to design is demonstrated vigorously and publicly, the developers will assume that they alone have the real responsibility for creating a successful product.

There is only one way to communicate this effectively. The company's top management must state unequivocally to all other managers of both design and development that programmers are off the hook. They must make plain that the design team is now responsible for product quality and that the designers have the authority to make the call, subject—of course—to management oversight.

The programmers are welcome to improvise below the surface of the program, but every aspect of the defined user interaction must be assumed to be firm. This is not to say that it cannot be questioned, but it cannot be unilaterally ignored or changed. It cannot be treated as advice that can be selected from or edited.

The design team must have responsibility for everything that comes in contact with the user. This includes all hardware as well as all software. Collateral software such as install programs and supporting products must be considered, too.

This is probably the most radical requirement of successful design and the one that will demand the most cultural adaptation. Later in the chapter, I will discuss the cultural-change issue in more depth. Right now, let's look at an example of a company that smoothly integrated design into its process.

An Example of a Well-Run Project

My design studio completed work on one of our most successful design projects for a small company in the Pacific Northwest called Shared Healthcare Systems Inc. (SHS). It was building software to manage every aspect of long-term health-care facilities.

During our initial meetings, I took pains to explain to SHS the importance of personas and how we use them throughout our design process. To our great pleasure and surprise, the SHS team really embraced the concept. When they showed up for the project kickoff meeting, they brought with them their own cast of characters, with about a dozen personas already defined. We still had to go through our process of investigation and learning about the product domain in order to verify and refine the personas, but the whole issue of communicating the persona tool to the developers and product marketers was completely eliminated.

SHS's business takes it into what Michel Bourque, of Clinidata in Montreal, calls the "clinical vortex." Although doctors' offices were some of the first small businesses to be computerized, it was only the billing part that converted. The facet involving doctor interactions with patients has steadfastly resisted the encroachment of the digital age and is one of the last bastions of the fully noncomputerized world.

Although much of SHS's efforts would be administrative, a large portion of its work would step right into that vortex. We had done some small design projects for other clients in this area but had yet to be given full charge of the entire vortex. We were very excited about working on this big, challenging project.

SHS was excited, too, and it initially told us that the scope of its business was so wide that it really didn't believe that we could ever wrap our heads around it. SHS believed that its business was simply too big to be understood. We took that as a challenge and accepted it willingly.

The project was big. We identified five primary personas, two more than we had ever found in any previous project. At first we were suspicious of this count, but upon review, we realized that SHS was really tackling a huge segment of the health-care business. Of course, creating software for five primary personas is a project too large to build all at once. SHS realized this, and the product was designed and built in successive phases, one persona at a time.

David West, the VP of development and our contact at SHS, also has the trust and respect of the others in his growing organization. The product-marketing people know that he has their best interests at heart, as do the programmers. They know that he is fair but firm. He is a rock in the middle of the swirling white water of development. His visible commitment to the design process made it possible for the other developers to trust our design work and take it seriously as a specification.

When SHS came to Cooper Interaction Design, its software-development department was arranged along the same functional lines as its legacy product, which was divided into two parts: clinical and financial.

After we conducted our investigation and developed our personas, we quickly realized why the current system was failing to satisfy the caregivers. Apart from significant interaction problems, there was an artificial dividing line between the clinical and financial information subsystems. This necessitated extra paperwork on the user's part to circumvent the data-processing system's shortcomings. Each user was stuck on his own island of data, unable to communicate because of the lack of communication between the two sides of the system.

A Companywide Awareness of Design

In most companies, designing the primary product or service is assumed to be a core competence. In the world of high-tech software-based products, it is assumed—wrongly—that product design is a core competence of the engineering staff. Actually, there are two parts to the act of creation: design and programming. It demands a significant cultural change to willingly allow interaction designers to work on the business's essential core alongside the engineers.

At any company, regardless of the business it is in, the employees know that they have certain obligations. For example, in a company that manufactures wire coils for loudspeakers, the production manager knows that, although her job is buying wire from the best and cheapest supplier, she cannot sign a supplier's contract until the company's legal counsel has reviewed it. The production manager doesn't know very much about contract legalities, but she knows that encumbering her company without first bringing in the professionals with specialized skills in the area of contract writing and negotiation is wrong. Even though she is not skilled with contracts—or because of her lack of skill in this area—she knows that the lawyers must be involved.

The receiving clerk at the freight dock—despite being the most junior person on the staff—knows that he is empowered only to sign for prearranged deliveries but that he cannot sign for anything else.

The founder and president of the coil-manufacturing company is also quite aware of the need for legal review at all levels. She isn't formally trained in law, either, and she consults with her counsel before signing any formal documents.

Even though none of these people, from the president down, is skilled in legal issues, they are all fully aware of the importance of legal review. Nobody in the company will make any commitments until the lawyers have had their say. There is a companywide awareness of the need for legal oversight and, when appropriate, intervention.

This companywide awareness is true in other areas as well.

When the coil-winding company needed a new manufacturing building, it hired an outside professional, an architect. Even though the production manager and the president were both well versed in the needs of the production floor, they knew that their understanding of the nuances of worker flow and building construction was sketchy. Nobody in the company would imagine expanding their physical plant without first consulting an architect. The architect translated the needs of the user into terms that could be understood by the builder.

The same is true for advertising. The marketing manager wouldn't think of asking a coil-winder to describe the benefits of the product for the company's brochure or for an acoustic-industry magazine. Everyone in the company, regardless of his or her sophistication, understands that advertising is the purview of professionals and that advertising experts must craft the company's public presence. Of course, those experts can be employees of the company or they can be hired from an outside advertising agency. Either way works just fine.

The analogy isn't perfect because neither architecture nor legal advice is a core competence of a product company. Programming, however, is the creation of a product, and that is typically assumed to be a core competence. Given the direct effect on the business, you would expect any company to be even more circumspect about turning the reins over to the wrong people than with advertising, architecture, or purchasing.



[< Day Day Up >](#)



Benefits of Change

In the software world, the apologists are so numerous and influential that their rule is waning only slowly. But wane it will. What it takes is a widespread understanding that technology doesn't have to be so dehumanizing. As more and more users of software-based products have interactive experiences that are not humiliating, they will come to lose patience with those that continue to harass and embarrass them. They will boot the dancing bears out of town.

When the users of software-based products were few, they were also the insiders, who knew how difficult software's feats were. As the technology explodes into the mainstream, those who partake of its power are less aware of the greatness of the accomplishment. They are not willing to forgive a product with bad interaction just because building it was difficult.

Following technology seems like a good plan, but it usually brings only boring products that are more-complex derivatives of products that came before them. Interaction design lets you break out of that pattern and create products that do things that have never been done before.

Interaction design makes your product desirable, conferring on it the singular advantage of customer loyalty. After you make a customer happy with your product, he will stick with your company and your brand for a long time. If your product is merely dancing bearware, your customers will be quietly casting their eyes around, looking for easier, friendlier alternatives.

Interaction design can shorten the amount of time that you spend developing your product. Knowing what to do in advance means that you will spend less time blundering about trying to discover by accident the right thing to do.

Getting to the right product is always a matter of iterating. It always takes several tries to get the details right. With interaction design done in advance, the number of iterations it takes can be reduced significantly. There is enormous cost in each new version of a product, so if you can reduce the version count from, say, four to two, there is a lot of time and money to be saved.

Having to make fewer versions and having to throw away less code will make the development process cheaper. Programmers often complain that our designs involve more-complex code, and sometimes this is true. However, there is typically a lot less of it in total. The cost of code doesn't increase much as its difficulty increases, but it becomes a lot more expensive as the quantity of it increases. Each extra line of code must be tested, debugged, and supported.



[< Day Day Up >](#)



Let Them Eat Cake

I live and work in Silicon Valley, California. Virtually everybody I know is involved in the high-tech industry. We are all affluent, highly educated, and geographically and socially mobile, and we are all very comfortable with computers, cell phones, DVDs, ATMs, and every other software-based product in the middle-class menagerie. When I eat lunch at the Crescent Park Grill or Spago, the people at the next table are always discussing "client/server this" and "Web-based that." It's an exciting place to live, but it isn't representative of the majority of people in this country, let alone around the world. Here in Silicon Valley, it is easy for our estimation of the suitability of high-tech products to be terribly skewed. We forget how hard these products really are to use.

Ten years ago, retail consultant Seymour Merrin said that we have found it easier to convince consumers that software is easy to use than it is to actually make it easier to use. Merrin was being cynical, but he was also expressing surprise that we were getting away with such a bold lie. His assertion is as true now as it was then, but with the growth of high tech, we cannot continue on mere cynicism—we need a real solution.

People know that using computers is very hard, but they assume that there are good reasons for the difficulty. Most people assume that things work as well as they possibly can.

Although most users of software-based products outside of the computer industry are extremely frustrated with hard-to-use products, most of the people creating them are satisfied with the status quo. Programmers don't find using computers particularly hard, so they are willing to tolerate things while they play with technology and have fun creating cool new dancing bearware.

For the rest of us, we get the software that we demand, and so far, we have demanded little. Software vendors give us geegaws, gadgets, and features we don't want and never use, yet we buy them anyway. We demand that our programs don't crash, so our programs are exhaustively tested, and they are reasonably reliable. We demand the newest versions right away, so they ship at breakneck speed. But unaware that things could be better, we don't demand that they be powerful and pleasurable, so they are weak and oppressive instead.

Occasionally, consumers hold out the vague and quixotic hope that the next wave of high technology—such as voice recognition—will make software-based products easy to use. This hope is naïve and foolish, and it saddens me how the apologists cruelly fan it.

Computer software is precisely that—soft—and it can be molded into anything that its makers want it to be. They don't make it easy to use because they don't know how, not because it can't be. Rather than admit that embarrassing fact, they claim that it cannot be done for "technical reasons." Computer users, who are not programmers, are forced to agree with the experts and suffer, or to disagree with the experts and—what?—suffer anyway. Not being experts, they are unable to proffer solutions of their own, so they are just regarded as unproductive complainers.

Detroit used to make huge, chrome-encrusted, gas-guzzling cars and proclaim self-righteously that it "only gave the consumer what they wanted." In the gas crisis of the mid-1970s, the Japanese stepped in with conservative, fuel-efficient small cars and dealt Detroit a blow it will never forget. Today, American auto makers show a much greater respect for the consumer's desires, and they will never again make the claim that they know best.

The Japanese seized the high ground of the auto market by giving users something that they didn't even know they wanted. But they knew a good thing when they saw it. In the same way, the high ground of software interaction is

Alan Cooper

As a software inventor in the mid-70s, Alan got it into his head that there must be a better approach to software construction. This new approach would free users from annoying, difficult, and inappropriate software behavior by applying a design and engineering process that focuses on the user first, and silicon second. Using this process, engineering teams could build better products faster by doing it right the first time.

His determination paid off. In 1990 he founded Cooper, a technology product design firm. Today, Cooper's innovative approach to software design is recognized as an industry standard. Over a decade after Cooper opened its doors for business, the San Francisco firm has provided innovative, user-focused solutions for companies such as Abbott Laboratories, Align Technologies, Discover Financial Services, Dolby, Ericsson, Fujitsu, Fujitsu Softek, Hewlett Packard, Informatica, IBM, Logitech, Merck-Medco, Microsoft, Overture, SAP, SHS Healthcare, Sony, Sun Microsystems, the Toro Company, Varian, and VISA. The Cooper team offers training courses for the Goal-Directed interaction design tools they have invented and perfected over the years, including the revolutionary technique for modeling and simulating users called personas, first introduced to the public in 1999 via the first edition of *The Inmates*.

In 1994, Bill Gates presented Alan with a Windows Pioneer Award for his invention of the visual programming concept behind Visual Basic, and in 1998 Alan received the prestigious Software Visionary Award from the Software Developer's Forum. Alan introduced a taxonomy for software design in 1995 with his best-selling first book, *About Face: The Essentials of User Interface Design*. Alan and co-author Robert Reimann published a significantly revised edition, *About Face: The Essentials of Interaction Design*, in 2003.

Alan's wife, Susan Cooper, is President and CEO of Cooper. They have two teenage sons, Scott and Marty, neither of whom is a nerd. In addition to software design, Alan is passionate about general aviation, urban planning, architecture, motor scooters, cooking, model trains, and disc golf, among other things. Please send him email at inmates@cooper.com or visit Cooper's Web site at www.cooper.com.

 [PREV](#)

[< Day Day Up >](#)

[\[SYMBOL\]](#) [\[A\]](#) [\[B\]](#) [\[C\]](#) [\[D\]](#) [\[E\]](#) [\[F\]](#) [\[G\]](#) [\[H\]](#) [\[I\]](#) [\[K\]](#) [\[L\]](#) [\[M\]](#) [\[N\]](#) [\[O\]](#) [\[P\]](#) [\[Q\]](#) [\[R\]](#) [\[S\]](#) [\[T\]](#) [\[U\]](#) [\[V\]](#) [\[W\]](#) [\[X\]](#) [\[Z\]](#)

 [PREV](#)

[< Day Day Up >](#)



[[SYMBOL](#)] [[A](#)] [[B](#)] [[C](#)] [[D](#)] [[E](#)] [[F](#)] [[G](#)] [[H](#)] [[I](#)] [[K](#)] [[L](#)] [[M](#)] [[N](#)] [[O](#)] [[P](#)] [[Q](#)] [[R](#)] [[S](#)] [[T](#)] [[U](#)] [[V](#)] [[W](#)] [[X](#)] [[Z](#)]

["brains" versus "gray hair" \(consulting\)](#) [2nd](#)

["clinical vortex"](#)

["computer literate"](#)

["dog's breakfast"](#)

["elastic users"](#) [2nd](#)

["expect what you inspect"](#)

["feature list bargaining"](#)

[programmer's role in](#)

["fudgability" of software](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#) [5th](#)

["gray hair" versus "brains" \(consulting\)](#) [2nd](#)

["Homo logicus"](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#) [5th](#) [6th](#) [7th](#) [8th](#) [9th](#)

["inflecting the interface"](#)

["Jetway Test"](#) [2nd](#)

["jocks", programmers as](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#)

["less is more" philosophy](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#)

["line of death" \("feature list bargaining"\)](#)

["mud-hut design"](#) [2nd](#)

["painting the corpse"](#) [2nd](#)

["playing devil's advocate"](#)

["polite" design](#)

["polite" software](#)

[characteristics of](#) [2nd](#)

["fudgability"](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#) [5th](#)

[anticipation of needs](#) [2nd](#)

[common sense](#)

[deferential role](#) [2nd](#)

[instant gratification](#)

[perceptiveness](#)

[personalization](#) [2nd](#)

[presentation of choices](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[providers of information](#)

[responsiveness](#) [2nd](#)

[self-confidence](#) [2nd](#)

[taciturn about problems](#) [2nd](#)

[trustworthiness](#)

[well-informed](#) [2nd](#)

[politeness versus humanness](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

["pre-production" phase](#)

[design as](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

["pretend it's magic" exercise](#)

[Logitech ScanMan case study](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

["redlining"](#)

["riding the tiger"](#)

["scar tissue" in programs](#) [2nd](#)

["seat at the table" design teams](#)

["Seven Habits of Highly Engineered People"](#) [2nd](#)

["shopping lists" of features](#)

["skin in the game"](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[interaction designers](#)

["software apartheid"](#)

["stinking gods among men"](#)

["teaching dogs to be cats"](#)

["user friendly"](#)

["wet dogs"](#)

["skin in the game"](#)

[\[SYMBOL\]](#) [\[A\]](#) [\[B\]](#) [\[C\]](#) [\[D\]](#) [\[E\]](#) [\[F\]](#) [\[G\]](#) [\[H\]](#) [\[I\]](#) [\[K\]](#) [\[L\]](#) [\[M\]](#) [\[N\]](#) [\[O\]](#) [\[P\]](#) [\[Q\]](#) [\[R\]](#) [\[S\]](#) [\[T\]](#) [\[U\]](#) [\[V\]](#) [\[W\]](#) [\[X\]](#) [\[Z\]](#)

[About Face](#) [2nd](#)

[Access](#)

[Accidental Empires](#)

[Action Request System project](#)

[Adobe Photoshop](#)

[aesthetics](#)

[versus functionality](#)

[airplanes](#)

[IFEs](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[navigation computers](#) [2nd](#)

[programmers as pilots](#)

[alarm clock](#)

[design problems](#) [2nd](#)

[aliasing](#)

[Amazon.com 1-Click interface](#) [2nd](#)

[American Airlines flight 965](#) [2nd](#)

[anticipation of needs](#) [2nd](#)

[apologists](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#) [5th](#) [6th](#)

[programmers as](#)

[Apple](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#)

[interface style guides](#) [2nd](#)

[Apple Newton](#)

[Atkinson, Bill](#)

[ATMs](#)

[confirmation messages](#) [2nd](#)

[design problems](#) [2nd](#)

[attrition strategy](#) [2nd](#)

[audience](#)

[narrowing](#) [2nd](#)

[roll-aboard suitcases](#) [2nd](#)

[sticky notes](#)

[automated systems](#)

[automobile market](#)



[[SYMBOL](#)] [[A](#)] [[B](#)] [[C](#)] [[D](#)] [[E](#)] [[F](#)] [[G](#)] [[H](#)] [[I](#)] [[K](#)] [[L](#)] [[M](#)] [[N](#)] [[O](#)] [[P](#)] [[Q](#)] [[R](#)] [[S](#)] [[T](#)] [[U](#)] [[V](#)] [[W](#)] [[X](#)] [[Z](#)]

[bad design](#) [See also [cognitive friction](#)]

[acceptance of](#)

[ATMs](#)

[confirmation messages](#) [2nd](#)

[blaming users](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[calendar software](#) [2nd](#)

[causes](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[confirmation dialog boxes](#) [2nd](#)

[costs](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#)

[business software](#) [2nd](#)

[loss of market share](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[narratives about](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#) [5th](#) [6th](#) [7th](#)

[opportunity cost](#) [2nd](#)

[prototyping](#) [2nd](#)

[effects](#)

[alarm clock](#) [2nd](#)

[ATMs](#) [2nd](#)

[digital cameras](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#)

[employability](#) [2nd](#)

[IFEs](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[navigational computers \(airplanes\)](#) [2nd](#)

[Porsche Boxster](#) [2nd](#)

[productivity loss](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#)

[techno-rage](#) [2nd](#)

[USS Yorktown](#) [2nd](#)

[email](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[file systems](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#)

[reaction to](#) [2nd](#)

[scheduling programs](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[technology as solution for](#)

[VCRs](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[bargaining](#) [See [feature list bargaining](#)]

[behavioral design](#)

[bell curve of skill levels](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#) [5th](#)

[Betsy \(Elemental Drumbeat persona\)](#)

[Bezos, Jeff](#) [2nd](#)

[Bjerke, Carolyn](#)

[Blair, Alice](#)

[blaming the user](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#) [5th](#)

[bloatware](#)

[blueprints](#)

[design documentation as](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#)

[blueprints as product descriptions](#) [2nd](#)

[Borland International](#) [2nd](#)

[Borque, Michel](#)

[boundary conditions](#)

[brick towers, programs as](#) [2nd](#)

[Bronson, Po](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#) [5th](#) [6th](#)

[Brooks, Frederick](#) [2nd](#)

[browser-based software](#) [2nd](#)

[building design teams](#) [2nd](#)

[business software](#) [2nd](#)

[businesspeople](#)

[role of](#) [2nd](#)

[buyer personas](#) [2nd](#)



[[SYMBOL](#)] [[A](#)] [[B](#)] [[C](#)] [[D](#)] [[E](#)] [[F](#)] [[G](#)] [[H](#)] [[I](#)] [[K](#)] [[L](#)] [[M](#)] [[N](#)] [[O](#)] [[P](#)] [[Q](#)] [[R](#)] [[S](#)] [[T](#)] [[U](#)] [[V](#)] [[W](#)] [[X](#)] [[Z](#)]

calendar software

[usability problems](#) [2nd](#)

[cancellation of products](#) [2nd](#)

[capability](#)

[versus viability](#)

case studies

[Elemental Drumbeat](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[competition](#) [2nd](#)

[design](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[floating palettes](#) [2nd](#)

[goals](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[personas](#) [2nd](#)

[product success](#)

[Logitech ScanMan](#)

["pretend it's magic" exercise](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[cropping tools](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[personas](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#) [5th](#)

[reorienting images](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[resizing images](#) [2nd](#)

[results](#)

[Sony Trans Com's P@ssport](#) [2nd](#)

[designing interface](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#) [5th](#)

[original interface](#) [2nd](#)

[personas](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#)

[cast of characters](#) [2nd](#) [See also [personas](#)] [3rd](#) [4th](#) [See also [personas](#)] [5th](#) [6th](#) [See also [personas](#)]

[primary personas](#) [2nd](#)

CD-ROM player

[cognitive friction of](#)

[Chad Marchetti, Boy \(Logitech ScanMan persona\)](#)

choices

[presenting](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[classroom management system](#)

[Clevis McCloud \(P@ssport persona\)](#)

[designing interface for](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#)

[cognitive friction](#) [2nd](#) [See also [bad design](#)]

[apologists](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#) [5th](#) [6th](#)

[programmers as](#)

[CD-ROM player](#)

[computers](#)

[costs of](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[engineering skills and](#)

[microwave ovens](#)

[microwaves](#) [2nd](#)

[picture-in-picture television](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[reaction to](#) [2nd](#)

[remote keyless entry](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#)

[source of](#)

[survivors](#) [2nd](#)

[Swiss Army knife](#) [2nd](#)

[typewriters](#)

[versus industrial design problems](#) [2nd](#)

[violins](#)

[WWW](#)

[common sense in software](#)

common vocabulary





[[SYMBOL](#)] [[A](#)] [[B](#)] [[C](#)] [[D](#)] [[E](#)] [[F](#)] [[G](#)] [[H](#)] [[I](#)] [[K](#)] [[L](#)] [[M](#)] [[N](#)] [[O](#)] [[P](#)] [[Q](#)] [[R](#)] [[S](#)] [[T](#)] [[U](#)] [[V](#)] [[W](#)] [[X](#)] [[Z](#)]

[daily use scenarios](#) [2nd](#)

[dancing bear](#)

[calendar software as](#) [2nd](#)

[email as](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[NetWare](#)

[satisfaction with](#)

[scheduling programs as](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[VCRs as](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[WWW as](#)

[dancing bear Explorapedia as](#) [2nd](#)

[dancing bears](#) [2nd](#)

[de Bono, Edward](#) [2nd](#)

[deadline management](#) [2nd](#)

["feature list bargaining"](#) [2nd](#)

[determining completion](#) [2nd](#)

[fear of cancellation](#) [2nd](#)

[Gresham's Law](#)

[late shipment](#) [2nd](#)

[Ninety-Ninety Rule](#)

[Parkinson's Law](#)

[Product Managers](#)

[debugging](#) [2nd](#)

[deferential role of software](#) [2nd](#)

[dehumanizing processes](#) [2nd](#)

[design](#)

[advantages](#)

[versus time to market advantages](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#) [5th](#)

[after programming](#)

[costs](#) [2nd](#)

[as "pre-production" phase](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[as core competence](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[before programming](#)

[behavioral](#)

[company-wide awareness](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[conceptual](#)

[conceptual integrity](#) [2nd](#)

[disrespect for](#) [2nd](#)

[documenting](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#)

[benefit to companies](#)

[benefit to managers](#) [2nd](#)

[benefit to marketing](#) [2nd](#)

[benefit to programmers](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[benefit to tech support](#)

[benefit to technical writers](#)

[effect on code](#) [2nd](#)

[evaluating](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[for narrow audiences](#) [2nd](#)

[roll-aboard suitcases](#) [2nd](#)

[sticky notes](#)

[free features](#) [2nd](#)

[generating customer loyalty with \(Apple\)](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#)

[goal-directed](#)

[classroom management system example](#)

[defined](#) [2nd](#)

[television news show example](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)



[[SYMBOL](#)] [[A](#)] [[B](#)] [[C](#)] [[D](#)] [[E](#)] [[F](#)] [[G](#)] [[H](#)] [[I](#)] [[K](#)] [[L](#)] [[M](#)] [[N](#)] [[O](#)] [[P](#)] [[Q](#)] [[R](#)] [[S](#)] [[T](#)] [[U](#)] [[V](#)] [[W](#)] [[X](#)] [[Z](#)]

[edge case scenarios](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[edge cases](#)

[Einstein, Albert](#)

[Elemental Drumbeat case study](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[competition](#) [2nd](#)

[design](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[floating palettes](#) [2nd](#)

[goals](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[personas](#) [2nd](#)

[product success](#)

[Elemental Software](#)

[email](#)

[threads](#)

[usability problems](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[emotional response to computers](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[employability](#) [2nd](#)

[encapsulation](#)

[end-user design](#) [See [interaction design](#)]

[enterprise resource planning \(ERP\) companies](#)

[Ernie \(Elemental Drumbeat persona\)](#)

[ERP \(enterprise resource planning\) companies](#)

[euphemism pyramid](#) [2nd](#) [See also [skill levels](#)]

[evaluating design](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[Evenson, Shelley](#)

[Evers, Ridgely](#)

[excise](#)

[experience versus expertise \(consulting\)](#) [2nd](#)

[expertise versus experience \(consulting\)](#) [2nd](#)

[Explorapedia](#)

[as dancing bear](#) [2nd](#)

[development of](#)

[programmers' views on](#) [2nd](#)

[success of](#)

[weaknesses of](#)

[[SYMBOL](#)] [[A](#)] [[B](#)] [[C](#)] [[D](#)] [[E](#)] [[F](#)] [[G](#)] [[H](#)] [[I](#)] [[K](#)] [[L](#)] [[M](#)] [[N](#)] [[O](#)] [[P](#)] [[Q](#)] [[R](#)] [[S](#)] [[T](#)] [[U](#)] [[V](#)] [[W](#)] [[X](#)] [[Z](#)]

facts

[versus information](#)

[false goals](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[Farros, Royal](#) [2nd](#)

[feature list bargaining](#) [2nd](#) [See also [product descriptions](#)]

["line of death"](#)

[personas as solution for](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#)

[programmer's role in](#)

[feature-dominated markets](#)

features

["less is more" philosophy](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

["less is more" philosophy](#)

[advantages/disadvantages](#)

[cost of](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[customer demands](#)

[personas and](#) [2nd](#)

[cutting](#) [2nd](#)

[influence on marketplace](#) [2nd](#)

[list of, versus product description](#)

[lists](#)

[usage/interaction relationship](#)

[versus goals](#) [2nd](#)

feedback loops

[negative](#)

[software design](#) [2nd](#)

file systems

[hierarchical](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#)

[technical support costs](#)

[filmmaking \(compared to software development\)](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#)

[focus groups](#) [2nd](#)

[forgetfulness of software](#)

[Forman, Ed](#)

[Fox, Sara](#)

[free features](#) [2nd](#)

[Fry, Art](#)

functionality

[versus aesthetics](#)

[\[SYMBOL\]](#) [\[A\]](#) [\[B\]](#) [\[C\]](#) [\[D\]](#) [\[E\]](#) [\[F\]](#) [\[G\]](#) [\[H\]](#) [\[I\]](#) [\[K\]](#) [\[L\]](#) [\[M\]](#) [\[N\]](#) [\[O\]](#) [\[P\]](#) [\[Q\]](#) [\[R\]](#) [\[S\]](#) [\[T\]](#) [\[U\]](#) [\[V\]](#) [\[W\]](#) [\[X\]](#) [\[Z\]](#)

[Gammill, Kevin](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[Gates, Bill](#)

[Gay, Jim](#)

[narrative](#) [2nd](#)

[Gellerman, Saul](#)

[General Magic](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[Glen, Paul](#)

[Goal-Directed design](#) [See [interaction design](#)]

[goal-directed design](#)

[defined](#) [2nd](#)

[examples](#)

[classroom management system](#)

[television news show](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[goals](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [See also [personas](#)][4th](#)

[corporate](#) [2nd](#)

[Elemental Drumbeat case study](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[false](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[hygienic](#)

[personal](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#) [5th](#) [6th](#)

[practical](#) [2nd](#)

[versus features](#) [2nd](#)

[versus tasks](#) [2nd](#)

[Gorelik, Vlad](#)

[graphical user interfaces \(GUIs\)](#)

[Gresham's Law](#)

[GUIs \(graphical user interfaces\)](#)

[\[SYMBOL\]](#) [\[A\]](#) [\[B\]](#) [\[C\]](#) [\[D\]](#) [\[E\]](#) [\[F\]](#) [\[G\]](#) [\[H\]](#) [\[I\]](#) [\[K\]](#) [\[L\]](#) [\[M\]](#) [\[N\]](#) [\[O\]](#) [\[P\]](#) [\[Q\]](#) [\[R\]](#) [\[S\]](#) [\[T\]](#) [\[U\]](#) [\[V\]](#) [\[W\]](#) [\[X\]](#) [\[Z\]](#)

[handheld computers](#)

[hardware](#)

[bridging software to](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[haves and have-nots](#)

[Heathershaw-Hart, Tamra](#)

[Hertzfeld, Andy](#) [2nd](#)

[Hewlett-Packard](#)

[hierarchical file systems](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#)

[high-technology businesses](#)

[capability](#)

[desirability](#)

[viability](#)

[hiring designers](#) [2nd](#)

[How the Mind Works](#)

[humanness in software](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

["polite" software](#)

[humans versus computers](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[hybrid products](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[hygienic factors](#)

[hygienic goals](#)

[hypothetical archetypes](#) [See [personas](#)]



[[SYMBOL](#)] [[A](#)] [[B](#)] [[C](#)] [[D](#)] [[E](#)] [[F](#)] [[G](#)] [[H](#)] [[I](#)] [[K](#)] [[L](#)] [[M](#)] [[N](#)] [[O](#)] [[P](#)] [[Q](#)] [[R](#)] [[S](#)] [[T](#)] [[U](#)] [[V](#)] [[W](#)] [[X](#)] [[Z](#)]

[I Sing the Body Electronic](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#) [5th](#)

IBM

[as customer-driven company](#)

[IFEs \(in-flight entertainment systems\)](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[P@ssport case study](#) [See also [Sony Trans Com](#)']

image reorientation

[Logitech ScanMan](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

image resizing

[Logitech ScanMan](#) [2nd](#)

[implementation model](#)

[in-car navigation system prototype](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[in-flight entertainment systems \(IFEs\)](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[P@ssport case study](#) [See also [Sony Trans Com](#)']

[industrial age](#)

[industrial design](#) [2nd](#)

[inflecting the interface](#)

[inflexibility of software](#) [2nd](#)

information

[software's providing of](#)

[versus facts](#)

[information age](#)

[installation](#) [2nd](#)

[instant gratification in software](#)

interaction design

["inflecting the interface"](#)

["less is more" philosophy](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#)

["pretend it's magic" exercise](#)

[Logitech ScanMan case study](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[as goal-directed](#) [2nd](#)

[assumptions of limitations](#) [2nd](#)

[benefits](#) [2nd](#)

[cast of characters](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[commitment to](#) [2nd](#)

[defined](#)

[documenting](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#)

[benefit to companies](#)

[benefit to managers](#) [2nd](#)

[benefit to marketing](#) [2nd](#)

[benefit to programmers](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[benefit to tech support](#)

[benefit to technical writers](#)

[effect on code](#) [2nd](#)

[frustrations of](#)

[generating customer loyalty with](#) [2nd](#)

[goals](#) [2nd](#)

[corporate](#) [2nd](#)

[false](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[hygienic](#)

[personal](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#) [5th](#) [6th](#)

[practical](#) [2nd](#)

[versus tasks](#) [2nd](#)

[hiring designers](#) [2nd](#)

[inflecting the interface](#)

[interaction implementation and](#)

[perpetual intermediates](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#) [5th](#)



[\[SYMBOL\]](#) [\[A\]](#) [\[B\]](#) [\[C\]](#) [\[D\]](#) [\[E\]](#) [\[F\]](#) [\[G\]](#) [\[H\]](#) [\[I\]](#) [\[K\]](#) [\[L\]](#) [\[M\]](#) [\[N\]](#) [\[O\]](#) [\[P\]](#) [\[Q\]](#) [\[R\]](#) [\[S\]](#) [\[T\]](#) [\[U\]](#) [\[V\]](#) [\[W\]](#) [\[X\]](#) [\[Z\]](#)

[Karp, Alan](#)

[Keeley, Larry](#) [2nd](#)

[tripod model](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#) [5th](#)

[Apple](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#)

[Microsoft](#) [2nd](#)

[Novell](#) [2nd](#)

[Korman, Jonathan](#)

[Krause, Kai](#)

[[SYMBOL](#)] [[A](#)] [[B](#)] [[C](#)] [[D](#)] [[E](#)] [[F](#)] [[G](#)] [[H](#)] [[I](#)] [[K](#)] [[L](#)] [[M](#)] [[N](#)] [[O](#)] [[P](#)] [[Q](#)] [[R](#)] [[S](#)] [[T](#)] [[U](#)] [[V](#)] [[W](#)] [[X](#)] [[Z](#)]

[late product shipment](#) [2nd](#)

[Lateral Thinking](#)

[lateral thinking](#)

[Lateral Thinking](#)

[laziness of software](#)

[Leading Geeks](#)

[limitations](#)

[assumptions of](#) [2nd](#)

[Logitech ScanMan case study](#)

["pretend it's magic" exercise](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[cropping tools](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[personas](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#) [5th](#)

[Chad Marchetti, Boy](#)

[Magnum, DPI](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[Malcom, the Web-warrior](#)

[reorienting images](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[resizing images](#) [2nd](#)

[results](#)

[long-term versus short-term thinking \(managers\)](#) [2nd](#)

[[SYMBOL](#)] [[A](#)] [[B](#)] [[C](#)] [[D](#)] [[E](#)] [[F](#)] [[G](#)] [[H](#)] [[I](#)] [[K](#)] [[L](#)] [[M](#)] [[N](#)] [[O](#)] [[P](#)] [[Q](#)] [[R](#)] [[S](#)] [[T](#)] [[U](#)] [[V](#)] [[W](#)] [[X](#)] [[Z](#)]

[Magic Link computer](#)

[Magnum, DPI \(Logitech ScanMan persona\)](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[Maister, David](#) [2nd](#)

[making movies \(compared to software development\)](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#)

[Malcom, the Web-Warrior \(Logitech ScanMan persona\)](#)

[managers](#)

[commitment to design](#) [2nd](#)

[cutting features](#) [2nd](#)

[design documents and](#) [2nd](#)

[influences on](#)

[moviemaker comparison](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#)

[short-term versus long-term thinking](#) [2nd](#)

[taking control](#)

[Managing the Professional Service Firm](#) [2nd](#)

[manual devices versus computerized devices](#)

[manual systems](#)

[market unpredictability, myth of](#) [2nd](#)

[marketing](#)

[design documents and](#) [2nd](#)

[marketing personas](#)

[marketing requirements documents](#)

[marketing specifications](#)

[McGregor, Scott](#)

[narrative](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#) [5th](#)

[measures](#)

[importance of](#)

[objective](#)

[quantitative](#)

[memory](#)

[human versus computer](#)

[Merrin, Seymour](#)

[metafunctions](#) [2nd](#)

[method acting](#)

[scenarios as](#)

[Microsoft](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#)

[attrition strategy](#) [2nd](#)

[competing against](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[interface style guides](#) [2nd](#)

[programming culture](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#) [5th](#)

[technical support costs](#)

[Windows](#) [[See Windows](#)]

[design iteration](#)

[microwave ovens, cognitive friction of](#)

[microwaves, cognitive friction of](#) [2nd](#)

[monocline groupings](#)

[Moody, Fred](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#) [5th](#)

[Moore, Geoffrey](#)

[Motivation and Productivity](#)

[moviemaker](#)

[manager comparison](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#)

[multidisciplinary design teams](#)

[\[SYMBOL\]](#) [\[A\]](#) [\[B\]](#) [\[C\]](#) [\[D\]](#) [\[E\]](#) [\[F\]](#) [\[G\]](#) [\[H\]](#) [\[I\]](#) [\[K\]](#) [\[L\]](#) [\[M\]](#) [\[N\]](#) [\[O\]](#) [\[P\]](#) [\[Q\]](#) [\[R\]](#) [\[S\]](#) [\[T\]](#) [\[U\]](#) [\[V\]](#) [\[W\]](#) [\[X\]](#) [\[Z\]](#)

[naive users](#)

[naming personas](#)

[narrowing user audience](#) [2nd](#)

[roll-aboard suitcases](#) [2nd](#)

[sticky notes](#)

[Nass, Clifford](#)

[navigational computers \(airplanes\)](#) [2nd](#)

[necessary use scenarios](#)

[need](#)

[versus desirability](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[negative feedback loops](#)

[lack of in software design](#) [2nd](#)

[negative personas](#)

[NetWare](#) [2nd](#)

[new technology](#)

[versus interaction design](#)

[Newton computer](#)

[Ninety-Ninety Rule](#)

[Nomadic Computing](#)

[Novell](#) [2nd](#)

[[SYMBOL](#)] [[A](#)] [[B](#)] [[C](#)] [[D](#)] [[E](#)] [[F](#)] [[G](#)] [[H](#)] [[I](#)] [[K](#)] [[L](#)] [[M](#)] [[N](#)] [[O](#)] [[P](#)] [[Q](#)] [[R](#)] [[S](#)] [[T](#)] [[U](#)] [[V](#)] [[W](#)] [[X](#)] [[Z](#)]

[object-oriented programming](#)

[objective measures](#)

[opportunity cost](#) [2nd](#)

[options](#)

[presenting](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[Oracle](#)

[as customer-driven company](#)

[[SYMBOL](#)] [[A](#)] [[B](#)] [[C](#)] [[D](#)] [[E](#)] [[F](#)] [[G](#)] [[H](#)] [[I](#)] [[K](#)] [[L](#)] [[M](#)] [[N](#)] [[O](#)] [[P](#)] [[Q](#)] [[R](#)] [[S](#)] [[T](#)] [[U](#)] [[V](#)] [[W](#)] [[X](#)] [[Z](#)]

[PalmPilot](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[Parkinson's Law](#)

[Peacock](#) [See [Logitech ScanMan case study](#)]

[PenPoint computer](#)

[perceptiveness in software](#)

[performance measures](#)

[perpetual intermediates](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#) [5th](#)

[personal goals](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#) [5th](#) [6th](#)

[personalization of software](#) [2nd](#)

[personas](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#) [See also [goals](#)]

[as communications tools](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#)

[buyer personas](#) [2nd](#)

[cast of characters](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[customer demands and](#) [2nd](#)

[defining](#)

[designers' need for](#) [2nd](#)

[Elemental Drumbeat case study](#) [2nd](#)

[Logitech ScanMan case study](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#) [5th](#)

[marketing personas](#)

[naming](#)

[negative personas](#)

[precision versus accuracy](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[primary personas](#) [2nd](#)

[Shared Healthcare Systems project](#) [2nd](#)

[skill levels](#) [2nd](#)

[Sony Trans Com's P@ssport case study](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#)

[designing interface for](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#) [5th](#)

[specifying](#) [2nd](#)

[stereotyping](#)

[versus users](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[picture-in-picture television](#)

[cognitive friction of](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[pilots](#)

[programmers as](#)

[Pinker, Steven](#)

[planning](#)

[financial/operational](#)

[product](#)

[Pleas, Keith](#)

[Porche Boxster](#)

[design problems](#)

[Porsche Boxster](#)

[design problems](#)

[Post-It Notes](#)

[power user](#) [See [apologist](#)]

[practical goals](#) [2nd](#)

[precision versus accuracy \(in personas\)](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[presentation of choices](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[primary personas](#) [2nd](#)

[Principle of Commensurate Effort](#)

[problems \(of computer\)](#)

[displaying to users](#) [2nd](#)

[processes](#)

[changing](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[design-friendly](#) [2nd](#)





[< Day Day Up >](#)

[[SYMBOL](#)] [[A](#)] [[B](#)] [[C](#)] [[D](#)] [[E](#)] [[F](#)] [[G](#)] [[H](#)] [[I](#)] [[K](#)] [[L](#)] [[M](#)] [[N](#)] [[O](#)] [[P](#)] [[Q](#)] [[R](#)] [[S](#)] [[T](#)] [[U](#)] [[V](#)] [[W](#)] [[X](#)] [[Z](#)]

quality

[responsibility for 2nd](#)

[quality measures](#)

[quantitative measures](#)

[QuickBooks, development time](#)



[< Day Day Up >](#)

[[SYMBOL](#)] [[A](#)] [[B](#)] [[C](#)] [[D](#)] [[E](#)] [[F](#)] [[G](#)] [[H](#)] [[I](#)] [[K](#)] [[L](#)] [[M](#)] [[N](#)] [[O](#)] [[P](#)] [[Q](#)] [[R](#)] [[S](#)] [[T](#)] [[U](#)] [[V](#)] [[W](#)] [[X](#)] [[Z](#)]

[Raymond, Eric](#)

[recognizing good design](#) [2nd](#)

[Reeves, Byron](#)

[Remedy Inc](#)

[remote keyless entry](#)

[cognitive friction of](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#)

[reorienting images](#)

[Logitech ScanMan](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[resizing images](#)

[Logitech ScanMan](#) [2nd](#)

[response to computers](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[responsibility of software](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[responsiveness in software](#) [2nd](#)

[reusing code](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#)

[Rheinfrank, John](#)

[Rivlin, John](#)

[narrative](#) [2nd](#)

[roll-aboard suitcases](#) [2nd](#)

[personas for](#) [2nd](#)

[Ruby \(programming language\)](#)



[[SYMBOL](#)] [[A](#)] [[B](#)] [[C](#)] [[D](#)] [[E](#)] [[F](#)] [[G](#)] [[H](#)] [[I](#)] [[K](#)] [[L](#)] [[M](#)] [[N](#)] [[O](#)] [[P](#)] [[Q](#)] [[R](#)] [[S](#)] [[T](#)] [[U](#)] [[V](#)] [[W](#)] [[X](#)] [[Z](#)]

[Sagent Technology](#)

[SAP](#)

[as customer-driven company](#)

[ScanMan](#) [[See Logitech ScanMan case study](#)]

[scarcity thinking](#) [2nd](#)

[scenarios](#) [2nd](#)

[breadth versus depth](#)

[constructing](#)

[daily use](#) [2nd](#)

[necessary use](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#)

[scheduling programs](#)

[usability problems](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[self-confidence in software](#) [2nd](#)

[self-referential design](#)

[versus interaction design](#)

[service companies](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[Shared Healthcare Systems project](#)

["clinical vortex"](#) [2nd](#)

[personas](#)

[Shared Heathcare Systems project](#)

[personas](#)

[programmers](#)

[unification of system](#)

[shipping products late](#) [2nd](#)

[short-term versus long-term thinking \(managers\)](#) [2nd](#)

[Silicon Valley, California](#)

[skill levels](#) [2nd](#) [[See also euphemism pyramid](#)][3rd](#)

[perpetual intermediates](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#) [5th](#)

[software](#)

[bridging hardware to](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[browser-based](#) [2nd](#)

[forgetfulness](#)

[inflexibility](#) [2nd](#)

[installation](#) [2nd](#)

[lack of responsibility](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[laziness](#)

[user blame](#) [2nd](#)

[withholding information](#) [2nd](#)

[software apartheid](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#)

[software design](#) [[See design](#)]

[usability problems](#)

[alarm clock](#) [2nd](#)

[ATMs](#) [2nd](#)

[causes](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[costs](#)

[digital cameras](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#)

[file systems](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#)

[IFEs](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[navigational computers \(airlines\)](#) [2nd](#)

[Porsche Boxster](#) [2nd](#)

[Windows NT \(USS Yorktown\)](#) [2nd](#)

[software development process](#)

[changing](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[software engineers](#) [[See programmers](#)]

[Sony Trans Com's P@ssport case study](#) [2nd](#)

[\[SYMBOL\]](#) [\[A\]](#) [\[B\]](#) [\[C\]](#) [\[D\]](#) [\[E\]](#) [\[F\]](#) [\[G\]](#) [\[H\]](#) [\[I\]](#) [\[K\]](#) [\[L\]](#) [\[M\]](#) [\[N\]](#) [\[O\]](#) [\[P\]](#) [\[Q\]](#) [\[R\]](#) [\[S\]](#) [\[T\]](#) [\[U\]](#) [\[V\]](#) [\[W\]](#) [\[X\]](#) [\[Z\]](#)

[T/Maker software company](#) [2nd](#)

[task-directed design](#)

[tasks](#)

[versus goals](#) [2nd](#)

[teams](#)

[tech support](#)

[design documents and](#)

[technical managers](#) [See [managers](#)]

[technical specifications](#)

[technical support](#)

[technical writers](#)

[design documents and](#)

[techno-rage](#) [2nd](#)

[technology](#)

[democratization of](#) [2nd](#)

[versus interaction design](#)

[television news show application](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[testing](#) [See [usability testing](#)]

[testing code](#) [2nd](#)

[The First \\$20 Million Is Always the Hardest](#)

[the jaggies](#)

[The Media Equation](#)

[The Secrets of Consulting: A Guide to Giving & Getting Advice Successfully](#)

[They're Mad as Hell Out There \(Wildstrom\)](#)

[threads \(email\)](#)

[time to market advantage](#)

[versus design advantage](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#) [5th](#)

[timing of design](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[training](#) [2nd](#)

[TransPhone](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[trustworthiness of software](#)

[typewriters, cognitive friction of](#)

[[SYMBOL](#)] [[A](#)] [[B](#)] [[C](#)] [[D](#)] [[E](#)] [[F](#)] [[G](#)] [[H](#)] [[I](#)] [[K](#)] [[L](#)] [[M](#)] [[N](#)] [[O](#)] [[P](#)] [[Q](#)] [[R](#)] [[S](#)] [[T](#)] [[U](#)] [[V](#)] [[W](#)] [[X](#)] [[Z](#)]

[U.S. Navy warships](#) [2nd](#)

[understanding, programmers' need for](#) [2nd](#)

[uninformed consent](#)

[unpredictable markets, myth of](#) [2nd](#)

[usability problems](#)

[acceptance of](#)

[alarm clock](#) [2nd](#)

[ATMs](#) [2nd](#)

[confirmation messages](#) [2nd](#)

[blaming users](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[calendar software](#) [2nd](#)

[causes](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[costs](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#)

[business software](#) [2nd](#)

[loss of market share](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[narratives about](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#) [5th](#) [6th](#) [7th](#)

[digital cameras](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#)

[email](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[engineering skills and](#)

[file systems](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#)

[IFEs](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[navigational computers \(airlines\)](#) [2nd](#)

[Porsche Boxster](#) [2nd](#)

[reaction to](#) [2nd](#)

[scheduling programs](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[technology as solution for](#)

[VCRs](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[Windows NT](#)

[USS Yorktown](#) [2nd](#)

[usability testing](#)

[before programming](#) [2nd](#)

[evaluating design](#) [2nd](#)

[focus groups](#) [2nd](#)

[interaction](#) [2nd](#)

[timing](#) [2nd](#)

[user testing](#) [[See usability testing](#)]

[users](#)

[versus personas](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[USS Yorktown](#) [2nd](#)

[[SYMBOL](#)] [[A](#)] [[B](#)] [[C](#)] [[D](#)] [[E](#)] [[F](#)] [[G](#)] [[H](#)] [[I](#)] [[K](#)] [[L](#)] [[M](#)] [[N](#)] [[O](#)] [[P](#)] [[Q](#)] [[R](#)] [[S](#)] [[T](#)] [[U](#)] [[V](#)] [[W](#)] [[X](#)] [[Z](#)]

VCRs

[as dancing bearware](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[viability](#)

vialbility

[versus capability](#)

[violins, cognitive friction of](#)

[visual design](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#)

[visual design language \(Xerox\)](#)

vocabulary

[specifying](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#)

[versus source code](#)

[\[SYMBOL\]](#) [\[A\]](#) [\[B\]](#) [\[C\]](#) [\[D\]](#) [\[E\]](#) [\[F\]](#) [\[G\]](#) [\[H\]](#) [\[I\]](#) [\[K\]](#) [\[L\]](#) [\[M\]](#) [\[N\]](#) [\[O\]](#) [\[P\]](#) [\[Q\]](#) [\[R\]](#) [\[S\]](#) [\[T\]](#) [\[U\]](#) [\[V\]](#) [\[W\]](#) [\[X\]](#) [\[Z\]](#)

[warships](#) [2nd](#)

[Web](#) [[See WWW](#)]

[ease of use](#)

[Weinberg, Jerry](#) [2nd](#)

[well-informed software](#) [2nd](#)

[West, David](#)

[Wildstrom, Stephen](#) [2nd](#)

[Windows](#)

[design iteration](#)

[Windows 95](#)

[file system](#) [2nd](#) [3rd](#) [4th](#)

[Windows NT](#)

[USS Yorktown problems](#) [2nd](#)

[World Wide Web](#) [[See WWW](#)]

[Worlds, Inc.](#)

[WriteNow](#)

[WWW](#)

[as dancing bear](#)

[WWW, cognitive friction of](#)

 [PREV](#)

[< Day Day Up >](#)

[\[SYMBOL\]](#) [\[A\]](#) [\[B\]](#) [\[C\]](#) [\[D\]](#) [\[E\]](#) [\[F\]](#) [\[G\]](#) [\[H\]](#) [\[I\]](#) [\[K\]](#) [\[L\]](#) [\[M\]](#) [\[N\]](#) [\[O\]](#) [\[P\]](#) [\[Q\]](#) [\[R\]](#) [\[S\]](#) [\[T\]](#) [\[U\]](#) [\[V\]](#) [\[W\]](#) [\[X\]](#) [\[Z\]](#)

Xerox

[visual design language](#)

 [PREV](#)

[< Day Day Up >](#)

 [PREV](#)

[< Day Day Up >](#)

[\[SYMBOL\]](#) [\[A\]](#) [\[B\]](#) [\[C\]](#) [\[D\]](#) [\[E\]](#) [\[F\]](#) [\[G\]](#) [\[H\]](#) [\[I\]](#) [\[K\]](#) [\[L\]](#) [\[M\]](#) [\[N\]](#) [\[O\]](#) [\[P\]](#) [\[Q\]](#) [\[R\]](#) [\[S\]](#) [\[T\]](#) [\[U\]](#) [\[V\]](#) [\[W\]](#) [\[X\]](#) [\[Z\]](#)

[Zicker, John](#)

 [PREV](#)

[< Day Day Up >](#)