Why Did I Decide to Do UX?

Consumer testing as a concept has come up a handful of times in the TV series *The Simpsons*. Usually in the episodes it appears in, it is presented as a shtick segment in which a product like a new toy is tested by some of the show's familiar characters, and one or two researchers are observing their reactions behind a one-way mirror in an adjoining room like seedy Soviet spies. There is an old-fashioned IBM computer set up against the wall. The room itself looks plain, dingy, and dark. In one instance an ill-timed sneeze by a researcher inside the hidden room causes the one-way mirror to jolt in a risible fashion, attracting the testers' attention.

The show revels in doing a disservice to the image of the market research occupation (as it does for just about every job which exists in that zany world), but whenever I watch these episodes, I always feel there is something appealing about what the researchers are doing—not so much the voyeuristic, money-fueled aspect of it as portrayed by the cartoon, but more so the fact that they are able to quantitatively gauge the subjects' feedback and apply their findings in a productive manner. They tap into the honest thoughts and emotions of others, an act which may seem invasive in one sense, but which in another sense has the potential to lead to a better, more satisfying product for its users in the end. In a way, this method of design and refinement based on people's reactions parallels what I experienced in attempting to reshape a testing form at Goodwill.

Not so long ago, I used to work in the electronics division of the e-commerce department of Goodwill, where we received putatively high-value electronics from the brick-and-mortar stores and sold them online on our own auction website. The tricky part of selling electronics, however, was that one could not know the functionality of a device by looking at it, and it soon became clear that testing it to check whether it worked or not would need to be an integral part of the listing process. A testing form was created as a means by which to communicate to the lister the tester's inspection results (which oftentimes came from different store locations, conducted by different employees), so that the lister knew what to write in the descriptions when listing the electronic items online.

But the form had its limitations. Different people filled it out in different manners, and it often lent itself to situations where we would receive completed forms that

were based on improperly performed tests or on negligence and prevarications. As a result I took it upon myself to rewrite the contents of the form so as to make it easy to understand and fill out, while still addressing the problems of tester error and testing inconsistency. My biggest goal was to create a sort of form in which if anyone were handed one without a word, they could merely look at it and intuitively know what to do. The rewrite process went through several phases, with each phase consisting of testing the testing forms for days or weeks on end and then tweaking it based on how the prototype performed, until I arrived at the final form which I felt allowed both the testing process and the result-writing procedure to be rendered simple, clear, and less ambiguous. Admittedly, it was not perfect, but it worked better than the original form.

I make myself sound as if I were an engineer dealing with something more complicated and significant than a little scrap of paper, but to see the form be put to good use and to watch it actually streamline both the testing and listing processes for electronic items, resulting in an increase in operation efficiency overall, however small, was gratifying to say the least. I was able to exercise creativity, research, and analysis simultaneously and make full use of the form users' feedback to help guide me in the right direction. And all without using a one-way mirror!

Far be it from me to demand or expect more such cerebral responsibilities, but the majority of my job duties as a manual laborer at Goodwill otherwise involved repetitive tasks that required little brainpower, and I sought out better opportunities elsewhere, whether that meant finding a new job or going back to school to further my education. About a year ago I stumbled upon the disciplines of human-computer interaction, user experience design, and human factors. I had known of human-computer interaction previously, but nowhere near enough to be able to state what it exactly entailed. I did my research, and at some point, something clicked. The more I read up on it, the more I came to envision it as a field I could possibly invest the rest of my life into. It had at least a sliver of bearing on what the product-test researchers were trying to do in *The Simpsons* and on what I managed to do with the testing form; it was something I thought I could seriously become involved in.

But not because I was interested in it (though I am interested in it) nor because I was suited for it (though I think I am suited for it) nor because one time at work I

was able to unknowingly engage in a related process in redesigning a form and delusionally extrapolated that one small accomplishment to being able to charge in all gung-ho and revolutionize the industry or solve many conundrums like some hero (though that would be nice). No, I realized it was because I cared about it. As information in all forms, and the way in which it is presented to the users, becomes increasingly digitized, it becomes increasingly important to empower everyone with the ability to keep up with and connect to technology on their own. No matter how much and how fast the world has evolved over the last few decades, the value of simplicity, accessibility, and convenience never changes. Being already surrounded by a motley of computer interfaces myself, be it through the Internet or through my smartphone or through video games, I am reminded of the reality and importance of it on a regular basis.

And so I embarked on a journey to learn more. In the summer of 2018 I graduated from the University of Texas at Austin, having spent two years studying UX in a master's program. The year before that I attended several classes at a local community college to familiarize myself with programming because I had a hunch knowing even a little about it would be useful in the tech industry. To retcon my life story, I also majored in Psychology as an undergrad, which geared me to comprehend the cognitive characteristics of the human mind, so as to create interfaces that suited them. Even with all this preparation, I still feel there is much to learn—about usability, about the research and design methods it employs, about the many tools that are out there—particularly within the presence of an ever-evolving landscape of the tech world. But I have been applying what I have learned in practice and aim to keep doing so as I continue to develop a career in the field.

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