

## Who Cares if You are Dressed if you are Alone?

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Let me dredge up an old observation. I made it during a CHI plenary talk. I was trying to explain why I wasn't coming to the conference any more. It was that the Gaithersburg Conference, which led to the formation of SIGCHI, took place *after* the commercial release of the graphical user interface and the Xerox Star. That is, the CHI literature played no role in the development of what was perhaps the greatest contribution to improving people's experience using computers. There was no CHI literature!

Now let's flash forward. Imagine stacking up all of the CHI literature that has accumulated since then. It would make a pile that was a couple of stories high. Yet, despite all of the work that pile represents, we as a discipline have not come up with anything that even begins to compare with those innovations that preceded the establishment of our field as a distinct discipline.

So here is the thought that drove me to speak then: We could have done so, we should have done so, and even now, I feel like a failure for not having done so.

Yet, we were not wasting our time. No. We were doing hard and useful things. But they had far more to do with analysis, evaluation and engineering than with the design of new things. It was distinctly *not* about doing to the GUI what the GUI did to the command-line style interface that preceded it.

One way that I would characterize this is to say that as a community we have been obsessed with learning how to *get the design right* rather than how to *get the right design*. Obviously both are critical, but without the latter, you fail, regardless of how well you do the former.

"Getting the design right" is largely what usability is about. And while ethnography helps inform "getting the right design", it does not *do* it. Both ethnography and usability are important and worthy of respect, but they are not sufficient to do what needs to be done. Without either divine intervention or a competent designer, they will fail in doing so.

Am I being too harsh or too dramatic? For once, I think not.

In the past three years I have been making a study of software companies. Here is what I learned. After their first product, in terms of designing new (as opposed to n+1) products, they suck. Is that blunt enough?

Look at Adobe. A great company with great products. But, besides their first application, *Illustrator*, they have produced precisely one other application in-house: *Acrobat*. All others came about through mergers and acquisitions. And Adobe demonstrates the rule, not the exception.

So if you are some CHI attendee who aspires to change the world through great innovation and your skills at shaping wonderful user experience, you had better go and work for a start-up, since without some serious changes, working for an established company will mean that you either (a) work on great innovative products that fail or never ship, or (b) work on version 7 of some established application that is so encumbered by the restrictions of the legacy code that all that you will live a life of frustration trying to make the proverbial silk purse out of a sow's ear.

Not the future that our prototypical young, bright enthusiast deserves. But in my view of the world, this is more-or-less where we are.

While the CHI community is fiddling around with our ethnography-usability dilemmas, Rome is burning, and has been doing so for years! If we believe the rhetoric about total user experience and value-based design, then perhaps we should spend a bit more time thinking about what makes products succeed, and how we can contribute to that, rather than how to get 10% better performance out of some menu.

And lest I be accused of being an old fart arguing about yesterday's news (the GUI), may I point out that having not learned our lesson with the GUI, mobile computing (as manifest in the smart phone, for example), is following exactly the same track as the GUI towards self-destruction due to feature bloat. The platforms have changed, but the song remains the same.

So let me put it to you this way. Let's take a successful and iconic design: the iPod. My feelings are this. I think that the design is seriously flawed. Working from the existing design, I think that any undergraduate design student that couldn't do significantly better may not be worthy of graduating. Let me soften that a bit. They can graduate. I just wouldn't hire them. (By the way, before the hate mail starts, I mean no disrespect for Jonathan Ive and his team. Hell, he himself revised the user interface three times during the three years that it took the iPod to become an "instant success".)

But here is the kicker: I also believe that the design of the iPod could have been a lot worse and it *still* would have been a phenomenal success. The reason is that "The Design" with a capital "D" is only minimally about that white and silver object with the rounded corners, the circular controller and the hard disk inside. Rather, my analysis says that there was not a single part of the Apple organization that was not involved in the iPod success, and that each excelled in its own sphere of "design" and that is what made "The Design" so outstanding.

But you won't learn about that at SIGCHI.

Too bad.

Time for change?

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Bill Buxton is a designer, researcher and old man about town who recently joined Microsoft Research as Senior Scientist, thereby demonstrating that he is still an optimist, and has a strong faith that some companies are as hungry for these types of change as he is. He is in the final stages of finishing a book on sketching in experience design.