THE INMATES ARE RUNNING THE ASYLUM

Why High-Tech Products Drive Us Crazy and How To Restore the Sanity

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ALAN COOPER is the founder of Cooper Interaction Design, a West Coast consulting firm that develops interactive product designs for high-tech companies. Mr. Cooper has more than 20-years experience designing and developing consumer software products, and is widely acknowledged as the "Father of Virtual Basic" for which he received the rare and coveted Windows Pioneer Award from Microsoft. Mr. Cooper is a frequent and highly opinionated speaker at software designer meetings and serves in numerous capacities in several foundations and associations within that field. His Web site is www.cooper.com.

MAIN IDEA

Computer technology is rapidly in the process of being embedded within almost every product that is manufactured. Yet all too often, these "new-and-improved" products are harder to use than their "non-intelligent" predecessors -- because engineers rather than designers are developing the interface between the user and the machine. And engineers don't think at all like the average man-on-the-street who knows nothing about technology. Therefore, the situation effectively becomes the equivalent of letting the inmates run the asylum in which they are incarcerated.

Instead of expecting the user to learn how to use the product, the situation needs to be reversed. Better products need to be developed which work the same way average people think. Only then will new products deliver on their implied promise of enhancing the quality of life for their users.

Those kinds of changes will only occur in the real world if responsibility for designing the interface between the user and the machine is transferred away from engineers and into the hands of designers who are skilled in this specific field.

Instead of expecting consumers to become "computer literate" -- by changing the ways they normally do things -- high-tech product designers should instead be spending more time and effort developing better interfaces between humans and computers that are usable and productive. In short, the current generation of computerized tools are too hard for humans to use productively.

Several unique features of computer software make the design of usable products difficult:
1. There often is no logical way to decide when a software product is done.
2. Few people take the time to think about what makes software "bad" as long as it does the job.
3. Well-designed products or services can generate huge levels of customer loyalty.
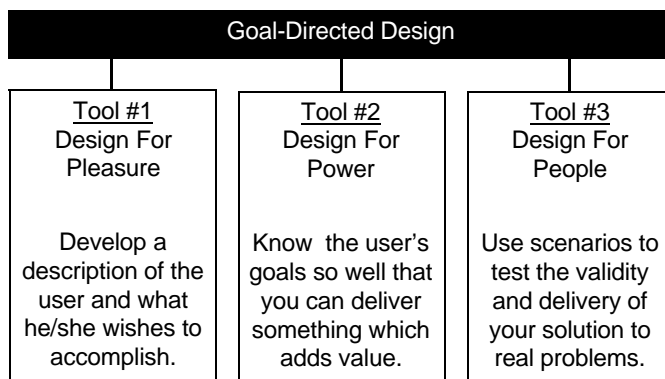
The reason many high-tech products are designed in such a way that users feel stupid is:
1. The design of the product has usually been left up to the technical experts.
2. Software engineers think and behave differently from normal human beings in four ways:
   • They trade simplicity for control.   • They trade success for understanding.
   • They trade what is possible for what is probable.   • They act like high school "jocks".
3. Software engineers like to act as if programming is a calling or a brotherhood rather than a career.
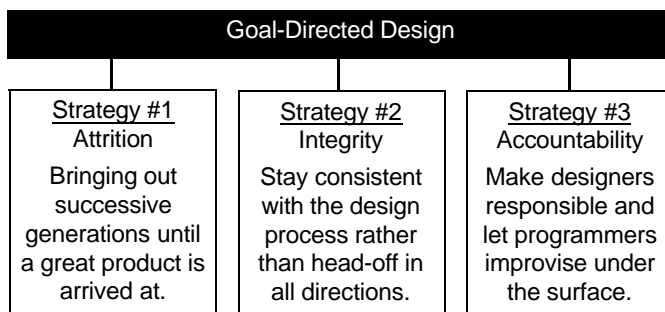
Goal-Directed Design is the process by which high-tech products which are designed for humans can be developed and brought to market. There are three key tools in the Goal-Directed Design Process:

Goal-Directed Design		
Tool #1 Design For Pleasure	Tool #2 Design For Power	Tool #3 Design For People
Develop a description of the user and what he/she wishes to accomplish.	Know the user's goals so well that you can deliver something which adds value.	Use scenarios to test the validity and delivery of your solution to real problems.

In addition to Goal-Directed Design, other strategies that can be used in the design of better products include:

Goal-Directed Design		
Strategy #1 Attrition	Strategy #2 Integrity	Strategy #3 Accountability
Bringing out successive generations until a great product is arrived at.	Stay consistent with the design process rather than head-off in all directions.	Make designers responsible and let programmers improvise under the surface.

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