

*It will take a lot of work to create a usable world full of usable products. In this Connections column, Russell Beale proposes we target a message to the public: Demand more from your products.*

*—Manfred Tscheligi*

## Rise up, Revolt!



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**THE OTHER DAY**, I watched a friend show a colleague how to use some new program on his computer. He played with it for a while, demonstrated its powers, and then vacated his seat to let Jim have a try. A few mouse clicks later, Jim said, “Ooohh, sorry, my fault... don’t know what I did but it’s gone all weird.” While the details of this story are not critical, the point is that when something unexpected happened, Jim felt he had to apologize—he felt it was his fault.

The same is true if you try to teach your parents to use a new mobile phone. They shake their heads and say, “Sorry, I can’t do it. You do it. I’ll only break it.” We all recognize these scenarios: users thinking they are at

fault when really they are suffering from the design of the systems they are using, something Don Norman has addressed well [1]. We all know this, and many of us try to

change it. We pursue manufacturers; we do consultancy; we moan at conferences; we highlight the occasional example of good design—all to little effect. Manufacturers like usability, they like good design—but it’s not usually that high up on the list of commercial considerations. And for a very good reason.

If something is produced that is just a little bit better, then consumers tend to be grateful and buy it in great numbers. And “better” is not just about usability—it is about coolness, novelty, opening new possibilities (useful or not)—a whole host of factors that decide whether we’ll pay good money for something. This is not just an opinion—it’s a fact that can be observed in the high street, in the gadgets that colleagues and friends own, and so on [2]. The unfortunate truth is: A bit better is usually good enough.

We therefore need to be more radical if we are to push usability and design higher up the commercial

agenda. We need to be speaking not to the manufacturers and the designers, but to the general public as well. We need to make them more demanding, more discerning, more aware of the potentials of technology. We need to make it clear to them all that technology can be so much better than it currently is, and that they need to rise up and revolt and demand far more usable, effective products. We must give them the right to blame the systems they are forced to use, and not themselves, for most of the mistakes that occur. We should educate them not to use awful systems, and if they have to use them, to continue to complain until they are improved. Thimbleby [3] has noted that the rapid pace of change means that products often become obsolete and are replaced before they ever get the chance to become better—but when the unusable is replaced with the awful, we need to make a fuss. We should therefore be addressing our HCI courses not only to the software engineers that create these systems, but to all undergraduates in a university; to the people at large via public lectures; to the world on the Internet—anything to make people realize that they are being conned and that only they can do something about it.

There are multiple ways to achieve this. Practical methods involve entertaining your friends at parties with the latest hilarious story of “unusability,” of uncontrollable products, of design not thought through. Demonstrate dire Web sites to your students or colleagues, and show them good ones—encourage them to shop on decent e-commerce sites and not patronize the awful ones. Talk to the media: Most journalists need a contact book full of quotable people who are able to comment at short notice. Remember that it is often the public that fund our work, either directly through the products they buy, the sites they visit, or indirectly, through their taxes that pay for research grants. Engaging with them as stakeholders in our work is

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something we are often reluctant to do, but which should perhaps be seen as an integral part of our work. Write columns for magazines, letters to newspapers, comments for in-house brochures. Blog-share your thoughts on such things with the wider world, and take the Kevin Costner *Field of Dreams* approach to marketing it: "Blog it, and they will come." They may not come in their millions, true, but influencing a few people may, in turn, cause them to influence a few more, and the cause will spread. Join your professional society, and get involved in it—make it advocate usability, try to use its professional standing and contacts to influence government, create policy, inform politicians. It is now just becoming the case that, in the UK, the government is writing usability requirements into new invitation to tender documents, which is an improvement, though I do have to wonder why they were not there before. But only by engaging constructively with the government can we continue this improvement. And this is just the practical list—the impractical ones I leave to you to decide for yourself.

At our university, we are asked to identify learning outcomes for the modules we teach. For my introductory HCI module, I wanted "Getting It." For if I can enlighten my students about design, usability, interaction and so on—if I can make them aware that the world can be a much better, easier, more entertaining place because of technology—if I can make them realize that all the examples of bad design we see around us all the time are not necessary parts of society, but things that should be pointed at, laughed at, and not paid for, then I feel I'll have achieved my goals. And maybe I'm getting there: I told the story of the small plot of ground that had been dug up, flattened, and then asphalted over to create a two-bay car parking space for disabled people right by the back of our new building, to ease their access. It's a great idea—except it's

lower than the entrance to the building, and so they have built a few steps up for access... The only way in with a wheelchair would be to go back up the access road, past the usual car park, and then around the building on the pavements. And most of my students agreed with me that it was terrible. Many of them now send me examples of bad Web sites (especially ones I have had anything to do with). But at least they are now critical and believe it is the designer or the company that is most at fault, and not them. Some have even begun to teach their parents to get out their hardly used mobile phones and text them. ◆

**REFERENCES** 1. D. A. Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*, MIT Press Edition ed. London: MIT Press, 1988. 2. J. Rode, E. Toye, and A. Blackwell, "The fuzzy felt ethnography—understanding the programming patterns of domestic appliances," *Personal and Ubiquitous Computing*, vol. 8, pp. 161-176, 2004. 3. H. Thimbleby, "The computer science of everyday things," presented at User Interface Conference, 2001. AUIC 2001. Proceedings. Second Australasian, 2001.



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