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This sampler contains extracts from the 184 page book 'Designing the Real World', by Lon Barfield (Published 2004 by Bosko Books). It has been optimized for fast download using low resolution images.

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Contact

I've just been watching the movie 'The Graduate', for about the seventh time. Highly enjoyable and thought provoking, and this time there was a thought provoked about media and communication. In the movie, the parents of the romantic young man and woman have their own plans for them and decide that they should not see each other any more or have any other sort of contact. In that era it would not be too difficult, it would just be a question of turning them away if they called at the door, hanging up on them if they rang and intercepting letters brought by the mail man. There were few 'gates' of communication and the parents were gate-keeper to them all.

Nowadays that has changed. The increasing spending power of average Western individuals coupled with the decreasing costs of technology means that parents are no longer the gate-keepers of the communication channels. Indeed, all too often, the younger generation have more access than the parents. ('Hey! Mom. I'm sending an email to cousin Jenny, is there anything you want to say to her Mom?'). Furthermore, the technological gates themselves are more discrete and more portable. It used to be the front door and the fixed point telephone. Now it can be the mobile phone in the bedroom, the SMS message in the garden, email at the internet cafe, ICQ at work.

As well as more channels of contact, the new technologies have meant that it is easy to maintain contact after a chance or casual meeting with someone. Exchanging telephone numbers is very difficult without a pen and a piece of paper. Occasionally, if I'm with a group of people I've tried



the approach of allotting two figures per person, but it never seems to work. However, email addresses can be easily memorized, and if you know where the person works and what their full name is you can even take a fairly good guess at the email address.

Nowadays, new technology is often responsible for that chance meeting in the first place. You can search for old friends on the internet, in chat groups you can chat to people with similar interests (think of the movie 'You've Got Mail'), ICQ offers a random chat facility and there is a new WAP 'blind date' service being launched in the UK where you can enter a personal profile, and as your WAP phone is aware of where you are, you can be put in touch with someone with a matching profile in the same vicinity.

This idea has been around for a while but only now does it seem to be taking off, mainly because it does not require buying special dedicated technology. Other contenders have been the Japanese 'love-getty' a rather less discerning version that just used to beep when you got within 10 meters of someone else who had one of the things. The consumer electronics company Philips also had the visionary idea of 'hot badges'. Somewhere in between the two mentioned above, hot badges were badges that could be profiled and would alert you if you came in the vicinity of someone with a matching profile.

To some extent this opening up of communication gateways and their adoption by the younger generation is a revolution comparable with the role of the car in the fifties. All of a sudden teenagers then had a private space that was their own, outside the scope of their parents' space and where they could meet other boys and girls. The sort of set up that was typified in the movie 'American Graffiti'. This has meant that today there is a certain generation that is used to hearing their parents saying, 'Oh yeah, your father and I used to drive down to the lake together in his '56 Chevy.' Maybe with the current contact revolution there will soon be a generation that hears their parents saying, 'Oh yeah, your father and I used to meet up every week on the z-world chat-zone after we'd connected our 28k modems.'

One final note on the subject of romantic communication. Everyone has an old box of love letters, and you can certainly have romantic phone calls, you can even send romantic emails (as long as they don't get forwarded around the globe!) and you can be a slave to romantic SMS messages, but has anyone ever carried out a romance using the good old fax machine? I wonder.

A background image showing various Euro banknotes, including 10, 20, and 50 Euro notes, scattered across the page. The notes are slightly out of focus, creating a textured, layered effect.

Interruptions


A friend of mine was queuing for the check-out in a supermarket recently when there was a fire alarm and everyone had to be evacuated. For my friend this was not a problem, faced with a further twenty minute wait to pay, she was glad to leave the basket there and get out. Which in itself is interesting since it was a way of having the whole shopping experience without actually buying anything.

However, for other shoppers the experience was a bit different since some were in the middle of the actual purchase, they had just handed over cash and were waiting for change, or they had a bag of things but hadn't yet got their receipt. The end-to-end purchase transaction was suddenly being split in the middle. Should they leave the goods they had just bought there in the shop, should the security guards challenge everybody that was leaving with goods, would it be a good chance to grab a few bottles of scotch and saunter out with the other shoppers?

This interruption of transactions is not always a vital scenario to design for. When it comes to sorting out what happens to the people at the till when there is a fire in the shop it is a miniscule number of cases and in each case the transaction is small (on a company perspective). They are certainly not going to re-engineer the transaction system and protocols to completely prevent errors in such a small number of cases.

However, there are situations where transactions can be interrupted more easily and where the transaction is worth a lot more than a basket of groceries. Consider the signing of documents by several parties to purchase a company. Although things can always go wrong in the transaction (person A signs five documents then person B has a heart attack after they have signed the first two of them) the error that has to be prevented is the intentional one. Person A signs a document saying that all their stock in the company is to be transferred to B. Person B grabs it and runs out of the door without signing their document and without making ten million pounds over to person A.

Lawyers who arrange such big deals put a lot of effort into ensuring that what happens is 'watertight' or legally perfect at each point in the proceedings. So that even if the transaction is interrupted for whatever reason, the state of affairs at that moment is complete, legal, and cannot be abused in any way. Legal transactions are interesting because it is human-human interaction that is being carried out according to a very strict set of rules and protocols.



Another bizarre illustration of transaction design in human-human legal interaction is the serving of a notice or a court order to someone in Britain. This is in effect just giving someone a formal document. But what if they don't receive it through the post – how can you prove that they have seen it? If you call at their house and actually hand it to them then they really have received it, but what if they don't want to participate in the transaction and put their hands in their pockets when you try and hand them the document? The legal answer is that it is sufficient to touch the person with the document! (Check out: www.tbvtv.co.uk/stb_social_faqs.asp).

Managing transactions and coping gracefully with interruptions is also important in the way that pieces of technology communicate with one another. If you accidentally hit the 'mail merge' button on a contact database and the printer starts printing thousands of letters, you want to quickly be able to pull the plug and stop the transaction. What you also want is the transaction to be ended in a coherent way so that the printer will behave sensibly after you put the plug back in. There are certain situations with technology, especially those where you are messing with the more deep-seated bits of programming, where the transactions are very delicate indeed. Installing a new BIOS on an older laptop for example. You have to have a power lead and a full battery and if you interrupt it mid-way you can end up having to bin it because it gets into a state that it is impossible to get it out of.

The early Apple Macs almost got into problems with interrupted transactions with floppy disk ejection. You put a floppy in and the icon appears on the desktop. Instead of doing 'put away' or dragging the icon to the trash can you do 'eject'. The floppy pops out and the icon is left on the desktop but is grayed out. You drop the floppy in the nearest river and next day, on the desktop, you try and clean up by dragging the grayed out icon to the trash can. To dispose of the icon properly the Mac asks you to insert the floppy back into the drive, and - hey presto! - you are stuck in an impossible transition. But those people at Apple obviously thought about this and if you cancel the operation with the apple and period keys, the demand for the lost floppy disappears along with the grayed out icon!

The legal problems described above also arise with the combination of the two; interruptions involving machines and humans. One country had problems with its first ATMs because the legal framework to support them had not been put in place. Legal framework? I hear you ask. Well if I request a hundred dollars from the ATM and then don't actually take it out of the machine but just leave it there, can I legally be said to have taken delivery of the cash? The early machines would offer the money and if the money wasn't taken from the slot the machine would suck it back in again and register the transaction as null and void. Which was fine until someone discovered that you could slip one of the middle bills out without the ATM being aware of it!

THE BOOK OF THE REAL WORLD COLUMNS FROM THE SIGCHI BULLETIN

'A fascinating collection of mini-essays reflecting on the technology around us and the ways in which it can either frustrate or delight us. Lon Barfield writes with a keen eye and a light touch resulting in a book that is as entertaining as it is insightful.'

Abigail Sellen (Microsoft Research, author of 'The Myth of the Paperless Office')

'The column didn't turn out the way I had anticipated; in fact it turned out better. It is great that Lon Barfield has collected the columns – and added to them – to create this book.'

Steven Pemberton (Editor-in-chief 'Interactions Magazine', former editor 'SIGCHI Bulletin')

Ten years ago the author started writing the popular 'Real World' column for the SIGCHI bulletin (the ACM magazine for interaction designers). It was a column observing everyday interactions in both real and digital environments.

This book contains fifty of those columns, covering such fundamental topics as:

- Switching things on and off
- Choosing correct terminology for interfaces
- Volume controls
- Annoying sounds coming from alarm-clocks
- Making the ideal slice of toast

They have been gathered together, along with extra sections on observing the real world and a number of new columns. The book is both entertaining and enlightening. Lecturers will find it a good supplement to any course dealing with designing for people, while industrial and digital designers can learn from the observations and insights it contains. The content is an inspirational resource for interaction designers, web designers, architects, industrial designers and anybody who has ever said 'Who on earth designed that?!'

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