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By Matthew Fuller

Matthew Fuller reviews two books on interface and interactivity design which push current thinking towards but not through the analytical compiler.

[IMAGE]

>> Illustration by Richard Priestley

Jakob Nielsen comes from a world in which PhDs are won and lost over which combination of yellow and purple make for the best PowerPoint presentation. He seems to have come out relatively unscathed, however. Most writers of instructional books for computer users know that readers skim — that is, they read roughly every fifth word. The logical thing to do, therefore, is to quintuple the number of words in order to make sure readers are forced through all you actually really wanted to say — hence the thickness of most software ‘Bibles’. This book, by contrast, is stripped down: Nielsen is the messiah of info-essentialism.

The book is organised on a theme and case-study basis. The focus is on corporate websites but the principles used could be used pretty much anywhere on the Web. There are no quibbles about anything like an ethics of design, just a straightforward look at how to maximise clarity, user throughput and cut down on what Alan Cooper calls ‘interaction overhead’.

On one level, what this means is that Nielsen represents the rationalisation of the Web. If even the effluvia of design needs to be subject to double-entry discipline, the boom is over and we’re strictly into quids-through. Users are no longer prepared to expend time getting dicked about by finance-heavy sites if they’re simply trying to buy something as dull as they can get in the shops. Equally, sites are no longer functional if they cannot accommodate the maximum range of bandwidths and access devices.

The panning of faux-3D navigational metaphors is spot-on and should be forced reading for the controllable kingdom sickos of media art. At other times Nielsen’s accent on speed, accessibility and clarity makes him the patron quack for misery-gutses. As a ‘strong proponent of getting an official set of web design conventions’ he’s quite happy to start doling these regulations out even before the coup takes place. However, whilst you might want to skip the prescriptions in this book, the sustained close attention to the small details of web use would make this a valuable read — simply to make sure you know why you’re ignoring them.

Unlike Nielsen, Alan Cooper writes not so much about the Web as about software. His method in the first third of the book is essentially to pick a category of problems with computer use — such as misinterpretation of the work-patterns it is supposed to compliment — and then pile up the evidence in a teetering mass of failures. This is all well done. Software comes tumbling down.

He then introduces some of the methodology his company (like Nielsen he’s targetting readers as consultancy fodder) uses to get beyond the current failures in interaction design. To specify what goals people have in using the software, as distinct from the tasks they have to complete in order to achieve those goals, they use ‘personas’. These are imaginary devices cooked up by committee, very specific caricatures of users, a way of discussing the program without adopting generalised assumptions about the user. At the same time, they construct a common ground of references about the purpose of the program that allows both programmers and designers to communicate.

The personas are admittedly stereotypes. Cooper is ‘shooting for believability not diversity’. Thus, whilst his technique allows for a thorough fine-tuning of current software paradigms, it actively constrains the production of any fundamental innovation. Where it does succeed is in allowing ‘non-standard’ users to creep in and enforce changes. In one touch-screen based case study a persona with arthritic hands forces the entire interface to become more information rich and clearer — this is a small, but definite, result. It says more about software design, however, that it even clocks as one.

Conventional coding puts user-testing in at the end of a production cycle. Cooper builds it in from the get-go and it is this that he shares with Nielsen. Both advance the case for interfaces that accurately and simply represent all that it is possible to do within a certain mode and that make it clear what’s involved in the step to another. There’s a commonplace distinction between interaction design and interface design and these two books both make it. They don’t, however, take the time to look at any of the wider conceptual, social, economic or other factors that might determine the way design goes. This is a pity — but it might also be a blessing. The writing in all of these books is heavily processed. Where did the ‘Lunatics’ go in Cooper’s title? Sub-editors have combed the text and made it feel good about life. You can feel that expensively jumpered guru’s arm settling around your shoulder, letting you in on a couple of things, as you read. Criticism of software, of interfaces, of interaction, always seems to founder around at this level, somewhere between the instructive and the anecdotal. Beyond case studies and platitudes, however, there looks to be room for a little more digging to be done.

In the meantime, the gurus might look towards a little interaction design of their own. ‘Book Download Time’ could be taken into account when computer trade publishers plan their lists. Book Download Time is essentially the amount of time it takes for you to earn the money to take the book out of the shop legally. Nielsen uses similar formulas to calculate the ‘costs’ to companies of badly produced sites. Say you earn a tenner an hour after tax. His book takes a whopping three and a half hours to download. Cooper’s: two hours twenty. Nielsen maintains that a ten second maximum limit be placed on the time it takes for a hyperlink to be made on the Web, after which people’s attention strays elsewhere. For this to translate to books, you’d have to be earning £1,260 an hour. Rote-learn these books, and a job in consultancy is yours.

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Jakob Nielsen, *Designing Web Usability: the practice of simplicity*, New Riders Publishing £34.99

Alan Cooper, *The Inmates are Running the Asylum: why hi-tech products drive us crazy and how to restore the sanity*, Sams Publishing £22.95