

# The Real World

In the light of the Starr Enquiry and the impeachment maybe I too should make a confession; I have been involved in user interface design for fourteen years and only in the last two weeks have I acquired my first video recorder.

It's amazing, it has changed my life completely; I don't have to wrack my brains for hours to write an article about usability, I can start conversations with other user interface specialists without having to wait until we are in a lift and, instead of spending all my evenings at cafés and cinemas (and changing diapers), I spend them at home with my family gathered around the TV trying to fathom out the workings of the system.

Take the 'energy saving' feature; I was trying to get the hang of programming the video and set it to record in an hours time. While waiting we settled down to watch 'The Fugitive' with Harrison Ford on TV, a real thriller; falsely arrested, imprisoned, caught up in a jail-break from the prison van, it crashes onto a railway line and then just as the train came hooting into view... the picture went blank. The video had switched itself off taking the TV picture with it. I switched it quickly back on. A few minutes later the same thing happened. It seemed to be happening at intervals of about 10 minutes. What was the machine assuming I was doing, what was its task model of me? Did the user usually program the video to record and then go to bed thus making it a good idea for the video to switch itself off automatically? Energy saving? The amount of mental energy I wasted struggling with the feature far outweighed any electrical energy that it may have saved.

Another example of advanced features occurred when we got fed up with 'The Doctor' with William Hurt. Half way through we decided to stop the video catch 'the X Files' on TV and watch the rest of the video the next evening. Twenty minutes later, while I was making a night-time drink for

myself, I suddenly felt as though I was starring in an episode of 'the X Files' myself. From the kitchen I heard the video machine reactivate itself and start whirring, what was it doing now? As I got to the doorway it ejected the videocassette which had been rewound right back to the beginning. An incredibly useful feature if you want to stop a film half way through and rewind the cassette right back to the beginning, but why would you want to do that?

What was the designers model of my task? What was the goal I was meant to be aiming towards that this machine was helping me with? How long did it give me before it started rewinding? Would I have time in future to stop the tape and have a tea break without being rushed back to the beginning of the film? Basically what I needed was not a set of instructions to tell me how to make the recorder fit my model of what it should do but a set of instructions telling me how to adapt my life so that it better matched the complex task model that the video was based upon.

As an example of simple faults consider the disconcerting readout on the front panel, under normal operations this always showed the message 'E1'. Now, anybody with experience of compilers for memory scarce 70s computers will interpret this as a curt compiler message something like: 'E1: Error one, syntax error, correct the syntax problem and continue programming'. Having this huge error message gazing at me at all times was worrying, I would have been happier if it was showing something simple and reassuring like 'OK' or 'A1'.

Analyzing all these features has made me look at our trusty old TV through new eyes and I realize that it too has some awful attributes. On the control panel at the front of the TV are two vital buttons, one allows you to tune in the channel you are currently watching (so you can zap through the channels with the remote and then tune each one in) the other is an automatic 'tune all

channels in' function that allocates each number to channels in their order on the wave band, it always seems to result in channel 0 to 9 being Arabic or Turkish for some reason. Anyway, these two buttons are identically colored, are about the size of split peas and are mounted very close together and about half an inch of the ground. And guess what? Yes, sometimes I go to tune in a channel and I press the wrong one thus losing all my hours work of presets in a split second.

And another thing! The power-on LED is miles away from the actual on/off button and both of them are mounted at floor level. When we turn in for the night I switch the lights out and then home in on the red LED and start kicking methodically and repeatedly about 4 inches to the right of it searching in the dark for the on/off button with my foot. Come to think of it it's a pity the same isn't true for the video recorder I think it would be very therapeutic to give it a good kicking every night before going to bed.

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