



JUS

JOURNAL OF USABILITY STUDIES

Vol. 8, Issue 1, November 2012 pp. 11-15

---

# Stick to the Knitting

## Steve Portigal

Principal  
Portigal Consulting LLC  
2311 Palmetto Ave., Suite D1  
Pacifica, CA 94044  
USA  
[steve@portigal.com](mailto:steve@portigal.com)

Hollywood—that seller of dreams—has filled our heads with an American-exceptionalism-esque belief that we are entitled, even obligated, to strive and ultimately triumph when we are clearly outmanned, outgunned, and outclassed. Melanie Griffith lands her dream job in *Working Girl*. The *Pretty Woman* is rescued by a (metaphorical) knight on a white horse. The nerds of *Tri-Lambs* get their revenge and defeat the other fraternity. Sure, *Rocky*, the *Bad News Bears*, and the *Spartans* all lose but what we remember is how hard they tried. Hollywood has successfully promulgated the values of having heart and dreaming big, not only for Americans or even the West, but ultimately for everyone.

If we use that cultural framing, maybe some of the things that the design communities are spending time on would make more sense. By “design communities” I’m referring to the software and product people—industrial designers, user experience designers, interaction designers, information architects, content strategists, and what have you. I’ll even throw my tribes in there: user researchers, ethnographers, and strategists.

Lately, these folks—us—are taking on audaciously challenging problems. The sexiest endeavors are those tackling the systemic “wicked problems” in government, healthcare, education, homelessness, civic life, and beyond. Of course the genuine passion and compassion is to be commended, but I’m feeling worried. Let me tell you why.



## Considering Our History

Let's step back and consider (in a highly limited fashion) how we got here. Lorraine Borman writes of the late 1970s: "The need for 'people-oriented' systems, which reflected the needs and behavioral characteristics of the user population, became a matter of major interest to the computing profession" (1996, January). Although I wouldn't enter the field (as an HCI graduate student) for a little more than 10 years later, that's the field I joined—making computers more usable. And as the field found its feet, we actively engaged and focused on making technology work for people. Both academics and practitioners emerged and articulated (through conference papers, articles, book, and eventually blogs) how to approach the problem of designing technology for the people who actually use it.

Over the next 20 years, a number of changes came to our fields. We and the organizations we work for had a growing awareness of important needs beyond ease-of-use. Call it desirability, or meaning, or emotion, these needs became something to understand and design for. With its roots in computer science, human factors, information science, psychology, and so on, our fields enlarged to include a new practice of design—interaction design (IxD)—design that focuses on human behavior and how products can be designed to satisfy the needs and wants of us humans. Experience in trying to work in industry served to highlight that the processes, organizational and team structures, skill sets, and roles for designing software needed to be changed in order to build the kind of products we wanted.

We resonated with the unfortunately desperate and needy phrase "a seat at the table." It's often said as if the utterer is Glenn Close in "Fatal Attraction" grating intensely that she will not be ignored. And yet it often came off more like Chester, the over-eager yapping puppy from Warner Brothers cartoons: "You wanna play ball, Spike, you wanna play ball?" (whereupon Spike inevitably smacks the little guy clear across the room).

From this desire to be noticed a number of articulate and passionate thought leaders emerged who made the case to business leaders for a more active role for design. Design is now championed in business publications, and business schools teach user experience (and look to design as a previously untapped set of tools to drive innovation). User experience is part of the plan for startups (and an element that some venture capitalists ensure is in place as a condition of their funding). Joshua Porter wrote in his blog that "Hot startups want designer co-founders... Startups are being bought for their design talent... Not only do you have a seat at the table, you've got a starring role" (2011, December 5, paras. 3, 4, 10). While this was happening, Apple was changing the entire conversation about design, offering a series of sexy iconoclastic game-changers that many sought to emulate (or even duplicate).

But do we deserve this seat at the table? Are we making the kinds of impacts in products, services, and experiences that merit the seat? Have we solved the problem of making products usable?

## Stuff Still Sucks

I'm reminded of the following "interview" (in Rolling Stone) between Charles M. Young and Beavis and Butt-Head. (For those who are not familiar with Beavis and Butt-Head, they are two animated characters developed by American Mike Judge in the early 1990s.)

Butt-Head: Also, I don't like stuff that sucks, either.

Young: But nobody likes stuff that sucks!

Butt-Head: Then why does so much stuff suck? (1993, paras. 117–119)

Why does so much stuff suck, indeed?

It's not that there isn't great work being done. The Interaction Design Association (IXDA) is now in its second year of an awards program highlighting exceptional work. The celebration of good design serves to encourage more of it. But it can also make us think that the current level of designed interactions with technology is actually better than it really is.

Here is what I believe. Our touchpoints with technology are sloppily facilitated. Within a week of the death of interaction design pioneer Bill Moggridge, LinkedIn suggested him as someone I

might want to connect with. Every time I upload pictures to Facebook, I'm asked to identify the "friends" in the pictures, even when the photos are actually of street art, sculptures, advertisements, and so on. Those sorts of failure are commonplace, and, despite the fact that they are frustrating, stressful, confusing, and a waste of time and energy, it's easy to apologize for the software. "Oh, how is the algorithm supposed to know?" we might say. But that shows just how "bought in" we are to sub-par technology experiences.

With our training and experience we should be able to see that mental models are often not well formed by people using technology. Many people will open up a browser, enter www.yahoo.com in the URL bar, and from Yahoo search for "gmail" in order to log in and check their mail. Many people simply aren't conversant about the differences between the OS, an application (e.g., a browser), a website, or an ISP. Yet, successfully using a PC and the Web requires that they are. Throw in a wrinkle like an updated iOS, changes in Facebook's UI, or Google changing how to manage multiple accounts and these people are out.

Even the best technology being produced is sadly lacking. In a blog article "The Best Interface Is No Interface," Golden Krishna wrote the following scenario about a supposed "state of the art" interaction:

Several car companies have recently created smartphone apps that allow drivers to unlock their car doors. Generally, the unlocking feature plays out like this:

1. A driver approaches her car.
2. Takes her smartphone out of her purse.
3. Turns her phone on.
4. Slides to unlock her phone.
5. Enters her passcode into her phone.
6. Swipes through a sea of icons, trying to find the app.
7. Taps the desired app icon.
8. Waits for the app to load.
9. Looks at the app, and tries to figure out (or remember) how it works.
10. Makes a best guess about which menu item to hit to unlock doors and taps that item.
11. Taps a button to unlock the doors.
12. The car doors unlock.
13. She opens her car door. (2012, August 29, "Principle 1")

These failures are nothing new: How many years has Don Norman, author of *The Design of Everyday Things*, been highlighting them with his usual balance of bemusement and belligerence? But is our technological world really more usable? We just continue to tolerate design failures, even as technology permeates more aspects of our being.

In a recent event, Don Norman and John Maeda, designer and President of the Rhode Island School of Design, couldn't get on the same page as to what design was even supposed to be fixing. Maeda cited elegantly designed chairs and knives, as well as organizations themselves. Norman dismissed both of those but emphasized wireless printers and enterprise software as examples of good design.

### **Making the World a Better Place**

It's not that I want anyone to ignore the problems like world hunger and educating the working poor. Those problems are certainly not going to fix themselves. There are plenty of opportunities to innovate in these spaces. And so we see a range of efforts: Project H Design is working hard at their mission of "transformation of curricula, environments, and experiences for K-12 educational institutions in the US." The Austin Center for Design "exists to transform society through design and design education. This transformation occurs through the development of design knowledge directed towards all forms of social and humanitarian problems." The MacArthur Foundation has given Dana Chisnell, co-author of *Handbook of Usability Testing: How to Plan, Design, and Conduct Effective Tests*, a grant (not to mention her

successful Kickstarter campaign) to support her efforts in developing materials that will ensure well-designed ballots (and other aspects of the electoral process). UX for Good gathered together user experience designers in New Orleans to look at opportunities to support community musicians. In a similarly named but different event, GOOD Ideas for Cities brought together designers and urban leaders in many cities, including New Orleans, to address the challenges faced by urban environments. The GSMA mWomen Design Challenge is looking for ways to “meet the needs of resource-poor women by improving the smartphone user experience.” And on the list goes.

Again, those are people doing good work. Their hearts and hands and backs are in the right place. Our world is a better place for their intentions. They should be praised for their compassion and commitment. To even infer anything else is sometimes seen as heretical. Bruce Nussbaum, professor of Innovation and Design at Parsons The New School for Design, framed some of these efforts as “design imperialism” (where do-gooders from one culture fix the ills—as they see them—of another culture); he was seen as a bit of a party-pooper (to put it politely). While his article, “Is Humanitarian Design the New Imperialism? Does our desire to help do more harm than good?” (2010), seems reasoned with hindsight, at the time it caused a bit of an upset.

It’s hard to categorize each effort you might come across (especially because many of them are multi-faceted) but, to simplify a bit, I see two categories:

- Deliberately applying the tools of design to an underserved client (say, revising the website for a local non-profit)
- Harnessing the aspirational, design-thinky energies of design professionals in order to make a dent in a crisis (say, fixing some aspect of a city)

I believe we need more projects in the first category. Broken experiences should be fixed. Where good causes can’t afford the time, energy, technology, or leadership to improve the technology interactions that support their cause, we should provide that. I would ask for caution in pursuing the second category. Only a small number of those projects are scaled appropriately to make a sustained impact against wicked problems, for example, the likelihood of your design project eliminating homelessness is low.

It’s tempting to turn a blind eye to the difference between these two categories. The curator of design and architecture at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, Paola Antonelli, advocates for design as she explained in *The World in 2011* (The Economist annual publication), “one of design’s most fundamental tasks is to help people deal with change. Designers stand between revolutions and everyday life...And they never forget functionality and elegance” (2010, November 22, paras. 1 and 2). I find it profoundly depressing to read about our fields in such a hagiographic terms. We can believe the hype, but we should be ready to disappoint ourselves and others.

### **We Haven’t Fulfilled Our Original Mission**

Indeed, I would remind everyone of our initial mission to improve the interactions between people and technology. As technology grows in reach and impact, that effort becomes more important, not less. Jon Kolko, founder of the Austin Center for Design, writes “Interaction design is the design of behavior, positioned as dialogue between a person and an artifact” (2009, December 1, “Behavioral Change,” para. 2). While it makes sense not to limit the domain to technological interactions, I feel that’s the key wicked problem of our era; it’s the one that brought us here, and it’s the one I desperately want people to continue to work on. The next time you find yourself cursing over an ATM, a botched login flow, a frustrating airline check-in procedure, maybe you should blame “us” not “them.” Because we claimed we were going to fix it, but did not. We’re collectively entranced by sexier problems. And making technology work for people is an incredibly wicked problem. Why does so much stuff suck? Having been given a seat at the table, I’m urging UXD folks to follow through and address the goals we sought in the first place but have not yet achieved.

## References

- Antonelli, P. (2010, November 22). Design takes over, says Paola Antonelli. The World in 2011. The Economist. Retrieved from <http://www.economist.com/node/17509367>
- Borman, L. (1996, January). The early years. *SIGCHI Bulletin*, 28 (1). Retrieved from <http://old.sigchi.org/bulletin/1996.1/borman.html>
- Kolko, J. (2009, December 1). Our misguided focus on brand and user experience: How a "total UX" derailed the creative efforts of the Fortune 500. Retrieved from <http://www.jonkolko.com/writingBrandUX.php>
- Krishna, G. (2012, August 29). The best interface is no interface. Cooper Journal [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://www.cooper.com/journal/2012/08/the-best-interface-is-no-interface.html>
- Nussbaum, B. (2010). Is humanitarian design the new imperialism? Does our desire to help do more harm than good? Co.Design. Retrieved from <http://www.fastcodesign.com/1661859/is-humanitarian-design-the-new-imperialism>
- Porter, J. (2011, December 5). The golden age of design in startups. Bokardo [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://bokardo.com/archives/the-golden-age-of-design-in-startups/>
- Young, C. M. (1993, August 19). Beavis and Butt-Head on what's cool and what sucks. *Rolling Stone* (663). Retrieved from <http://www.ccs.neu.edu/home/image/bnb-interview.html>

## About the Author



### Steve Portigal

is the founder of Portigal Consulting. In the past 15 years Steve has interviewed families eating breakfast, rock musicians, credit-default swap traders, and radiologists. His work has informed the development of music gear, wine packaging, medical information systems, corporate intranets, and iPod accessories. He is an avid photographer who has a Museum of Foreign Groceries in his home.