Cycle Time

Michael Moon

is President of GISTICS and a lecturer and leading authority on digital asset management, automation of marketing services and multichannel brands. He has delivered more than 300 keynotes, presentations, executive seminars, workshops, and web-based seminars around the world. His book *Firebrands: Building Brand Loyalty in the Internet Age* has been published in 13 different languages. He also conducts primary research through surveys and one-to-one interviews. Michael and his team advise international-brand corporations on multichannel strategies for brand management and digital asset management, including Amway, Boeing, Disney, Frank Russell Company, Gap, General Motors, FCB, Hallmark, Hasbro, Leo Burnett, Nokia, Sanoma WSOY, TeliaSonera, Thomson Corporation, VF Corp and Warner Bros.

THE USER INTERFACE IS THE GAME, AND THE GAME, THE USER INTERFACE

Several years ago at the Computer Game Developer Conference in Santa Clara, California, Bill Volk, a rather bright fellow and CTO of computer game publisher Balmoral Software, made an astonishing and prescient claim about user interfaces for computer games. In essence, he asserted that if the user notices the interface, you have failed on the first order of game design: you have punctured the ever-so-delicate bubble of suspended disbelief. Great designers create spaces into which users will self-identify and co-imagine living or playing.

How do user interfaces and applied theories of computer game design relate to digital asset management? What can great games teach us about knowledge-worker interfaces? What can “worst practice” interfaces tell us about workflow optimization?

IN THE FLOW

In the previous issue, this column introduced a formal model for knowledge work, building upon the seminal work of Peter Drucker, noted management guru. Knowledge workers ask other knowledge workers (or data systems) for answers, or they provide answers to other knowledge workers. How quickly a knowledge worker makes a request for information *and* how quickly others provide adequate answers or responses to a request for information defines knowledge worker productivity. Cycle time, pure and simple.

Knowledge workers transform noise and data into *answers* — information that has relevance in a particular social context, usually a request from a co-worker, customer, or trade partner.

Once delivered, the “need to know” (the social context of the requester) changes — answers devolve into mere information. This devolution calls attention to the bane of our existence and source of tremendous lost productivity: information without social context (who created it and for whom); information becomes noise or “info smog.”

This brings us to user experience (UE) professionals who design system interfaces; or as I previously stated, the designers who “suppress or delete non-essential data and functions that a DAM system presents to its users. UE professionals understand that *less is indeed more*.”¹

Now let’s substitute the word “game” for “work,” where we define work as an activity or set of tasks that a knowledge worker (and user of a DAM system) performs to produce a useful answer or result: “work is the interface, and the interface the work.”

The user interface (UI) of a DAM system should facilitate the fastest accurate production of answers (units of work) as possible with the fewest number of non-essential elements, steps, mouse-clicks, or supplemental “how to” help cycles.

Let me reiterate, with one clarification: UE professionals take great effort to design interfaces that speed the production of *one* unit of work, *one* answer, *one* piece of socialized information.

This will require, no, *demand*, that DAM system owners submit their UIs to continuous, on-going improvement, mapping functionality to the user requirements of particular user types and skill sets. The best, most brilliant UE designers I have met or know about, only get it 85 or 90 per cent right; these designers submit their work to the ignorance of mere mortals.

Michael Moon
CEO, GISTICS Inc.,
4171 Piedmont Avenue,
Suite 210,
Oakland, CA 94611,
USA
Tel: +1 510 450 9999
Email: moon@gistics.com

Artful collaboration can result in brilliant simplicity. An example?

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY

Two companies that consistently get UE right come to mind: Nokia and Apple iPod. Nokia gets it right as a function of a robust, repeatable experiential design process. They have spent millions and millions in testing every nano-acre of their interfaces. They test and test with thousands of true end-users — first time mobile phone users, a rare bird in the developed world. For their more advanced mobile phone and gaming systems, Nokia has its own “beta test pilots association.” Most Finnish teenagers consider it a sacred and patriotic duty to provide precise and informed feedback when asked, and Nokia does ask! Apple gets it right by sheer brute force of Steve Jobs’ taste and “encouraging” personality.

Over the years Microsoft has spent hundreds of millions of dollars in transforming some bad stuff into “pretty good” stuff. However, now they try to do too much; as a result, their Office products have become bloated — a case of “overkill.”

For my candidate for all-time-worst, ugliest UI, check out this year’s crop of BMW luxury cars that come with a console controller they call an iDrive. Poorly lit, fuzzy, low-resolution displays with jaggy, hard-to-read labels, rigid

and hierarchical command structure, and infuriatingly non-intuitive controls for the radio and CD player. It took me back to the days of HyperCard on an Apple II or SuperCard on DOS! Arggh!

What can we learn from the BMW iDrive fiasco and the brilliant Apple iPod? User interfaces represent one the most complex, nuanced interactions of a human being and technology. Great user experiences derive from socialized interfaces that a designer sweated blood to produce: *one* result for *one* type of user. Socializing an interface starts with the assumption that the designer can only ever get about 85 per cent of it right; users must contribute the remainder. Getting it right means that when a designated user of your DAM system looks at the interface, they experience a deep, visceral recognition: “my work on speed: cool, now I can really fly!” This user sees his or her work, clarified and accelerated. No instructions needed to start and curiosity instantly rewarded, “I wonder if it will . . . damn, that’s cool!” Just as Jeff Bezos of Amazon figured out the one-button, sold function supercharged his book store, we must search for similar one-button wonders.

Reference

- 1 Moon, M. (2005) “Cycle Time”, *Journal of Digital Asset Management*, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 7.