

Systems Design and HCI: A Practical Handbook

BRIAN SHORROCK

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This book describes an approach to computer systems design based on the concept of 'patterned systems design' (PSD) developed by its author. The overall aim of PSD is to produce systems which are easy for people to use. PSD is based on the organization of databases into a hierarchical structure of systems, sub-systems and modules. The module is 'the basic building block of a PSD system', and the menu of functions is the same for all modules. This standard menu comprises five options for operations to be performed on individual records (create, amend, erase, display, print) and two for reports (display, print).

The description of the details of PSD and its comparison with other methods of systems design are both clear and well illustrated with examples. In general, it assumes that there is an existing manual system to be computerized. In view of the author's OR background, this reviewer was somewhat surprised that very little advice is given as to how to judge the adequacy of the existing system and procedures. Shorrock is certainly not one of those who believes that a prototyping approach is the answer to these (or other) systems design problems; prototyping is considered and dismissed in two sentences in Chapter 1!

The emphasis throughout is on the large, often mainframe, transaction-processing type of computer system, despite the drawing of a twin-floppy PC on the book's cover. (Possibly this is the machine on which the book was written!) The author makes a good case for the use of PSD for such large systems, but Chapter 15 on 'Special applications', specifically bank cashpoint machines and word-processing, does not tie in very well.

The final chapters, looking at the potential for improving fourth-generation languages (4GLs) by including features of PSD, return to the high standards of the earlier part of the book.

The layout of the book is clear, with few typographical errors, at least by current standards. The exception to this is on page 72, where the author is discussing the importance of designing reports to fit the width of the printed page. In what is either a bizarre coincidence or a very subtle demonstration, the right-hand margin on this page has been set in too far, so that the ends of all full-width lines have been cut off.

To sum up, the author states that the book is aimed at four classes of people: executives, systems designers, HCI researchers and students of computing. As such, it is likely to be of only marginal interest to most JORS readers, but those who fall into any of the latter three classes will find it affordable, informative and in places unconventional. Some discussion of the application of PSD to decision support systems would have made the book more useful for 'executives', and perhaps for other JORS readers also.

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