On Addressing Wicked Problems...

Jon: A lot of the discourse that surrounds interaction design speaks to the large, cultural change it can afford. When I used to teach, my students would become enamored with the possibilities of design and would make grandiose and unintentionally trivializing statements like “World hunger? It’s just a design problem; we could solve it, if only we had the right model...” This issue of *interactions* presents a number of these types of problems: homelessness, sustainability, and memory impairment. Do you feel that we actually can solve these wicked cultural problems through design?

Richard: Design can play an important role. As we suggest in our introduction to this issue, design is changing in ways that should increase the role it can play. And increased adoption of “design thinking” by others—as we’ve referenced in previous Interaction Cafes—will help as well.

But let’s take care not to treat design as if it were a religion or a savior. Agile development methodologies with more than a few fanatical followers are, in some cases, justifiably decried as little more than an excuse not to document code. The OLPC hasn’t had, and is unlikely to have, much of an impact on children’s education in developing nations.

Jon: The two examples you give share an interesting commonality. Both the hardware and software of OLPC have been debated and critiqued from an aesthetic and experiential point of view. But the truly exciting part of the project is how it exemplifies “shifting the placements,” to quote Richard Buchanan, in order to tackle the wicked problem of hunger by providing intellectual self-sufficiency. Agile development has been adopted in a dogmatic style or rejected in an equally abrupt fashion, yet it too is a drastic approach to solving an obvious and painful problem; instead of rethinking specification writing, it turns coding on its side by questioning a lot of established paradigms.

Richard: I admire the thinking underlying both OLPC and agile development, just as I admire the thinking underlying the concept of open access to intellectual content, as discussed by Elizabeth Churchill and Mark Vanderbeeken in this issue.

But just as OLPC and agile development have their limits, so, too, does open access. Indeed, I don’t see it as appropriate for *interactions* magazine, at least not yet.

Jon: The first two ideas are nonobvious attempts at solving obvious problems. The third—open access—might be a novel idea to a nonissue. It could be argued that *interactions* magazine should cost money because the content in it is worth something: The content has value. I suppose it could also be argued that the magazine should be free so that value can be shared by the masses. To which argument do you subscribe?

Richard: Neither. The content in *interactions* is worth something—it has great value, but that alone doesn’t mean that the magazine should cost money. And though you and I are working to broaden the scope and readership of the magazine, it isn’t intended for the masses, and it can be argued that we can extend the reach of the magazine more effectively if it does cost money.

Open access to *interactions* content might become appropriate. Indeed, we’ve already begun to increase access in a couple of ways. My point is that wicked problems don’t have simple solutions, an argument Don Norman makes in this issue.

Jon: I agree; one might even argue that truly wicked problems don’t have solutions at all—they only have appeasements, and the best we can do is temper the symptoms.

I don’t take that point of view, however. I think we can best these problems, specifically because we’ve created them. The massive phenomena discussed in this issue are all human, and it’s with a human and humane mind that we can both explain and, ultimately, fix the problems that exist in our culture and society. Design modeling, divergent thinking, and empathetic approaches to life offer the answers to these difficulties, and free content or not, it’s the implicit goal of this magazine to bring these issues—and the attempts to best them—to light.

—Richard Anderson and Jon Kolko

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