

the design of everyday things

by don norman · Language: EN

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Overview

Don Norman's "The Design of Everyday Things" is a seminal work that critiques the design of common objects, explaining why some are intuitive and delightful to use, while others are frustrating and confusing. Norman argues that when users struggle with a product, the fault almost always lies with poor design, not user incompetence. He introduces fundamental principles of human-centered design, emphasizing the importance of making products discoverable, understandable, and enjoyable.

The book delves into key concepts such as affordances (what an object's properties suggest it can do), signifiers (visual or auditory cues that communicate affordances), conceptual models (the user's mental understanding of how something works), and feedback (information about the result of an action). Norman uses numerous real-world examples, from doors and telephones to complex digital interfaces, to illustrate how these principles are either successfully applied or disastrously ignored. He advocates for a design process that prioritizes the needs, capabilities, and psychology of the user, rather than focusing solely on aesthetics or technological feasibility.

"The Design of Everyday Things" matters deeply because it empowers both designers and consumers to critically analyze and demand better products. It shifts the blame for user error from the individual to the design, fostering a more empathetic and effective approach to creating tools and systems. The book's insights are timeless and have profoundly influenced the fields of industrial design, user experience (UX) design, and human-computer interaction, making it essential reading for anyone interested in how we interact with the world around us.

Key Takeaways

- Good design makes objects discoverable and understandable without requiring instructions or prior knowledge.
- Utilize affordances and signifiers effectively to communicate how an object should be used and what actions are possible.
- Provide immediate and informative feedback to users after every action to confirm success or indicate issues.
- Develop clear and intuitive conceptual models that align with users' expectations of how a system works.

- Recognize that 'human error' is often a symptom of poor design, and strive to create error-tolerant systems.
- Embrace human-centered design principles, focusing on the user's needs and cognitive abilities throughout the design process.
- Employ constraints (physical, semantic, cultural, logical) to guide users towards correct actions and prevent mistakes.
- Remember that good design is often invisible because it seamlessly integrates into our lives, while bad design is always noticeable.

Chapter Summaries

The Psychopathology of Everyday Things

This chapter introduces the pervasive problem of bad design, using frustrating everyday objects like poorly designed doors and confusing controls as examples. Norman argues that when people struggle with products, they often blame themselves, but the real culprit is usually poor design. He sets the stage for understanding why some designs fail and others succeed, emphasizing the need for designs that are intuitive and user-friendly.

The Psychology of Everyday Actions

Norman explores the cognitive processes involved in human interaction with objects, detailing the 'seven stages of action': goal, plan, specify, perform, perceive, interpret, and compare. This framework helps designers understand how users form intentions, execute actions, and evaluate outcomes. It highlights the importance of making each stage clear and supported by the design to facilitate smooth and effective interaction.

Knowledge in the Head and in the World

This chapter differentiates between knowledge stored internally in memory ('knowledge in the head') and knowledge available externally in the environment ('knowledge in the world'). Good design leverages both, minimizing the need for users to remember complex procedures by providing clear cues and information directly on the object or interface. It discusses how different types of knowledge impact usability and learning.

Knowing What to Do: Constraints, Discoverability, and Feedback

Norman elaborates on how constraints (physical, semantic, cultural, logical) limit possible actions, making correct usage more obvious and preventing errors. He emphasizes the critical roles of discoverability (making possible actions visible) and feedback (providing information about an action's result) in creating intuitive and effective designs. These elements guide users and build confidence in their interactions.

Human Error? No, Bad Design

Challenging the common notion of 'human error,' Norman argues that most mistakes are provoked by poorly designed systems that fail to anticipate or prevent them. He advocates for designing error-tolerant systems that guide users, provide clear warnings, and make it easy to recover from errors. This chapter shifts the focus from blaming the user to improving the design of the product or system.

Design Thinking

This chapter introduces the concept of design thinking as a human-centered approach to problem-solving. It emphasizes understanding user needs through observation and empathy, iterative prototyping, and continuous refinement. Norman highlights that good design is not just about aesthetics but about deep understanding of human behavior and creating solutions that truly meet user requirements and context.

Design in the World of Business

Norman explores the practical challenges and opportunities of implementing human-centered design principles within commercial contexts. He discusses the balance between usability, aesthetics, cost, and market demands. The chapter addresses how businesses can integrate design thinking into their processes to create successful products that are both innovative and user-friendly, navigating real-world constraints.

The Future of Design

Looking ahead, Norman discusses emerging design challenges and opportunities, particularly with complex systems, smart technologies, and the internet of things. He reiterates the enduring importance of human-centered principles, arguing that as technology becomes more pervasive, the need for intuitive, understandable, and enjoyable design will only grow, ensuring technology serves humanity effectively.

Themes

- User-Centered Design
- Usability and Discoverability
- Affordances and Signifiers
- Human Error vs. Bad Design
- Conceptual Models
- Feedback and Constraints

Notable Quotes

- "Good design is actually a lot harder to notice than poor design, in part because good designs fit our needs so well that the design is invisible, serving us without drawing attention

to itself." — Explaining why good design often goes unnoticed, contrasting it with the obvious frustration caused by bad design.

- "The two most important characteristics of good design are discoverability and understanding." — Defining the core goals of effective design: making it clear what actions are possible and how the system works.
- "When we interact with objects, we need to figure out what they mean, what they are for, and how they are supposed to be used. This is the role of the conceptual model." — Highlighting the importance of a clear conceptual model for users to understand and operate products effectively.
- "People are often blamed for their errors. But most errors are not the fault of the person but of the design of the system." — Challenging the common perception of 'human error' and advocating for design solutions to prevent mistakes.
- "Affordances determine what actions are possible. Signifiers communicate where the action should take place." — Distinguishing between affordances (inherent properties) and signifiers (communicated cues) as crucial design elements.
- "Design is really an act of communication, which means getting the designer's conceptual model communicated to the user." — Emphasizing that effective design bridges the gap between the designer's intent and the user's understanding.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the design of everyday things about?

It's about how good and bad design impacts our daily lives, explaining why some objects are easy to use and others are frustrating. Don Norman introduces key principles like affordances, signifiers, and feedback, advocating for human-centered design to create intuitive and effective products.

Is the design of everyday things worth reading?

Absolutely. It's a foundational text for anyone interested in design, usability, or understanding why some products work well and others don't. It provides practical insights applicable to designers, engineers, marketers, and even general consumers, making daily interactions less frustrating.

How does the design of everyday things end?

Spoiler: The book concludes by emphasizing the ongoing relevance of human-centered design principles in an increasingly complex technological world. It calls for designers to continue prioritizing user needs and understanding, even as technology evolves, to ensure future products are usable and enjoyable.

Who should read the design of everyday things?

Designers of all kinds (product, UX, industrial), engineers, product managers, marketers, and anyone interested in understanding human-computer interaction or why certain products are frustrating. It's also valuable for consumers who want to articulate what makes good design.

How long does it take to read the design of everyday things?

The book is approximately 250-300 pages long. At an average reading speed of 250 words per minute, it would likely take between 6 to 8 hours to read thoroughly, depending on your engagement with the concepts and examples.