

The Use Improves Us as Well

I was intrigued by Michael Helms' article on "Designing Things that Improve with Use." Agathonic design, as he calls it, relies on the interaction between the user and the object to improve the usefulness of the object. I find this idea compelling and, using his example of a baseball glove, worth expanding on.

Imagine a fresh-from-the-factory baseball glove as a system of stiff leather "springs," each set at a nominal value according to the thickness and stitching of the leather. The act of breaking-in the glove requires that some of the leather will be stretched and repeatedly flexed, while other parts will move very little. This stretching and flexing is geometrically specific to the hand around which the glove is "trained." The leather "springs" are strengthened or weakened by the breaking-in process and the glove becomes more useful.

Moreover, as any professional baseball player will tell you, you just cannot "catch right" with another guy's glove. Something else happens in the "breaking-in" process that captures a deeper level of individual neurological and sub-conscious information. Repeated use with the glove "encodes" the reaction time of the player and the acuity of the user's visual system, as well as the handedness of the user's overall reaction mechanism. This neurological information is critical to the glove's function and produces subtle variations in the way the glove responds in the hand that are very user specific and highly functional. Descriptions vary, but "my lucky glove," "my 'winner's glove," and the like all refer to the fact that optimal performance can be triggered by the information encoded in the glove during the break-in process.

These two ideas provide a clear explanation for why gloves are not interchangeable among high-performance athletes, even ones with identical hand geometries.

Mr. Helms may be on to something. I enjoyed his paper and the rest of *Ambidextrous*. It's high time for a journal such as this one from Stanford.

Bill Burnett
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Bill- thank you so much for inaugurating our Letters to the Editor section! We look forward to hearing from more readers in the issues to come! -Editors

CORRECTIONS: In last issue's article on the San Francisco Museum of Craft+Design, we misspelled director JoAnn Edwards' name. Apologies.

Our contributors are colorful members of the design community who decided to share a little bit of themselves:

Ben Shaw

Ben—a PhD candidate at the Royal College of Art, London—studies visual representation and design collaboration. A Paleolithic graduate of the Stanford Design program, he has worked in engineering design, organizational learning and knowledge management.

Meredith Ringel Morris

Merrie is a PhD candidate in Computer Science at Stanford. Her interests include human-computer interaction, computer-supported cooperative work, tabletop interfaces, and golden-retriever puppies.

Björn Hartmann

Björn is a PhD student in the Computer Science department's Human Computer Interaction group at Stanford. He splits his time pondering phenomenology and programming micro controllers.

Mike Ananny

Mike is a PhD student in Stanford's Department of Communication. He's interested in how people become "public communicators" and, more generally, how individuals and communities develop civic communication skills.

Angie Heile

Angie is a graphic designer in Palo Alto. She also takes many, many pictures of bugs.

Susan Wyche

Susan is a Ph.D. student in Georgia Tech's Human-Centered Computing program. She is insanely interdisciplinary, having taken courses on topics ranging from queer theory to aerospace engineering.

Bill Verplank

Bill is an interaction designer, human-factors engineer and visiting scholar at Stanford.

Michael Mad...

Michael has been a comp... has programmed in an e... Today he is a QA Tools E... but also an avid entrepre...

Mike O'Neill

Mike is an Irishman with an English accent and, by the time this article appears, a US citizen. He lives the frenetic life of an entrepreneur with his wife Kelly in San Francisco's Inner Richmond, which is Spanish for the foggiest place on earth. Mike likes making new things.

Bill Cockayne

Bill's work blends cutting-edge research, industrial leadership and learning practice in the development of innovations.

Rosa Wu

Rosa, a recent graduate from Harvard College, is constantly searching for ways to combine her interests in business and design. Let her know if you have any ideas.

Roger Dennis

Roger is partially ambidextrous, a Southern Hemisphere left-hander in a right-handed world. However this is of little help when piloting a left-hand-drive car in the Northern Hemisphere.

Jess McMullin

Jess is founder of Canadian consultancy nForm User Experience, where he works with North American clients to create value at the intersection of business goals and human needs. He blogs at www.bplustd.org.

Sarah Jain

Sarah is an assistant professor in the department of Cultural and Social Anthropology at Stanford. Her book, *Injury: Product Design in the United States*, will be published next spring 2006 with Princeton University Press.

Michael Helms

Michael is a PhD candidate at Stanford. He is currently analyzing rapid cognition processes in design. His two-year-old daughter assists by experimenting with entropy, bounded rationality, and chaos theory.

Christian Rohrer

Christian is the director of user research at eBay in San Jose, California. He was previously director of user experience research at Yahoo!.

Felicity Pino

Felicity is a Missouri gal getting a Master's in Biomechanical Engineering at Stanford. She graduates this December! Every little bit of affiliation with the "design folk" there has been a true honor!

Doantam Phan

Doantam is a PhD candidate in Computer Science at Stanford. His research interests include human-computer interaction and information visualization.

Holly Liu

Holly is a UI Designer at AOL in the Community Product Line. She is a graduate of UC Berkeley's School of Information Management & Systems, and in her free time she likes to cause harmless trouble.

Andrew Dahley

Andy is a leader in designing physical and digital "stuff." At the MIT Media Lab he was a pioneer in domain of ambient and tangible interfaces. Currently he is a consultant in San Francisco helping companies use design thinking to develop new business strategies.

Elison

Computer programmer since the second grade and entrepreneur since the sixth grade. Engineer at Tellme Networks in Mountain View, entrepreneur who runs several other businesses.

