

Usability

Nobody asked but ...

In earlier days, as a software engineer in Academia, I focused my research inquiries on usability —

Usability is the ease of use and learnability of a human-made object such as a tool or device. In software engineering, usability is the degree to which a software can be used by specified consumers to achieve quantified objectives with effectiveness, efficiency, and satisfaction in a quantified context of use.

The most important thing I learned is that “users” are very seldom guilty of user error; they are rather victims of systematic error. As my guru, Donald Norman might say, if an error can happen it will. The first errors are those of the designers (if users can make mistakes that is proof that designers of uses make mistakes).

My mistake was in seeing usability in too narrow a sense. I saw it as a software problem — I was in the ivory tower after all. Really it was a system problem, which made it equal in size and complexity to the multiverse. Systems have a way of encapsulating errors, to hide them, in complexity.

I see a real danger to human social advancement here. As a community, we tend to push systems up the ladder of use. Rather than taking on problems at the individual level or the association level, well meaning but misdirected, we push the acceptance of systems toward mandatory state control.

— Kilgore Forelle