

Personal Reflection on Mirel, “interaction design for complex problem solving”, 2004

By Harriet King, September 21, 2011

This book was advertised as “easy to read” and “entertaining”, which it might be for certain audiences. I guess I’m not that audience. I found many sentences confusing due to embedded phrases, but I’m guilty of this in my own writing. So I should have a heart before I criticize Mirel.

My reading journey felt long. I struggled to get through the introduction pages numbered with Roman numerals and was exultant when I passed out of the “XV” pages. But that took me all summer and two weeks of the semester. Then I plodded through the first 27 pages.

I returned to the task in week four of the semester. I was resolved to cruise through this strangely wall-like task. It was morning when my attention skills are best. I was listening to some quiet but peppy music to keep my A.D.D. down and my mood positive. I was armed with confidence in my intuition as I started to skim the book with a pen and notebook beside me. Skimming requires intuition to find the relevant bits possibly buried in a paragraph.

“This. That. Oh! There’s another”, I said to myself as I picked up glimmers of interesting things that could relate to my thesis. Later I transcribed these notes into a list of “sparks” to pursue later. Maybe one or more will become a fire to destroy my distraction forest.

Then I came to the last section of the book: “how” to make changes in commercial software production so usefulness will rightfully dominate. Yikes! This section depressed me horribly. I’m not sure whether to listen, but I told myself, “You should never, ever, work in a place like these examples”. Which inspires the question: “What other kind of place is there?”

I felt grubby just reading the political strategy section, and yes, I’m hypersensitive. But I was oddly drawn to the topic and read almost every word. I never think about gamesmanship like “Who has the power? Who sets the criteria?”. Power plays, ug. Not “ug” exclamation point, but “ug” period.

I am reminded that software is a field that is in constant flux. There are structures and methods that may stay somewhat stable. And in the big picture, business is always the same basic patterns. But satisfying the gaping maw of consumer demand for tools and toys for computer devices, that is scary. That is speed of light change. And what am I doing here preparing for a career in it? I don’t like change.

So the Mirel book was helpful to read because it inspired some fresh thoughts about software design, about being a human on the planet, and about usefulness.

I would summarize the book as a thorough explanation of software usefulness and its makers. Usefulness means fitting the end user’s need for help. This is distinguished from usability, a common software design branch relating to ease of use. The book is about software makers with examples of users to show why makers should prioritize usefulness.

I plan to study users, who are receivers of software, not makers. Common users have no say in what happens in software production and if they did, it would be chaos because they have

diverse and competing opinions and needs.

But reading Mirel gave me lots of ideas for further exploration about users. I feel excited to learn more. Thank you Barbara Mirel for sparking my thinking. I don't want to study making, but now I'm curious about vocabulary, ideas, and effects on users and those fit my study. Unfortunately, I also don't want to work at a big company making software anymore. Oh well.