

Book Review - Emotional Design: Why We Love (Or Hate) Everyday Things

Yann Blake E-mail: blakey@tcd.ie

1 Thesis summary

"We become attached to things if they have a significant personal association, if they bring to mind pleasant, comforting moments [...] Perhaps the objects that are the most intimate and direct are those that we construct ourselves[...]" Donald Norman (p.48) [1]

Emotional design is at the heart of the development of Donald Norman's thesis, and it is a formulation which, beyond its astonishing preliminary impression, allows a very logical construction of its argument : emotions substantially affect the human ability to understand the surrounding world and to learn new information.

For example, an aesthetically pleasing object such as a Mini Cooper which Norman often refers to - will appear to the user as more effective due to its somehow sensual appeal.

To explain this phenomenon, Norman bases himself on the model which he designates as being the typical Affect and Cognitive attitudes but transposed to design. Therefore, the design is perceived by the user through three dimensions:

First, Visceral: which directly relates to aesthetics, to the feeling of the appearance of objects. Second, Behavioral: the usefulness of objects and their ease of use. Third, Reflective: how rational and intellectual a product is and what the owner of the product thinks it can bring them in terms of pride from the image they give for example. An ideal design must therefore address these three dimensions at the same time.

2 Review

The cover of the book reveals an intriguing object resembling a tropical insect or a high UFO. Donald Norman the author explains that this is a gold-plated juicer designed by Philippe Starck and makes a first demonstration of the attachment that one can have for objects: the object must in fact not be used because the acid would damage the gold plating - so it is not made for its logical use, but simply for decoration. The same demonstration is reproduced throughout the book for other objects such as the Impossible Teapot designed by Jacques Carelman or the water bottle designed by Tynant used as a Vase. Norman emphasizes on the importance of stories in these cases. Being able to tell someone a story about an object relates to reflective emotions.

The development of the book is tied around two conceptual distinctions that Norman continually takes as basis for his arguments and his examples. The First is Affect (which includes Emotions) versus Cognition. *"The affective system makes judgments and quickly helps you determine which things in the environment are dangerous or safe, good or bad. The cognitive system interprets and makes sense of the world"* Donald Norman (p.11) [1]. The Second is the three levels on which Emotions can occur: Visceral, Behavioral, and Reflective. Visceral and Behavioral are subconscious, while Reflective is conscious.

Visceral covers attractiveness, emotional responses to pleasant appearance which he relates to the intrinsic state common in all humans: sweet tastes and smells, harmonious music and sounds, smiling faces, smooth objects, etc. In this list (p.29), Norman seems close to falling into oversimplifications of the complex reality with what he describes as a universal natural state. Behavioural focuses on how an object performs and its functions are used; highlighting challenges with the gap between the actual use and the original use for which the object is designed - which brings us back to the Tynant water bottle. Reflective, finally, details the controlled response of humans shaped with the culture, the values, the personality and the aspirations. This is the most complex of the three and also the only fully conscious type of emotion: it combines personal meanings of things with received signals from other levels of emotions and stimuli.

To illustrate the powerful impact emotions can have, Norman often refers to height and the fear of being "hundred meters in the air" that paralyzes someone, therefore strongly affecting the brain functions. He points out advantages of such Emotions. Anxiety and fear are in fact very helpful to focus, but narrows and reduces the creativity. Examples of fire exits show issues with this, when the doors do not open outward, while when escaping people would be under high anxiety. On the other hand, Diesel stores purposely create anxiety and confusion emotions to their customers on the behavioral and reflective levels, so that Diesel can create a positive response when the customers are relieved from these emotions while being helped by a sales person. Being relieved from anxiety in this case, is seemed more successful than not putting anxiety into the equation at all. This is based on the way anxiety works, i. the expectation of something negative, then, when the expected outcome doesn't happen, the emotion is "one of relief" - as opposed to Hope emotions.

In contrast to anxious people, happy and relaxed ones, would tend to think outside the box, and have great capabilities of solving new problems. Brainstorming would therefore work better

if games or other pleasant experiences are involved, resulting in participants feeling relaxed therefore more creative. On this, Norman writes that "creative decisions" are precisely what machines lack of (p.207). Even though machines can be excellent at rapid search of information in millions of data sets, their limitations lie on the absence of having emotions.

When Norman mentions the fish ping-pong table, clearly, the cognitive components in the design have no added-value from the projected water and fish. However, emotions had a key role in making this ping-pong game much better than any other, just from its "fun" aspect. He then points out the "lack of scientific understanding" (p.100) of enjoyment, fun and humor, stating that these are more an "art form" in the process of design.

"We are all designers. We manipulate the environment, the better to serve our needs. [...] We build, buy, arrange and restructure: all this is a form of design" Donald Norman (p.224) [1]. Norman puts into perspective an incredibly essential mechanism in the field of User-centred Design: objects all have an innovative and unique way of being used, from an individual to another. Designers therefore need to understand multiple ways that object could be used, disposed or even recycled. He even goes further in his statement: we **must** be designers in life - this a necessary requirement. Norman concludes his book on an eye-opening note of philosophical analysis related to Life and Human interactions.

Overall in this book, Norman raises very interesting issues relating to the process of designing an object or more generally a product. It intertwines very well real-life related examples, latest scientific research findings and exploration of surprising objects with his vision of cognitive science. Its very approaching written style and pleasant reading makes it suitable for people of any interest - not only designers or engineers. This is a lot to do, not only to his capacity of phrasing complex ideas into easily understandable concepts, but also the variety of examples he uses from music sounds to automobiles.

However excellent the book is, a few negative criticism must be made. Some examples are often far too much developed, exploited, and re-exploited through the chapters. In regards to his concepts of cognition, Norman is very good at defining them, and analysing them separately. However, when it comes to bring them cohesively, this is often unclear or slightly poor. I also found some distinctions too Manichean, especially when it comes to the Visceral level. The taste is certainly visceral, and liking a Bitter taste would, according to Norman, be part of the Reflective level. But I am still puzzled by these examples, it seems to me that it is simply an evolution of the Visceral level which during the experiments of life changes, and almost loses its own Visceral aspect. The evolution of the Visceral level is therefore neglected in his analysis. Also Manichean, is the fact that Visceral and Reflective cannot be intertwined for the very same emotion, Norman envisions that they could interact with each other but remain separate levels. I feel however, that I may receive visceral emotions at times, that straight away if not almost simultaneously enter in the reflective emotions level.

Many questions that were introduced remain unanswered by the end of the reading. Perhaps, the author's desire to leave such impression in order to stimulate further thinking from the reader. The negative points are minor in comparison to the great aspects of the book discussed in this review - and it appears essential to me for readers to learn from his thesis on Design.

References

- [1] Donald A Norman. *Emotional design: Why we love (or hate) everyday things*. Basic Civitas Books, 2004.