

## Public Demonstrations

Matt Jones

© 2002

Like death and taxes, bad usability affects us all. In a way, it is comforting to know even one of the richest people in Britain, the Duchess of Devonshire, has trouble with Television remote controls. In her book ("Counting My Chickens", *Farrar Straus & Giroux*), she writes: "There are so many tiny rubbery squares ... I go to Bakewell & buy a lot of sticking plasters to cover the unwanted buttons...Oh for a telly of yesteryear". Bad HCI must be a big problem if even the rich can't escape it.

However, perhaps the Duchess was just unlucky in her choice of TV, for it seems that money can indeed purchase better interactive experiences. A couple of months ago, I borrowed a friend's Apple iPod, a pocket-sized, sleek, personal portable music player. Although there are some usability glitches – I got confused by the timeouts – it provides an almost beautiful user experience. The designers have really thought about how to give simple and easy access to potentially thousands of music files. But good design comes at a price – in this case, the cheapest model is \$299. By way of a contrast, my \$70 personal CD player makes it difficult for me to manage a single CD's twelve tracks.

If the lower-end of the market can't afford products with high usability are they destined to a lifetime of technological frustration? One class of devices that should offer them an escape might be those that increasingly populate our public spaces. Ticket and vending machines, ATMs, digital picture booths and Government information kiosks might appear less exciting than other types of ubiquitous computing, but for CHI designers who want to make a real difference to everyday life, they are a great and worthy challenge. Not everyone can afford to have a large garden, so there are public parks. Most of us haven't got a swimming pool – we go to public baths. Many users will never have high-end gadgets; their pleasant user experiences might only come with these public devices.

As well as improving the future environment, good public space technology could raise people's expectations of interactive technologies. If they use a satisfying, intuitive electronic voting cubicle, they will be less tolerant of a recordable DVD player that has (again) recorded 100 channels they do not want to view. Public service education by example, then, could empower users to demand better user experiences elsewhere.

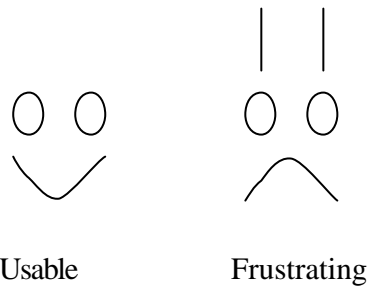
Sadly, much of the current public space technology provides users with as many, if not more, difficulties than the devices they have at home. On a recent trip to London, I was rushing with a friend to a meeting. At one of the city's busiest stations, I needed to buy a ticket. While my friend fretted - we were getting later and he already had a monthly permit - I attempted to buy a travel pass. Many minutes, screens, beeps and key presses later, I gave up and had to queue to buy a ticket from a salesperson.

Such experience is repeated everywhere, everyday and all of the difficulties are invisible and ephemeral. As soon as I had given up on the machine and walked away, another customer was ready to try their luck; unaware of my knowledge of the low-odds of

success. To make usability a public issue and to improve public space usability, there need to be ways for people to pass on their experience with a device to users who come after them.

While in London, the “WARchalking” ([www.warchalking.org](http://www.warchalking.org)) movement burst onto the streets. Wireless Internet users were encouraged to chalk simple signs on pavements to show the location of any Wi-Fi (wireless broadband) access points they had encountered.

Users, especially specialists like us, the CHI community, could provide a similar community awareness service. Whenever we use a public device we could leave a sign (or more appropriately, an icon) that simply expresses its usability, whether good or bad. Some first examples are shown here - get in touch with me if you can think of extensions and improvements.



CHI researchers and practitioners often seem to worry about the apparent low impact of their work. The sorts of public demonstration talked about here could be one effective way of making things better for everyone, from dropouts to duchesses.