Book Review: The Inmates Are Running the Asylum, by Alan Cooper

I want to learn to be a project manager, not just as a project manager in the sea of many. I want to learn how to be effective and innovative. I want to be a leader and learn from the past and be an admiral of this ship we call, technology. I don’t like accepting what is to be truth. Just because it works doesn’t mean it is working to its best ability. Alan Cooper, the VB extraordinaire and the author of The Inmates Are Running the Asylum charts the course in the rough seas of user interface design.

Cognitive Friction

One of the “gems” that Cooper introduced to me is, cognitive friction. Cognitive friction is when you introduce many elements or functions in one place. Your mind has to try to adjust by either trying to learn or prioritizing. Cooper notes that most of the time there is a great deal of information that goes unused because there isn’t need or it is too frustrating and too much information. I have found that Cooper has created a lot of lingo in the software industry.

Dancing Bear Charade: Cooper suggests that we pay money for a silly parlor trick, because we think it is new and different. He compares the consumer who buys a fancy new gadget, but doesn’t know how to operate more than half of its functions to a pedestrian giving money to a street vendor. Without good design you have a non-value added cheap trick.

Human Characteristics

Cooper points out that features tend to be easier and less expensive, but not necessarily wanted or used. He says that instead, software needs to be more “polite”. He describes polite software as being interested in the person, forthcoming, responsive, fudgable and other human like attributes.

The author further states that technology is being driven by personality that are more like computers. He says that software engineers are less concerned about harmonizing polite human reaction with technology and more concerned about ease and cost of building the product. Cooper literally admits that software engineers push functions to the top of the list based on how much interesting or how easy it is to program. That statement alone makes me really question who holds the power when most of us rely on this skilled work force to make our time lines and design decisions.
**Personas**

Cooper constantly challenges the computer lingo in his book. One term in particular that stands out is the user. Instead of stating a mass audience of end-users he suggests that we go through the exercise of building a specific character. I liken it to building the Gilligan cast, focusing on the main character Gilligan. If you build this fantasy cast you are building a specific persona to market to. In turn you can answer specific questions for objectives. For example, if Gilligan needs a ship to sail away then it is unmistakable his functions will need to produce a sail.

In addition to establishing personas, Cooper explores in-depth the danger of lumping users into for easy categories of; Power Users; Computer Literate Users; and Naïve Users. He insists that we will be more successful at marketing the 20% group with specific wants than the 80% group with all different wants. The author gives example after example of personas that can’t be lumped into just one of the three user categories listed above.

To drive it all home, Cooper declares that it isn’t the user that is stupid, but the design of the technology that fails us. Cooper says, “Technology doesn’t have to be so dehumanizing.”

**In the End**

It is the beginning that counts to Cooper. He preaches about goals and building a solid design or your product will “burn in hell”. He colors his book with story after story of failed projects that didn’t have a strong objective or clearly designed process.

**Summary**

Cooper takes a lot of high level ideas and challenges our every day way of doing things, but doesn’t necessarily offer a concrete solution. Cooper offered up to many simple antidotes for my taste and was a bit too redundant in his stories. Don’t get me wrong, if you love story telling, and who doesn’t, than Cooper satisfies that for the reader. He had a collage of great ideas, however I still can’t see the end result. If anything Cooper shakes you up a bit and causes you to think about how we may truly be hostage to technology.

I think a lot of the ideology will be a hard sell to executives. It will be hard to start justifying more human and capital resources into user interface design, especially when the return on investments have such soft costs associated to it. However, nothing is a better indicator than when a product is profitable and gets rave revues from customers. It is such a large ship to turn around, but I believe Cooper is bravely leading the charge.

The justices that I can do for the technology user is to recognize the importance of the human attributes and implementing that into the product. Only then can I begin to commandeer the world of project management. If anything, Cooper has helped me think
beyond the tight reigns of the established world of thinking such as, “this is just how projects run its course”. I am challenged to find working solutions to better develop a product, such as spending more time and consideration in the overall goal and design phases of the process.

I recommend this book because it is fun and easy to read and has a lot of good points that need to be heard in the technology industry.

Thank you Cooper for a good beginning to big changes.