CHAPTER

1

13 years later...

ANOTHER EDITION?

SO SOON? WHAT'S YOUR HURRY?

Excepted from ***Don't Make Me Think: A Common Sense Approach to UX Design and Research, rev 4***

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Just when I thought I was out,
they dragged me back in.

—MICHAEL CORLEONE,
IN *THE GODFATHER PART III*

When I first wrote *Don't Make Me Think* in 2000, the subtitle was *A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability*.



It made sense. After 10 years as a usability consultant (helping clients make their software and websites easier to use, and teaching them how to do it themselves), when I was handed the opportunity to write a book about it, I really liked the idea of sharing what I'd learned.[1]

I focused it on web usability because the people who needed the most help seemed to be the ones who suddenly found themselves responsible for building websites.

When I did the third edition in 2013, I added a chapter on mobile apps and changed the subtitle to *A Common Sense Approach to Web and Mobile Usability*, because by then as much work was going into building apps as websites.



1 ...and—if I'm being completely honest about it—the prospect of being able to raise my consulting rate after I'd published a book. (It wasn't until several years later that I discovered that I could have raised my rate anyway without spending a very painful year writing. Live and learn.)

"Finally," I thought, "now I can relax."

In the years that followed, I was very happy to have the book-update monkey off my back. I'm lazy by nature, and after doing two of them, I knew that no matter how modest you think the changes are going to be, a new edition always turns out to be a huge amount of work. And for a while it seemed like I might be able to get away with never having to do another one.

For one thing, people were still reading it. With more than 700,000 copies in print, to this day it remains consistently one of the top five web design books on Amazon.

And I thought everything I'd said was still true. Yes, some of the technology had changed, but usability is about people, not technology, and while technology changes fast, people (and human nature) change slowly. As usability guru Jakob Nielsen so aptly put it:

> "The human brain's capacity doesn't change from one year to the next, so the insights from studying human behavior have a very long shelf life. What was difficult for users twenty years ago continues to be difficult today."

But then about five years ago, as much as I hated the idea, I started to think that maybe I should consider doing another edition, for two reasons.

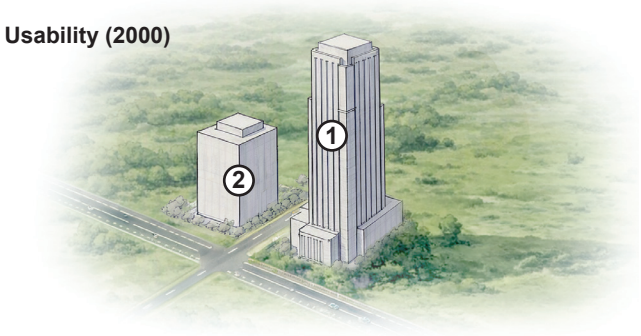
#1. It was starting to look old

Based on the Amazon reviews, people still seemed to find the book as useful as ever. But given how much app and website design had changed, some negative reviews (thankfully only a few) started to appear suggesting that some of the examples were making the book feel dated. The good news was that almost all of those reviews ended with some variation of "...but it's still all relevant, and everybody should read it!"

But it was enough to make me think that it might be time for a refresh. ("Dated" is definitely not a good adjective for a tech book, and I know that when I'm deciding whether to read one the publication date is one of the first things I check.)

#2. User experience had swallowed up usability

Until 2000, usability was the name for what you did if your job was to make products more user friendly.[2]



1. Usability
2. Information Architecture

But starting around 2010 usability went from being the one thing you did[3] to make products more user friendly to one of many, all under banner of "user experience," a term originally coined by Don Norman in 1993.

Here's the difference:

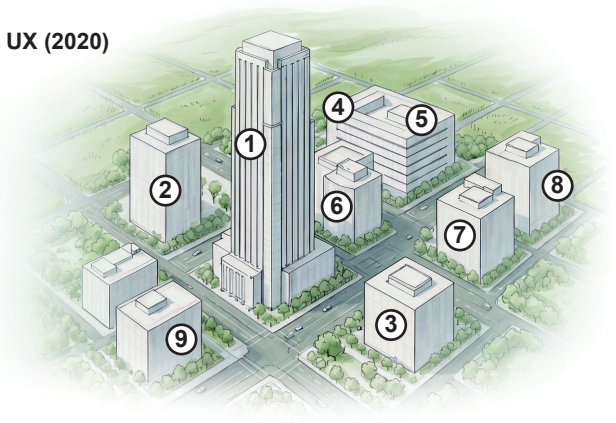
- **Usability** is about the experiences you have while using a product.
- **User experience** (UX) is about **all** the experiences you have related to a product, from discovering it, shopping for it, learning how it works, and using it, to getting customer support, writing a review, and even returning it. At each step, the main goal is to create a positive experience that makes the user feel good about the product and the people, organization, and brand behind it.

2 Curiously, the people who "did" usability never actually had a proper job title. We called ourselves things like "usability consultants," "usability specialists," or even "usability experts" if we thought we could get away with it, but nothing really stuck.

3 ...with a little help from Information Architects, who organized content so it was easy to find...

Probably the clearest indication that usability was now just a part of UX came in 2012 when my beloved professional society, the Usability Professionals Association (UPA), renamed itself the *User Experience* Professionals Association (UXPA). Or, as I liked to put it, "usability became a wholly owned subsidiary of UX."

What had been usability finally acquired two proper job titles (UX Research and UX Design) and was now surrounded by a number of specializations that had grown up around it under the banner of UX.



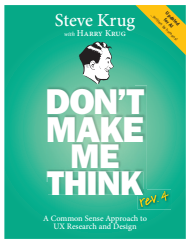
1. UX Research and Design
2. Information Architecture
3. User Interface Design
4. Interaction Design
5. Visual Design
6. Content Design
7. UX Writing
8. Service Design
9. UX Data Analytics

The goal of usability remained the same: to make sure that products do things that people want or need to do (they're **useful**), and ensuring that they're easy—or easy *enough*—to use (they're **usable**, or "user-friendly").

The "useful" part i*s* mostly the responsibility of UX researchers who help decide *what to build*, using things like interviews, surveys, and data analytics to understand users' needs and motivations. The "easy to use" part is largely the job of UX designers who are experts in knowing *how to build things* so people can understand and use them.

So I changed the subtitle...

Namely:



A Common Sense Approach to UX Research and Design

And then I went through the whole book, replacing "usability" with "UX" or "UX research" or "UX design" wherever it made sense, and doing a lot more thinking, writing, and rewriting than I expected.

Don't get me wrong, though...

Even though the subtitle has changed, you'll find that this is still basically a book about usability.

And this is probably as good a place as any to give you my personal definition of what it means for something to be usable:

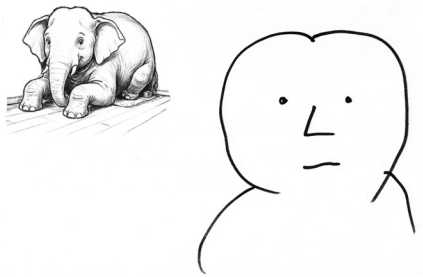
> A person of average (or even below average) ability and experience can use the thing to get something done without it being more trouble than it's worth.

As you can see from the relative size of the buildings in the diagram, I still think that usability (UX research and design) is the most important part of UX, for one simple reason:

> If something is too hard to use, it's broken. And if it's broken it doesn't really matter how good the rest of the UX is.

And I also still believe that usability testing (watching people try to use what you build) is by far the most effective thing you can do to improve any product. Which is why—at no extra charge—I've folded in parts of my other book (*Rocket Surgery Made Easy: The Do-It-Yourself Guide to Finding and Fixing Usability Problems*) that spell out what I think is the best way to do usability tests. (You're welcome.)

Thanks a lot, AI!



And then just when (like Michael Corleone) I finally had one foot out the door, an elephant lumbered into the room and plopped itself down in the corner.

I have to admit part of me was pleased because I've had an avid interest in artificial intelligence ever since I first learned about computers, and I've been eagerly tracking its progress since its first big boom in the 1980s.

But, of course, I was less pleased by the obvious fact that the sudden leap forward of AI (LLMs and generative AI) was going to drastically disrupt UX and the lives of the people who make it happen, either by doing everything that they do and doing it faster, or by doing things that they can't do.

Oh, right—and maybe destroy society and bring an end to life as we know it. There's that.

So I was faced with trying to figure out how to deal with a ridiculously fast-moving target that also just happened to be a shape-shifter. Suffice it to say, I've been busy.

I took some consolation in realizing that a lot of what I've always said remains relevant, particularly during the transitional "between times" (like, before websites go away completely).

As we go along, you'll see what I've done, and I hope you'll find it useful. But before we strap on our jet packs and head off bravely into the future, let's take a few minutes for a quick look at the past.