Reviews


In User Error, Ellen Rose seeks to change our perspective on computer use. As the title suggests, Rose's book is about the computer user. It is not about the everyday errors we make as users of technology; rather, the book is about resisting an erroneous representation of the user. She argues we have come to think of ourselves as users but rarely think about the meaning of that identity or the relations of power in which it is entrenched. Herein lies the value of Rose's book, for it forces us to think critically about a subject position often taken for granted.

User Error is a work of advocacy based in part on Rose's experiences at various stages of the technology design process. Her concern for the user is grounded in a previous career in New Brunswick's software development industry, where she was a technical writer, instructional designer, and manager of software development projects. Rose often functioned as the liaison between end users and software developers, a boundary role which increasingly revealed to her the unequal power relations underlying the production and use of technology. Rose's resulting concern for the user now carries over into her current position as head of a graduate programme in instructional design at the University of New Brunswick.

Rose sets out to answer the question, “What does it mean to be a computer user?” by examining how the user is situated and represented in computer culture. She argues computer culture is characterized by the “rhetoric of inevitability,” a disempowering perspective shared by critics and celebrants of technology that is premised upon the certainty of unstoppable technological change. Rose criticizes those who write about technology—from Negroponte to Postman—for drawing upon and thereby perpetuating this rhetoric.

Her criticism centres upon the fact that this preoccupation with technology shifts attention away from the individual user to create a socially constructed subject position: the monolithic “User,” characterized both by a lack of voice and a lack of technological expertise. Rose deconstructs the User and shifts our focus back to the individual user. Her stated goal is “to help users reclaim some of their volition and responsibility in a computing culture that increasingly requires that we become users and at the same time deprives us, in that role, of the power of self-determination” (p. 9).

Rose traces the origins of the User as a social concept, first grounding it in the mythology of computer use foundational to modern culture. In it, technology reigns supreme, seemingly with a will of its own despite being an object of our own invention. A subsequent review of computing’s history reveals the ongoing struggle for power among various actors (including users and programmers) contributing to the construction of the User as a “monolithic, unknowing entity.”

Rose then discusses the culture of software production and its perpetuation of the dumbed-down representation of the User. Programmers, distant from and often disdainful of users, design “user friendly” software that does not meet user needs and worse, requires of users constant contortive acts of “computer friendliness.” When these actions fail, we are apt to blame ourselves rather than badly designed technology (Norman, 2002 [1988]). This culture of self-blame helps feed the engine of unchecked technological advancement. Consumption and use are inextricably interconnected; we pin our hopes on—and struggle to keep pace with—a seemingly unending cycle of hardware and software upgrades.

Though ostensibly intended to democratize (or at least disseminate) technical expertise, computer manuals do not escape Rose's critique. She argues they maintain rather than subvert “the existing hierarchy of computer knowledge,” best exemplified by the popular For Dummies series of manuals. The pathologization of resistance to use further contributes to this hierarchy. Rose illustrates her point by examining research on the phenomenon...
known as “computer anxiety,” “computer phobia,” or “technostress.” The implicit assumption is there must be something wrong with you if you do not want to use a computer.

Rose also criticizes the assumption that children have a “natural affinity for digital devices” (p. 10). She worries children are learning to use technology in a rote manner because the nature of their interaction with technology is never in question. Children are limited to the range of options available in the realm of digital play. They learn to accept the constraints inherent to a technology designed by an industry actively involved in the construction of the User. Children are therefore unwittingly prepared to assume the adult User's disempowered subject position. As a consequence, today's generation of children may lack the capacity to reject the User identity Rose criticizes.

In spite of this grim picture, User Error ends on a cautiously optimistic note. Rose concludes by offering an alternative to the powerless, unknowledgeable User identity. Rather than argue we distance ourselves from digital technology, Rose encourages users to engage in “responsible action.” Grounded in use, this solution stems from Rose's conviction that most users do not have the luxury to choose a life without technology. It encompasses a range of actions, from choosing to speak directly to a colleague instead of sending her an e-mail, to postponing a company-wide hardware upgrade for another year. Responsible action is fundamentally about rejecting the rhetoric of inevitability and accepting responsibility as unique, individual users.

Rose's analysis is valuable because it is grounded in the experiences of everyday users, though the concept of responsible action merits further elaboration, particularly in terms of how it can be practically applied to users' everyday experiences. User Error would also benefit from a more substantive engagement with the unequal gender relations shaping technology from production to use (Wajcman, 1991).

Despite this criticism, User Error makes a contribution to the literature on technology through an innovative reframing of our conception of the User. It is also relevant to current design practices, appropriate for both an academic audience and those working in the high-tech trenches. Clear and accessibly written, User Error should be required reading for those who use technology and those who produce it.

References

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