More Examples of Thoughtless—
and Thoughtful—Design

A supplement to *The Thoughtless Design of Everyday Things*

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Contents

But Seriously, Where's the Art?

Perhaps when you travel, you enjoy viewing public artworks, or maybe you're seeking an original piece of art to complete your home decor. A website called Wescover.com is intended to connect art lovers with creators of unique designs. Wescover.com contains beautiful images of innovative pieces, but the website's user interface exhibits multiple characteristics of thoughtless design. It repeatedly violates the principle of "Design for the user's convenience."

Problem #1: Searching Behavior

The first problems are with the search fields. I can search for a particular art item or category, either in all cities or in a specific one. Figure 1(A) shows that, as I type in the city field, the drop-down uses predictive text to show a list of five candidates to complete the letters I've typed already. Suppose I'm searching for Boise, so I type "bo." The candidate cities that appear all start with "bo," but they are not sorted alphabetically. Based on the results shown, I doubt whether they are shown based on search frequency statistics either. Would visitors to this website really be searching more for art in the city of Boone (wherever that is) than, say, Bordeaux? Boise doesn't even appear in this list of predicted suggestions; the list is neither complete nor scrollable. I can't discern the filtering criteria that led to this particular list of predictions.

If I add two more letters to my search string as in Figure 1(B), Boise now appears at the top of the candidate list, but several other cities that do *not* begin with "bois"—or even just "bo"—also appear. I expected that narrowing down the search would have focused the candidate list correspondingly, rather than bringing in new entries that don't match the search criteria.
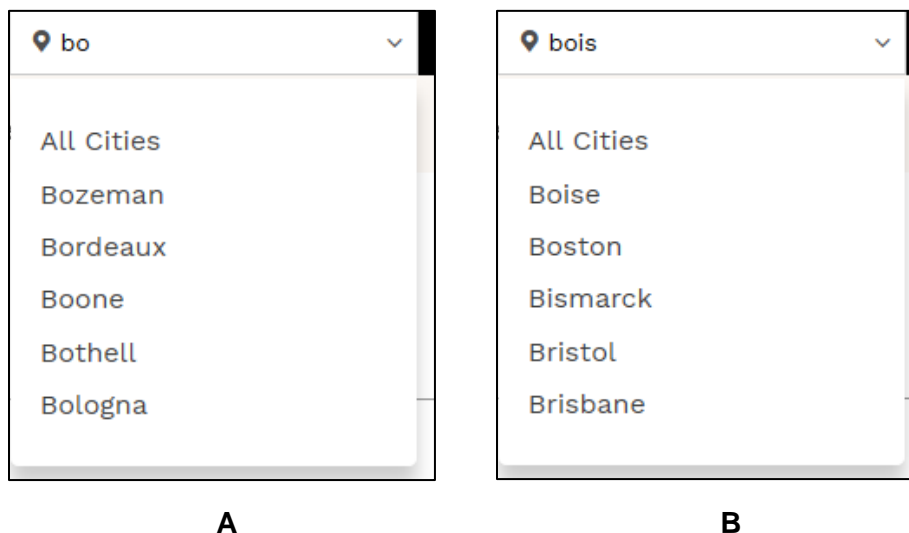

A   B

Figure 1. The predictive text feature in the city search drop-down doesn't behave logically.

In most search fields, if you type the exact string you're looking for and then initiate the query, the search engine hunts for exactly that string. However, if I type "boise" in its entirety on this

form and then press Enter, the form deletes my "boise" entry and doesn't launch the search. Instead, it replaces "boise" with whatever text was in the field previously (defaulting to "All Cities") and then it just sits there. The form requires that I select one of the items in the drop-down list to initiate the search. These behaviors are not consistent with usual search functions, nor are they efficient. I made repeated mistakes until I figured out how it worked. This function violates my Design Lesson #10, "Ensure that the user won't be surprised with unexpected and undesired behavior."

Problem #2: Specifying the State

Another searching problem at this site is that I can't specify the state in which to search, just the city name. Suppose I want to find interesting public art to enjoy on my upcoming trip to Springfield, Illinois. "Springfield" appears in the city list after I type in the full name, as you can see in Figure 2. But twenty-eight American states contain cities named Springfield. I only care about the one I'm visiting. The site offers no way to narrow down the list of results to a specific Springfield. Consequently, a search can return many irrelevant items.
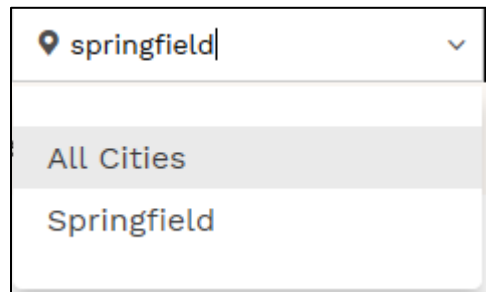

Figure 2. The drop-down list of city names doesn't let you select the state; all Springfields in the database are searched.

Furthermore, the results returned from a query are displayed in no apparent order. Results from the various Springfields are randomly intermingled, so I can't easily view just the ones that I care about. The location information displayed on the images returned from a query sometimes is truncated before showing the state, as Figure 3 illustrates. This forces me to make another click to determine if a search hit is in my specific Springfield of interest, further wasting my time. It would be much better to let the user narrow down the geographical search by indicating the state when necessary.
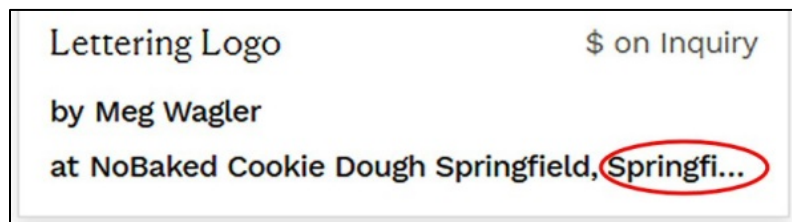

Figure 3. There's not always enough room in the query results to show the state, so I must click on the returned result to see where the store is located.

Problem #3: Excessive Search Results

If I search for the general category of Art in all cities without specifying any search keywords, 39,070 items are returned. I'm not likely to scroll through 1086 pages of random results to see if anything catches my eye. Keyword searches apparently scan the entire lengthy description that the artist provided for each item, not the actual relevant keywords that pertain to the item. This results in many false-positive hits and makes it even harder to generate a focused search.

The function provided to "Explore Creators" returns 16,320 items, in no sequence, at 36 items per page. I don't see how this is helpful to the user, unless I'm willing to page, page, page just to see if something grabs me. It would make a bit of sense if the "Explore Creators" function returned a different sequence of hits each time, to randomly position different creators from the database on the first few pages. That's not how it works, though; the same unsorted sequence seems to appear each time. Any artist who doesn't appear on the first three or four screens will probably never be seen by anyone using the Explore Creators function.

Problem #4: Multiple Sign-Up Invitations

After I performed a search, a popup invited me to enter my email address and subscribe to Wescover.com's weekly design newsletters. Not being interested, I clicked on "Maybe Later." A different popup then immediately appeared, with precisely the same invitation. The only available button said "Subscribe." I had to close the popup to proceed with using the site.

Website developers should not annoy the user with repeated invitations like this. And if I do decide that I want to get the newsletter, I must scroll clear down to the bottom of the page—requiring 17 page-down actions—to find the subscribe box. You'd think the designer would put that option right at the top of the page, in the nonscrolling zone.

These and other instances of thoughtless design all make it much more difficult than necessary for visitors to wescover.com to find artistic items of interest. That's unfortunate, as there are thousands of lovely and innovative pieces of work listed there.

The Case of the Suicidal Breadmaker

Years ago I owned a great breadmaker. It looked rather like a small Star Wars R2-D2 unit (Figure 4). This machine produced baked excellent bread.

Figure 4. My great breadmaker walked to the edge of the counter and dove to its death.

One day, however, I guess the machine decided it had had enough. During the kneading cycle, the machine must have gotten out of balance. Its vibrations caused it to migrate from the back side of the kitchen counter to the front edge, at which point it took a plunge to the floor below. Fortunately for me, the dive was not fatal. The breadmaker was slightly damaged but it still worked. Several months later, the bread machine decided to retire for good. It again walked over to the edge of the counter while kneading a loaf. This time, its dive to the floor caused terminal damage.

There must have been some design flaw that allowed the breadmaker to wander across a kitchen counter surface on its little rubber feet. The unit was fairly heavy and always seemed to be secure on the counter. Perhaps the small surface area of the feet didn't provide enough friction to keep it firmly attached to the counter surface. Or maybe the cylindrical design was less stable than the rectangular shape that characterizes contemporary breadmakers. Whatever the reason, it was disappointing to have this otherwise well-performing device destroy itself. I haven't yet found another breadmaker that does as good a job, but at least the one I have now remains securely in place as it works.

Does Anybody Really Know What Time It Is?

I've traveled a lot, both in my career as a software development consultant and for pleasure. Virtually every hotel room I've been in contains a clock radio. With some of them, it's not hard to set the alarm or to adjust the time if the clock is not accurate. However, other models are baffling. I sometimes have spent a ridiculous amount of time trying to figure out how to configure the clock so it will wake me up at the desired time.

Certain clock models, like the one in Figure 5, have a particular design flaw: there's no way for the hotel guest to change the clock's time if it's wrong. Perhaps they automatically synchronize their time setting to a particular radio broadcast, which may not always work right. Clocks that are off by exactly one hour might not have been reset following a shift to or from daylight saving time. Perhaps the last person who did manually adjust the clock got it wrong.

Figure 5. This hotel clock radio displays controls for the guest to set the alarm, but not the current time.

When I enter a hotel room and see that the clock is wrong, I immediately reset it. I want to know what time it really is and to have the alarm go off when I want. After struggling to learn how to adjust the time on certain clocks, I sometimes am forced to admit defeat. I eventually learned that the time-adjustment controls on some clocks are concealed behind an unobvious panel that required some tool to open. I don't carry Allen wrenches or screwdrivers with me wherever I go, so I must call the hotel's front desk and ask them to send a maintenance person to reset the clock. These clocks definitely are not designed for the user's convenience.

And it's not just me. Some frequent-traveler colleagues have described the same annoyance, as has design guru Don Norman ("The Hilton Hotel Alarm Clock," https://jnd.org/the_hilton_hotel_alarm_clock, 2019). With so many models of alarm clocks and clock radios available, surely hotels can do a better job of providing their guests with easily-adjustable units. In the meantime, I use my phone to wake myself up.

Please Tell Me What's Wrong

When I request to save a new Microsoft Word file, Word derives a default file name from the first few words of text in the file. If I'm writing an article or a book chapter, those first few words will be the title. I've noticed some funny business going on with the way Word handles certain characters in file names, which violates several of my design lessons.

Suppose my title is "What's Up, Doc?" Word will create a default file name of "What"—truncating at the apostrophe. This suggests that an apostrophe is not allowed in a file name. But it is! If I then type in a file name of "What's Up, Doc" with the apostrophe—but without the question mark—Word saves the file under that name just fine. Apostrophes are clearly permitted characters, so I don't understand why Word truncates everything from the apostrophe onward.

If I type the full title—"What's Up, Doc?"—as the file name in the save dialog, I see the error message that is shown in Figure 6. Because of the way I did the experiment, I can guess that a question mark is not a legal character in a Microsoft Windows file name, but simply telling me "The file name is not valid" isn't helpful. This message violates my Design Lesson #40, "Craft messages both to inform the user of a problem and to help them solve the problem." Word obviously knows why it rejected the file name; not telling me exactly what's wrong is thoughtless because it doesn't help me fix the problem.
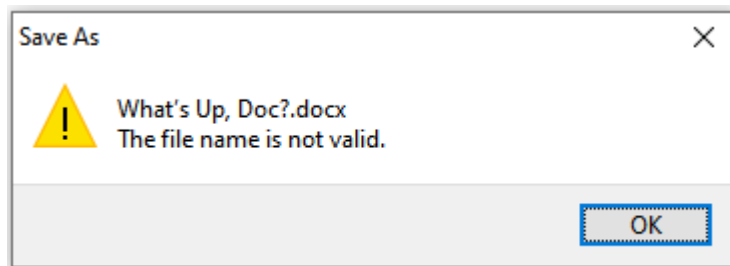
Figure 6. Word doesn't like my file name but it doesn't tell me exactly what's wrong, so I don't know how to correct it.

The question mark is not the only character that is not permitted in a Windows file name. Other illegal characters include these: asterisk (*), colon (:), double quote mark ("), slash (/), backslash (\), less than sign (<), greater than sign (>), and a vertical line (|). Attempting to include one of these characters generally triggers the error message in Figure 6—but not always. Consider these three experiments:

File Name	Response
What's Up, Doc?	The file name is not valid.
What's Up, Doc [no question mark]	File is saved with that name
What's Up Doc? [no comma]	File is not saved, no error message

It's a mystery why Windows doesn't provide any feedback at all if the file name includes an invalid question mark character but no comma, whereas it complains if the comma—a permitted character—also appears in the file name. The lack of feedback in that circumstance is inconsistent with the file save dialog behavior under other conditions. It offers the user no hint about how to solve the problem. Leaving the user baffled violates Design Lesson #64, "Minimize user perplexity."

The design of the file-save operation could be improved by the simple action of telling the user exactly which character(s) in the file name are causing validation to fail. Word knows what the offending characters are. Why won't it tell me? A helpful generic error message would list the disallowed characters, thereby solving this problem and saving users time both now and in the future.

One Size Fits None

My friend Deb, a rather petite woman, recently purchased some underwear that was advertised as being one-size-fits-all. She put them on for the first time and continued getting dressed. As she took a couple of steps, she was surprised to see that her underwear had fallen down around her ankles. Apparently, there was at least one person this item of apparel didn't fit at all. There's some kind of thoughtless design going if a brand-new item of clothing won't stay on an intended customer's body.

Products that are advertised to fit a range of people often don't fit any of them properly. I wear a size 15-34 dress shirt. Many dress shirts these days are sized in the form 15-34/35, suggesting that they should fit someone who wears either a 34- or 35-inch sleeve. But wait: the sleeves are only a single length. They'll be a little long for someone who needs a 34 and a little short for someone who needs a 35. It's only going to properly fit someone who takes about a 34-1/2-inch sleeve, which is likely the actual sleeve length. It's cheaper for merchants to carry fewer sizes that are claimed to fit more prospective customers, even if it doesn't fit many of them quite right.

I've encountered the same one-size-fits-none problem with products other than clothing, too. I needed a new blanket for my queen-size bed. Many blankets on the market claim to fit both full (or double) and queen beds. A full-size mattress has dimensions of 53.5 × 74.5 inches. A standard queen-size mattress is 60 × 79.5 inches. Obviously, a blanket that fits well on one of these mattresses is either going to be too large or too small for the other.

As mattresses come in standard sizes, so should the blankets that are designed to be used on them. I have one of these full/queen blankets that is so large that the sides hang nearly to the floor even on my queen-size bed. On the other hand, my newest full/queen blanket isn't long enough to tuck in at the bottom of my bed. It might fit a full-size mattress well, but it certainly is not designed for use on a queen.

These kinds of products violate my principle to "Design for the User's Convenience." Products that are intended to cover multiple usage scenarios often don't serve any of them well. They are designed for the convenience of the manufacturer or the merchant, not the customer. Perhaps the manufacturer can save some material—and increase their profits—by making a slightly larger double-size blanket and claiming it is also a queen.

Some products that don't fit right are downright deceptive in their explanations. The memory foam mattress pad I bought for my queen bed is three inches too small in each dimension (Figure 7). The manufacturer's description said it was slightly undersized because the foam spreads out when you lay on it. However, that's not how foam behaves: it compresses under pressure, rather than flowing outward.

Figure 7. This memory foam mattress pad is supposed to fit a queen bed, but it is deliberately designed to be several inches too small in both dimensions (the diagonally opposite corner is properly aligned with the mattress).

The description of the product as fitting a queen-size bed was deceptive. The memory foam pad is comfortable, but I have to reposition it nearly every day because it slides around on the larger mattress surface. I wanted to contact the manufacturer and call them out on their lie. Unfortunately, I couldn't find any way to reach the company. Perhaps they are in hiding.

A Puzzlingly Good Website

My wife, Chris, and I enjoy doing jigsaw puzzles. Several companies will make custom jigsaw puzzles from your own uploaded images. A few years ago, I had such a puzzle made with a photo of Chris and myself in our prize-winning Halloween costumes. It was fun to assemble a picture of ourselves.

Like many other people who are mostly staying home during these days of COVID-19, we usually have a puzzle going. I decided to make another custom puzzle for Chris's upcoming birthday. I discovered a delightful website, PuzzleYou.com, that lets customers design a wide variety of custom puzzles using their effective and well-designed user interface.

First, you decide how many pieces you'd like in your puzzle, choosing from several standard sizes with 48 to 2000 pieces. You can use a single image as I did previously, or you can build a collage from multiple uploaded photos. The website offers enormous flexibility to create just the puzzle you want. There are nine standard layouts with many variations of each to choose from. For instance, the "simple grid" style alone offers 91 different layouts that contain from 2 to 64 images of various sizes. I decided to create a 1000-piece puzzle with a simple layout containing 21 photos we have taken of flowers—very colorful, but containing enough green foliage to pose a puzzle challenge.

After you select and upload your images, the website lays them out in a default sequence in your chosen pattern; see Figure 8 for an example. You can rearrange the images, dragging them from one slot in the pattern to another. You can even crop the photos to zoom in on just the portion of each original image you'd like to include in the puzzle. At any point, you can change the number of pieces in your puzzle or switch to another of their more than 200 layout options.
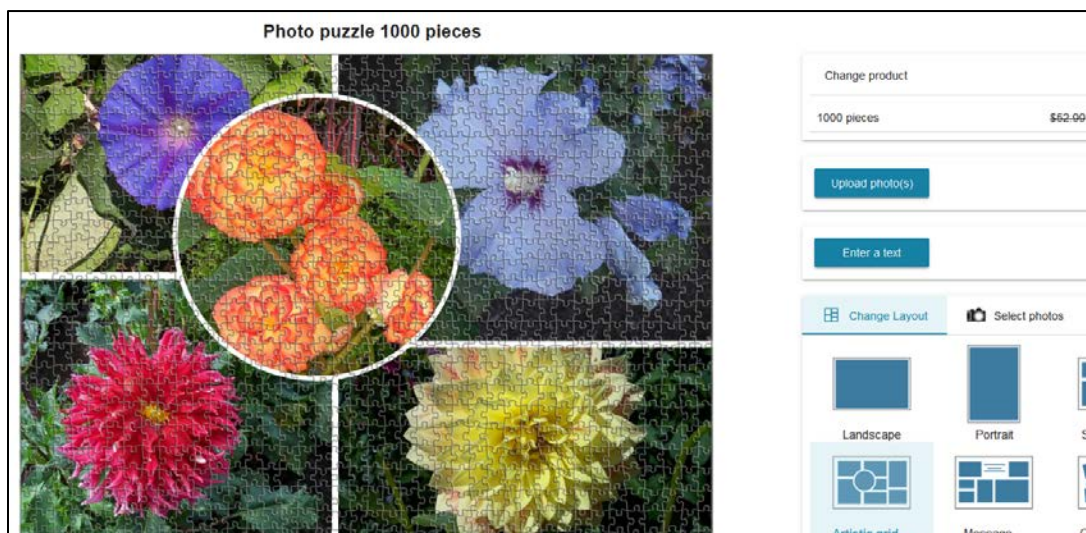

Figure 8. You can create more than 200 customized jigsaw puzzle designs with your own images using the nicely-designed user interface at PuzzleYou.com.

Once you've designed your perfect personal puzzle, you choose your box design and enter any text you like to appear on the box cover. Less than 24 hours after I placed my order, I received an email telling me the puzzle had been shipped. It arrived just three days after I placed the order—from Germany, no less—much quicker than two commercially available puzzles I had ordered recently from other vendors.

The user interface at PuzzleYou.com exemplifies thoughtful design. The task flow is simple and logical. The tools provided for creating your puzzle are obvious, intuitive, and easy to use. The site looks appealing, and I encountered no problems while using it. I only wish I had spent more time exploring all the available options before I submitted my order. Chris and I are looking forward to a fun, personalized puzzle-assembly experience.

The Windows App That Wouldn't Die

When I buy a new PC or install a new operating system, the first thing I must do is to configure it into the form that I wish. One step in that process is to delete the useless (for me) applications that come preinstalled. Usually I can do this from Windows Settings, but the standard uninstallation process doesn't work for certain apps, for reasons I don't understand.

I do not have an Xbox and I never will. Therefore, I wanted to remove everything having to do with Xbox that appeared after I updated my PC's operating system from Windows 7 to Windows 10. Most of the Xbox components went away upon request, but I could not delete the Xbox Game Bar app. As Figure 9 illustrates, the Uninstall button is not active when I view Xbox Game Bar under Settings/Apps & features. When I click on Advanced options, I see several control settings, including Uninstall, but again Uninstall is grayed out and inactive.
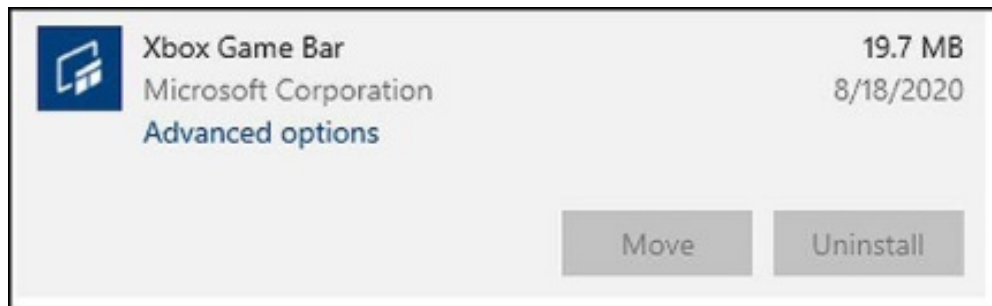

Figure 9. The Uninstall button is not active for Xbox Game Bar in Windows 10 Settings.

As nearly as I can tell, there is no way to activate that Uninstall button to make this unwanted app go away, which makes me wonder why Microsoft teases me with a grayed-out Uninstall button. I found some instructions online about an alternative way to completely remove Xbox Game Bar using Windows PowerShell. I followed those instructions and it seemed to work. Nonetheless, Xbox Game Bar still appears in my Start menu and app list. If I try to run Xbox Game Bar, nothing happens. Maybe it really has been deleted from the computer, but not from the list of apps for some reason. In either case, something's wrong.

I've spent way too much time trying to figure out this problem. The design violates several of my design principles:

- Don't waste the user's time
- Design for the user's convenience,
- Place the minimum mental burden on the user

It's my computer, and Xbox Game Bar is a nonessential app. Why does Microsoft make it so hard to remove?