Critical Assessment of the Book
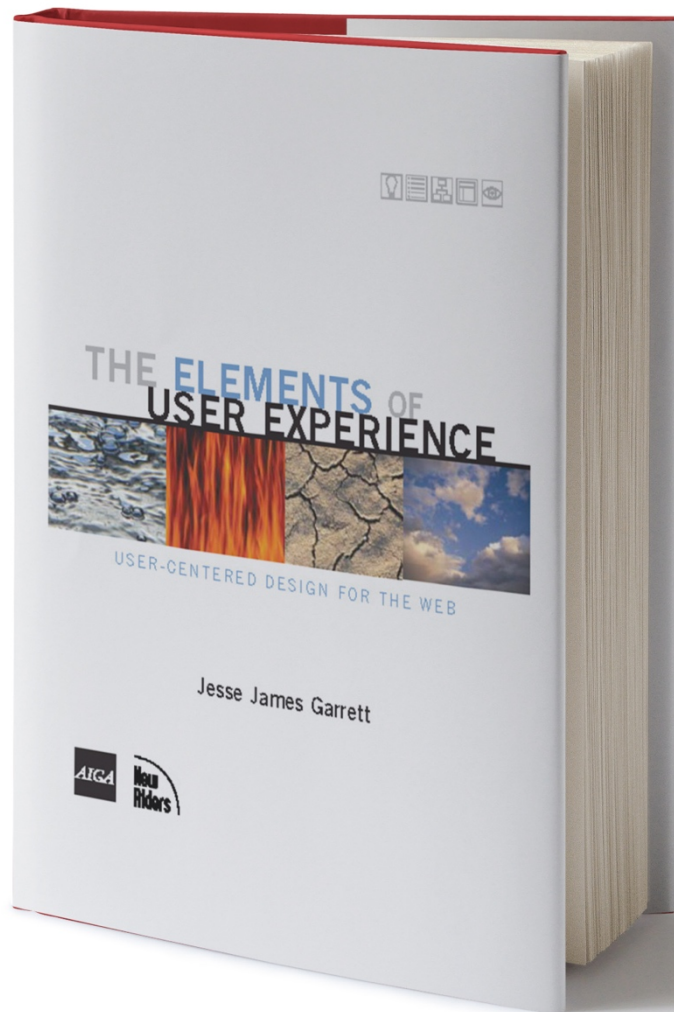
The Elements of User Experience
by J.J. Garrett

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Introduction to the Author

Jesse James Garrett is a User Experience Designer based in San Francisco, California and Co-founder of Adaptive Path strategy and design consulting firm.

Born: Ottawa, Canada
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Books Authored:
(i) The Elements of User Experience: User-Centred Design for the Web, 2002
(ii) Updated version: "The Elements of User Experience: User-Centred Design
            for the Web and Beyond", 2011

Introduction to The Elements of User Experience: User Centered Design for the Web, 2002

Jesse James Garrett, a reflective practitioner, were among the people who brought people's attention to User Experience and its need to design better web services. While writing his book "The Elements of User Experience: User Centered Design for the Web, Jesse had to coin many terms for several scenarios and events that occur while working with websites and software interfaces, to bring standardization to the field and academia. In his own words Jesse describes his book
"The Elements of User Experience cuts through the complexity of user-centered design for the Web with clear explanations and vivid illustrations that focus on ideas rather than tools or techniques. Jesse James Garrett gives readers the big picture of Web user experience development, from strategy and requirements to information architecture and visual design. This accessible introduction helps any Web development team, large or small, to create a successful user experience."

Context

Being the first to draw market's and academia's attention towards User experience, the book brought standardisation to the process of website and other digital applications designing. It then became a vital reference for web and interaction designers the world over, and had helped to define the core principles of the practice. In the beginning of the book, Jesse humorously explains the story behind writing the book and how it went from various ups and down during Jesse's early career phases. Later, this book became one of the most sought after book in web design field.

In his introduction Jesse defines User experience in context of website design,
"The user experience design process is all about ensuring that no aspect of the user's experience with your product happens without your conscious, explicit intent. This means taking into account every possibility of every action the user is likely to take and understanding

the user's expectations at every step of the way through that process", later he argues that," We have a double-edged relationship with the products and services we use. They empower us and frustrate us; they simplify and complicate our lives; they separate us and bring us closer together. But even though we interact with countless products and services every day, we easily forget that they are made by people, and that someone, somewhere should get the credit when they work well for us—or get the blame when they don't." Jesse, with his book introduces elements of User experience design and proposes a skeleton model for elements of User experience. He explains, that for a good User experience there are many factors that are involved, from the look of a website to its behaviour, how and what it allows you to do. He proposes these factors as classified into various planes and explains them in context of an online shopping website-

The Surface Plane
Surface brings everything together visually: What will the finished product look like? On the surface you see a series of Web pages, made up of images and text. Some of these images are things you can click on, performing some sort of function such as taking you to a shopping cart. Some of these images are just illustrations, such as a photograph of a book cover or the logo of the site itself.

The Skeleton Plane
Skeleton makes structure concrete: What components will enable people to use the site? Beneath that surface is the skeleton of the site: the placement of buttons, tabs, photos, and blocks of text. The skeleton is designed to optimize the arrangement of these elements for maximum effect and efficiency—so that you remember the logo and can find that shopping cart button when you need it.

The Structure Plane
Structure gives shape to scope: How will the pieces of the site fit together and behave? The skeleton is a concrete expression of the more abstract structure of the site. The skeleton might define the placement of the interface elements on our checkout page; the structure would define how users got to that page and where they could go when they were finished there. The skeleton might define the arrangement of navigational items allowing the users to browse categories of books; the structure would define what those categories actually were.

The Scope Plane
Scope transforms strategy into requirements: What features will the site need to include? The structure defines the way in which the various features and functions of the site fit together. Just what those features and functions are constitutes the scope of the site. Some sites that sell books offer a feature that enables users to save previously used addresses so they can be used again. The question of whether that feature—or any feature—is included on a site is a question of scope.

The Strategy Plane
Strategy is where it all begins: What do we want to get out of the site? What do our users want? The scope is fundamentally determined by the strategy of the site. This strategy incorporates not only what the people running the site want to get out of it but what the users want to get out of the site as well. In the case of online bookstore website, some of the strategic objectives are pretty obvious: Users want to buy books, and we want to sell them. Other objectives might not be so easy to articulate.

Further in his book, Jesse elaborates these elements and tries to represent them in context of web as a software interface and web as a hypertext system. He includes various processes onto his different planes to propose a method to design software and websites.
For designing website as software interfaces and hypertext system, he calls Surface Plane as visual design plane and explains as the tasks related to graphics treatment of interface elements (the "look and feel"). In case of web as a hypertext system he explains visual design as visual treatment of text, graphic page elements and navigational components.

For Skeleton Plane, he includes interface design and information design for software, for hypertext systems he adds navigation design to the same plane. Explaining Interface design as traditional HCI (Human Computer Interaction), he relates it to design of interface elements to facilitate user interaction with functionality, where, Information design is the designing of the presentation of information to facilitate understanding. For hypertext system, he explains navigation design as design of interface elements to facilitate the user's movement through the information architecture.

Moving to Structure Plane, Jesse allocates the tasks of Interaction design and Information architecture design for software and hypertext systems consecutively. He explains, Interaction design as development of application flows to facilitate user tasks, defining how the user interacts with site functionality. Information design is structural design of the information space to facilitate intuitive access to content.

Scope Plane gets added with Functional Specification and Content Requirements tasks. He explains Functional specification as feature set, detailed descriptions of functionality of the website that must be included to meet users needs. Content requirements elaborate the needs for content definitions in order to meet user needs.

Jesse adds User Needs and Site objectives in the Strategy Planes explaining both relevance for designing a software or hypertext system. User needs comprises of externally derived goals for the site; identified through use research, ethno/techno/psychographics etc., where Site objectives define the business, creative or other internally derived goals for the site.

This model brings structure and clarity in website design projects by stating different tasks by standarised terms and aligning the process to design good User experiences. Website design projects can be overwhelming without any defined process in place and can bring chaos and mismanagement in the workflows for design and development of the project. Jesse's proposition lets team to see website design project as a series of research, learning and designing tasks. It facilitates teams to plan and manage website projects effectively. From informing the designer about various elements of a website project, it also helps to divide tasks and allocate it to team members for an efficient execution of project.
Before, Jesse's proposition, websites were designed by ambiguous methods that overwhelmed organisations with every project and lead to project delays and mismanagement.

Application at Tangible Design Scenario, Wheelchair

It came as no surprise, when some designers acclaimed for using Elements of planes method to design some physical objects and approved it to be successful for their projects. This inspired me to try to think of an application of this elements model to a tangible product design project. What happens if we apply this elements model and later the method to design a Wheelchair ?
The method classifies the design tasks into following planes–

1. User Needs/Site Objectives
2. Functional Specifications/Content Requirements
3. Interaction Design/ Information Architecture
4. Interface Design/ Navigation Design/ Information Design
5. Visual Design

User Needs/Site Objectives
A good design method takes care of all the processes, user needs, research, market insights, prototyping, iteration, testing and implementation. To design a Wheelchair following above method first we follow the first step of analyzing the User needs, let's for our hypothesis we assume it's a chair for a patient suffering through knee pain and is in recovery phase from a knee replacement operation. As per first step the User, Patient in this case needs a comfortable chair that can help him to rest his knees in prescribed positions, must be easy to approach and sit, must have hand rest for support for hands while getting up or making self comfortable by putting whole body weight on hand bars. Since it's a recovery phase chair, it should be easy to leave or get off from the chair to routine exercises, it should be able to accommodate some wheels to help with navigation by self and by a helping nurse. The Chair is not just a chair but an essential companion/tool for recovery, to leave room for garden to exercise or for physiotherapy sessions and come back, to join everyone for dinner at table.

This step proves to be helpful in figuring out the needs of the User and develop an optimum design brief for the project from User Perspective.

Functional Specifications/Content Requirements
Following the element method, as per User needs research, a designer can start figuring out the functional specifications for the Wheelchair. Benchmarking the best User experience scenario, we come up with dimensional details and other functional parameters for the chair from a User/Patient's perspective, not doctor or physiotherapist's.

On the contrary, being a medical and patient rehabilitation equipment, the functional specification of product may not be an expertise of a designer.
To figure out the technical/functional specification for the Wheel Chair, a designer needs to have knowledge of different fields such as Industrial Product Design, Ergonomics, Physiotherapy, Knee Patient Recovery Process, Medical Equipment, Patient Recovery, Health and Rehabilitation Products Market and Branding Experts.

To design such a technical product Knee Patient Wheel chair, a Product designer must collaborate with physiotherapist, surgeons and other stakeholders in a multidisciplinary team, on the contrary this process doesn't propose any team working or collaboration tool or method for a multidisciplinary team or processes. In todays time, problems are not limited to one single discipline's expertise, we need multidisciplinary perspectives to look into and comprehend a problem, to design a meaningful solution.

By the time, I was at this stage of designing and analyzing the elements method and model, I realized something is not right and this process is not proving to be taking care of multidisciplinary perspectives for a problem or a solution and is incapable of generating valuable insights and research to facilitate designing of complex products like a Wheelchair. The method fails to work in the case of a complex product design, however it might prove to be useful in case of simple design projects, such as a garden chair or a piece of furniture, these types of project don't need a team to collaborate to come up with optimum solution to a problem, often these kinds of projects are done by an expert mindset individual designer.

It might be tempting to advance into the further processes by integrating Jesse's method for designing this Wheelchair, but instead of taking the standard definitions of terminologies, we might have to consider the philosophical meaning behind these planes which is not a good way to doing things scientifically. We must not try to approve the process of crossing a channel to scale a mountain. Though we might find some similarity in planning stages of an expedition with planning of doing a channel crossing swimming event, like booking tickets, hiring a team of experts to form crew, arranging travel and hotel reservations, but gears are different, team, strategy and environment of activity is different, doing such a thing can result in failure of whole attempt and may result in life threatening situations calling for some emergency evacuations.

After going through all those conflicts, I decided to not further test this method

for designing a Wheelchair, as it was quite clear the result won't be a promising one and our solution thus developed will result into ineffective problem solving.

The Book in publishing year's context

"The elements of User Experience Design" presents a concrete model to plan, design and manage website design projects. This book played an important role in setting standards to User Experience Design in 2002, when it hit the storefront. Jesse had to coin many terms for several scenarios and events that occur while working with websites and software interfaces, resulting in laying a foundation for User experience perspective for projects of websites. Jesse successfully reflects his disappointments and frustrations with designing complex websites without having any concrete method or model to follow, that made him to write this book and spark a discussion over experiences with digital web interfaces. This book became one of the most successful books published in User experience and web design field in a very short span of time post its launch in 2002, the book brought standardisation to the process of website and other digital applications designing. It then became a vital reference for web and interaction designers the world over, and had helped to define the core principles of the practice.

Key take-away from the book

Every design method has its limitations, based on its application areas, hypothesis and environment. Just like Participatory design method best works for most of the community driven projects, for public space. Jesse's elements and method model works best for websites and software interfaces, but, if we try to apply this method to other design fields, then it may prove to be inefficient, or result in weak solutions.
User experience is a stage of a product or service design, where we have worked out a solution concept or final idea for a problem, following problem solving methods like Design Thinking, Systems Thinking, Participatory design or Human centered design process, and we want to push the idea in design and development phase. Most of people confuse User experience with Service design, where User experience design is a subset of Service design.

Today, User experience is a buzz word and everyone has his or her own definition, in this scenario, this book helps to separate facts from hype. User experience is a very scientific method to design a human computer interaction in a meaningful way. It never solves problems; it helps to design digital interfaces following standards to facilitate meaningful human computer interactions. With the development that the world has been through in past 10 to 15 years, we have witnessed a lot of new inventions and introduction of new kinds of digital device, the way we consume information has changed, the way we interact with digital devices has changed a lot from last decade. Though the core principles and methods remain the same, a lot of factors and parameters have been taken into consideration while designing a User experience in present

times. The book lays a solid foundation of understanding those core principles of User experience, it is a great start for someone who wants to understand what is User experience design for digital products and services like websites, softwares and apps. It helped me to understand User experience, what it is and what isn't, in a time where a lot of confusion remains in the industry about what User experience is and how to design it ?