

Stop Plugging Up the Dam—

And Help Build It Better!

The Changing Role of the Technical Communicator from Traditional Documentation Deliverables to Product, User Interface, and User Experience Design

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About Andrea

- Technical communicator since 1983
- Areas of expertise
 - Information architecture and design and interaction design for products, Weblications, and interactive information systems
 - Usability, including analysis and testing
 - User-centered design and development process
- Certificate coordinator for two UC Santa Cruz Extension programs
- STC Board of Directors

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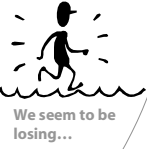
Discussion Topics

- Our industry is changing
- Why? One reason: Traditional documentation deliverables aren't working
- How do we fix it?
- The bottom line

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What I Want to Know Is...

- Why are we plugging up the dam of unusable products with documentation?
- Why are we writing instructions describing how to use product features that should be intuitive?
- Why aren't we helping to build the dam better in the first place?



We seem to be losing...

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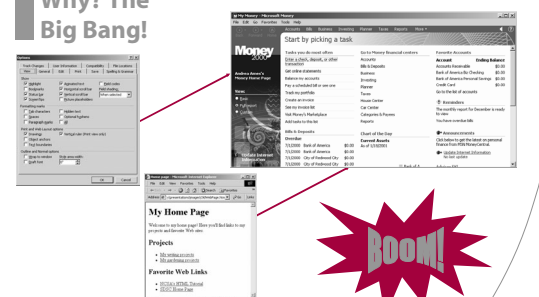
Our Industry is Changing

We're starting to see

- Usability receive more attention
- More products being *designed*
- More information in product user interfaces

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Why? The Big Bang!



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The Evolution In Software Application Design and Development

From

- Traditional desktop software applications (widget oriented) and Web sites/pages (nearly all text with few in-line images)

To

- Information-rich user interfaces in e-commerce applications on the Web and in browser-based desktop software applications

And Because...

Computers are becoming ubiquitous

- More and more inexperienced users coming onboard
- New users have expectations of the Web (very often their first "user experience")
- New users bring those expectations and experiences of the Web to other interfaces

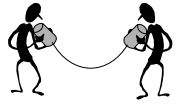
And...

- Even experienced users are fed up
- *The Inmates are Running the Asylum*—Alan Cooper



And Finally...


Traditional information deliverables are not working



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Why Traditional Information Deliverables Are Not Working


- Reactive
- Interrupt work flow
- Perpetuate strong user-interface/ information boundaries (online)
- Weaken integrity of user interface design/screen real estate (online)



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How Do We Fix the Problem? With Strategy!


- Stop trying to find ways to make our users read our documentation
- Start finding ways to make them more *successful* with our products
- Think strategically—outside the "documentation box"—about the user experience



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With Design!


- Design information (and interaction) for a successful *user experience*
- Design for products and product interfaces
- *Not* strictly for documentation deliverables



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With Technology!

- Create customized user experiences
- Intelligent interfaces
- Intelligent assistance
- For example, “intelligent” agents like Microsoft Office’s Clippit



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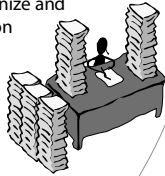
With a Common-Sense Approach!

- Put more information online
- *Not* because we dump print information into an online format
- *Not* because we rewrite print information for online systems
- Because users *need less documentation* when products are *designed* appropriately

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Implications for Technical Communicators

- Aren't we "fixing" ourselves right out of a job?
- No! But we'll have to
 - Re-think how we architect—organize and structure—and design information
 - Re-think how we develop our information—new technologies and infrastructures



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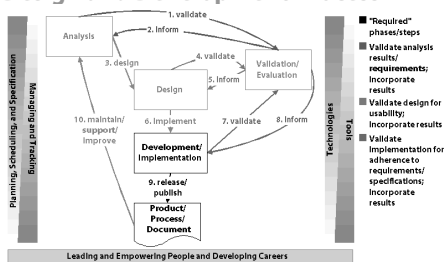
Redefining Product and User Interface Design

- Traditional user interfaces "designed" by
 - Engineers/developers design based on vague—or no—market requirements
 - Graphic/visual designers "put lipstick on the pig"
- Enlightened user interface design is a multidisciplinary endeavor
 - Information
 - Interaction
 - Visuals
 - Algorithms

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User-Centered Product and Information Design and Development Process



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**The Bottom Line:
We Must...**

- Stop defining ourselves by tools and old-fashioned paradigms
- Start (return to) thinking of ourselves as communication problem solvers
- Develop communication strategies and solutions based on our knowledge of users and on our communication skills
- Design and develop information and interaction based on strategy
- Choose technologies based on strategy and design
- Choose tools—last—based on technology

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