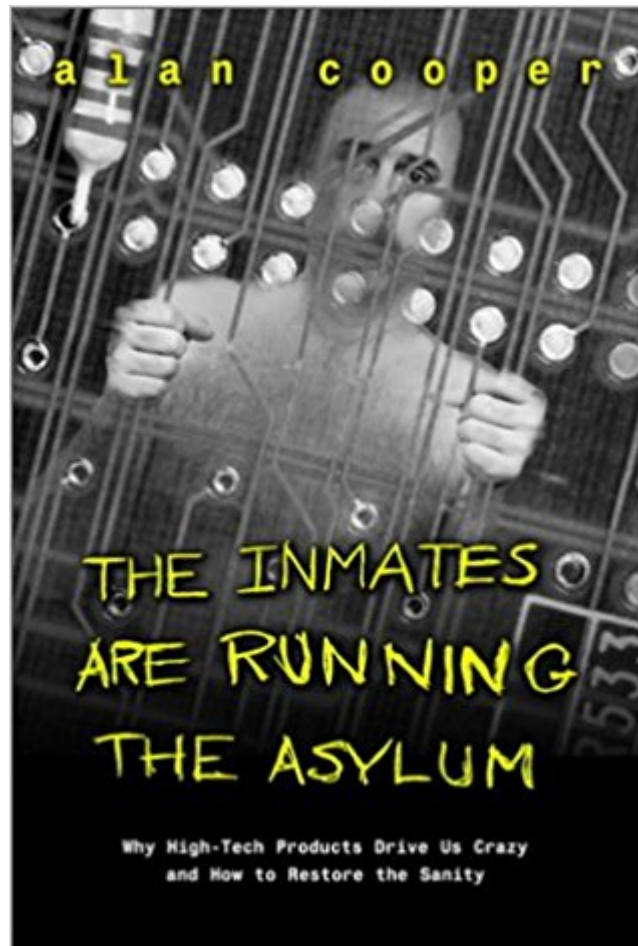




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The Inmates Are Running The Asylum



Synopsis

The Inmates are Running the Asylum argues that, despite appearances, business executives are simply not the ones in control of the high-tech industry. They have inadvertently put programmers and engineers in charge, leading to products and processes that waste huge amounts of money, squander customer loyalty, and erode competitive advantage. They have let the inmates run the asylum. Alan Cooper offers a provocative, insightful and entertaining explanation of how talented people continuously design bad software-based products. More importantly, he uses his own work with companies big and small to show how to harness those talents to create products that will both thrill their users and grow the bottom line.

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Customer Reviews

The Inmates are Running the Asylum makes the business case for interaction designers playing a central role in the development of technology products. It starts by providing examples of technology that is difficult, frustrating, humiliating, and even dangerous to use. Cooper argues that, although people have gotten used to being humiliated by technology, it doesn't have to be this way. His claim is that most technology, especially software, is designed by engineers who think differently than non-technical people: they enjoy being challenged by difficult problems and they are trained to think in terms of "edge cases" rather than on the common case. Thus when engineers design software, they tend to create products with far too many neat features that clutter the interface and make it difficult to do the simpler tasks. In the second part of the book, Cooper describes an approach that

he and his design firm uses to simplify products and keep them focused on the users' needs, eliminating or hiding more complex features that few people use. He gives some specific and compelling examples of how they took a different approach to an interesting design problem and keep the product simple while still being powerful. He makes the case that you can grab a market with powerful, feature-rich, complex software that is frustrating to use, but you don't build customer loyalty that way; as soon as a well-designed version of that product comes along, your customers will defect. If you delight the user with your products, on the other hand, you will engender deep loyalty that will help see you through some poor business decisions. His primary example of this is the fanatical loyalty that Apple garners from its users, compared with the rage that Windows users feel toward Microsoft.

The culture of software development is changing, but grudgingly. The short-sighted notion "It's better to be first with something bad than second with something perfect" has been discredited after too long a reign as the New Paradigm of the Information Age ("It's brilliant because it's counter-intuitive!"), and instead has been exposed for what it is: bad business and a lousy way to treat customers. Alan Cooper's book helps make sense of things as software developers, after decades of coding for each other, are forced to begin acknowledging the cold and strange outside world of Real Life Users. Cooper's writing is generally clear and easy to follow. He documents his points well and uses numerous true-to-life examples to illustrate the concepts. The ATM analysis, for example, is both effective and memorable: Why DOES the ATM list account types you don't have, permitting an invalid selection? Why can't you return to a previous screen to correct mistakes, instead of starting over from scratch? Why doesn't the system give you an error message that helps you understand the problem, rather than "Unable to complete transaction"? No one even bothers to ask these questions, Cooper points out, because we've accepted the default structure of ATM screens--which were created for the convenience of coders and system engineers, rather than users. Cooper also performs a valuable service in demolishing that old standby programmers' excuse: "We don't call any of the shots-it's all management's fault!" Bull. Half the managers in the computer industry are former coders themselves (and laboring under an outmoded and faulty mental model of how software development must occur, by the way).

I have been passionately interested in usability issues and ways to improve them for a quarter century. I read all that I can on the subject to gain insight into how to make things better. This book, however, fails miserably. It is about 50% personal exorcism, projected onto others, of his own former

self. It is about 50% advertisement for the kind of consultant he now stylizes himself as. It is 100% the kind of book on usability you would expect the "Father of Visual Basic" to produce. There is some good information in this book, which would normally merit a rating of two or three stars. However, by its polemical tone, it diverts attention away from really good books by such authors as Donald Norman and Jef Raskin, and, for that matter, Cooper's own About Face, which is quite good. If you hate unusable products and are looking for nice, easy scapegoats to be angry about, this will be an enjoyable read. If, however, you are interested in the actual reasons that products are poorly usable or are interested in how to improve the world, this book is worse than useless. One histrionic account describes how he cannot buy a VCR that lets him record shows by setting time with a knob. This would be excusable except for the fact that, the year this book was published, a remote control was being sold that did exactly that, and it received saturation advertising on television. The problem is that nobody bought it. Demand was so poor that it isn't made any more, and no sales staff I have spoken with has remembered anyone ever asking for such a device.

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