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Needed: A GUI Revolution

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Commentary Ezra Shapiro

Needed: A GUI Revolution

Users of the world unite! It's time to overthrow the GUI status quo.

History tells us that revolutions don't always result in a better lot for the masses. New regimes frequently become as unresponsive and entrenched as the ones they displace.

Take the revolution in computer interface design. Roughly 10 years ago, the windowing Xerox/Apple/Microsoft GUI marched into town, smoking a cigar and proclaiming liberation. We peasants were dazzled by the newcomer's shining uniform of pull-down menus and multiple windows—and we needed something to show us the typefaces we wanted to print on our new laser printers—so we welcomed the upstart. We cheered as the old command-line interface hurriedly packed its bags and fled into exile.

Sadly, the new interface soon grew accustomed to the pleasures of the palace. Improvements dwindled. The interface grew spoiled, fat, and irritable.

Today, we await the next round of excess from our master, be it System 8.0 or Cairo or whatever, knowing that we will be forced to pay for any benefits with bushels of memory, CPU speed, and disk space. In return, what will we get? Drag-and-drop icons? Phooey.

I yearn for a new revolution. Self-interest is a factor. I'm getting older. My increasing eyestrain now blurs even 12-point type on a 0.28-dot-pitch monitor. My repetitively stressed fingers and wrists cry out for relief.

In spite of my afflictions, year by year I move more and more of my life onto my machines. I do not think I am atypical. My hard disks have become so crowded with directories and subdirectories that I spend too much time looking for things (as opposed to working with them).

And now that I teach, it's clear from the reactions of my students that interfaces are not obvious. Why does the Mac Trashcan erase files but not disks? Why does the Windows Program Manager delete icons without deleting the associated files? What is "the desktop"—is it the screen, a place somewhere between the hard drive and the floppy drive, or a physical desktop? Why do all current interfaces assign primacy to applications when what matters is the work created with them? Isn't calling a letter to your mother a "word processing document" as dumb as calling your house a "hammer building"?

Sure, the past decade has brought significant change to the internal workings of operating systems, but all the advances in multitasking and multimedia have done little to alter the conventional look and feel of interfaces. What I want is change in the *externals*.

I'm not demanding sweeping reform that throws out everything all at once. We could start small and renovate slowly. For starters, there's color. At the moment, it's
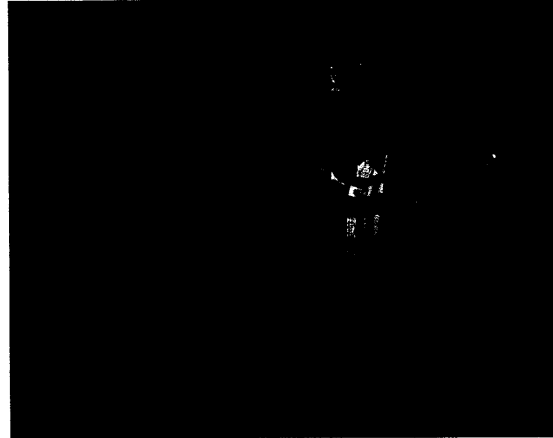
little more than decoration; all-important menus and dialog boxes are largely black on white. Must we forever cater to the needs of monochrome users? Color systems outsell monochrome systems by an overwhelming majority. Let the monochrome minority suffer.

Why not use color to group files, objects, or commands in a visually informative way? The priority-based color coding in the Mac Finder is only a hint of what could be done. Why not make destructive menu commands (e.g., delete, cut, and clear) flash in red, and commands for creating (e.g., new, open, and record) flash in blue? Why not divide the menu bar or the entire screen into colored regions organized by time or function?

Speaking of menus, why must we continue to put up with pull-down lists? A number of experiments have successfully used circular menus. Users let muscle memory guide their actions as they pull their pointing devices to choices around a circle; this turns out to be faster and easier than reading and selecting from text in a vertical menu. Pen-based systems have suggested all sorts of new menu approaches that are worth reconsidering.

And what of the file cabinet directory metaphor, in which programs and documents are icons or line entries of equal importance? Why not hide the programs altogether? Or let the user group files and programs into project relationships (rather than directory relationships) by freehand drawing with a pointing device?

You know, these suggestions are not radical or even very original. But shouldn't we try new things rather than wallow in the status quo? It's time to whine and demand and invent! And—who knows—maybe someday little more will remain of the faded Xerox/Apple/Microsoft interface than a muddy footprint and a smudge of cigar ash on the palace carpet. ■

Former BYTE editor and columnist Ezra Shapiro teaches journalism at California State University, Northridge, and writes for a variety of computer publications. You can reach him on the Internet at ezra@earthlink.net or on BIX c/o "editors."

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