



Let our core competencies complement yours...



The Elements Of User Interface Design: [Theo Mandel](#), Wiley, 1997. ISBN 0-471-16267-1.

As a software developer in the midst of a user interface design project, I carried this book coast to coast several times this summer, reading and re-reading portions of immediate relevance to discussions I'd had that day. Never was I disappointed. Rarely did I find a quick and easy "cook book" answer, available for immediate but mindless application. Instead, I'd characterize this book as "food for thought", dishing out observations on man-machine interaction with generous dollops of seasoned insight.

More often than not, I found the book to be a condensation of what should be intuitively obvious -- but of course is not until someone reminds you! My favorite example is Mandel's admonishment to build on-line help that does not obscure the user's view of the application for which help is being provided -- a common-sense proviso ignored by an astonishing number of popular desktop applications.

Mandel does not assume the reader is already a user interface design guru. He starts at the beginning, introducing foundations and principles without excessive jargon or techno-speak. Discussions are illustrated with screen snapshots and analogies immediately familiar to most computer users. I did not find it at all difficult to understand the points presented, although I may not have always agreed with the conclusions reached.

In fact, there were many discussions that I found thought-provoking, opinions expressed that I was not sure that I shared. But agreeing upon a singular "right answer" was not usually the point -- Mandel presents his arguments in a manner that makes the reader consider whether he or she finds a design choice appealing, and why or why not. For example, "The Anti-Mac Interface" suggests not that Mac - or PC - user interface paradigms are bad, but that both paradigms are at least a decade old and that we should continue to evolve and do even better.

This book was a topical read for me this summer and, on the whole, I found it rather insightful. If you're involved in user interface design -- or if you'd simply like to understand why you find yourself loving or hating interfaces designed by others -- then this is the book for you.

-- reviewed by Lisa Phifer, Core Competence, Inc. lisa@corecom.com