Entrepreneurial UX State of Mind

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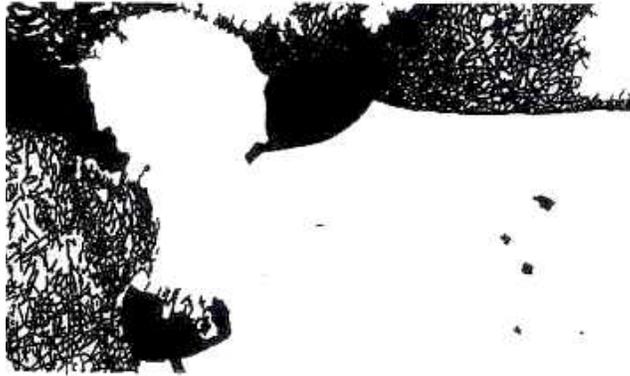
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Entrepreneurial Thinking (ET), User Experience (UX), and its close relative Design Thinking (DT), have in recent years become hot topics in startup communities. Having advised hundreds of entrepreneurs in the last three years, Remy has found that, despite the popularity of books on topics like business model canvas and lean startup, entrepreneurs too often pick up the concepts and terminology of ET and UX/DT without internalizing the fundamental principles necessary for success.

In our view, the most fundamental problem addressed by ET and UX/DT is that people are prone to a powerful illusion that blinds them to the uncertainty they face in predicting how people outside their organization will experience and interact with the products and services they're creating.

For example, when conducting a usability test of a consumer web portal, where users could personalize it by adding widgets, Michael discovered that an essential feature (the link to add a widget) was so easily missed by most new users that it was effectively invisible to them. This was not an early prototype from a cash-strapped startup. It was a consumer product that a "household name" software company had been offering to the public for quite some time. Why hadn't such a major usability problem been identified earlier? Because to everyone involved, the "add" link was obvious on the page *as they experienced it*.   They were unaware of how prior knowledge was affecting their perception, so it simply didn't occur to them that others might not notice the link. Similarly, once you perceive the hidden figure in the following image, you'll lose the ability to experience the image without perceiving the figure*:

Riding back-to-back successful startups, Remy launched his third startup, IronSilk, in the early 2000s. IronSilk signed up close to half a million users in a short amount of time. Success! Not so fast. Even though IronSilk had a large member base, the revenue from advertisers was too low and the cost of managing partners was too high. Remy and his team were subject to a collective illusion that led them to treat assumptions as facts–in this case it led to the closure of Ironsilk. Remy calls these types of assumptions "show stoppers", as they often lead to the end of the startup.

The essence of the illusion addressed by ET and UX/DT is *the impression that the world as you experience it is the world as it is* – and is therefore the world *as other people experience it*. This impression works just fine for basic physical characteristics of things. If you see a bus coming down the street, you can generally be quite confident that other people looking in the same direction are also experiencing the sight of an approaching bus. However, even with such a simple example, neuroscientists know that each person will process details of this experience differently. Furthermore, it becomes very misleading when applied to more complex examples such as predicting other people's preferences, priorities, behaviors, and reactions to complex interactive products and services. If a team of software experts at a well-known software company can be unaware that a critical element of their product is effectively invisible to many users, what uncertainties might your team be unaware of?

Groups as well as individuals are subject to this illusion. Teams and organizations naturally develop commonalities in how members experience aspects of the world relevant to their work. We've both observed countless meetings in which teams discuss how users will interact with products – with an unspoken assumption that the only source of uncertainty is differences of opinion within the team. By ironing out differences of opinion without seeking information from outsiders, these discussions merely merge individual illusions into a collective, typically even stronger, illusion.

Entrepreneurial UX State of Mind (E^{UX})

The entrepreneurs that get the most benefit from ET and UX/DT are those that not only adopt concepts, vocabulary, and activities, but also integrate ET and UX/DT into themselves and their

relationship to the world around them. We call this an entrepreneurial UX state of mind, or E^{UX} for short. Entrepreneurs in this state of mind view their entire business, not just their products or services or user interfaces, as something they are creating to interact with people outside of the business. They realize they are creating many "user experiences" the nature and results of which will be quite uncertain until steps are taken to learn about them in advance. E^{UX} involves realizing that, to provide the greatest value to your customers and users, you must cultivate habits of constantly questioning assumptions, seeking valid feedback from outsiders, experimenting to learn, and welcoming any temporary discomfort this may cause – as an indicator of valuable learning that supports entrepreneurial success.

Some key hallmarks of E^{UX} are:

1. Awareness that you and others live in different worlds-as-experienced, not in a single shared world-*as-it-is*. Awareness means this is not just an intellectual belief, but part of how you perceive your world.

2. You realize that every interaction between your organization and someone outside it occurs in that person's *world-as-experienced* and must therefore be viewed as a "user experience."

3. You're willing to acknowledge uncertainty and take useful steps to manage it, and to let go of the belief that you can eliminate uncertainty altogether.

4. Your desire to learn through experimentation outweighs your instinct to "just do it" or to confirm your existing views.

5. You have a drive to solve problems and create opportunities.

6. Your enthusiasm for improving things outweighs your desire to believe that things are good enough already.

How can innovators and entrepreneurs cultivate E^{UX}?

E^{UX} is challenging to cultivate because it involves fundamental changes in how we relate to our beliefs and perceptions. Merely doing UX/DT activities will not in itself change how your mind works, though it will still provide useful information, and is a lot better than *not* doing UX/DT activities. Without E^{UX}, the information you get from your UX/DT activities will always be fighting an uphill battle against your sense of knowing "*the world as it is*" and hence will have difficulty bringing you the full benefits it has to offer. On the other hand, if you do UX/DT activities while cultivating E^{UX}, then the information you get from your UX/DT activities will not only benefit that specific project, but will also help you deepen your E^{UX}.

Some specific suggestions for how to cultivate E^{UX} are:

- Adopt E^{UX} as a lifelong learning orientation, not something you expect to quickly achieve and check off a list.

- Read books or take classes on key principles that drive entrepreneurial thinking (ET) including uncertainty management, opportunity recognition, learning through experimentation, and risk mitigation.

- Look out for signs of E^{UX} in other innovators and entrepreneurs, such as acknowledging uncertainty and frequently taking steps to learn from outsiders.

- Do not worship popular books or methodologies like "Lean Startup" or "Design Thinking." Instead, come to understand them in light of E^{UX}.

- Get in the habit of actively seeking out unfamiliar or surprising information about other people's experiences. For example, take advantage of opportunities to converse with people you don't seem to have much in common with, and read autobiographies you might not previously have taken an interest in.

- Find and adopt a personal development practice that broadens and deepens your perception of your own personal experiences *as experiences*, not just as observations of objects. Mindfulness meditation is an increasingly popular example, and there are many other options. Keep looking until you find an approach that appeals to you.

- In your entrepreneurial thinking activities, get in the habit of calling out instances when you or others make assumptions about other people's experiences, preferences, and behaviors; resources needed; technical/product specs; and team/community dynamics. Challenge the assumption with a question such as, "*Should we seek input from outsiders rather than rely on our best guesses?*"

- Whenever you do UX/DT activities, pay close attention to your own reactions both to the prospect of getting new information, and to the new information when it arrives. Greater awareness of your own relationship to uncertainty will help you get a better sense for when to seek more information and when to decide you have sufficient information that it's time to proceed bravely into the unknown!

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* It's a cow. Image by John McCrone [CC-BY-SA-3.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0)], via Wikimedia Commons