Book Review and Commentary

Rocket Surgery Made Easy: The Do-It-Yourself Guide to Finding and Fixing Usability Problems
Steve Krug
Berkeley, California: New Riders, 2009

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INTRODUCTION

Rocket Surgery Made Easy is Steve Krug's follow-up companion to his 2000 book *Don't Make Me Think*, and it details how to find and fix usability issues with your website, application or software. *Rocket Surgery Made Easy* does an excellent job of positioning itself as a handbook for quick and dirty usability testing, building on the commonsense approach espoused in Krug's earlier offering.

The book is structured in three sections over a series of very short chapters; this review follows a similar path. The initial nine chapters discuss the basic elements of conducting usability tests, the next four detail specific strategies for fixing what is found and the last three chapters are dedicated to emerging technologies, additional recommendations for reading and some useful materials with which to get your team started. The book is aimed both at professional usability people and those managing software teams. However, managers involved in any user-facing application, from mobile applications to the simplest of websites, would find this book a very accessible and practical guide to usability testing. Additionally, if you are planning on engaging a professional usability firm, this is a quick study in the process, practice and terminology of usability testing.

PRAEMONITUS, PRAEMUNITUS

Krug offers a few caveats before truly beginning the handbook. He admits it is not to be taken as a comprehensive addition to the multitude of usability tomes already in existence, though he offers his thoughts on many popular ones in the penultimate chapter. The book is purposefully succinct, undertaking to be readable on a long plane ride. The author carefully addresses a number of arguments that amateurs should not be delving into such important work. However, he does caution that if you can afford professional

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usability testing you should proceed with it. Finally, he bounds the book's purpose firmly within the realm of simple, informal and small sample usability testing, not to be used for fool-proofing systems but to make them a little easier to use without much fuss. Usability testing is an area of distinct interest to managers that is often ignored. When testing does occur it is often relegated to the finished product, when both the resources and appetite for alterations are sparse. A central theme of this book is to test early and often. The key points for software or product development managers to take home from this book are that its lessons provide the impetus to start testing early and often, and that it can be done with as little resources as you can wrangle. Later in the book, Krug even suggests that you show the 'napkin sketch' to a few people to ensure its veracity. This is the essence of the guerrilla approach.

A GUERRILLA GUIDE

Krug proceeds fairly directly to a straightforward, honest explanation of what is the proffered flavour of usability in the book – expedient, low numbers, qualitative testing. He contrasts his method with the depth of quantitative approaches but does fail to truly expose the value of true breadth in less expedient qualitative testing. That said, as the first chapter introduces the reader to the idea of guerrilla testing there is no surprise in the contrast presented. As a general rule throughout the book, Krug presents short anecdotes of his teaching methods that illustrate the value of the simplified method he presents. This chapter proves no exception, illustrating the method's basic workings by offering a typical story of a live demo usability test from one of his usability training workshops: an attendee is chosen to complete an abbreviated usability task on another attendee's own website, lasting for fifteen minutes or so. The results are reported in the text as four bullet points that quickly illustrate that the tester has enjoyed the process, the site owner has been busy scribbling what he has learned in his observances, the audience understands it's easy to do this, and Krug gets to present the rhetorical 'Does that seem like a worthwhile way to spend 15 minutes?' while the audience nods in assent.

The second chapter consists of a single page, consciously scant and directing the reader to watch a 24-minute online video, which brings the reader through an actual user test. The author devotes the whole, single-page chapter to the video in order to highlight the importance of watching the video, however the reader is encouraged to skip forward if the video is inaccessible.

In the following chapters the book outlines its various arguments for expedient usability testing, leading to the maxim 'one morning a month'. The author provides a useful comparison between traditional usability testing's 'big honkin' test' with his stripped-down version of 'do-it-yourself testing', illustrating differences such as in cost (thousands versus hundreds), the time spent (over a week versus a single morning), and importantly the primary purpose – a long detailed list of issues categorised by their severity versus a small list of the most serious items.

The next item on the handbook's agenda is when to start this testing. The author dissuades the inclination to wait until the project is complete before testing, instead suggesting that you test your existing site or application, competitor sites, sketches and

wireframes as well as prototypes and everything beyond. He provides a useful illustration with a napkin test where you show the earliest of designs to almost anyone and see if they understand *what* the thing is rather than give an opinion on whether they like it or not.

The next hurdle this guide brings you over is the difficulty of getting testers, figuring out how many, how to source them and how you might compensate them for their time – all real issues with any research. Krug quickly and fairly neatly dispenses with these, summing up with another motto – 'Recruit loosely and grade on a curve'. Instead of seeking the elusive 'representative user' find some who reflect your audience but don't overly worry about it. Use just three testers to find the big problems you *can* fix instead of more testers finding more minor issues you don't have time to fix. On accessing testers, Krug refers to Willie Sutton's answer on why he robbed banks: 'Because that's where the money is.' This encourages the guerrilla usability tester to think about where the participants might congregate. To recruit more senior participants, as an example, he suggests placing invitations in libraries and church group events. Chapter 6 encourages the reader to think about the tasks a user might do and detail how to create scenarios around those tasks. This is followed with a detailed chapter on the conduct of the tests themselves, giving quick guidance on such research issues as impartial observance, basic ethical considerations, layout of the testing area and the phrasing of probing and prompting questions. Throughout these chapters the author presents quick checklists for everything, again displaying the goal of this book as a handbook of implementation.

FIND, BUT ALSO FIX

The debriefing section begins in earnest with another maxim imploring a careful focus in prioritising the more serious issues and not the easiest-to-fix issues. Krug again presents specific, numbered guidelines for running a debriefing meeting yet still manages to paint a quick picture of the room. The convenor writes the top three issues from each tester on large sheets until everyone has had their voice heard. A new sheet is filled with a prioritised top ten and the team proceeds to discuss and add the minimalist fix for each issue. The big problems are the focus, to ensure that your resources are deployed most effectively. The minimalist fix is presented again with dualistic arguments for the perfect fix (fixing it for all users takes more time and work) versus getting it done (fixing it for most users without too much time or effort). Krug then presents some of his favourite usability issues, which he has encountered time and time again in his years of experience. In the final chapters of the how-to-fix section, the author mourns the unimplemented results of large-scale user tests – 'big honkin' reports' – that he himself once wrote while briefing the reader on the essential elements of change management and strategies to help make your test findings see the light of day.

QUICKER AND DIRTIER

The final chapters talk about the advantages and disadvantages of emerging solutions such as remote testing using video conferencing or screen sharing and internet telephony services. Krug tends to play up the advantages somewhat, such as the convenience, access to a larger pool of participants and producing similar enough results for some circumstances.

However, he also draws out the distinct disadvantage of not having as much control in the session. He presents little strategies as usual for the conduct of remote sessions, advising a pre-test of screen sharing, managing interruptions remotely and how to adjust the task scripts appropriately. He rounds off the discussion cautioning that it's really not to be tried without a few face-to-face sessions under your belt first. A further innovation on the screen sharing approach, called 'unmoderated remote testing', is discussed next. These are web-based services where you can upload a series of tasks, enter the domain name or location of the application to be tested and receive the recorded audio from a usability session conducted by one of the service's pool of testers. Krug says they are surprisingly helpful given the low cost, low effort and speed at which you get data.

CONCLUSION

The book directs itself at the non-professional who just wants to do some testing. While it certainly completes this goal, I would not be surprised if the first group to have purchased this handbook were indeed the experts whose shelves are lined with some of the volumes Krug lists as recommended further reading in the last chapter. Additionally for managers who engage usability testing professionals in their product development, the book serves as a quick study of the field to better manage those relationships. The second distinct goal of the book is that the findings of a usability test must be implemented. Chapters 10 through 13 detail how to manage the findings, prioritising what to fix and the best way to fix them. This more directly opens the book's audience up to developers and their managers. Regardless of whether you intend to directly implement usability testing or engage a third party, this book gives you the tools and the vocabulary necessary to manage such a project. More importantly, it might provide the impetus to make usability a priority. As a short yet comprehensive guidebook, this is a valuable read for any business doing anything on the web or with software product development. If you care about your products' end user, this book is a valuable asset.

Krug begins the book explaining that one of the reasons for the nine-year delay between his earlier effort and this offering is that he finds the task of writing an agonising one. Despite that assertion, the writing style is far from pained. It is light and conversational. It is witty and sparse. It covers the content quickly but at just enough depth to help the reader understand the important concepts without dwelling too much.

In his discussion of remote usability testing, Krug estimates that one loses 20 per cent of *something* by not being in the same room as you would be in his guerrilla testing approach. In his description of unmoderated remote testing he suggests that the value is somewhat eroded but that it retains a certain place in the toolbox. This admission alludes to the greatest lesson from the book. I say 'alludes' because it's never explicitly said and is marked by the absence, considering the directness of the rest of the writing. Whilst one can find the majority of the big issues – the 'low-hanging fruit' – with the guerrilla testing approach, there is an amount that remains undiscoverable without serious professional research. The trick is to retain standards as high as can be managed in your circumstances to make that undiscoverable percentage less significant. This book is the perfect companion to finding the highest quality of that low-hanging fruit.