1. Me vs. Design

The Rice Cooker

One non-desktop user interface I often interact with is our apartment’s rice cooker. This device is primarily used in the kitchen with one simple purpose: to cook rice (or keep it heated when done cooking). With only one simple purpose, it makes sense for the rice cooker to have a simple interface. Since it’s also used in the kitchen often, the rice cooker also needs to be aesthetically pleasing.

One thing I like about the rice cooker is how it’s so simple to use. There is a switch that can change the setting to cook rice or porridge. Then a lever needs to be pushed to have it start cooking. This simple interface is very simple. Another strength of the design is that it is pleasant to look at. Our kitchen has white walls and a granite-like counter top, so the white colors of the rice cooker fits well with the kitchen. Small flowers and hints of green gives it color to look pleasing. And finally, I like how the designers put in a drainage hole for water to go into when the lid is opened and the condensed water falls from the lid and onto the rice cooker. It’s a small thing, but not every rice cooker has that feature.

However, not everything with the rice cooker is designed well. First, the rice cooker lacks an on/off switch. It seems so trivial, but the only way to turn on or off the rice cooker is to plug and unplug it. Adding an on/off switch is a simple fix for this problem. Another problem is with the interface. Since it’s so simple, it’s sometimes easy to mistake whether rice is actually cooking or not. When the rice cooker is plugged in, the “Cook” light automatically turns on, despite the fact that it’s actually not cooking. The only way to be sure if it is actually cooking is to check if the lever was depressed. Having a light to show whether the cooker is on or off would help, or change the “Cook” light to only turn on when the cooker is actually cooking the rice. The final design issue is the button to open the lid of the cooker. The button is placed on top of the lid, which makes it difficult to open if you’ve never used it. It needs to be pushed down, despite the fact that the lid needs to open upwards. Moving the button below the lid like on some CD players is a very simple fix.

The Shower

Another interface I interact with is our apartment’s shower. Obviously, showers are located in bathrooms. Since water temperature is controlled with two pipes (one for cold water and another for hot water), it makes sense for there to be two knobs to control the volume of water. The interface should also be simple, since taking a shower shouldn’t be a difficult mental task.

One strength of the interface is that it has two knobs to control each temperature of water, giving more control over volume and temperature. I prefer this setup over showers that have only one knob, since I’ve personally had more problems controlling the temperature with one knob. I also like how the faucet is designed. Most shower faucets have a small nub to pull up in order to use the shower nozzle, but this one has you pull down on the faucet nozzle instead. I’ve had experiences with the nub often weakening over time, so I believe this design would last longer. Finally, this shower has a rough floor that helps prevent slipping while taking a shower. Most showers I’ve been in lacked these kinds of floors, requiring the purchase of a mat to go over the floor.

One issue I have with the design of the shower is with the same two knobs that I’ve praised previously. Most showers either have knobs that pull out or turn counter-clockwise to turn them on. However, these knobs must turn in opposite directions in order to turn them on.
The design makes sense when you’re in the shower and you need to turn off the shower by turning the hands in opposite directions. However, when first turning on the shower, I never want to be in it with the water first running since it’s almost guaranteed to be cold. Perhaps having them oriented vertically closer to the edge of the shower would be better since many people turn on their shower before going in. Another issue is with the lack of a nub to turn on the shower. When first moving into our apartment, my roommates had no idea how to use the shower because the faucet did not follow standard design of having a nub to turn it on. Simply following the standards would’ve prevented their frustration. And lastly the shower lacks areas to put shampoo bottles and soap. I’ve been in older showers that have shelf space for the bottles and soap, but our apartment apparently lacks them. Simply adding in nooks in the walls to put soap and bottles would’ve fixed the problem.

**Zen Touch MP3 Player**

I often listen to my MP3 player when I’m going between classes or waiting for another class. Thanks to the iPod, which is now a cultural icon, MP3 players now have to be well designed so it looks pleasing to the eye and yet have enough features to make it stand out from the competition. This would be tough for the designers and the engineers to create a powerful media player that’s portable and pleasing to look to the eye.

One thing I like about the MP3 player’s design is how it has separate buttons to play music and access the library. It makes it easy to tell which button does what since they all have only one function and are commonly used. It even has a dedicated random button, which I’ve found to be very useful. Another thing I like about the design is its larger-than-an-iPod size and its metal casing. I’ve seen websites that had opened up the MP3 player and the extra size was designed to add in some cushioning to protect the sensitive components inside from being damaged if it were dropped. It’s undoubtedly a good design feature since it promotes durability and the fact that I have already dropped my MP3 player over 10 times. Finally, I like the simple interface of the MP3 player. The menu is divided simply into the Music Library, Now Playing, Play Mode, and Settings. The submenus are also simple, only showing the most commonly used choices, hiding the advanced features in another submenu. This allows for music to quickly be selected and played without getting confused with the menu system.

A design feature I really dislike is the touch strip used on the MP3 player. The strip is harder to use than the touch wheel found on the iPod since it is difficult to carefully select an option without it constantly scrolling in one direction. It also isn’t as easy to scroll through a large list of artists, songs, or albums as the touch wheel is. You can circle your finger on the touch wheel, but you have to repeatedly slide your finger down the strip to continue scrolling. I’m not sure how it can be fixed, since Apple has a patent on the scroll wheel. Perhaps a touch screen or some other method can work better. Another design issue I have is with the MP3 player’s screen. Whenever the MP3 player is on, the screen remains until the MP3 player is turned off. I find this annoying since I only look at the screen for a couple seconds to change songs, and the screen remaining on would drain the battery. They should have the screen turn off whenever the user doesn’t press any button for a certain period of time. Finally, I find the large size of the MP3 player to be annoying. Although it really helps its durability in the countless times I drop it, it doesn’t fit really well in my pocket. I constantly have to carry it around in my hand whenever I’m listening music on it. Making it smaller would be an obvious fix, but it would also hurt its durability.