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Building Tomorrow's UX Designers

The Walkthrough's Keeper in the Machine Era

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Contents

Introduction

Chapter 1 — The Walkthrough

Chapter 2 — The Two Folklores

Chapter 3 — The Way In

Chapter 4 — The Working Day

Chapter 5 — The Craft

Chapter 6 — The Expiry

Chapter 7 — The Conversation

Chapter 8 — The Instruments

Chapter 9 — The Year

Chapter 10 — The Long Arc

Introduction

A screen is a conversation with somebody who is not in the room. The designer asks the stranger for a booking, a payment, an address, and the stranger answers with a tap, a pause, a retreat to the previous page. Most of what the trade calls design happens between those two events, and almost none of it can be judged by looking at the picture.

That is the uncomfortable fact this book starts from. Two versions of a screen can both look composed, both follow every guideline, and one of them quietly sends a third of its strangers back a step they did not mean to take. The difference is invisible from the desk where the screen was drawn, and it is obvious from the chair where the stranger sits.

The trade's answer is an artefact: the walkthrough, a recorded sequence of somebody who did not build the screen using it for a purpose they brought themselves, with the places they hesitated marked in their own words. It does for this trade what a measurement does for a laboratory, and every claim a designer makes about a screen is either supported by one or it is decoration.

Two habits argue that no such artefact will be needed, and both are loved. The first is the belief in taste, under which a designer's judgement is a kind of sight that ordinary people lack. The second is the belief in finishing, under which design is the polish applied once the real work is done. Both survive because both flatter somebody, and both collapse in the same place: the moment a recorded stranger cannot find the button.

The machine era has made the walkthrough more important rather than less, and the chapters on it explain why. Screens can now be drafted in volumes no team could have drawn by hand, variants can be tested against each other overnight, and the trade's pile of pictures grows faster every season. What does not generate is the judgement about people, and a screen nobody has watched is a guess wearing a border radius.

What follows walks the trade as it is really run: the artefact at the centre of it, the two stories the trade tells about itself, the routes in, the shape of the day, the craft of screens that hold up under strangers, what the generated era expires and what it does not, the conversations the work is made of, the instruments, one constructed year inside a single designer's working life, and the shape of a career that ends either in taste or in teaching.

One warning belongs at the beginning. The tooling in this trade turns over fast, and the sections that age first will be the ones about tools. The parts that hold

are about confusion: what it looks like on a stranger's face, how it is caused by a sentence, and how it is prevented by a discipline that starts before the screen is drawn. That was true when the screens were text, and it will be true when nobody draws them at all.

Two notes on the book's construction belong here rather than in a preface. The people in it are composites or constructions, labelled as such wherever they appear, and the cases are worked for the page rather than reported from a company; nothing in them should be read as a real firm's history. The conventions are the trade's own: sentences quoted in a session are set in the stranger's words, italics are used for the promises screens make, and the reserved words of the series are avoided so that the text keeps to description rather than advertisement.

The reading order is the working order, and the chapters can be read in an afternoon or consulted separately: the artefact first, the stories the trade tells itself second, then the door in, the day, the craft, the era, the rooms, the tools, one year, and the arc. A reader who takes one instruction from the whole book should take the first chapter's, which the last chapter returns to: book the stranger, defend the hour, and file what they say.

One last note before the work begins. The composite whose year the ninth chapter constructs works in rostering software, for shift-based businesses, and her world is chosen because it is ordinary: no novelty in the product, no glamour in the users, and therefore nowhere for the argument to hide. The trade's claims are strongest in the ordinary settings, and the reader whose product is less ordinary will find that the artefact travels without modification, because a screen is a promise whatever the domain makes of.

The reader who manages designers rather than being one should read the fourth, seventh and tenth chapters with the rest held for reference: the calendar's politics, the conversations' evidence, and the arc's management fork are the three places where a manager's decisions decide whether the discipline survives in a building. The reader who is a practitioner should simply start at the artefact, and the reader who is both, as many are, should read the whole book and then forgive it its repetitions, which are deliberate, because the trade's habits are taught by repetition or not at all.

A word on tone, before the reader meets the chapters. The trade's practitioners are a calm group, and the book's voice borrows theirs deliberately, because panic is the folklore's idiom and calm is the evidence's:

the screen that confuses a stranger is not a crisis, it is a finding, and the finding has a known handling, which is the artefact, the revision, and the recording that grades both. The chapters will therefore sound more certain than any honest practitioner feels, and the certainty is structural rather than temperamental: it is what a habit sounds like when it has been held long enough to be described, and the reader is invited to hold it for a year and then argue with the book, from their own library, which is the only argument it has ever wanted to lose.

Chapter 1 — The Walkthrough

A Claim That Needed a Stranger

A team ships a redesigned checkout and calls it cleaner. The screenshot is composed, the spacing is generous, and nobody on the team can find anything wrong with it, because every person who looks at it has already seen it forty times. Three weeks later a recording shows a customer reading the delivery date, leaving the page, coming back, and reading it again, three times, before choosing the ordinary option and abandoning the faster one the redesign was built to promote. Nothing about the screen failed. The screen worked exactly as drawn, and the sentence at its centre was not written for a person reading it for the first time.

The recording is what this trade means by a walkthrough: the shortest honest sequence of a stranger using a screen for a purpose they brought themselves, with the places they slowed marked in their own words. Not a count of clicks. Not a satisfaction score. A record of what a particular human being tried, expected, and encountered, specific enough that a second designer could reconstruct the confusion from the recording alone.

The walkthrough is to a design what a quoted source is to a claim. A designer who says the flow is clear has offered an opinion; a designer who plays forty seconds of a stranger circling the same sentence has offered a fact that argues for itself. The trade's most reliable habit, and the one this book is built around, is refusing to let the two travel under the same name.

The Four Questions Inside It

A walkthrough earns its keep when it carries four answers. Who was struggling, in the terms a team can act on: not a persona, a person. Where, exactly, with the moment named to the sentence and the element rather than the page. What did they expect would happen, which is a question about the promise the screen made. And what did they say at the moment, in their words, not translated into the team's vocabulary, because the translation is where the evidence usually dies.

The fourth question is the discipline. A stranger's remark, I thought this was for saving, is worth more than a paragraph of interpretation, because it is transferable: it can be played in a meeting, and it survives the meeting. An interpretation cannot be played, and it is changed by whoever holds the strongest opinion in the room, which is precisely the situation evidence exists to prevent.

Why the Picture Is Never Enough

The seduction of this trade is that its artefacts are beautiful, and beauty reads as proof. It is not. A composed screen is a claim about a stranger's behaviour, made by somebody who cannot see the stranger, and the claim has a truth value that is completely independent of the composition. Teams that ship on composition alone are running experiments on their customers and declining to read the results.

The honest version of the same work is slower by one week and stronger by every week after. The walkthrough does not replace the designer's judgement; it feeds it, the way a physician's eye is fed by what the patient actually says. A trade built on watched behaviour accumulates an instinct that is worth more than taste, because it is calibrated against the world rather than against the portfolio.

What It Costs, and What It Saves

The cost is a scheduled hour, a recording, and the humility to watch it more than once. The saving is larger and less visible: the redesign that is never commissioned, the meeting that ends in ninety seconds because the recording settles it, the support queue that never fills with customers who cannot say what went wrong because nothing on the screen behaved wrongly at all.

The trade's quiet knowledge is that most expensive design work is the correction of unwatched design work, and that the walkthrough, taken early and cheaply, is the cheapest instrument in the building. The chapters that follow treat it the way other trades treat their units of evidence: as the thing that makes the work discussable, the thing the folklore works hardest to talk the team out of, and the thing the machine era, for all its speed, still cannot produce on its own.

The Anatomy of the Session

The walkthrough is collected in a session, and the session has a fixed shape that earns its rigidity. The stranger is recruited for their situation rather than their opinions: a person who rosters shifts, a person who books deliveries, a person who has the purpose the screen exists to serve. They are asked to bring a task of their own, because a purpose the stranger chose produces a purpose the stranger defends, and a defended purpose is the condition under which real behaviour appears. The designer's script is short: a sentence of welcome, the request to work aloud, and then the discipline of the next hour, which is silence.

The silence is the instrument. The temptation to help arrives within the first two minutes, and it arrives disguised as courtesy, and the practitioner learns to answer it with the one sentence that keeps the evidence intact: what would you expect to find here. The stranger who is helped has taught the designer nothing except that help works. The stranger who is left alone teaches the screen.

Two roles fill the room when the trade is done properly: the designer who watches, and a second practitioner who takes the note, because watching and writing are different jobs and one person doing both loses the first to the second. The recording runs the whole time, marked at the hesitations, and the debrief is held before anybody leaves, while the sequence of expectations is still warm. A session held any other way produces a memory, and memory is the trade's least reliable medium.

The Five Observables

What the recording actually contains, when it is read honestly, is five behaviours, and the trade's vocabulary for them is worth learning early. The pause: a stillness at a sentence, which means the promise was read and not understood. The reread: the retreat to an earlier screen, which means the promise was misunderstood and believed to have been kept elsewhere. The retreat: the departure to the previous step, which means the promise was not believed at all. The workaround: the achievement of the purpose by a path the team never designed, which means the screen's promise was understood and refused. And the blame: the apology, offered to the room, for the screen's failure, which carries the highest price of the five, because it removes the evidence from the stranger's own account and places it in the designer's.

Each behaviour is a fact about the screen, not about the stranger. The first lesson of the session, and the one that takes the longest to learn, is that the stranger is never wrong: the screen made a promise, the stranger read it as written, and the reading that resulted is the only reading that matters. A team that treats the recording as a list of user errors is watching its own defence collapse and calling it a finding.

What the Walkthrough Is Not

The instrument has neighbours, and the trade's credibility depends on not confusing them. It is not a demonstration, in which the designer drives and the stranger nods, because a demonstration can only confirm what the demonstrator already believes. It is not a survey, which collects opinions about

behaviour and is mistaken for behaviour itself, and which the stranger answers as the person they would like to be. It is not the variant test, which measures what a thousand strangers did and cannot say why any of them did it, and which produces its numbers fastest exactly where its reasons are weakest. And it is not the heuristic review, in which an expert lists the guideline violations, a genre that is useful, cheap, and blind to the one thing the trade is paid to know, which is what the guidelines cost a particular stranger on a particular Tuesday.

The distinction that matters is the presence of a purpose. Without a purpose brought by the stranger, the session is theatre with an audience of one, and its findings are the designer's opinions wearing a recording. The purpose is the stranger's contribution and the screen's examiner, and the practitioners who recruit for purpose rather than for availability are the ones whose recordings end arguments.

The Inheritance Problem

The final case for the artefact is written in the trade's handover gaps. A screen is a bundle of promises made by people who have usually left the building, and the walkthrough is the only instrument that reads the promises back in the presence of somebody they were made for. The team that inherits screens without recordings inherits claims with no way to check them, and its first redesign is spent re-earning what the previous team knew and never wrote down. The team that inherits a library of sessions inherits the previous team's judgement, at the price of a single weekly hour, the cheapest succession in the building.

The practitioner reading this on a first week has one instruction, and it is the same the whole book will keep returning to: book the stranger, press record, and watch. The rest of the craft, the words, the paths, the states, the instruments, are downstream of that hour, and the trade's entire argument is downstream of what the hour shows.

A Worked Walkthrough

A full example, constructed for the page and labelled as such, shows the artefact whole. A cafe manager, recruited for the purpose, arrives with a real task: publish next week's rota, keep Tuesday understaffed, and let a new starter book their own induction. The flow she is given was redesigned last quarter and praised for its clarity, and the team's screenshot of it hangs in the corridor.

She reads the first heading without slowing. She hesitates at the second, for four seconds, at the phrase used to name the shift pattern: the pause, priced later at the pause rate. She chooses the pattern, fills the Tuesday, and then, at the third screen, she retreats, because the screen offers Publish and she has not yet added the induction. The retreat costs her ninety seconds and teaches the room the most expensive fact of the session: the promise of Publish, as read by somebody who does not publish rotas for a living, is not the promise the team believed it made.

She finds the induction by a path the team never designed, through a link that was added for a different purpose: the workaround, which is the stranger's redesign and is usually correct. At the end she publishes, apologises to the room for taking so long, and fills the debrief with the trade's raw material: I thought I had to publish before I could add people. Forty seconds of her session, played the next morning, ends a month-old argument about the button's label, and the recording is filed with the note that reads, in full: stranger read Publish as the end of the task, not the end of the draft.

Pricing the Five Behaviours

The behaviours can be priced, roughly and honestly, by the queue. The pause costs seconds and trust in small amounts: the stranger who pauses at a sentence suspects the product of complexity, and suspicion accumulates. The reread costs minutes and breeds the first support tickets, because the stranger who returns to an earlier screen is looking for the promise they believe they missed. The retreat costs the flow's purpose entirely: the stranger who leaves has not been delayed, they have been lost, sometimes for good, and the analytics read it as a bounce and the support queue never hears about it at all.

The workaround costs the team rather than the stranger, and it is the behaviour that pays for the session calendar, because a workaround is a free redesign delivered by the person with the most at stake, and the trade's cheapest habit is adopting workarounds deliberately. And the blame costs the most of the five, invisibly: the stranger who apologises for the screen leaves without filing anything, and the product keeps the confusion forever, because the only person who could have reported it believes the confusion was their own. A trade that learns to price the five behaviours stops calling its recordings qualitative, which is the laboratory's word, and starts calling them specific, which is the honest one.

The Recording in the Room

Evidence behaves differently in rooms, and the behaviour is worth studying, because it is the reason the artefact is collected at all. A spoken finding is an opinion the moment it is spoken, and the room reshapes it by seniority within minutes. A played recording is not an opinion: it is an event the room attended together, and the argument it settles stays settled, because the participants own a shared memory of the forty seconds rather than a contested account of it.

The trade's practitioners learn to use the difference sparingly and precisely. The recording played to prove a point is theatre, and the room learns to distrust theatre quickly. The recording played to ask a question, where does the confusion start, keeps its authority for years, and the room that watches evidence together, weekly, becomes a room in which the arguments are shorter and the decisions are quieter. There is a politics in this that the later chapters will take up properly: the designer whose recordings are shared currency holds a different kind of standing from the designer whose opinions are argued over, and the difference compounds across a career.

The Cheapest Instrument in the Building

The chapter closes where the argument for the artefact should: on cost. The session costs an hour, the recruiting an afternoon, the tooling almost nothing, and the library compounds. The redesign of an unwatched screen is a quarter, the support volume it produces is a year, and the corridor screenshot of the flow that confused the cafe manager is the trade's most expensive genre of decoration. Every instrument described in this book, the prototype, the library, the half-page, exists to feed or store the walkthrough's content, and the trade's whole economy, honest about itself, is the conversion of an hour of watching into a quarter of not rebuilding.

Recruiting the Stranger

The artefact depends on a stranger, and the stranger has to be found, which the trade does more cheaply than its reputation suggests. The customers themselves are the first pool: the company's own users, approached through the support queue, the newsletter, or the account managers, and offered the ordinary courtesy of a paid hour. The second pool is the purpose's natural home: the trade association, the community forum, the shop down the road, wherever the people who actually have the Tuesday task can be found and asked. The third pool is the cheapest and the least reliable, the colleague from

another team, and its caveat deserves stating plainly: a colleague who works in the building carries the company's vocabulary in their head, and their session is a rehearsal rather than a walkthrough. The trade uses colleagues for the dry run and strangers for the finding.

The recruiting carries one rule that the trade learned expensively: recruit for the purpose, not for the demographic. A rostering screen is examined by a person who rosters, whatever their age, and a session recruited for the checkbox instead of the task produces a stranger who is present, cooperative, and unable to defend a purpose, and the hour produces politeness instead of behaviour. The purpose is the examination; the stranger is its bearer; and the booking that gets this backwards is the booking the debrief cannot use.

The Ethics of the Hour

The session is an hour of a stranger's attention, and the trade's ethics are therefore not a paperwork topic but part of the method. Consent is asked at the booking and confirmed at the recording, in plain words, with the right to stop stated as a right and not as a formality. The stranger is paid honestly, told what the recording is for, and never mocked in the debrief or the meeting that plays it: the recording is evidence about a screen, and the stranger who gave the hour is the session's sponsor, not its subject. The trade's practitioners who forget this produce a library the room laughs at, and the laughter is the discipline's reputation dying at the speed of a forwarded clip.

The second ethic is the silence's own limit: the designer's discomfort is not the stranger's problem. The practitioner who cannot watch a person struggle without helping has a real and common difficulty, and the difficulty is managed, not indulged, because the hour's whole value is the struggle that the room's courtesy would have interrupted. The honest formulation, taught by the trade's mentors in the first month, is that the kindest thing the designer can do for the next thousand strangers is to let this one be confused, with full consent, in safety, for eleven minutes.

The Method's Honest Limits

The walkthrough's limits belong in its first chapter, because a practitioner who overstates the instrument will be corrected by the room and remembered for it. The session answers specific questions: what this stranger, with this purpose, understood this screen to promise. It does not answer what most strangers would do, which is the variant test's question, and it does not answer why the population behaves as it does, which is the study's. A team

that books five sessions and declares a national habit has done a small, honest thing and described it dishonestly, and the description is the failure.

The instrument's power is exactly its smallness. Five sessions will find the confusions that any stranger hits, because the screens that confuse one purpose-bearer usually confuse the next two as well, and the finding is specific, actionable, and cheap. The trade's honest claim for the artefact is therefore narrow and strong: the walkthrough does not tell a team what its customers are like. It tells the team what its screens said, in the presence of somebody they were said for, and that is the one fact no other instrument in the building can produce at any price.

Marking the Moments

The recording is only half-collected while it runs; the other half is marked in the hour after, and the marking is a skill the trade teaches in its first month. The pause is marked at its start, not its end, because the length is in the file and the start is what the next practitioner will seek. The words are transcribed in the session's margin, verbatim, in quotation marks, because the archive's value is the stranger's vocabulary and paraphrase is the vocabulary's death. And the moments are named to the element, the field, the button, the heading, because the note that says the stranger was confused by the page is a note that cannot be acted on, and the note that names the sentence is a ticket waiting to be written.

The marking has a courtesy the trade's better practitioners insist on: the recording is watched once at speed for the marks, once slowly for the words, and never edited into a highlight reel. The reel is the argument's theatre form, and the room that has been shown reels starts to discount reels, and the discount spreads to the sessions, which are the discipline's whole asset. The honest recording is unedited, marked, captioned, and filed whole, and its credibility compounds precisely because nothing about it was arranged to persuade.

How Many Sessions

The question the artefact's newcomers always ask is the counting one: how many strangers, before the finding is a finding. The trade's honest answer is the saturation rule, learned from the method doors and confirmed by every year of practice: the confusions that any purpose-bearer will hit appear in the first three sessions, the rarer ones by the fifth or sixth, and the point of saturation, where new sessions stop producing new moments, is the honest

stop. The rule has its exceptions, the flows with many audiences, the screens with rare purposes, and the exception's handling is the method's own: sample the audiences separately, saturate each, and file the findings under their purposes.

The counting question is usually the wrong question wearing a number, because the team asking it is usually asking whether the sessions can be skipped, and the saturation rule answers the skipping honestly: three sessions, this week, against the flow that ships next, are worth more than a study commissioned next quarter, and the team that internalises the ratio books the three. The artefact's economy, one last time in its opening chapter, is not statistical. It is diagnostic: small, specific, and repeated at the pace the work actually ships, which is the only pace at which evidence has ever changed a screen.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aiman JoeHanz writes the Building Tomorrow's People series, one working role per book. This volume takes design, and refuses the version of it that lives in presentation decks. Its subject is the walkthrough: the ordinary path a person takes through a product when nobody is watching, the failures that only appear at the fourth attempt, and the difference between a screen that photographs well and a flow that holds up. He writes as someone convinced that design work is judged in use, by people who will never read the brief and will notice every place the product made them feel foolish.