



By

Valentina Ferrari

Designing for engagement is now one of the most talked about aspects of user experience design. It makes sense – UX practitioners often focus on designing websites and applications that draw their revenue from users interacting with them, whether by clicking on ads or making purchases. Increasing engagement is a clear way to increased revenue, as well as brand awareness and loyalty. This has resulted in some truly awesome, fun, smart products. Unfortunately we’ve also seen a whole slew of others made in the hope that adding daily reminders and superfluous gamification elements will translate to success.

UX, however, is more than just websites and apps. Don Norman spoke at the [Convey UX 2014 conference](#) regarding the same principles we apply to digital interfaces in relation to his morning shower. It was a wonderful reminder that there is more to UX than what’s in our phones and laptops. This is where I believe there is an opportunity to focus less on engagement and more on disengagement – on designing devices that do the mundane tasks we don’t really care about and let us focus on things that require an active human mind. This will become even more important as technology progresses and the “Internet of Things” develops. If we keep prioritizing engagement I can imagine a future where our homes turn into a sort of street market, with each device yelling at us to grab our attention.



Don Norman at Convey UX 2014

What I call “designing for disengagement” is not a new idea. Naoto Fukasawa has long been a proponent of “design dissolving in behavior” and Mark Weiser’s famous dictum that “the most profound technologies are those that disappear” dates back to 1991. It will become more important as we move forward.

One of the issues I have with current smart wearables (particularly smart watches) is that they are too reliant on engagement: they are either just one more notification device, or have all sorts of applications that you would never be able to use properly on your wrist. Really now, how are we supposed to use Evernote on a two-inch screen?

An example of a device that successfully implements disengagement is [Nest](#), the smart thermostat that learns your behavior and automatically adjusts the household temperature without you needing to do anything. The experience is seamless, occurring in the background of your day.

As technology advances, I hope we start to focus less on enticing people to engage with all of our work and more on designing devices that let users dedicate their time to activities they want to pursue, both in the digital and analog world.

*Valentina Ferrari is a UX consultant at Blink UX. She has lived half her life in Milan, Italy, and half in Seattle.*

*In her free time she enjoys studying foreign languages and traveling around the world.*