Emotions and Oracles

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Who I Am

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I solve testing problems that other people can’t solve.
A Plug

WReST
The Workshop on Regulated Software Testing
Indianapolis
November 16-17
See John McConda or
Karen N. Johnson
(Google ’em)

Background

• Discussions with Pradeep Soundararajan
• Discussions with Jerry Weinberg
  • including the Satir Interaction Model
• A question on the Agile Testing list
• Two discussions with B.J. Rollison

Each of these experiences led me to believe that, as a culture or community, we might be missing something important.
Disclaimers

• I am not an academic
• I have lots of questions
• I do not believe that I have useful answers or sensible prescriptions
• People are welcome, encouraged, to follow up on these questions
• People are welcome, encouraged, to leave if they don’t like works in progress

Skill + Heuristics Makes Testing Powerful

This...

...not this.

1. Do this
2. Then do this
3. Then do this
4. Then do this
5. And then this…

Hey! Testing is not a clerical process.

A heuristic is a fallible method for solving a problem.
Heuristics and Oracles

- **Heuristic**: a fallible method for solving a problem or making a decision
- **Oracle**: a heuristic mechanism or principle by which we might recognize a problem
  - all oracles are heuristic
- A perceived problem based on some oracle doesn’t **guarantee** a problem, but it points to a **potential** problem

**When we see a problem, it’s always a problem with respect to some oracle.**

All Oracles Are Heuristic

- We often do not have oracles that establish a definite correct or incorrect result, in advance. **That’s why we use abductive inference.**
- No single oracle can tell us whether a program (or a feature) is working correctly at all times and in all circumstances. **That’s why we use a variety of oracles.**
- Any program that looks like it’s working, to you, may in fact be failing in some way that happens to fool all of your oracles. **That’s why we proceed with humility and critical thinking.**
- You (the tester) can’t know the deep truth about any result. **That’s why we report whatever seems likely to be a bug.**
**Consistency** ("this agrees with that")

*an important theme in oracles*

- **History:** The present version of the system is consistent with past versions of it.
- **Image:** The system is consistent with an image that the organization wants to project.
- **Comparable Products:** The system is consistent with comparable systems.
- **Claims:** The system is consistent with what important people say it’s supposed to be.
- **User’s Expectations:** The system is consistent with what users want.
- **Product:** Each element of the system is consistent with comparable elements in the same system.
- **Purpose:** The system is consistent with its purposes, both explicit and implicit.
- **Statutes:** The system is consistent with applicable laws.
- **Familiarity:** The system is not consistent with the pattern of any familiar problem.

*Consistency heuristics rely on the quality of your models of the product and its context.*

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**Noticing Problems**

- Simply run the program, and observe it
- Make comparisons based on the list of consistency oracles
- This is a very logical, objective, dispassionate process.

*Right?*
How Do You View These Problems?

• This error message was observed by an end user (me) on a moving train as I tried to connect to the onboard Web access.
How Do You View These Problems?

- This email message was received from a conference promoter that is oriented towards government organizations

How Do You View These Problems?

- Intended to be a map of the world…
How Do You View These Problems?

• …and on one level, maybe it is.
How Do You View These Problems?

- Note this is a broadcast TV channel in 2005
THE NEXT SLIDE MAY GREATLY DISTURB SOME VIEWERS

YOU ARE ACTIVELY ENCOURAGED TO LOOK AWAY.

CONTINUE TO WATCH SOLELY AT YOUR OWN RISK.

NO, I’M NOT KIDDING

Is There A Problem Here?
How Do You View These Problems?

• An ambiguous question
  • How do you see these bugs?
  • How do you notice these bugs?
  • How do you feel about them?
  • What do you think about them?

What happened for you?

Emotions and Oracles

• I’m going to suggest that

  Emotions are
  a potentially valuable source of information
  as we’re testing.

• I’ll suggest ways in which this principle may help us to better our testing.
• I’m a member of the Context-Driven School, so…
• I’ll also suggest ways in which the principle can fail.
What is Emotion?

• No single accepted definition
• Study of emotion includes
  • psychology
  • neuroscience
  • artificial intelligence
• Distinguished from *reason* by Descartes and the dualists
  • …but lately we find that the distinction between reason and emotion is not as clear as it seems
• Central to our decision-making processes

Types of Basic Emotions

• anger
• fear
• disgust
• sadness
• surprise
• joy
• acceptance
• curiosity

Note how few of these are considered positive!

(which, by the way, is meta-emotion—how we feel about feelings)

Emotions seem to have emerged in the mammalian brain to arbitrate action when complex situations and motivations, plus limited information, are in play.
(Maybe) Not-So Basic Emotions

- Frustration
- Impatience
- Irritation
- Embarrassment
- Amusement
- Glee
- Schädenfreude

What is Emotion?

- a complex psychophysical process that
- appears to arise spontaneously—that is,
- not by conscious effort—and
- evokes an often involuntary
- psychological response and
- physical expression,
- related to feelings, perceptions or beliefs,
- about things or relations between them
- in reality or in the imagination.

adapted from Wikipedia; useful, if not authoritative
What is Emotion? (Damasio)

- Complicated collections of chemical and neural responses, forming a pattern
- Lead to creation of circumstances advantageous to the survival of the organism
  - that is, they’re about sustaining life
- Biologically determined by evolutionary history
  - but learning and culture alter expression of emotion
- All the devices can be engaged automatically, without conscious deliberation
- Our physiological and emotional responses may kick in even when we’re not aware of a conscious trigger for them

What If We Didn’t Have Emotions?

- Individuals suffered neurological damage lost a certain class of emotions
- They also lost the ability to make rational decisions

- “Selective reduction of emotion is at least as prejudicial for rationality as excessive emotion.”
- “Emotion probably assists reasoning, especially when it comes to personal and social matters involving risk and conflict.”
- “Well-targeted and well-deployed emotion seems to be a support system without which the edifice of reason cannot operate properly.”

Antonio Damasio
Components and Stages of Emotion

- physiological arousal
  - the startle reflex; “waking up”;
- behavioural expression
  - tensing up, gritting teeth, blushing
- conscious experience and expression
  - recognizing the state; thinking or talking about it

Arousal

- defined by Wikipedia as a physiological and psychological state of being awake.
- important in regulating consciousness, attention, and information processing.
- prepares people for fight-or-flight actions
- develops slowly—takes two to three seconds after the interruption
- resolved as people compare the current situation with their experience
Arousal

- According to Weick and some of his citations, arousal is triggered by interruptions of ongoing activity
- *What* activity?
  - Testing activity?
  - Or productive, end-user style activity?
- Might this be one reason why testers miss problems that users find?

How We React

- We perceive some stimulus
- We react emotionally
- We start a process of sensemaking
- We (try to) impart meaning to what we see
- We ascribe significance to the meaning that we have inferred
- We respond
  - one way of responding is to go back to meaning
We Act Before We Know

• Running away is important to the survival of terrestrial animals, so we react based on incomplete information
• Our brains decide first whether objects count, then decides what they are
• Our bodies and our emotions are stimulated before reason kicks in
• Our emotions can be easily fooled in a given context

Emotions Are Heuristic

• A bad feeling about something might mean that it is bad.
• A good feeling about something might mean that it is good.
• An emotional response to something might be valid.

...but maybe not. What can we learn?
Common Cognitive Biases

• Assimilation Bias
  • allowing experience and exposure to a situation to condition your evaluation of new information

• Reasoning Bias
  • preferring information based on logic and reason to information derived from emotions

• Representativeness Bias
  • the idea that one part of something stands reliably for the whole, or that one instance of something determines the way that all other instances should be

Common Cognitive Biases

• Fundamental Attribution Error
  • the idea that someone or something is consistent with our current observation in all situations, irrespective of context

• Anchoring Bias
  • “dropping anchor” on an idea; staying locked into a hypothesis or theory, and ignoring potentially new evidence for a different theory

• Automation Bias
  • trusting or preferring the result of a process because the process was automated; diminishing the human element
Using Emotion To Help Overcome Bias

- Your biases may cause you to miss bugs
- An emotional reaction is a trigger to learning
- When you find yourself suppressing or ignoring an emotional response, you may also be suppressing an opportunity to learn
  - Your emotional resistance to your anchor being pulled up may be trying to tell you something
- When you find yourself mildly concerned about something, someone else could be very concerned about it

An emotion is a signal; consider looking into it

Emotional Triggers

- Impatience ⇒ an intolerable delay?
- Annoyance ⇒ a missing feature?
- Confusion ⇒ insufficient testability?
- Frustration ⇒ a poorly-conceived workflow?
- Amusement ⇒ a threat to someone’s image?
- Surprise ⇒ inconsistency with history?
Meaning and Significance

- *Presence* of the emotion is an indicator of a potential problem (meaning)
- *Intensity* of an emotion is an indicator of the possible threat (significance)
- Because emotional reactions vary from person to person, so too will assessments of meaning and significance

Refocusing or Stopping Heuristics

- When we’re curious or puzzled
- When we’re fearful or disgusted
- When we’re intimidated or paralyzed
- When we’re satisfied or comfortable
- Might we derive meaning or significance from an *absence* of emotional responses?
  - When we’re *not* emotionally invested
  - When we’re *not* excited by a bug
Problems With Applying Emotions

- When we have an emotional response, it might not be about the product
  - it might be about ourselves
  - it might be about the people around us
  - it might be about our situation
    - e.g. the “Snakes on Everything” moment
- Emotions don’t have hard measures
  - The language-squishing hypothesis
  - The experience-stretching hypothesis

Our clients are human

- *Our* humanity as testers helps to reveal important information about our products.
- Emotions provide a rich source of oracles—principles or mechanisms by which we recognize problems.
- I’ll wager that any time we’ve seen a bug, our emotions were a big factor in recognizing or interpreting it.
- Why do so many in our profession seem to be so oblivious to the value of emotions?
Further Reading

- Sensemaking in Organizations (Weick)
- Stumbling on Happiness (Gilbert)
- The Feeling of What Happens (Damasio)
- Emotional Intelligence (Goleman)
- This is Your Brain on Music (Levitin)
- Mind Hacks (Stafford and Webb)
- Mind Performance Hacks (Hale-Evans)
- Tools of Critical Thinking (Levy)

Emotion and Risk

- “...both risk detection and risk avoidance are not mediated in the thinking part of the brain but largely in the emotional one (the “risk as feelings” theory). The consequences are not trivial; it means that rational thinking has very, very little to do with risk avoidance. Much of what rational thinking seems to do is rationalize one’s actions by fitting some logic to them.”
  - Nassim Nicholas Taleb, Fooled by Randomness