

First Edition, May 2017

The Interface Psychopathy Checklist (IPC)

by Jack Yager

Based on the The Hare Psychopathy Checklist developed by Dr. Robert D. Hare

“I am only what you made me.”

-Charles Manson

Introduction

Most of the software, computer systems, devices, and digital interfaces that we constantly interact with have a shocking number of qualities in common with people who are psychologically classified as psychopaths. Despite increased awareness, discourse, and focus on “user-centered” design, people are continually exposed to psychopathic interfaces. While some interfaces are intentionally designed to exploit “psychological vulnerabilities”¹ purely to manipulate people and encourage interface addiction, most of them are psychopathic by accident or oversight. The Interface Psychopathy Checklist (IPC) can be used to help identify psychopathic tendencies as an interface is created, so they can be intercepted and replaced with more psychologically attractive alternatives.

A minor note on semantics: Throughout this document, the word “interface” is used as a generic term for all computers, mobile and input devices, software, systems, displays, services, etc. This was done not only for clarity and readability, but because almost any interaction with the digital world requires some sort of interface, regardless of the specificity of the definition, and this interaction is what this document is exploring.

In the novel “Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep” by Philip K. Dick, the main character Rick Deckard has a robotic sheep as a pet. He has “an actual hatred... toward his electric sheep, which he had to tend, had to care about, as if it lived. The tyranny of an object, he thought. It doesn’t know I exist.”² Despite a religious fervor surrounding “user-centered design”, the term “user” has devolved to just another scientific, abstract, and neutral representation of data inputs. Psychopaths view people in much the same way. They assess the utility of a person, manipulate them to get what they want, then discard them.

The natural emotional response when exposed to a psychopathic personality is fear, distrust, and anger. Psychologists recommend completely avoiding psychopaths whenever possible. If that is not possible for whatever reason, one should be skeptical of everything the psychopath says and never share personal information with them because it can be used for manipulation. If that sounds familiar, the United States Department of Justice encourages people to “Think before you post anything online or share (personal) information... (it) is risky and should be avoided.”³ However secure, safe, or useful content is, when it’s presented through a psychopathic interface, people react negatively.

1 Bosker, Bianca. “The Binge Breaker.” The Atlantic. Atlantic Media Company, 06 Jan. 2017. Web. 18 May 2017.

2 Dick, Philip K. *Blade Runner (do Androids dream of electric sheep)*. Toronto, Ont.: Random House, 1968. Print.

3 “Protecting Yourself While Using The Internet.” The United States Department of Justice. N.p., n.d. Web. 18 May 2017.

Assessment

In the 1970s, Canadian psychologist Robert D. Hare created the The Psychopathy Checklist⁴, a psychological assessment tool most commonly used to identify the presence of psychopathy in people. The Interface Psychopathy Checklist (IPC) was created based on characteristics identified in the PCL. Sixteen of the twenty characteristics that Dr. Hare identified can be used to identify the presence of psychopathy in an interface. Two of the remaining characteristics relate to childhood behavior problems and juvenile delinquency. One might argue for their inclusion since psychopathy may be inherited from a previous version of the interface, but they are excluded in this first edition. The final two are demonstrating criminal behavior and escaping from an institution. These are eliminated since an interface cannot act based on its own volition (yet).

⁴ Hare, Robert D. The Hare psychopathy checklist - revised: PLC-R. North Tonawanda, NY: MHS, Multi-Health Systems, 1991. Print.

IPC-1: Lack of Empathy

Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, and is absent in the psychopath. Do you understand and share the feelings of people using your interface? Consider their feelings. Respect their time. Don't treat them like data inputs.

IPC-2: Shallow Affect

A psychopath lacks the ability to experience a normal range of emotions. This is an obvious mechanical shortcoming and somewhat related to a lack of empathy, but more specifically related to trying to create an "emotional connection" between people and the interface. This isn't something that can be forced or created inertly.

IPC-3: Egocentric

Make sure your interface doesn't have a grandiose and inflated sense of its own value. Avoid bragging because just telling people that something is great doesn't actually make it great. Even if you do it over and over again. Concentrate on making sure your interface has a clear purpose and function, design it and build it well. Let people decide how great it is. As sad as it may be, accept that you are not making the world a better place.

IPC-4: Glib

This means that something seems technically fluent but is actually superficial, shallow, and insincere. Be transparent with how things work and straightforward in the way you explain them. Don't promise to deliver more than you actually can. The goal is to explain technology in human terms to humans. Robots already understand your interface.

IPC-5: Easily Offended

Psychopaths can become disproportionately angry over petty things and suddenly irritable and impatient. Make sure that you are patient with people. Don't punish them for not doing something right. Don't send them down confusing and unrecoverable paths and act like they are stupid for getting there. Any failure of a person is a failure of the interface.

IPC-6: Prone to Boredom

Does your interface have an excessive need for interaction? Does it need to be updated constantly? Does it send a steady stream of push messages, emails, or text messages? Think of it like a hammer. Sometimes you need a hammer and you want to know where it is when the time comes. If you don't need a hammer, don't try to find something to make people hammer.

IPC-7: Manipulative

Manipulation is the primary weapon of the psychopath. Provide people motivation to use an interface instead of implying social isolation, punishment, adverse consequences, or a threat to their way of life if they don't use it.

IPC-8: Lack of Remorse

If something goes wrong (something always will), help people figure out what went wrong. Provide detailed error messages and clear instructions or tips on how to correct or report an issue. Make sure people can contact you or your support team.

IPC-9: Promiscuous

Psychopaths tend to have impersonal and trivial relationships and they don't discriminate when selecting partners. An interface should make people feel like they are important, not disposable or part of a download statistic. Connect with people. Don't compromise the experience to make it more widely desired.

IPC-10: Parasitic

By presenting themselves as helpless, psychopaths can exploit people for support. There is a way that interfaces and people can work together with both parties achieving some level of success. An interface should not be needy or interrupt people's lives by constantly requiring support and attention.

IPC-11: No Goals

A psychopath is typically unwilling or unable to develop or carry out long term plans, so they change their mind frequently. Don't change the direction, focus, or key functionality of an interface without planning for consequences. Technology is evolutionary, not revolutionary.

IPC-12: Short Term Relationships

Psychopathic relationships tend to be intense and involve a great deal of commitment, but typically don't last very long. Requiring a ton of up-front interaction or activity can appear to force a relationship and make people uncomfortable, especially if there is no follow through or long term benefits.

IPC-13: Irresponsible

Psychopaths are untrustworthy and careless. Make sure your interface is socially aware and also respectful of people and their time. Don't encourage or reward behavior that is antisocial, careless, dangerous or puts people at risk. Honor any commitments that are made.

IPC-14: Unwilling to Accept Blame

Rationalizing, making excuses, or blaming other people for mistakes is typical psychopathic behavior. People tend to blame themselves for the shortcomings of an interface, so make sure it is easy to understand and use. There is no such thing as "User Error". Any problems with an interface are the fault of the designer and builder.

IPC-15: Deceptive

Another characteristic of a psychopath is habitual lying and deception. In many cases, they are proud of these abilities. Try to be honest and straightforward with people. They will definitely appreciate it and be much more inclined to use and promote the software. If value cannot be clearly communicated, there may not be any.

IPC-16: Impulsive

Psychopaths don't think before they act. They often do things just because they feel like it or because an opportunity presented itself. Plans change on a whim with no notification. A sudden shift from what they are used can make people uncomfortable and nervous. This can create an uncertainty that will erode their confidence in the interface.

Therapy

Fortunately, much like evaluation, the same methods for treating psychopathy in people can be adapted to “treat” interfaces. One option is psychotherapy. If an interface is inherently psychopathic, we evaluate it to identify psychopathic tendencies and suggest ways to modify, repair, or eliminate them. One concern with psychotherapy is that, depending on how deep-seeded the issues are, updates may be dramatic and costly.

It would obviously be more helpful to design an interface that isn't psychopathic from its inception. Behavior therapy can help with that. It is based on the premise that psychopathy isn't inherent, but rather the result of environmental influence. Ironically, it is also commonly referred to as “programming”. Using the IPC during the design process can help identify psychopathic tendencies and correct them before it affects the entire interface.

The attribution of human characteristics to something non-human is called personification (think of a cat driving a car). If you think of an interface as something that is able to do human things, it will help to keep humans in mind when designing and building an interface. It's important to note that this doesn't mean personalization or personality. Just because an interface can call you by your name (when and how you tell it to) and a person can change the background color, it doesn't mean it is less psychopathic.

The psychopathic interface is the unfortunate result of thinking about people only as users and not people, and forcing them to communicate on machine terms as data input devices. Interfaces only care about what they need and people are only useful or necessary when they can give it to them. People inherently know when they are being used or manipulated and there is an instinctual aversion to it. Using the Interface Psychopathy Checklist can help make an interface better and easier to understand and use.

“Those of you who continue to profess a belief in the Users will receive the standard substandard training which will result in your eventual elimination. Those of you who renounce this superstitious and hysterical belief will be eligible to join the warrior elite...”

- *Tron* (1981)

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The IPC Worksheet

An interactive form for use as a companion to the Interface Psychopathy Checklist
written by Jack Yager

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