



National Capital Region Chapter of the  
ACM Special Interest Group on Computer Human Interaction

## Frontiers of User Support: Bridging the Gap Between What Users Know and What They Need to Know

Presented by **Ron Baecker**, Bell University Laboratories Professor of Human-Computer Interaction, University of Toronto

### What?

Today's computer systems are often characterized by system complexity and poorly-crafted interfaces which lead to confusion, frustration, and failure. One of the key challenges is the gap between what users know and what they need to know. Bridging this gap is the function of user support systems. This phrase generally includes documentation, online help, customer support, and training. The state-of-the-art in these areas will be reviewed.

I will then describe a number of recent approaches to improving user support:

- Minimalist documentation
- Users helping themselves with Web-based support
- Intelligent help agents; and
- Enabling access to the expertise of peers through collaborative networks and technologies, i.e., users helping users.

Finally, I will present early results from three research projects designed to close the gap between what users know and what they need to know:

- Providing multiple concurrent and in one case user-adaptable interfaces to software with very extensive functionality, i.e., the software which is sometimes known as "bloatware" (Ph.D. research of Joanna McGrenere)
- Eliminating the need to file and retrieve by name large quantities of electronic data; and
- Providing documentation and support of complex software through animated icons (joint work with Apple Computer) and through structured Internet video explanations (joint work with Expresto Software) as opposed to conventional text descriptions.

### Who?

**Ronald Baecker** is the Bell University Laboratories Professor of Human-Computer Interaction in the Department of Computer Science of the University of Toronto. He is the founder and Chief Scientist of the Knowledge Media Design Institute, and is also cross-appointed to the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering and the Faculty of Management. His B.Sc., M.Sc., and Ph.D. are from M.I.T.

Baecker is an active researcher, lecturer, and consultant on human-computer interaction and user interface design, software visualization, multimedia, computer-supported cooperative work and learning, the Internet, entrepreneurship and strategic planning in the software industry, and the role of information technology in business. He has published over 100 papers and articles on topics in these areas. He is also the author or co-author of two published videotapes and of four books:

- Readings in Human-Computer Interaction: A Multidisciplinary Approach

- Human Factors and Typography for More Readable Programs
- Readings in Groupware and Computer-Supported Cooperative Work: Facilitating Human-Human Collaboration, and
- Readings in Human-Computer Interaction: Toward the Year 2000.

Baecker is also the founder, CEO, and Chairman of Expresto Software Corp, a firm specializing in visual, interactive, self-serve explanations, designed to help users understand software and other complex technology. He was previously the founder, CEO, and Chairman of HCR Corporation, a Toronto-based UNIX contract R&D and technology development and marketing firm, sold in 1990 to a U.S. competitor.

### **Where and When?**

The meeting takes place on [Tuesday, October 02, 2001](#) at 7:00 pm in the Conference 2 Boardroom at the Nortel Skyline location. Directions and a map can be found at [www.capchi.org](http://www.capchi.org).

**Note:** All attending will be required to register with security. Please arrive 5-10 minutes earlier to allow for registering. The meeting fee is \$5 for non-members and free for CapCHI members (\$20 / year).