

A day in the trenches

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I got up at 5 this morning to spend the day at Product Support Services answering phones: today was the day the Blaster worm launched its second wave. And by a startling coincidence, the person at the station next to me was Michael Howard our Senior Security Program Manager and author of *Writing Secure Code*. Getting Michael Howard to help you secure your computer is like getting Lance Armstrong to help you change a flat tire on your bicycle.

As enlightening yet humbling experiences go, for a software designer, it's hard to top (1) watching a usability session, and (2) answering product support calls. You get to observe users — customers, the people your job it is to make more productive — struggle with the software you helped create.

Usability sessions are particularly frustrating since you are hidden behind a one-way mirror, watching somebody struggle to accomplish something you designed to be the most obvious thing on the planet. It's a hard lesson to learn: Not everybody is a geek like you. (Watching a usability session is a lot like being a member of the studio audience at *The Price Is Right* trying to help the contestant on stage guess the price of a new car.)

Product support calls let you participate in the other end of the pipeline. The software is written, it's out there, and now you have to pay for all your mistakes and bad designs when people call in with their problems. It's software karma.

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