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Hall of Fame and Shame: Blinds

The Object

Pictured above are blinds in my apartment, the kind of blinds you see pretty much everywhere. The two strings on the right control the height of the blinds while the stick-like contraption on the left controls the angle of the blinds. These are the only two controls (three if you count each string separately) for the blinds.

The Fame

These blinds have a clear purpose: to provide privacy and shade as desired. Want more privacy? Lower the blinds. Want more sun? Adjust the angle of the blinds.

Each horizontal piece of the blinds is identical to all the rest so they are easily mass-produced. Not only does this reduce the cost of manufacturing, but the repetition and uniform alignment lends itself to a simple and clean presentation.

Feedback is straightforward. If you twist the stick-like contraption and the blinds change angle, then it works. Otherwise, there is an issue with the blinds that needs to be fixed.

There is a nice one-to-one control-to-function ratio, and there are very few controls. Additionally, the strings afford a natural pulling motion to raise the blinds.

The Shame

While the two strings on the right are great for raising the blinds, they are terrible for lowering the blinds. Strings afford a pulling motion towards the person operating them, but they do not easily afford a sideways pulling motion necessary to lower the blinds. It's unnatural to be pulling as far left as possible with arms outstretched, and then repeating the same ridiculous motions on the right, hoping that one of the directions will work. And maybe pulling the strings so far to the side isn't really the correct way to lower blinds, but I can't tell you exactly how to lower them because I can't do it properly myself.

Without instructions or labels or other visible clues, the blinds are not teaching the user how to operate them, and in fact, promote learned helplessness. The user may think, "It's hot, I want to lower the blinds for more shade." However, the process of physically lowering the blinds is too difficult because of a gulf of execution, and after a few failures, the person may give up and blame himself/herself.

An additional source of confusion comes from the fact that there are two strings. One controls the height for the left side of the blinds and the other controls the height for the right. This is entirely unnecessary. Adjusting just one side of the blinds makes them lop-sided, so why do it in the
first place? Lop-sided blinds look horrible and have the appearance of being broken. No one wants to live in a place that looks run-down. Additionally, realigning the blinds is a pain. People unable to stand the lop-sided appearance and unable to realign the blinds by using the strings might be tempted to pull on the bottom of the blinds, increasing the chances of actually breaking the mechanism. This extraneous functionality not only distracts the user, but can lead to frustration and/or damage to the blinds.

For those with prior experience, twisting the stick-like object on the left to change the angle of the blinds might seem natural. The hexagonal cut of the stick affords for twisting, but it is not obvious enough for first-time users. For the longest time, I thought the stick-like object was simply a decoration and never realized that it actually had a function.

While the blinds only have two functions, the controls to these functions are far away from each other. If the user wants to adjust both the height and the angle of the blinds, then he/she must move to the other side of the blinds to reach the second control.

**Recommendations**

For a more expensive set of blinds, you could install a motor and up/down buttons to raise and lower the blinds. The Up button would have a green arrow pointing up on it and be located directly above the Down button. The Down button would have a red arrow pointing down on it. This could conceivably be on a remote control as well.

For a cheaper solution, the blinds could have one large loop of string; pulling on the outer string raises both sides of the blinds and pulling on the inner string lowers them. Feedback would be immediate and there would be no more lop-sided blinds and confusion. This configuration is common in other types of blinds like roller blinds. I would modify this slightly by making the loop a bit flatter and wider to allow for a few green arrows pointing down accompanied by the words "raise blinds" on the outer side of the loop and red arrows pointing down with the words "lower blinds" on the inner side of the loop (see rough conceptual drawing below). For safety reasons, the loop should not hang low in easy reach of children.

I would also move the stick-like contraption to the right side of the blinds near the loop (but not too close because we don't want it getting in the way). Additionally, I would add an arrow wrapping around the stick to indicate a twisting motion.