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INTERACTIVE MEDIA

ETHICS, UI, UX, and INTERACTION

Designing an effective user interface system for a website is almost, if not harder, than defusing a bomb. Making UI elements that can effectively communicate their function while remaining readable and concise takes a ton of research, consideration, patience, and effort. It also involves a ton of iterating and fine-tuning to get right.

One interesting thing about the UI design process, is how much psychology unpins so many possible element choices. The brain's chemistry and psychology are powerful tools, one that would serve a web designer sufficiently if properly understood and implemented. Of course, when users interact with a website, some amount of cognition is needed to navigate the various hyperlinks and pages. So, at its most basic, UI designers engage with the minds of their users. However, this is minute compared to the real potential of UI elements designed with the psychology of targeted users understood, and ultimately used to the advantage of the webpage owners.

Providing features, enticing layouts, compelling feedback, that users are guaranteed to want to interact with might seem like fortune-telling or hopeful, then ultimately successful prediction, almost like playing the lottery. However, these UI elements are far from hopeful bets and predictions. Gaining an understanding of how the user wants to interact with the website, through their psychology, can lead to a more effectively designed UI, and better curated user experience.

As Wang Yan (4; 2020) reminds us that "the quality of a user UI design is ultimately determined by the user. As software is designed for users, the users of the software are the ones who have the final say. Hence, the UI design of computer software is closely related to human psychology. Both programmers and designers should review and consider the UI design of software from the perspective of most users' psychology".

This sentiment is applicable with web design, despite Wang Yan focusing on UI for computer software in her article. Its applicable in this context because of its emphasis on the importance of UI designed around the psychology of users. These concepts meld perfectly with user experience, as one ultimately begets the other. The description of the relationship between UI and UX would be one that describes a directly proportional relationship. As the UI caters for the user, it directly increases the satisfaction of the interaction between the system and the user.

This is not a new concept. Theorists of user interface design have created numerous laws and principles that “prey” on the psychology of the user. For example, the theory of similarities and differences, the Von Restorff effect, suggests that when multiple similar objects are present, one that differs from the rest is most likely remembered. UI designers can use this principle to subtly shepherd users into picking specific answers or clicking on specific hyperlinks. One could see this repeated with newspaper articles. People tend to buy and read newspapers with the most sensationalised article headings. Or for a “softer” example, bold YouTube thumbnails and titles written in all caps tends to draw more attention.

Another theory of user experience is William Edmund Hick and Ray Hyman’s law. This principle suggests that the time it takes to make a decision, increases with the number and complexity of choices. So, the optimal thing to do in this case, would be to provide the user with shorter and concise options, otherwise the UI designer risks a situation where the user becoming overwhelmed by a plethora of options is presented.

The third law of user experience design is Fitts’ Law. This law states that the time to acquire a target is a function of the distance and size of the target. One might understand this principle as imply that the bigger and more prominent the target is, the quicker it is for users to pick up and interact with. The target in this context being whatever the UI designer wants the user to interact with. A “buy item” button, a news article, a hyperlink that sends the user to the sponsor of the website.

The fourth law is the Zeigarnik Effect. This law states that people remember uncompleted or interrupted tasks better than completed tasks. This is an interesting law because it subverts some preconceived ideas. One would assume users would remember a completed task; a finished download is the best example of this. However, users tend to remember the download as it happens, and then promptly forget once the download is completed. Not to say the user completely neglects the piece of media they downloaded, “forget” in the context of Zeigarnik effect, could describe the feeling of being unbothered by a process. This could also relate to the anxiety and fear of a failed download, or other process. Once that progress bar is filled, and the process is completed, the anxiety of the user scatters.

The final law that unpins users experience that will be mentioned in this paper is the Serial Position Effect. This principle states the users have a propensity to best remember first and last items in a series. This is probably one of the most direct ways a designer can manipulate a user’s psychology to make them do what they want.

To fully understand how these laws work when applied to a webpage, we will be analysing the BeerHouse website (<http://www.beerhouse.co.za>). The BeerHouse franchise is well known for its craft beers and is a favourite hangout spot for many. Despite its fame among its devoted fans, the BeerHouse website leaves a lot to be desired.

For instance, all of the website's information is packed into its homepage. There are buttons that take you to specific pages like their events page and blog. The slightly cluttered look of the website makes it a bit difficult to locate the target. The Hicks law would have aided the website immensely. Breaking up the information would have allowed the user to interact with a tab or feature of their choice, without all of them being launched at the user as soon as they open the tab.

One thing this website does right is that it is very eye catching. The bright yellow can be overwhelming if looked at for extended periods, but if the goal was to create an eye-catching introduction, it certainly provides it. The yellow background also helps to sell the warmth the company presents. The website is filled with articles and entries about their charity work and the warmth of the yellow really brings that forward.

Breaking up the website's information would have benefited the user experience. Reading through some of the text is rather overwhelming, seeing as there is no break in the content. Despite that, the website presents all it has to offer from the get-go. Users can navigate through the website with relative ease. In three buttons clicks or less.

All of these laws, in combination with the UI elements combine to provide the wholistic user experience. However, there is a huge question mark on the usage of principle like these. Anything that can prey on and manipulate the psychology of users tends to fall into the trap of using these human behaviours to dive into unethical design practices. Agency is one of these ethical issues. Or more specifically, an abuse of perceived agency.

As Toni Robertson mentions "as agency is about the capacity to act and ethics is about action, then how human agency is produced, distributed and experienced within environments where technology is used is a central ethical issue in the design of technology and the design of the activities that technology is used for" (10; 2005). This is unfortunately a growing trend among mega- corporations. User interface designers that purposefully add fake buttons that force the user to interact with ads and sponsored application against the will of the user. The worst thing about this distortion of agency affects older web users and children.

Relating the issue of ethics with the website analysis, the designers of the BeerHouse seemed to have created an experience that offers users agency. The website does not force you into interaction.

REFERENCES

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