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Why I'm Taking the Course: Major requirement, enthusiastic about web design

Current Skills: HTML, XML(some), Python, MATLAB,

Interests: programming, web programming, graphic design (still learning), running, working out.

Questions: Does INFO 2300 focus more on web apps while INFO 1300 focuses more on general web design?

INTRODUCTION

From its humble beginnings as an email-based service in 1995 to a sizeable classifieds database by 2001, Craigslist introduced a novel way to search for what you need. Anything from tangible items such as housing to relationships can be found. In my critique I plan on discussing my user experience with Craigslist, one significant problem the website faces currently, and design ideas that tackle the problem at hand.

USER EXPERIENCE (UX)

From the home page, the first thing that is noticeable is the plethora of text links and options where you can search for what you want. Job listings seem to take up the largest amount of space on the homepage. Gigs and resumes take up the least amount of space. The areas of interests are all organized with a header and sub headers, which surprisingly works very well, making navigation apparent and unchallenging. In this respect the site is organized efficiently as the most topical areas are shown first. However I believe the links on the right hand side of the page are a tad undistinguishable when you are quickly perusing through the homepage (e.g. help, faq, fraud link). I cannot help but feel there is a better way to display the deluge of information on the homepage in a different manner.

The design is fairly minimalistic in nature: blue text on a plain white background. In terms of presentation, most of the important items are visible (e.g. classifieds). The gray panes around the text and headers give the page a cool tone but I am not sure it works well with white and blue, a neutral and cool color, respectively. Such colors are known to put a damper on moods (e.g. cool colors such as gray are usually associated with depression). It doesn't exude brightness that similar websites have like trulia.com

(green navigation panes with plenty of images). In addition, Craigslist has no logo or any images on its main homepage—truly a glaring issue. In addition their events calendar appears to not have full utility since one must click on the days of the week to actually see the events that are occurring. Evidently, the designers of Craigslist were not as focused on aesthetics as they were on utility when creating the site.

The discussion forum on Craigslist seems unorganized and appears to be trying to emulate Reddit's ([reddit.com](https://www.reddit.com)) forums. The main difference is that there is a frame on the right hand of the page of the discussion where the content appears. Reddit has a collapsible thread where the content drops down when you click the thread or sub-thread links. In my opinion, it is distracting to constantly have to look at the right hand side of the page to see what is being said in a discussion. Moreover, its hard to discern replies from main threads since there is a lot of extraneous information displayed next to the threads such as location of user, user id, time stamps, etc. Despite the lack of structure in the discussion areas, the listing areas of the website work appropriately and go with the whole minimalistic theme prevalent throughout. That is why Craigslist is so popular with people looking to find or sell housing and items. The listings tell you all the relevant information you need such as housing or item location, prices, images, and other miscellaneous details pertinent to the sale.

MAIN PROBLEM

As has been aforementioned, one of the most prominent issues with Craigslist is its lackluster graphic design. In terms of functionality and utility, the site is engineered to do as it promises: connect people across the products they wish to receive or provide. I believe the site can still be functional while become more appealing to the eyes and

making clear the location of important hyperlinks on the site. Moving on, an example of the poor visual design is the “my account” link of the left hand pane of the homepage. Account logins would seem to be one of the most important aspects of a site and thus should be a distinguishable link. Without proper visibility, visitors to the site will miss important information, leading to frustration and inevitably cessation of use in future instances. Put briefly, the main design issue of the Craigslist website is the visibility of important links on the homepage

DESIGN IDEAS

One potential idea to address the looming lack of visibility and aesthetics is to make the more important links of the sites into buttons. This can be accomplished by making boxes around the text using simple HTML. A more sensible and cleaner solution would be to use a graphic rendering program such as Adobe Photoshop to create custom buttons for hyperlinks such as “my account” and “post to classifieds.” In other words, designers should make the most vital hyperlinks different from the rest of the links on the home page so that they stand out when someone is looking for the login or posting section of Craigslist. One of the main drawbacks of this design idea is that highlighting certain areas of the site may potentially clash with the minimalistic theme of Craigslist. That is a risk worth taking, though.

A second idea to convey greater perception is to create a drop down menu for all the headings and subheadings that are strewn about on the center of the homepage. Although all the information is readily accessible in the format that Craigslist has it currently, a drop down menu could make space for other information in the middle of the page such as events section (denoted by a monthly calendar on the top right of the page).

The drop down menu can start as a bar across the top of the homepage with all the headings (e.g. housing, community, jobs, for sale, etc.). Then, when a field is clicked, the menu will populate with all the subheadings (e.g. housing → apts, rooms to share, etc.). A potential issue with this is that some fields will populate with a substantially lengthier list than others. For example, the job listings field would most likely go off the immediate screen if made into a drop down menu due to the number of different areas. This could be remedied if certain large areas are divided into two or more menu items from the drop down menu bar on the top of the page.

A last idea would be a complete overhaul of the website color scheme. Blue contrasts well with white but it creates such a glum ambience for visitors to the site. Usage of a dark background with white text boxes and a different color font might make the site “jump” out more, so to speak. As long as the colors are complimentary, it cannot hurt the utility of the site. This could backfire if proper color theory is not implemented and the wrong colors are chosen, which is easy to do if inexperienced with graphic design. Also, some colors are culturally unsuitable such as the color white in Asian cultures denoting death. In all I believe if more attention is given to presentation, more visitors would be attracted to the site.