



Design and Functionality in New Media and Electronic Spaces

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Table of Contents

About Me ----- Page 3
Research Report----- Page 4-7
Digital Poster----- Page 8
Reflection----- Page 9

About Me

My name is Dominic Scola and I am a technical communicator, designer and programmer. I work with different software, programming languages, and physical documents to design, edit and create information to display to others. I am experienced in providing technical instructions and I have developed my skill in instruction writing at my job at Heiden Technology as the support technician in charge of documentation. I implemented a series of checklists and forms through the website GoCanvas used to help my coworkers and peers to follow company guidelines and procedures. I am also experienced in designing information in electronic spaces and making design choices in new media. As a student at Michigan State University, I helped design a mobile application to help students view the dining hall menus and to discuss food options with fellow students online. I am also a very effective critical thinker and I am able to work under high-pressure situations very easily. My involvement with the business/marketing club DECA has helped me prepare for unfamiliar situations and come up with solutions to problems on short notice. While practicing for business simulations where we must come up with a solution to an unfamiliar problem, I was able to hone my skills as a quick and critical-thinker and I was a state finalist for my business category in DECA in 2013. My professional brand offers a diverse and varied amount of experience in different fields of technical communication, and valuable skills that would be beneficial for any profession inside or outside of the world of professional and technical writing.

Research Report

Introduction

Accessibility and design in electronic spaces is a ubiquitous concept that may not be noticed by the average user. All information that you encounter electronically, whether it is your favorite social media website, an eBook that you picked up on your favorite tablet, or even a the word processing software you use to type an essay in class has had some sort of thought process gone into how users will interact with that information. Users must be able to clearly navigate, read, or make changes to the material that is given to them, and balancing the actual functionality and the design of these materials is imperative to providing the user with an enjoyable and practical encounter with the information. Ultimately, designers of information in new media and electronic spaces must find a way to create the best User Interface and User Experience possible.

Differences Between User Interface and User Experience

User Interface and User Experience are critical components of the design and implementation of a website or mobile application. User Interface (UI) focuses on the physical layout of the information that is displayed to the reader. Features of a web space like buttons, navigation bars, menus, search bars, tabs, and tables of contents make up the UI and are imperative to quick access to the information being displayed. It is common practiced to implement similar styles of UI across the entire site. If you access one page through a drop down style menu, users become more comfortable with drop down menus and will anticipate it again in the future. Switching UI styles in the web site can cause confusion to the reader-user and ultimately distract from the functionality of the site. The User Experience provided by a web site is also important to the design and structure of the site. User Experience (UX) refers to the overall feeling or sensation that a user receives while accessing the electronic space. Design options like color, style, font, and layout all influence the experience that a user is provided. Manipulating these choices to elicit a response, or lack of response, can influence the message users receive from the site. For example, if you were designing a web site to describe a wedding hall, the fonts and colors would be muted and flowery to suggest an elegant and sophisticated feeling from the user.

You wouldn't design your web site for a wedding hall as dark and moody, as these are not feelings that are typically tied to a wedding atmosphere and the connotations that surround it. Providing a UX that gets a response from the reader in order to convince them to come back to the site is absolutely critical to the success of the media being designed.

Functionality vs. Design

UI and UX have an overwhelming amount of influence on the reader-user that encounters the site, but balancing these ideas is troublesome. Some professionals in the new media field make entire careers focusing on either User Interface design or User Experience design, but a talented communicator must find ways to balance both ideas. The two main characteristics that are built from the UI and UX of a site are design and functionality. These ideas can be viewed on the opposite ends of the spectrum of building information spaces, but creating effective design and functionality in a site is very important to perspective and returning viewers. Learning to combine both ideas will create a lasting effect to the outcome of the web site.

Design

While it may not be obvious, all information spaces have elements of design that make up the visual aspects that a site possesses. When an author chooses a font, color scheme, or even the location of elements to the page, a reader-user's experience is altered. This experience is crucial in determining whether or not a user will return to the site. Authors dictate elements of design to elicit a temporary or long-term emotional response from the reader; these responses can be beneficial or detrimental to the site. For example, if the user likes the visual makeup of the site, information is easy to read or understand, or the theme of the site matches a certain emotional response, users will come away with a better experience than a site that has little to no design choices.

However, sites that are over-designed or seem too complicated to the user can ultimately take away from the user's experience. Sites with distracting fonts, colors that are hard to read, and multiple layouts styles can make navigating a site much more difficult than it should be. Users experience frustration if the purpose of a site is blocked by design choices, and in a

world with billions of web pages to visit, a site can be completely forgotten if the design distracts from the user. Designers of new media and electronic spaces must also be aware of the functionality of the site and how to avoid compromising this functionality for the sake of making a web site look interesting.

Functionality

Arguably the most important part of the process of designing and creating new information in an electronic area is making sure that the purpose of the site is not forfeited for the design of the product. Users encounter media in order to fulfill some purpose, which can be anything from learning, entertainment, or to accomplish a task. The first overall goal of any media that is designed is to have functionality, or to serve this purpose. A site can be very well designed, but if the user interface (UI) is poorly constructed, the reader-user will struggle to access information quickly and efficiently.

When sites are designed intuitively and efficiently, the audience is able to complete the task they have set out to accomplish. Navigation is a very critical element to the functionality of the electronic space. Most sites or programs have more than one page of information that users may want to access, and a site will potentially have hundreds of different pages to access can get complex. By building an interface that allows the user to quickly and easily move through the site, information becomes more readily available to the user. Creating hyperlinks and menu options that link to pages with relevant information will also help users to move linearly across the site. And allowing pages with similar topics or relevant information to link to one another helps users locate the pages they desire. When considering a site's functionality, the goal of the web designer is to make operating the site as clean and intuitive as possible.

Conclusion

Balancing design and functionality might be a daunting task, but it is very important to the overall outcome of any electronic space. Users want a site that is visually appealing, but also serves a purpose and is not optimized to serve this purpose. Providing a unique User Experience and a clear User

Interface not only constructs the basics of design and functionality, but also personalizes a site and separates it from other similar sites. Designers of electronic spaces must consider both the design and functionality and how to optimize each of these ideas without distracting from the other. A visually well-designed site may be pleasing to the eye, but if it serves no function or purpose, it is useless to the reader. Similarly, a site with a great interface that serves a purpose and is easily accessible, but has no design elements or experience could be easily forgotten by a reader and ignored by the general population. Finding a way to balance what is visually appealing and what works fluently is pivotal to designing great electronic media.

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Design vs. Functionality

Creating a balance between what is visually appealing and what works fluently



DESIGN

- Is the design consistent?
- Is the design visually appealing?
- Do visuals distract from the function of the site?
- Do visual elements provide the user with an experience?

FUNCTION

- Is it easily navigable?
- Does the site accomplish a task or serve some purpose?
- Does the design of the site distract users from the functionality?
- Is the site intuitive or easy to learn?

Reflection

When designing this portfolio, I tried to incorporate some of the ideas and expertise that I am best at within the field of technical communication. I chose my topic to research because it was focused on technology and new media, something that I have experience with and because it is different than some of the “typical” subcategories of the profession. With this idea of technology in mind, I designed the visual aspects of my portfolio to fall into this same type theme. I used a blue color as the primary for my headings and background for my poster because it gives off a feeling of coolness and is typically associated with technology and computers. My background of the poster included binary 1’s and 0’s and a map of the world to incorporate the idea of electronic design as a universal concept, and to drive home the theme of technology. My intended audiences for this portfolio were fellow students and peers within the technical communication field. I wanted the report to be technical enough to show expertise in the field, but to also be basic enough to introduce new concepts to readers who may be unfamiliar with new media design.

This semester, I believe I grew as a technical communicator and began to fully understand what the field of professional and technical communication really entails. I learned that the major is not just physical writing, but can combine design and editing and instruction writing on top of many different subcategories to form an entire field of study. The part of this course that was most beneficial to me was to learn some of the various jobs that a technical communicator can have, and how technical communicators may not be experts in the job, but can be experts in problem solving and heuristics to be effective. I enjoyed this class because it allowed me to gain the introduction to the major that I was looking for, while also practicing and developing my skills as a writer and designer. I wish I would have spent more time practicing and learning some of the new software that we were exposed to like Adobe InDesign and Photoshop and I look forward to honing my skills in programs like this in the future. Overall, I think this class was a good experience and will definitely impact the rest of my career as a student at Saginaw Valley State University.