Client-side Web Design - Design and Consistency - Basics

A brief intro to design and consistency for client-side web design.

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Design and consistency - intro

Imagine if we had to learn to use an application which looked different on each page. Or, perhaps it used icons for actions in some locations, and text in other areas. In effect, a site or application that applies colours in a seemingly random order, and with no discernible design patterns or rules.

As designers and developers, we need to establish rules for placement and usage of interface elements. Then, importantly, we need to consistently adhere to these prescribed rules. We can mix and match visual interface characteristics without confusing, and annoying, our users.

Our designer's visual language, like natural language, requires a set of rules to be applied consistently, which can then be recognised and interpreted. Try switching in the middle of conversation from English to French, then French to German, and then back to English via Japanese. You won't be popular in most circumstances.

Consistency in design, as with most aspects of life, is not exciting or necessarily interesting, but it will help our users gain an innate sense of familiarity with an application. This will, hopefully, drive further adoption and usage. Therefore, design consistency is simply about giving users what they can understand and, in essence, rely on throughout an application.

Design and consistency - considering consistency

As we start to design our interfaces for applications and web sites, and then update them in response to feedback or feature changes, we'll notice how the smallest changes can cause a ripple effect throughout our application. A small change, such as repositioning a button or changing a colour, can annoy and alienate a user base or customer.

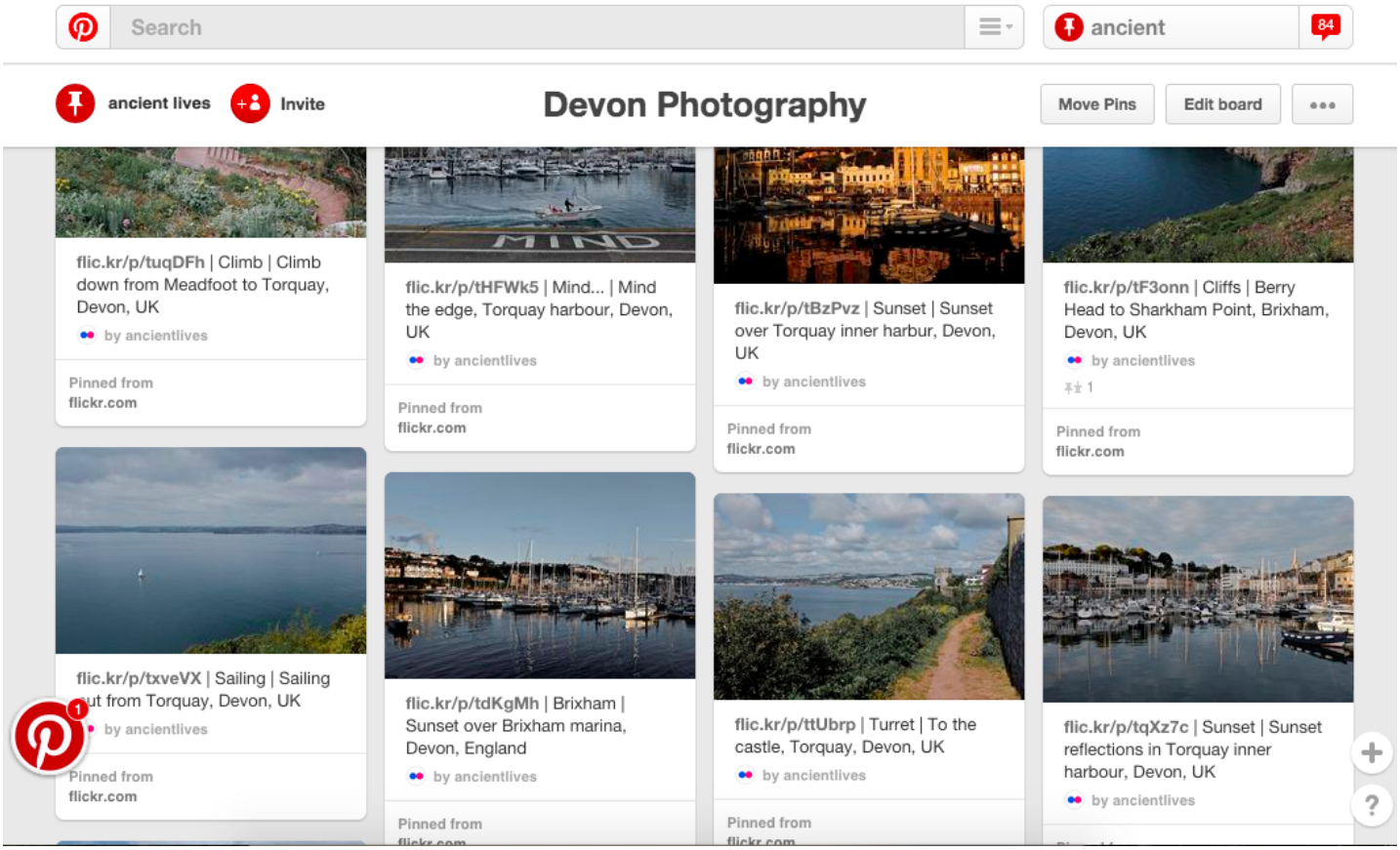
Applications may change and evolve, implementing new or updated technologies and options, but we still need to establish consistency in usage. For example, consider the interface of Pinterest. It uses an interface mechanism of almost endless scrolling to display a rich variety of images. However, this is now an accepted option for an interface pattern.

In effect, this pattern is attempting to solve a given problem. The user needs to view a subset of data that is not easily displayed on a single page. Therefore, an application's content should be presented to users as a focused subset of a much larger, seemingly endless set. An inherent component of this pattern is that a user needs to be aware of the ongoing content without excessive effort or hindrance to the usage experience.

Design and consistency - continuous scroll

We can use this pattern when there is more relevant data to show than our interface can comfortably accomodate. In effect, we can't fit all of it on the same page, so we allow a user to continuously scroll to retrieve more and more of the dataset. This can be better than simply navigating to another page, as it helps the user maintain an almost unbroken focus solely upon the content, and not the necessity to navigate, click, or even think about what to do next. The action of scrolling becomes a natural act of simply retrieving additional data. It is presented as an alternative to paging through a set of data, and is particularly useful for large datasets of contiguous information, which is not necessarily organised in a formal structured manner.

Image - Pinterest continuous scroll



Pinterest - Continuous Scroll

Source - Pinterest

Design and consistency - establishing consistency

As interface designers, we can help our users by starting with elements and designs that people are familiar with from other examples and applications. In essence, users' expectations can simply be influenced by what they see onscreen, and naturally what they've seen in the past. It's one of the reasons that it's important to review and consider many different types and examples of websites.

Forms can be a good example of this type of conditioning and expectation in users. If a user sees a form for payment or credit card information, they have normally seen and used other examples. These examples will often follow the same pattern. Why change if it is not broken. Of course, we can modify slightly to match specific requirements, such as text, specific event or purchase details, and so on. However, a user will normally look for interface elements such as a **submit** button, and they will normally look in the same position over and over again. As users, we become conditioned to use patterns on a regular basis.

Establishing such consistency relies on an inherent awareness of user expectations. Part of this is formed by expectations we set as designers via visible conventions on an application's screen. Another part is the expectation set from other screens that might use the same patterns and elements. The other part, as mentioned already, is simply the pre-existing expectations of our users. There's not much we can do about this, except test, learn, and observe.

Design and consistency - common mistakes

We'll also consider some of the common mistakes that affect our ability to design and implement consistency within our interfaces. We can often consider interfaces that achieve consistency as achieving the following,

- colours appropriate for the criteria or usage environment
    - consistent use of colours
- consistent standards for typography
- consistent implementation and styling of controls
- elements correctly organised and aligned
- elements placed in a logical position for users
    - ie: where users expect to find them
- fonts used appropriate to a given situation, event...
- grouping of similar, contiguous elements