Client-side Web Design - Design and Interface - Intro

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

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Design and interface - intro

We'll now take a look at some of the concepts, challenges, and options for interface design on the client-side.

As we start to build our applications, and consider broader design issues and implementation, it's important, and indeed useful, to remember the very nature of these applications.

Inherently, they are highly interactive, they display content from myriad sources, including databases and streaming APIs, they communicate with other systems, and they are now more dynamic than ever. They are often designed and implemented with more than one activity in mind, and can often represent actions such as finding results and records, whilst also managing that data.

In essence, we can see that what makes these apps interesting to design and develop, is also what makes them inherently compelling to use; quite simply, their access to and awarenesss of real-time data and streams. Consider many different applications, from news to banking, and we can see changes in data provision affecting the nature of our designs.

Design and interface - goals

One of the issues with website and app design is often focusing on both functionality, and complementary aesthetics.

If we look at client-side design trends in general, we can see how the very ubiquity of digital applications has led to a reduction, or watered down effect, for many early design conventions. Indeed, it is rare to see a site still use browser defaults for links, for example. It is often an actual design or aesthetic choice, a lack of design for design's sake, to leave them set to blue with underline.

If we consider the sheer breadth and diversity of devices and network connected applications, we can also see a dizzying number of evolving patterns and standards. Consider Apples's or Google's design guidelines, and then compare them to Microsoft's.

In essence, design for many of these applications has become a type of free-for-all, and there is no single pattern for use, no unified visual language outside of prescribed ecosystems.

Therefore, whilst we may not wish to return to the examples of blue links, we certainly want the applications we design and use to be more than simply utilitarian. I doubt it's a coincidence that Apple's recent rise has coincided with a greater awareness in design and the value of aesthetics.

Design and interface - design as a guide

It may sound obvious, but interfaces simply allow us to mediate communication options and associated interaction through screens and available networks.

Therefore, there is a definite need for a clear visual language that contains signs and symbols to help inform our users, and provide complementary direction and feedback. It is not as simple as just presenting the data as various forms of information.

> ...primary technique to achieve improved visual communication is to use clear, distinct, consistent visible language... Marcus, Aaron. *Graphic Design for Electronic Documents and User Interfaces*

So, if we consider detailed, complex visual interfaces, we can observe the many messages they often try to convey on a single screen. Inherently, the challenge for design is to create some semblance of direction, order, and pattern to help users simply make sense of what they see. In effect, to help them create a sense of order from chaos.

Design and interface - communication

Communication, in general, can be considered as involving a sender, a message, a conveying signal or carrier for the message, and a receiver or viewer who needs to interpret the message. As we consider this simple process, we can readily observe how, as designers and developers, we are not able to control the entire process. With interface design, the very act of selecting elements with user expectations in mind, and then the combination of these elements with appropriate and useful visual signals that users actually understand, most of the time, makes it more likely that a given target audience of users will successfully understand and interpret our message.

In effect, we need interfaces that will help us successfully manage the increasingly complex nature of data, and that preserve our sense of the real and exact.

Design and interface - direction and principles

By providing a basic framework, a set of underlying principles that we can follow or use as a template, we can start designing our applications with a more informed decision-making process that helps us bridge form and function, and provide a sense of the beautiful with the useful. It's important to realise that in client-side design, as with most examples of design, such considerations are not mutually exclusive.

We'll be looking at some underlying principles we can consider, and apply, to our designs, which inherently help inform good practice and design choices for our development work. These principles will focus upon consistency, hierarchy, and basic design personality.

Therefore, we can often consider these underlying principles in a similar vein to syntax or language. **Consistency** and **hierarchy** are often seen as analagous to a language's grammar, which a user learns whilst using an application.

The visual characteristics, notable traits in effect, of our design become the words we use to convey our message. The functionality and purpose of our applications through the visual **personality** of our design.

Such principles can hold true even as technology continues to evolve, which inherently affects the development of our applications. Our design aesthetics and principles can remain as a footprint of our work.

Design and interface - tools of the trade

We'll also consider the visual tools of our trade, not so much applications to help us design, but the nuts and bolts of visual design. The **tools** that help us layout and construct our interfaces for users.

Therefore, we'll need to define and outline the various visual tools of application design, which include

- affordances
- colour
- controls
- imagery
- layout
- type

These visual tools may seem easy and straight-forward, almost common-place, but their correct usage and implementation in client-side design will affect interpretation and representation of almost every aspect of our applications and, of course, their design.