IMS564 | USER EXPERIENCE DESIGN

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Defining the Surface

Recap

- the skeleton plane
  - dealing primarily with arrangement
    - interface design concerns the arrangement of elements to enable interaction;
    - navigation design, the arrangement of elements to enable movement through the product; and
    - information design, the arrangement of elements to communicate information to the user.

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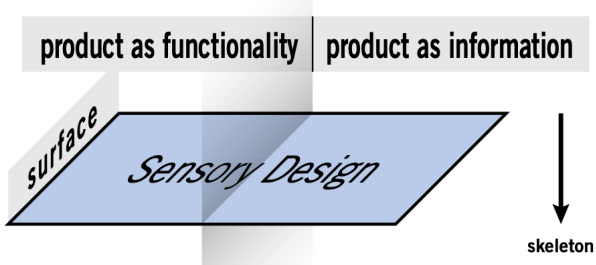
Defining the Surface

- Surface plane dealing with the sensory design and presentation of the logical arrangements that make up the skeleton of the product.
- For example,
  - through attention to information design, we determine how we should group and arrange the information elements of the page;
  - through attention to visual design, we determine how that arrangement should be presented visually.



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Making Sense of the Sense

- Every experience we have—not just with products and services, but with the world and with each other—fundamentally comes to us through our senses.
- In the design process, this is the last stop on the way to delivering an experience to our users: determining how everything about our design will manifest to people's senses.
- Which of the five senses (vision, hearing, touch, smell, and taste) we can employ depends on the type of product we are designing.

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Making Sense of the Sense

Smell and Taste

- Except for food, fragrance, or scented products, smell and taste are rarely considerations for user experience designers.
- It's true that people sometimes develop strong associations with the smell of a product—such as "new car smell," which has proven so popular that it can be added as a fragrance long after the car has outstripped anyone's definition of "new"—but these smells are typically the result of the choice of materials in the product's construction, not the decisions of experience designers.

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Making Sense of the Sense

Touch

- The touch experience of a physical product lies within the realm of industrial design.
- Industrial designers are concerned primarily with the user's physical engagement with a product.
- This entails elements of interface and interaction design (such as the arrangements of buttons on a mobile phone) but also includes purely sensory considerations, such as the shape of a device (rounded? square?), the textures used (smooth? rough?) and the materials employed (plastic? metal?).
- Thanks to vibrating devices, screen-based experiences can have touch dimensions as well. Mobile phones and video game controllers both use vibration to communicate with the user.

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Making Sense of the Sense

Hearing

- Sound plays a role in the experience of many kinds of products.
- Think of all the different beeps and buzzes in a typical automobile and the messages they send: Your headlights are on. Your seat belt is unfastened. Your door is open, but you left your key in the ignition.
- Sound can be used not just to inform the user, but to imbue a product with a sense of personality.
- For example, any TiVo user can easily recall the variety of bings, boops, and bumps that accompany navigation through the TiVo experience.

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Making Sense of the Sense

Vision

- This is the area where user experience designers have the most sophistication, because visual design plays a role in virtually every kind of product there is.
- Initially, you might think visual design is a simple matter of aesthetics.
- Everybody has different taste, and everybody has a different idea of what constitutes a visually appealing design, so every argument over design decisions just comes down to personal preference, right?
- Everybody does have a different sense of aesthetics, but that doesn't mean design decisions have to be based on what looks cool to everyone involved.

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Making Sense of the Sense

- Instead of evaluating visual design ideas solely in terms of what seems aesthetically pleasing, you should focus your attention on
  - how well they work
  - how effectively does the design support the objectives defined by each of the lower planes?
- For example, does the look of the product make distinctions between sections of the architecture unclear or ambiguous, undermining the structure? Or does the visual design clarify the options available to users, reinforcing the structure?

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Making Sense of the Sense

- Communicating a **brand identity**, for example, is a common strategic objective for a Web site.
- Brand identity comes across in many ways—in the **language** you use or in the interaction design of your site's functionality—but one of the main tools used to communicate brand identity is visual design.
- If the identity you want to convey is **technical and authoritative**, using **comic-book fonts and bright pastel colors** probably **isn't the right choice**. It's not just a matter of **aesthetics**, it's a matter of **strategy**.

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Contrast and Uniformity

- In visual design, the primary tool we use to draw the user's attention is contrast.
- A design without contrast is seen as
  - a gray,
  - featureless mass,

  causing the user's eyes to drift around without settling on anything in particular.
- Contrast is vital to drawing the user's attention to essential aspects of the interface, contrast helps the user understand the relationships between the navigational elements on the page, and contrast is the primary means of communicating conceptual groups in information design.

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Contrast and Uniformity

- When elements in a design are different, users pay attention. They can't help it.
- You can use this instinctive behavior to your advantage by making the pieces users really need to see stand out from the rest of the elements.
- Error messages in Web interfaces often suffer from blending in with the rest of the page; contrasting them by putting the text in a different color (like, say, red) or highlighting them with a bold graphic can make all the difference.

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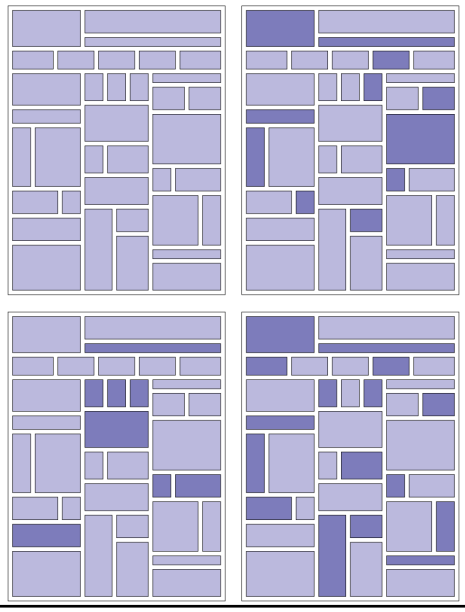
Contrast and Uniformity

In a visually neutral layout (near right, top), nothing stands out. Contrast can be used to guide the user's eye around the page (far right, top) or draw their attention to a few key elements (near right, bottom). Overuse of contrast leads to a cluttered look (far right, bottom).



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Contrast and Uniformity

- The difference has to be significant enough for the user to clearly tell that the design choice is intended to communicate something.
- When the design treatment of two elements is similar but not quite the same, users get confused.
  - "Why are those different?"
  - "Are they supposed to be the same? Maybe it was just a mistake." Or
  - "Am I supposed to notice something here?"

  Instead, we want both to grab users' attention and to assure them that it is intentional.

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Contrast and Uniformity

- Maintaining **uniformity** in your design is an important part of ensuring that your design communicates effectively without confusing or overwhelming your users.
- Keeping the sizes of elements uniform can make it easier to recombine them into new designs as you need them.
- For example, if all the graphic buttons you use for navigation are the same height, they can be mixed and matched as needed without creating a cluttered layout or requiring that new graphics be produced.

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Contrast and Uniformity

- **Grid-based layout** is one technique from print design that carries over effectively to the Web.
- This approach ensures uniformity of design through a master layout that is used as a template for creating layout variations.
- Not every layout will use every part of the grid—in fact, most layouts will probably use only a few—but every element's placement on the grid should be uniform and consistent.

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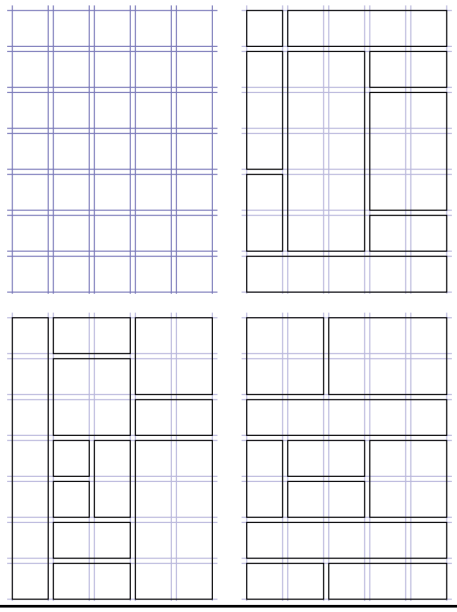
Contrast and Uniformity

Grid-based layout ensures that diverse designs have a shared visual order.



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Contrast and Uniformity

- Devices, screen sizes, and screen resolution can vary widely, applying grids to screen-based design **isn't always as simple as it is in print design**.
- It's easy to fall into the trap of adhering to a grid system—or any standard intended to ensure uniformity—even when it clearly isn't working anymore.
- The anarchy of working without design standards is bad, but the straitjacket of trying to work within design standards that are inadequate for your needs can be worse.
- The product has taken on new functionality that no one had imagined at the time when the grid was developed; maybe the grid just never worked all that well in the first place.
- Whatever the reason, it's important to be able to recognize when it's time to revisit the foundations of your visual design system.

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Internal and External Consistency

- Because of the way Web sites often have been produced—piecemeal, ad hoc, and isolated from other design work going on in the organization—they have been plagued with problems of consistency in visual design. These problems take two forms:
  - There are problems of **internal consistency**, in which different parts of the product reflect different design approaches.
  - Then there are problems of **external consistency**, in which the product doesn't reflect the same design approach used in other products from the same organization.

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Internal and External Consistency

- Good solutions to problems of internal consistency are rooted in an understanding of the skeleton of the site.
- The key is to **identify recurring design elements** that appear in different contexts throughout the various interface, navigation, and information design problems in the product.
- By isolating each design element from those different contexts before designing it, we can more clearly see the small-scale problem we're trying to solve, instead of getting distracted by the larger-scale problems imposed by context.
- Rather than designing the same element over and over again, we can design it once and use that design throughout the product.

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Internal and External Consistency

- For such an approach to work, we will have to check our work against the different contexts in which that element appears.
- Maybe a **big**, **round**, red **STOP** button will work fine for the **checkout** page, but it might **not** be as visually **effective on the crowded product customization page**.
- The best approach is to **design each element**, try it in various contexts, and then rework the design as needed.
- A **successful design** is not merely a collection of **small**, **well-designed objects**; rather, the objects should form a **system that operates as a cohesive, consistent whole**.

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Internal and External Consistency

- Enforcing design consistency across media presents your audience—customers, prospects, shareholders, employees, or casual observers—with a uniform impression of your brand identity.
- This consistency of brand identity should be present at every level of the visual design of your product, from the navigation elements appearing across every screen to the humble button that appears only once.
- Presenting a style on your Web site that's inconsistent with your style in other media doesn't just affect the audience's impression of that product; it affects their impression of your company as a whole.
- People respond positively to companies with clearly defined identities.
- Inconsistent visual styles undermine the clarity of your corporate image and leave the audience with the impression that this is a company that hasn't quite figured out who it is.

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Color Palettes and Typography

- Color can be one of the most effective ways to communicate a brand identity.
- Some brands are so closely associated with colors that it's difficult to think of the company without the color automatically coming to mind—consider Coca-Cola, UPS, or Kodak. These companies have employed specific colors (red, brown, yellow) consistently over the years to create a stronger sense of their identities in the public's mind.
- The core brand colors are usually part of a broader color palette used in all of a company's materials.
- The colors in a company's standard palette are selected specifically for how well they work together, complementing each other without competing.

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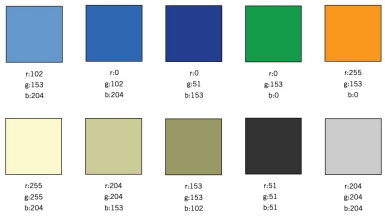
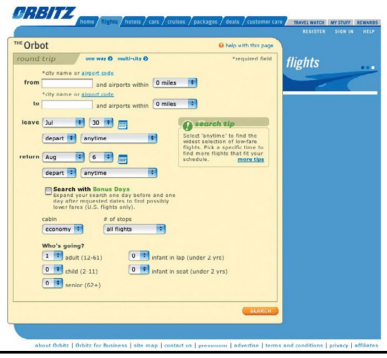
Color Palettes and Typography

- A color palette should incorporate colors that lend themselves to a wide range of uses.
- In most cases, brighter or bolder colors can be used for the foreground of your design—elements to which you want to draw attention.
- More muted colors are better used for background elements that don't need to jump off the page.
- Having a range of colors to choose from provides us with a toolkit for making effective design choices.
- When used in the same context, colors that are very close to one another, but not quite the same, undermine the effectiveness of your color palette.
- This doesn't mean you only get one shade of red, one shade of blue, and so forth. It means that if you want to use different shades of red, make sure they're different enough that users can tell them apart, and make sure you use each in consistent ways.

Color Palettes and Typography

Orbitz has used a limited color palette (top) to differentiate features and functionality on the Web site (bottom).





Color Palettes and Typography

- **Typography**—the use of fonts or typefaces to create a particular visual style—is so important to their brand identities that they have commissioned special typefaces to be produced specifically for their use.
- Organizations ranging from Apple to Volkswagen to the London Underground and even Martha Stewart have used custom typography to create a stronger sense of identity in their communications.
- Even if you choose not to take this extraordinary step, type can still serve as an effective part of communicating your identity through visual design.

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Color Palettes and Typography

- For body text—any material that will be presented in larger blocks or that will be read by users in longer stretches—simpler is better. Our eyes quickly get tired trying to take in lots of text in a more ornate typeface.
- For larger text elements or short labels like those seen on navigational elements, typefaces with a little more personality are perfectly appropriate.
- But one of our objectives is not to overwhelm our users with visual clutter, and using an unnecessarily wide variety of fonts—or even using a small number of fonts in inconsistent ways—can contribute to that sense of clutter.
- In most cases, you won't need more than a handful of fonts to meet all your communication needs.

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Color Palettes and Typography

- The principles of using type effectively are really the same as those for other aspects of visual design:
  - Don't use styles that are very similar but not exactly the same.
  - Use different styles only to indicate differences in the information you're trying to communicate.
  - Provide enough contrast between styles that you can draw the user's attention as needed, but don't overload the design with a wide range of diverse styles.

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Design Comps and Style Guides

- The most direct analog to the wireframe for the realm of visual design is the **visual mock-up or design comp**.
- Comp is short for composite, because that's exactly what it is: a visualization of the finished product built up from the components that have been chosen.
- The comp shows how all the pieces work together to form a cohesive whole; or, if they don't, it shows where the breakdown is happening and demonstrates constraints that any solution will have to account for.

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Design Comps and Style Guides

- You should be able to see a simple one-to-one correlation between components of the wireframe and components of the design comp.
- The comp might not faithfully reproduce the layout of the wireframe—in fact, it probably won't.
- The wireframe doesn't account for visual design concerns, focusing instead on documenting the skeleton.
- Building the wireframe before we tackle the design comp allows us to look at skeleton issues in isolation first, then see how surface issues come into play.
- Nevertheless, the core ideas in the wireframe, particularly regarding information design issues, should be plainly evident in the design comps, even though they may not follow the precise arrangement presented in the wireframe.

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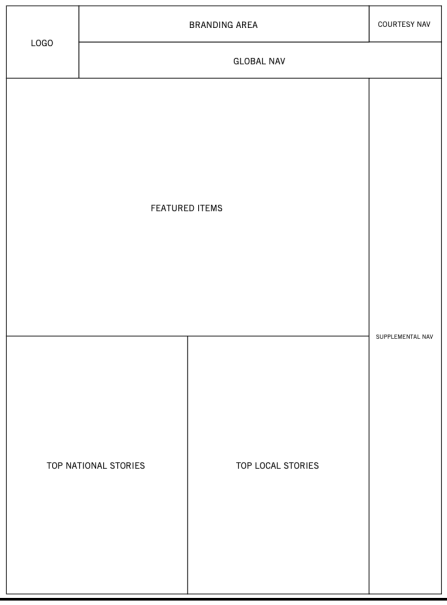
Design Comps and Style Guides



The visual design doesn't have to match the wireframe precisely—it only has to account for the relative importance and grouping of elements presented in the wireframe.

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Design Comps and Style Guides

- Reason to document your design system is that people eventually quit their jobs.
- When they do, they walk away with a wealth of knowledge about how a product gets designed and built on a day-to-day basis.
- Without a style guide that remains up-to- date with the latest standards and practices, that knowledge is lost.
- Over time, as people change positions, the whole organization gradually suffers a sort of amnesia, as the ways things were done and the reasons for those decisions drift away to other parts of the company or back out into the workforce.

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Design Comps and Style Guides

- The definitive documentation of the design decisions we have made is the **style guide**.
- This compendium defines every aspect of the visual design, from the largest scale to the smallest.
- Global standards affecting every part of the product—such as design grids, color palettes, typography standards, or logo treatment guidelines— are usually the first things to go into a style guide.

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Design Comps and Style Guides

- The style guide will also include standards specific to a particular section or function of a product.
- In some cases, the standards documented in the style guide will go all the way down to the level of individual interface and navigation elements.
- The overall goal of the style guide is to provide enough detail to help people make smart decisions in the future—because most of the thinking has already been done for them.
- Creating a style guide is also helpful in imposing design consistency across a decentralized organization.
- Getting all those people to go along with a unified set of standards can be a lot of work, which is why responsibility for enforcing design style guides often resides higher up in the organization than you might expect.
- Having a style guide you can refer to is the single most effective way to get your product looking like a cohesive whole instead of just a jumble of tacked-on pieces.

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