

Usability Evaluation of IMDb

IMDb (Internet Movie Database) is a global platform that attracts millions of users daily. As the name indicates, IMDb is a movie database on the internet. Even though IMDb is owned by Amazon, it isn't a streaming service like Prime Movies or Netflix, rather a platform with tons of information about movies, television shows, actors, directors, producers, and anything else related to the entertainment industry. IMDb also offers users the ability to review and rate movies and TV shows as well as view other user's ratings and reviews. Apart from being a library with a rating system, IMDb has several useful features. For instance, IMDb has a recommendation system that suggests new titles based on users' viewing history, which helps them discover new content that matches their tastes. IMDb also has a feature called the "Watchlist" where users can save content for future watching. IMDb also has another version called IMDbPro, which is meant for professionals in the movie industry. From IMDbPro, professionals are able to find specific information like contact information of actors.

As mentioned, IMDb has a diverse user base, ranging from industry professionals to casual viewers. Actors, filmmakers, casting directors, and other professionals in the film industry may use IMDb for visibility, networking, and tracking ongoing and upcoming projects. On the other hand, IMDb's easy accessibility makes it appealing to anyone with an interest in movies and TV. For example, a scenario where two people are looking to settle a debate over an actor's previous roles, IMDb will probably be their choice of service. Critics, scholars and researchers, use IMDb as an essential resource to require comprehensive, accurate information on entertainment topics, from filmographies and production histories to thematic analyses and industry trends, and film, and TV enthusiasts use it for finding new shows, exploring detailed reviews and learning more about the cast, crew and production details of their favorite media.

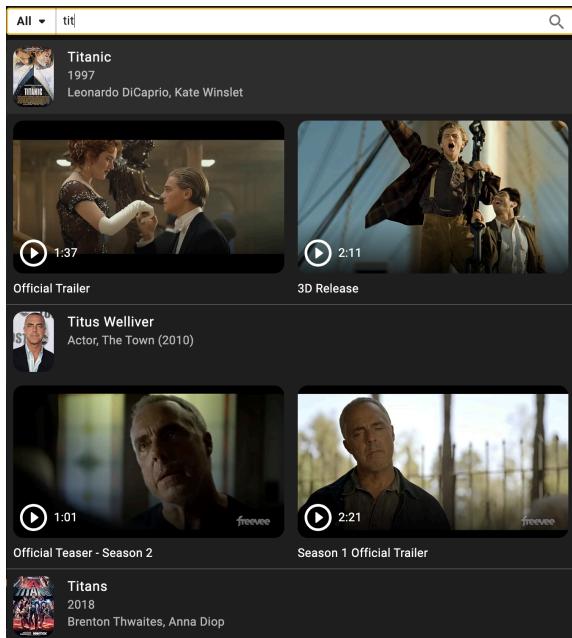
We are going to review IMDb's website with Jakob Nilsen's, 10 general principles for interaction design, from the article: "*10 Usability Heuristics for User Interface Design*", published in . . . The goal with this review is to evaluate the design aspects of this website, to get an understanding of the overall usability of the website.

1: Visibility of System Status

This heuristic highlights that the design of a system should always visualize the system status. Users should at all times be informed about what is going on. The system should give constant feedback, which allows users to trust the system and make informed decisions. Therefore, loading pages and real-time feedback is essential for a website, to make the user feel in control of the system.

IMDb's search function is a great example of this. When a user types into the search bar, a drop-down list of matching results appears in real-time, which includes movies, TV shows, actors, and directors. This does not only reassure users that the system is processing their input, it also helps users to recognize possible typos without having to retype their whole

search. Overall, the search function of IMDb improves efficiency and reduces guesswork, which makes the users feel in control while searching information.



2: Match Between the System and the Real World

This heuristic ensures that the user and system understand each other. The design should use familiar language, structures, and icons, while avoiding technical jargon and a complex interface. This makes the system accessible to a broader audience, due to users not having to learn new concepts and words.

IMDb does this by using a standardized navigation bar as well as many widely used symbols that represent different actions. Having a top-bar with different quick actions has become common among websites. IMDb's bar consists of multiple regularly understood elements like a magnifying glass for search and a "+" symbol to add to the Watchlist. Users are most likely already familiar with these concepts from other sites, which therefore make understanding of the navigation easy. Additionally, IMDb uses other commonly known concepts, like a star-based rating system. Users can rate movies on a scale of 1 to 10 stars, and the average rating is displayed. This is an ordinary system known and used by most people for several decades.

A screenshot of the IMDb rating section. It features a dark header with the IMDb logo, a menu icon, and a search bar. Below the header, the text 'IMDb RATING' is displayed in a bold, white, sans-serif font. To its left is a yellow star icon. To the right is the rating '7.9 /10' in a large, white, bold font. Underneath the rating, the number '1.3M' is shown in a smaller, white, sans-serif font.

3: User Control and Freedom

This heuristic ensures that users are able to undo or redo actions. The design of the system should make it possible for users to recover from mistakes. This encourages users to explore without fear of irreversible consequences and feeling in control of their own actions.

IMDb supports user control and freedom through features like the top bar. The top bar is consistent at every page of the site, which allows users to navigate seamlessly across pages. Users have the option to at any time access the most used features, "Menu," "Search", "Watchlist", and "Language" in the top bar. Additionally, IMDb uses several confirmation prompts to ensure users aren't making a mistake. For example, when a user tries to remove something from their watchlist, IMDb asks for additional confirmation. This prevents accidental action and gives users a sense of security. Furthermore, IMDb supports browser controls like the "back" button, allowing the users to return to previous pages without losing progress.

4: Consistency and Standards

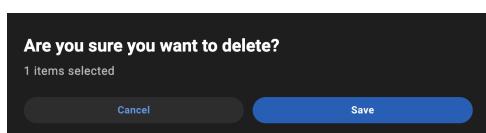
This heuristic ensures that users can predict how a system works by having used other systems. This means that a site should have similar design and language compared to other popular digital products, to improve the learnability. A site should follow established structures and arrangements to not force users to learn something new.

IMDb has a consistent design that follows established structures. For example, the top navigation bar that has become a common feature across many websites. It gives access to familiar labels, such as "Menu", "Search", and "Watchlist". IMDb uses familiar icons like the "hamburger" for the menu, the "triangle" for playing a trailer, and the "profile picture" to access your profile. Movie and TV show pages are clear and follow a consistent layout. These features are commonly known and therefore reduces the users cognitive load and improves the site's learnability.

5: Error Prevention

This heuristic is to have a design that helps users avoid mistakes before they occur. Clear instruction should be available to guide the user towards the correct action. Having constraints like a confirmation prompt, that is a user having to confirm an action, avoids possible errors.

IMDb uses multiple different constraints to guide users to the correct action and prevent error. The search bar suggests movies or TV shows in real-time, helping users to avoid misspellings as well as guiding them to the title they are searching for. A user only has the option between 1-10 stars when ranking a movie or TV show, which is a constraint making sure no one misjudges the ranking system. Additionally, IMDb uses confirmation prompts. For example when trying to delete something from your watchlist, IMDb asks if you're sure you want to delete it.



6: Recognition Rather Than Recall

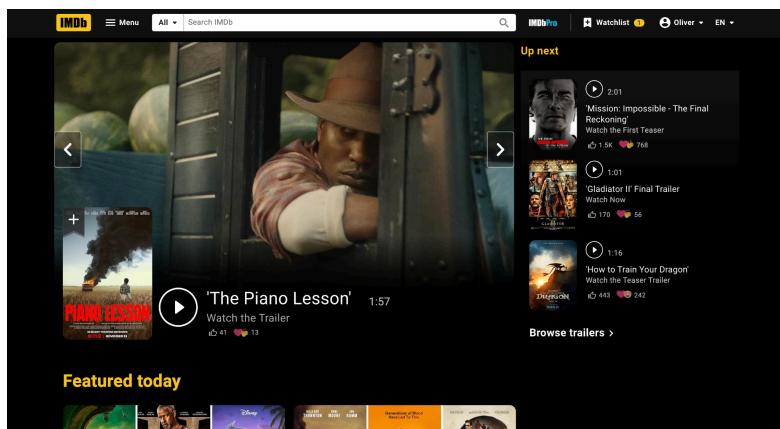
This heuristic focuses on minimizing the information users need to remember and rather having a visible, easy to recall interface. The idea is to visibly present recognizable options and actions to reduce users' cognitive strain. This makes the interactions with the system more efficient and less demanding for the users.

IMDb has a clean interface with clear indications for actions and options preventing users having to recall demands. As already mentioned, the constantly present top bar guides users to the most important actions and options without users having to remember a path to a specific page. IMDb also has a "Recently Viewed" section that allows users to return to previously browsed content without needing to remember specific titles. Additionally, search suggestions help users identify movies, TV shows, or actors even with incomplete input.

7: Flexibility and Efficiency of Use

This heuristic is about having a method to make interaction more effective for experienced users without affecting less experienced users. Systems should offer unnoticeable options for "experts", that may be harder to understand or remember, but improves their efficiency, while maintaining accessibility for newer users. This could include shortcuts, personalization and customization in different ways.

IMDb has options for more experienced users. For example, Advanced Search allows experienced users to apply detailed filters, which allows them to find more niché and specific results. The feature is generally harder to grasp and isn't therefore the main search. However, IMDb doesn't have any keyboard shortcuts for common actions like navigating to the Watchlist or rating content, which would enhance efficiency for experienced users.



8: Aesthetic and Minimalist Design

This heuristic focuses on having a clean and pleasing interface without unnecessary elements. Only relevant information should be displayed preventing users' from getting distracted. This makes navigation more intuitive for users.

IMDb's homepage and content pages are generally clean and well organized. It has different sections like "Featured today", "Most popular celebrities", and etc, with white space in between for enhanced readability. However, IMDb is filled with ads that disrupt the layout and possibly distract users from the meaningful content. Reducing or removing ads would improve the usability of the site.



9: Help Users Recognize, Diagnose, and Recover from Errors

This heuristic ensures that the system helps users recognize , diagnose and recover from errors. A clear and understandable error message should be provided so that users understand what the issue is and how to recover. This helps the users to quickly recover from the issue without frustration.

IMDb gives the message "No results found" if you type a search that doesn't exist. This encourages users to try something different. I personally haven't run into other errors making it hard to evaluate this heuristic further.

A screenshot of the IMDb search interface. At the top, there is a search bar with the query "Search '4roj fkdvsmö'". Below the search bar, there are three separate search results boxes. The first box is labeled "Interests" and contains the message "No results found for '4roj fkdvsmö'". The second box is labeled "Titles" and contains the message "No results found for '4roj fkdvsmö'". The third box is labeled "People" and contains the message "No results found for '4roj fkdvsmö'".

10: Help and Documentation

This heuristic is about finding support for issues you have. Help and documentation should be easily locatable and provide the users with relevant information. A system should be intuitive but accessible support ensures that users can resolve issues independently if needed.

IMDb provides a Help Center that is categorized into different topics like "Account & Login" and "Watchlist". From the Help Center users can find answers to commonly asked questions. IMDb also has a community forum which offers support for less common issues. There users can ask questions that will be answered by an employee. However, the Help Center link is located at the bottom of the homepage, which could make it harder to find. If the link would be more visible like for example in the top bar, more users would possibly be satisfied.



Using the 10 heuristics

Throughout this evaluation, some heuristics were easier to understand and apply than others. This depended on how clear their concepts felt as well as if recognizable examples were found from IMDb.

Visibility of System Status and Help Documentation, were the only two heuristics that felt distinguishable from every other heuristic and easy to provide concrete examples for. It was straightforward to identify features like real-time feedback from the search function and Help and documentation from the Help Center and FAQs.

It was relatively easy to comprehend the concept of Aesthetic and Minimalist Design. However, it was slightly harder to find examples due to the subjective opinion of what is considered useful and distracting. Nilsen (2023) didn't provide any concrete examples of what should be considered unnecessary or distracting. In my own opinion, IMDb's layout is well-organized with the exception of ads, but someone else could have the opposite opinion, and find the moving parts on the home site distracting.

Help Users Recognize, Diagnose, and Recover from Errors was also clear in theory, but in my mind it overlapped with User Control and Freedom and Error Prevention. I considered User Control and Freedom as a broad concept that included the likes of error prevention and recovery. Therefore, finding concrete distinguishable examples of these heuristics was more difficult.

Finding examples for Flexibility and Efficiency of Use was challenging due to my own lack of experience with IMDb. Even though the heuristic itself was easy to understand, I had trouble identifying advanced features or accelerators aimed at experienced users. However, this isn't

necessarily something negative. It rather shows that possible shortcuts and customisations weren't meant for newer users like me.

Consistency and Standards and Match Between the System and the Real World were both as well easy to understand conceptually but felt somewhat similar when applied. Both their focuses were on familiar design and predictable interfaces which lead to related examples. I understood that Consistency was focused on internal uniformity, and Match emphasized real-world metaphors, but their similarity made it harder to find distinct examples.

Considering this evaluation, IMDb's design mostly follows the usability principles. I was only able to find one severe issue and one possible issue that didn't align with Nielsen's 10 Usability Heuristics (2023). The major problem was the constant ads that disrupted the simplicity and created constant distraction for the users, that may cause irritation and frustration. The second questionable issue would have been the lack of shortcuts, especially keyboard shortcuts, that might frustrate very experienced users that want to use the site as efficiently as possible. Else the website was designed with caution and good design in mind.

Heuristic evaluation process

Heuristic evaluation can be used for identifying usability problems early in the design process. By evaluating the interface against established principles, designers are able to identify areas for improvement already early in development. Heuristic evaluation is a cheap and easy way to fix potential issues users may experience, especially in the beginning of development. It gives designers insight on issues they possibly else would have missed. As Jakob Nilsen states in his book *Usability Engineering* (1994), "many usability problems have fairly obvious fixes as soon as they have been identified", which in context has the meaning that issues often have easy fixes but the challenge is to find them, and therefore evaluation of many gives better result.

It's important that heuristic evaluation is conducted by having each evaluator individually inspect the interface first before aggregating and consolidating the findings in a group. This ensures that every evaluator brings up their own unique perspectives that will lead to a wider range of issues being brought up. If the evaluators would conduct the evaluation together, there would be a high likelihood of them being influenced by group dynamics or bias, that would limit the opportunity to find several specific details. Therefore, individual assessments should firstly be completed so that the group can then discuss findings and prioritize the most critical issues.

In my opinion, despite Nielsen's 10 heuristics being introduced over 30 years ago they still remain applicable to modern usability evaluations. This is due to their focus being on human behaviors. Human behavior hasn't really changed for the last hundred years, which proves that these principles are quite timeless. Nevertheless, I still believe that designers shouldn't solely rely on these heuristics when designing an interface. There is a strong need for some heuristics with updated context, such as accessibility for diverse user groups and compatibility across different devices.

References

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