Creating Meaningful
Websites

D

Imprint

About This Book

What is it that makes a website stand out from the crowd? What makes it memorable and meaningful? To approach these questions we had put together this eBook. It's in no means a step-by-step guide to follow, but rather a collection of thoughts to give you some general impulses and perspectives on creating meaningful websites.

Starting with a comprehensive website planning guide to the question, "Which role does emotion play within the emotionless Web system?", our authors explored a variety of different aspects that all contribute to aesthetically beautiful and thoroughly thought-out user experience.

Last but not least, this eBook also features an overview of innovative Web design solutions for you to dig in. We hope that some of the ideas presented here will come in handy in your daily workflow and, most of all, that they add to the development of your own, meaningful, style.

— *Cosima Mielke, Smashing eBook Producer*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

A Comprehensive Website Planning Guide

BEN SEIGEL ❧

As a veteran designer, developer and project manager for more websites than I can count, I've identified a common problem with many Web projects: failure to plan. The same issues come up repeatedly in my work, so I've written this guide in order to help clients, other designers, businesses and organizations plan and realize successful websites.

This guide is written in relatively non-technical language and provides a broad overview of the process of developing a website, from the initial needs assessment through the launch, maintenance and follow-up. It is appropriate for:

- Small and medium-sized businesses;

- Organizations;

- Institutions;

- Web designers, developers, and design and development firms.

If you're building a four-page website for your family reunion or a 5000-page website for a Fortune 500 company, then this guide might not be for you; it will either be too detailed or way too short, respectively.

Important questions and answers. Image by opensourceway[1]

Why Plan?

Planning is essential for most businesses and organizations. In practice, many people fail to plan their websites. Sometimes the ever-busy, dynamic nature of running a business is to blame; there are so many operational demands that proper time is not allotted to projects. But this often happens because people fail to recognize that planning for the Web is just as important as planning for anything else in a business.

THE (LENGTHY) DECK EXAMPLE

Consider the example of building a deck. If you want a deck for your house, you probably won't call several carpenters and ask, "How much is a deck?" If you do, you'll get the smart answer: "It depends." In order to provide you with an estimate, a carpenter needs some details about the project:

- What kind of wood? Cedar? Treated? Synthetic?

- Where exactly will the deck go? Are there any obstacles to work around?

- What height will it be, and how many levels will it have?

- Do you want benches, railings, built-in planters?

- Do you have clearance to bring special equipment into your yard?

  Then there is the host of other things for the carpenter to consider: scheduling, building permits, inspection, maintenance, etc. That's why a smart carpenter will answer your simple question with "it depends."

---

1. http://www.flickr.com/photos/opensourceway/5556249000/in/photostream/
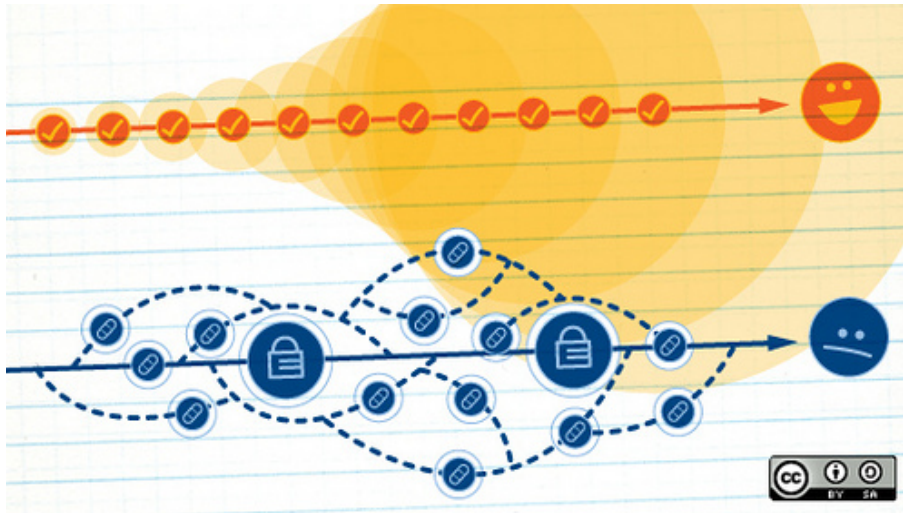
Be sure to plan your way to success. Image by opensourceway[2]

It makes sense to meet with more than one contractor to address the questions above and more. When you choose a carpenter, they should provide a detailed plan that you both sign. Throughout the building process, the carpenter should check in with you periodically and discuss potential challenges and snags.

Surely all of this makes sense, but consider another scenario wherein there is no clear plan:

> *"Hi, Jennifer Carpenter. It's Juan Homeowner. I need a 20 × 30-foot cedar deck in my backyard. I want it built in two weeks."*
> *"Okay, Juan. I'll pick up the materials and get started tomorrow. If you have any questions, just see me in your backyard while I'm working."*

Jennifer Carpenter gets started by drilling post holes for each corner of the deck. She assumes that Juan Homeowner has secured a building permit from city hall, because that's how most of her previous jobs have worked out… But there's no building permit.

As Ms. Carpenter starts framing the deck, she notices that Mr. Homeowner has put a large hose reel against his house and connected it to the faucet. Based on where the deck will sit, the hose reel will have to go. She's not sure if he will want to move it somewhere else or have his outdoor faucet replumbed to reconnect it and put it on the deck, which is two feet off the ground. She stops building and waits to ask Mr. Homeowner when he gets home… But it turns out that he's on a business trip for three days.

---

2. http://www.flickr.com/photos/opensourceway/5320590228/in/photostream/

When he gets back, Ms. Carpenter reaches him by phone. He's not happy that his faucet will have to be moved, because it adds unplanned expenses to the project. But that's not Ms. Carpenter's fault. She's not the plumber. She's just putting the deck where he asked.

Once the deck is framed, she starts building a railing for one side. This wasn't discussed, but she sees that there are small children around the house and thinks this is a good safety measure. Mr. Homeowner comes home one day and is happy to see the great progress on his deck, but he notices the railing.

> *Mr. Homeowner: "What's this?"*
> *Ms. Carpenter: "I added a railing to the side because you have kids. It's a good safety feature."*
> *Mr. Homeowner: "I don't have small children."*
> *Ms. Carpenter: "But I saw them playing in your front yard."*
> *Mr. Homeowner: "Oh, those are the neighborhood kids. My kids are in high school."*
> *Ms. Carpenter: "Well, a railing is still a good feature."*
> *Mr. Homeowner: "Fine, but can you make it shorter and put a bench next to it?"*
> *Ms. Carpenter: "I didn't buy enough wood for a bench, and the railing is already drilled and attached. I'd have to remove and recut it. Also, we didn't talk about a bench."*
> *Mr. Homeowner: "Well, I'd like a bench here."*
> *Ms. Carpenter: "That will take more time. I won't be able to get this done by your two-week deadline if we add the bench. Plus, I'd have to charge you for the extra wood."*

What began as a simple project has become a series of headaches, all due to a failure to plan.

From a Web professional's perspective, developing a 50-page website for six unique stakeholders is far more complex than building a rectangular deck. A deck is a physical structure built in stages. You can look out the window and see the progress. In contrast, a website has a number of technical and administrative steps that aren't visible to all.

A CAVEAT, AND THE "WATERFALL" METHOD OF DEVELOPMENT

When I worked at an insurance company, business analysts from the information technology (IT) department would write project charters: long, painfully boring documents that attempted to outline every possible aspect of a website. I hated these documents and preferred to work by the seat of my pants. My reasoning in part was that websites are

flexible, unlike print material. That is, their content can be changed at will. The idea that every aspect of a website could be pre-planned on paper was ludicrous.

IT departments that handle large projects often use something called the "waterfall" method of development: specify absolutely everything, down to the point size of the type, the line length of page headers and exactly how a simple photo gallery will work.

See what is relevant and react. Image by opensourceway[3]

This is my view of the waterfall method: if you're building a banking application that transfers money in and out of customer accounts, you'd better be sure your code is perfect. When dealing with debits and credits, there is zero allowance for error. For projects this critical, it makes sense to specify everything you're going to do in great detail before writing a single line of code.

However, as I said, websites are flexible. So how do we reconcile the need for clear and detailed specifications with the inherent flexibility of the medium?

We do this by splitting the difference. By following the process I've outlined below, we can create a set of content and design specifications that greatly reduce the likelihood of mid-project glitches, while creating a framework that allows the website to grow with time. In fact, we can plan for expansion by allowing, for example, a news section to handle 10 news items or 200. When these specifications are properly implemented in a content management system (CMS), the website will give its editors the flexibility to swap out key photos, change titles and head-

---

3. http://www.flickr.com/photos/opensourceway/5265955107/in/photostream/

ers, reorder content, etc. — all within the framework established by proper planning.

THE VALUE OF PLANNING AND NEEDS ASSESSMENT

I am frequently approached by prospective clients who want estimates for building their websites. Sometimes they have a general idea of what they want and possibly a simple website map. Others, especially organizations, will submit a request for proposal (RFP). In most cases, none of this gives the designer or developer enough information to generate an accurate proposal. Even a multi-page RFP usually does not have enough detail from which to create a proposal and estimate. If a prospective client just wants a ballpark figure, I can usually do this, but much more information is needed in order to arrive at an accurate cost.

Ideally, prospective clients would hire either a designer, developer or project manager to do a thorough needs assessment before requesting a proposal. However, clients don't necessarily understand the efficiencies gained by up-front assessment. Ten hours spent on a needs assessment can save 30 hours of development time. Discovering the needs of a client halfway through a project is a recipe for headaches, extended development time, cost overruns and missed deadlines. As you'll read below, failing to recognize and pay for proper planning creates big problems.

COMMON RESULTS OF FAILING TO PLAN

- The designer or developer is forced to make assumptions, which may or may not be correct, about how certain content will appear on the website.

- The amount of back-and-forth communication about trivial matters can be multiplied many times over.

- Backtracking causes delays and missed deadlines.

- Work that falls outside the original scope of the project creates cost overruns.

- Confusion and client dissatisfaction are byproducts of a shoot-from-the-hip process.

Needs Assessment

Important things to remember:

- Unless you're building an intranet, the website is not for you and must meet the needs of your client.

- A website is not an event. It is a flexible, extensible communications tool that reflects, negatively or positively, on the business.

Now we could potentially start using business-speak, as in "Assemble your key internal stakeholders." That's another way of saying: "Get everyone together who has something valuable to contribute."

ALIGNING THE WEBSITE WITH THE MARKETING CAMPAIGN

The website must work in concert with the overall marketing plan. The needs assessment for the website might overlap with the other efforts and approaches of the marketing department, which is fine. This is outside the scope of this chapter, but note that the established branding and marketing of the business should inform the structure and design of the website.

ROLES: WHO'S DOING WHAT?

Every project is different, but these are the typical roles in a sizable Web project:

- Internal stakeholders (aka "clients"), who represent all primary aspects of the business;

- Project manager;

- Copywriter or editor;

- Web designer (graphic design, illustration, Web design);

- HTML coder (HTML, CSS, JavaScript, Flash);

- Web or CMS developer.

Keep in mind that one person can play multiple roles. The number of participants does not necessarily bear on the quality of the result. In some cases, a series of one-on-one meetings between company principals and an experienced designer can yield a great website.

Determine Website Content

WHO'S RESPONSIBLE?

As you prepare to add content to the website, think about who will contribute. In a five-person business, it might be just two of you, and that's fine. In a large business or organization, 5, 10 or 15 people might be contributing content. The time required to edit and proofread both copy and visual content grows exponentially in proportion to the number of people who contribute content.

Clear the fronts and distribute clear responsibilities. Image by opensourceway.

CONTENT IS NOT JUST TEXT

Unless you are creating the dullest, most technical website imaginable, your content should consist of more than just plain text. By using one or more of the following multimedia elements, you'll greatly enhance the appeal and usefulness of the website:

- Images;

- Documents (usually PDFs);

- Audio;

- Video (i.e., embedded from YouTube or Vimeo, or self-hosted);

- Adobe Flash files;

- Content feeds (from other websites, for example);

- Photos (from Flickr perhaps);

- Twitter stream;

- Facebook "friends" list;

- RSS feeds.

THE VALUE OF GOOD PHOTOGRAPHY

Like other elements of a website, photos communicate the brand of the organization. If you've just moved into a beautiful new building or storefront, you may have snapped some pictures of it and your staff on your $150 digital camera. In most instances, unless you have bona fide photography skills, these will not be quality photos. Try to budget for professional photography. You don't necessarily need a lot of photos, just *good* ones. Twelve professional images is better than fifty amateur snapshots.

If your budget doesn't allow for a pro, then contact your local art school or community college and ask for a recommendation. A budding student photographer with a good eye will work for cheap in order to build a portfolio. If you have no budget at all, then take the photos yourself, but pay special attention to lighting, framing and focus... and hope for the best.

In some cases, when generic images will suffice, stock photography can be used. But there is no substitute for quality photos of your staff, storefront, products or services.

THE VALUE OF GOOD WRITING

Good writing, like good photography, requires a skill that not everyone possesses. Writing for the Web is different than writing memos, policy papers and technical documents. You might write great technical manuals for precision machining tools, but that doesn't mean you can write well for the Web. If your organization doesn't have someone who can write clear and concise marketing copy, hire an expert. If you can write reasonably well but need some guidance, consider hiring an editor to polish your output.

QUICK WRITING TIPS

Consider your audience and write accordingly. Try to see the business from the customer's perspective. What do they care about?

Avoid business-speak, confusing acronyms and dry details. Your customers do not work at your shop, office or widget factory; they are the ones purchasing your products or services. Speak to them accordingly. When appropriate, write in generalities, and save the hardcore

details for multi-page PDFs (as downloads). This approach is especially useful for product information, white papers and copy that approaches or exceeds 1000 words.

Here is a useful approach when writing for the Web:

1. Write your first draft,

2. Cut it in half,

3. Cut it in half again,

4. Add bulleted and numbered lists where possible,

5. Send it to the editor.

Reading on a screen is fatiguing. A screen, whether a massive 26-inch monitor or a diminutive smartphone, projects tiny points of light at your eyes. Consequently, reading long stretches of text on it can be very tiring. Users will scan for key points in the text, so short blocks of copy and bulleted or numbered lists are helpful because they're easy to spot.

Don't style the content. Most writers prefer to work in Microsoft Word or a similar program. This is fine, but Word is notorious for outputting messy code. Don't worry about colors, fonts and alignment. Just write well. Style will be applied later at the level of each Web page.

Determine Your Website's Structure

Here are the key elements in planning a website's structure.

SITE MAP

Your site map could be structured like a flow chart and built with software such as Visio or a free tool like Gliffy[4]. Alternatively, you could create an outline with bulleted lists and indentations that indicate pages, sub-pages and other structural breaks.

CONTENT DEFINITION

Some content will be easy to define. A contact page, for example, is generally expected to include a business name, a location, contact information, hours (if applicable) and, often, a simple form. Other types of content require more consideration. This is another point when failing to carefully define the content will create headaches for you later on.

---

4. http://gliffy.net

Structure your content. Image by opensourceway[5]

Perhaps you want to put a photo gallery on your website. Good idea, but what exactly will the gallery consist of? Will it be 20 images in a grid of thumbnails with a nice pop-up overlay when you click on one? Or a multi-page gallery with 1000 photos, individually categorized and tracked with meta data? Should users be able to rate the images? Comment on them? Download high-resolution versions? Email them to friends?

This is but one example of why defining each type of content is so important. If you don't, then the developer will make their best guess as to what each type of content should be. Content elements like an event calendar, staff directory or blog might provide a general frame of reference, but they require clear direction: what exactly do they need to accomplish, and how will they be used?

One way to help define content is to simply observe the functionality of other websites and see what might suit your purpose.

CONTENT CHECKLIST

Here is a list (though not exhaustive) of common types of content. Remember, these are just types, not definitions:

- Articles;

- Blog;

- Banner advertising;

- Discussion forum;

---

5. http://www.flickr.com/photos/opensourceway/4371000846/in/photostream/

- Documents;

- E-commerce;

- Forms for contact, quotes or something else;

- Physical products (how many?);

- Digital content (what kind and how many?);

- Email newsletter;

- Event calendar;

- Event registration;

- Image gallery;

- Link management (dozens or hundreds of links, ordered by category);

- Incoming RSS feeds (pulled from other websites);

- Outgoing RSS feeds (your content syndicated to other websites);

- Search;

- Social media sharing links (Twitter, Facebook, etc.);

- Staff directory.

CONTENT RELATIONSHIPS

Some of your content will relate to other content. For example, the same details might appear on different pages of your website. Map these relationships carefully, and remember that when content is changed in one area of the website, it might need to be changed in other areas for consistency and accuracy.

SEPARATING DESIGN FROM CONTENT

Design and content are intimately related, but they are also separate. This might be confusing at first. But it means that website content is completely free of design elements. To avoid speaking in hypotheticals, let's consider a simple example. Let's say your website has a set of articles. For each article, there is a:

- Title,

- Meta title,

- Meta description,

- Author,

- Date of publication,

- Category,

- Summary,

- Main text.

These pieces of information constitute a whole article. At this point in the process, it doesn't matter what design you apply to the copy: fonts, layout, colors, author photo thumbnails, etc. The content is valid even in the absence of design. It may not look pretty in plain text, but it reads correctly.

This separation neatly suits Web Standards[6], a project that advocates for a set of standards for Web design that makes content accessible to the broadest possible range of people and devices.

Then, when it's time next to redesign your website, you can easily apply an entirely new design to your existing content, because you've maintained the separation between content and design.

The Value Of Good Content And Meta Data

WHAT IS META DATA?

Meta data is content about your content. In the case of an article, everything other than the title and article text is considered meta data. When some people hear "meta data," they immediately think, "Oh, that's for search engines," which is correct: search engines do rely on meta data to index Web pages effectively. However, you might want some meta data just for your own records, without displaying it.

When deciding what meta data to collect for each type of content, there is a benefit to collecting more data than needed. Still, you could collect a lot less than what we've listed above and still have a valid article. The bare minimum you need for something to qualify as an article is:

- Title,

- Author,

- Article text.

---

6. http://webstandards.org

You might think that that is enough, or that you won't have many articles, or that they'll be short, or that the articles won't need summaries, or that your visitors won't care about date or categories. This might be true today, but what about next year? If you write good content, then it will be useful well into the future.

COLLECT META DATA, PLAN FOR THE FUTURE

Over time, the value of good meta data increases. If you have only 10 articles, then tracking authors and categories might not seem useful. In two years, though, when you've built up a library of 150, you'll be glad you took the time to collect it. You will be able to sort by author, date and category. And because you've collected summaries, you'll be able to make a version of your website for mobile devices, for which summaries are all that fit on the screen at once.

Wireframes

Once you've determined the structure of the content, you can move to the first step in the design process. Building wireframes mostly has to do with the layout aspect of Web design. They are done in grayscale and are designed not to be pretty but rather to show page layout. There are many great tools for this: Photoshop, Illustrator and Visio work well, as do specialized tools like Balsamiq.
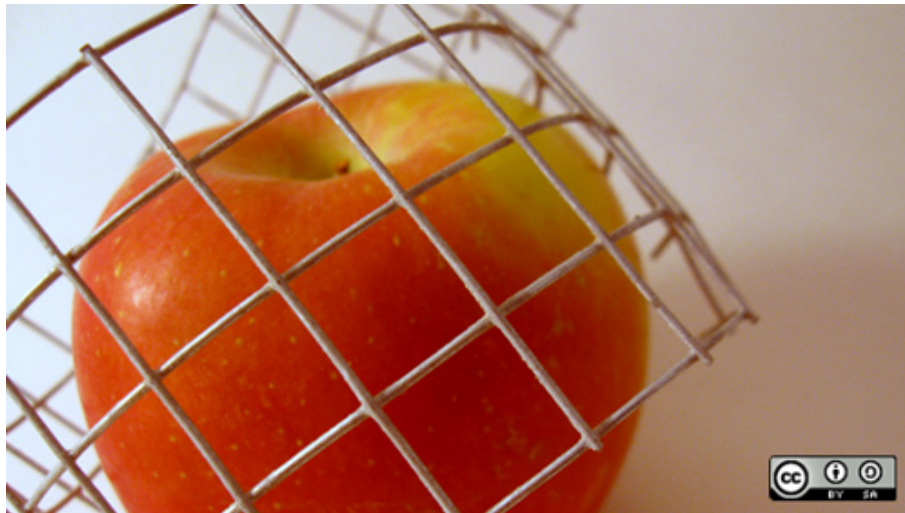
You can wireframe anything. Image by opensourceway[7]

---

7. http://www.flickr.com/photos/opensourceway/4371001018/sizes/m/in/photostream/

The tendency of designers especially is to make things look appealing from the beginning of the process. But this should be avoided completely at the wireframing stage, because that would distract from the purpose of the wireframe, which is to decide where things should go, not what font size to use or what color the navigation should be.

Generally speaking, one wireframe should be made for each unique page on a website. If you have a page that offers downloads or photo galleries, mock it up as well. The examples that follow are for a home page and two internal pages, respectively.

Once the wireframes have gone through your review process, it's time to move to the design stage.

The Value of Good Design

Consider the iPod. Apple has been wildly successful at selling products with exquisite and refined design (in terms of both the physical object and the user interface). The iPod doesn't have any particular capabilities that its competitors lack. In fact, by some measures, it has fewer features than others. For example, it doesn't record audio out of the box; you have to attach a piece of hardware to the iPod before it can do this. Nonetheless, the product's exceptional industrial design and highly intuitive interface, combined with great marketing, make the iPod a far more coveted item than any competing product.
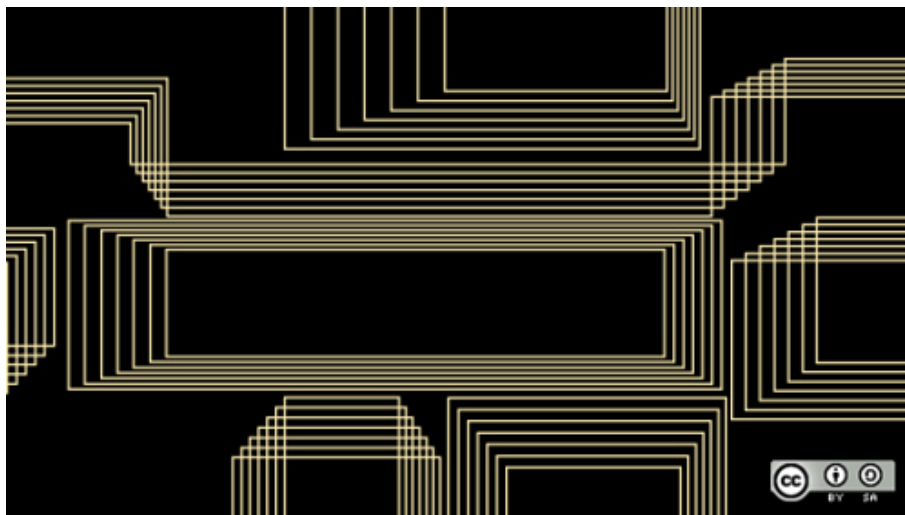
Where does good design start? Image by opensourceway[8]

When it comes to websites, however, good design and attention to detail are often discounted. The reasoning is that if something works, it

---

8. http://www.flickr.com/photos/opensourceway/4437604613/sizes/m/in/photostream/

doesn't need to be refined. This is misguided thinking. A website —
along with a logo, business cards, signage, letterhead, direct mail and
other visual expressions of a brand — critically affects the way cus-
tomers perceive a business. The experience users have on your website
is part of this impression. When a website is harmonious, pleasing to
the eye and easy to navigate, visitors will leave with a positive impres-
sion. Conversely, when a website is just passable, it could annoy cus-
tomers, leave a bad impression and discourage return visits. And, im-
portantly, you likely won't hear about it from them. The Web isn't very
old, but here's a key question that has been relevant since the first busi-
ness website went online: if a customer goes to a website to search for
the specifications of a product that they know you sell and finds noth-
ing, what will they do next?

They'll leave. Typically, when users get frustrated, they don't search
any further, and they don't call or email; they just leave the website. To
get a sense of this, review your website visitor statistics (see the section
below on bounce rates).

Still, these stats can't tell you what a visitor was thinking when they
left. And unless you're selling something wonderful and unique, cus-
tomers will probably go elsewhere to find a similar product or a differ-
ent service provider.

INITIAL DESIGN

The initial design, commonly created in Adobe Photoshop or Fireworks
(and sometimes Adobe Illustrator), consists of visually accurate images
("mock-ups") of the home page and at least one internal page. Your
business' visual branding elements should be included here. If you al-
ready have well-defined graphics in addition to a logo, they should dic-
tate the design of the website. If your brand lacks these, then the de-
signer should do their best to create work that accurately reflects the
business.

Here is a short list of key points for successful mock-ups. We'll as-
sume that the designer is working in Photoshop, although these guide-
lines apply to other programs as well.

- Start with a pre-made template, with pre-drawn pixel-accurate guides.
  Some designers create their own, and others adhere to systems like the
  960 Grid System[9]. Whichever you start with, the template should be
  clean. Make the canvas wider than the width you're designing to so
  that you can add notes on one side.

---

9. http://960.gs/

- Add the color palette and basic branding elements (e.g. fonts) in the margins of the canvas so that you have them for reference when viewing on screen or in print.

- Draw everything to exact pixels, and draw clear guides and slices around design elements. This becomes critical when you execute the design in HTML later.

- Organize all design elements with a logical folder or sub-folder structure, and label each item clearly. If the designer will be handing files off to an HTML specialist, this is especially important. "Sidebar events header" is clear; "Layer14 Copy" is not.

- Make clear notes about fonts, alignment, repeating background elements, gradients and anything else that will be implemented with CSS. Photoshop's sticky-note feature can help with this. If something is unclear, ask the person who will be converting the design.

- If you're using a common style for headers, navigation or other design elements that appear throughout the website, consider making separate templates for them. These will also come in handy later in the design process, once mock-ups have been approved.

- Use realistic content. Designers often use Lorem ipsum to fill space, which is okay for body copy. But for headlines, titles, events and so on, use real copy. Consider the two following headlines. The layout considerations would be different for each:

  ◦ Widgets, Inc. Wins Green Manufacturing Award

  ◦ Widgets, Inc. Employees Win Landmark Court Case Affirming Employee Right to Petition for College Tuition Reimbursement When Training Is Relevant to Work Role

DESIGN APPROVAL AND REVISIONS

After you have submitted the initial mock-ups for approval, there could be a revision process where the designer and key stakeholders go back and forth a few times, trying a variety of edits until the design is approved.

DESIGNING-BY-COMMITTEE: DON'T DO IT

Having to consider multiple opinions can be a problem at this stage. Some stakeholders might be quite vocal in critiquing the design but are absent later, when the time comes to put in solid hours sifting through content for the website. Certainly, soliciting feedback about each de-

sign is important, and project stakeholders have valuable criticism to offer; they help to guide the design process so that the result accurately represents their business. In some instances, legal or technical staff will need to review. However, giving equal consideration to all feedback might not satisfy anyone.

Generally speaking, in small businesses or organizations, allowing more than five people to provide design feedback creates gridlock. It would help if these five (or fewer) people solicited feedback from their subordinates or department colleagues, but this feedback should be compiled by each stakeholder. In other words, don't invite 15 people to a design review meeting.

DESIGN TENSION: DESIGNER VS. CLIENT

There is often tension between trained designers and less-informed clients. This is best illustrated by the "bad idea" conundrum: the client requests a design feature that is ugly, unworkable or for some reason a bad idea. Entire websites are dedicated to chronicling the poor choices of clueless clients. The responses of designers usually fall somewhere between "That's horrible, and we won't do it" and "Well, if that's what you want…."

The response should be based on a number of ever-shifting factors, including:

- When the designer hopes to get paid;

- How emotionally invested the designer is in the project;

- How much time the designer has invested in the design phase, and how long a delay would result from implementing the bad idea;

- The client's willingness to hear constructive criticism of their ideas.

Every project is different. Designers who continually get requests from clients for ill-advised features are likely to write the project off at some point. It's just too exhausting having to constantly explain why centered bold red paragraphs, crazy Flash animations or poor-quality photography make for an ineffective website. Their attitude shifts from "Let's make something that we're proud of" to "Let's just get it done." Designers don't say this to clients, but it happens frequently.

Realize, also, that the work of some designers is not up to par. Perhaps they have refused to listen to valid criticism. Avoid this situation by inspecting their previous work.

Consider Content

Think about future expansion. For example, you might have a news section with six news items. You'll have a main news page with summaries, each of which links to the full view of the item. This is fine. But what happens when you have 10, 20 or 50 news items? Now you have other considerations. Do you want to archive old news? Paginate the items? Show only the last 10 items? Consider these questions in the design process.

For websites that accumulate content, such as news, press releases and reports, there's a good rule to follow when creating mock-ups: you can never have enough mock-ups. In other words, if you think the layout or design of a page or section of the website will differ significantly from other pages, then mocking it up is worthwhile. This step normally comes after the initial mock-ups are approved.

Web Style Guide

A style guide is where proper planning shines. A style guide determines and defines all the design, layout, interactive (i.e. JavaScript and Flash) and type elements used throughout the website. These include but are not limited to:

- Navigation styles;

- <h1> through <h5> (heading tags);

- Paragraphs;

- Lists;

- Block quotes;

- Italics, bolding and underlining;

- Links, including active, hover and visited states;

- Icons;

- Use of images and image style;

- Use of background images (watermarks);

- Common elements such as sidebars.

The mock-ups and style guide are the foundation of the next steps in development.

Integrating With Content Management System

At long last, your brilliant design has been converted to code and is ready to be integrated into a CMS. The individual or team tasked with doing this will provide you with log-in details for the CMS that allows you to add content, including text, photos, video and documents. Most editors prefer to cut and paste from Microsoft Word.

Make sure everything fits in. Image by opensourceway[10]

Depending on the specifics of the CMS, you might be able to do this easily and retain simple formatting like bold, italics and lists. Sometimes, though, the CMS will strip out the formatting when you cut and paste, and you'll have to put it back. This can be tedious, but it ensures that your content remains neat and orderly and thus can be easily printed, cited, indexed by search engines and converted to other formats.

Putting It All Together

After following these steps, you should be sitting on a pretty solid website. Regardless of the size of the project, now is a good time to do the following:

• Review the content once again, and check it against the points listed under "Writing for the Web" above.

10. http://www.flickr.com/photos/opensourceway/4581225583/sizes/m/in/photostream/

- Ask a third party to proofread all of your content. This is not the task of the designer or original writer. Bring in someone with a fresh perspective. Don't proofread your own work.

Beta Testing and Launch

When you feel that the website is almost ready for the public to see, it's time for beta testing. Go through this checklist (which is the bare minimum):

- The website looks correct in all targeted Web browsers. Web browsers include the usual Internet Explorer, Firefox and Safari, as well as (depending on the specifications) less common browsers like Chrome and mobile devices (iOS, BlackBerry, etc.);

- Interactive features work smoothly;

- Contact and other forms work predictably and send the correct information to the user and recipient(s);

- Internal and external links work;

- Images are sized properly;

- All placeholder content has been replaced by the final copy;

- Links from third-party software, such as email campaigns, work.

Once you've thoroughly beta-tested the website, launch it.

Post-Launch

After you've launched, maintain the website. Here are a few helpful tools for that.

WEB STATISTICS

Visitor statistics provide insight into how people use your website. You'll need at least a month or two of data to make any determinations. Here are a few questions to consider:

- Where are visitors coming from? See search engines, direct traffic (i.e. visitors who type your website's URL directly into the address bar), ads, links from other websites, etc.

- Where do visitors live? Are they mostly local, regional, national or international?

24

- What pages are the most popular?

- How long are visitors staying on the website?

- What is the bounce rate? That is, how many users visit only one page on the website before leaving?

Google Analytics is one of the most commonly used Web statistics apps, and you will find answers to these questions in the high-level data it presents. Other software should provide these answers as well.

DOCUMENTATION

Much of your documentation will consist simply of the different elements discussed earlier in this document, including wireframes and Photoshop documents. You'll also need detailed notes on how various parts of the website are implemented in the CMS. Think about what information would be needed if you brought in new people to maintain the website, people who were not at all familiar with it. What would they require in order to pick up the project? This is what proper documentation is.

BACK UP

Schedule regular back-ups of the website's files and database. Daily is ideal. Your hosting company might provide an automated way of doing this, so that if your files or database get hacked, erased, corrupted or otherwise damaged, you can restore them with copies from the previous day. Depending on the size of the website, update frequency and some technical matters that vary from website to website, you could schedule more frequent back-ups.

MAINTENANCE PLAN

Your maintenance plan should clarify roles and responsibilities for every aspect of the website. For example, if two articles per week are to be posted, who is responsible for them, and who is that person's back-up? If your website requires that photos or graphics be created regularly, make sure this work is assigned and understood. Decide who will check links.

Write a simple maintenance plan, and share it with everyone involved in the website's care and development. Remember, a good website isn't a one-time event, but rather an extensible communication tool that requires regular updates to stay valuable, relevant and compelling for visitors.

SOLICIT VISITOR FEEDBACK

A great way to improve the impact of a website is to solicit visitor feedback. There are a variety of ways to do this, from conducting simple online surveys to on-site focus groups. Website visitors often have trouble articulating what they like and don't like about their experience. With this in mind, craft very clear and specific questions when soliciting feedback. And remember: if you're going to take a significant amount of visitors' time, offer something in return (a product discount, a prize or simply a handwritten thank-you note).

Conclusion

Okay, one more time: a good website isn't a one-time event, but rather an extensible communications tool. Once you've built a great website, keep the momentum going. Devote resources to regular maintenance, and check in with visitors regularly to identify areas for improvement.

Mike Kroll[11] supplied wireframes and design mock-ups. Susan Morris[12] provided editing and proofreading.

DOWNLOAD A FREE PDF COPY

You can download an even more detailed PDF version[13] of Ben's project planning guide after a quick registration on his agency's site. ❧

---

11. http://imagehat.com
12. http://yorkmorris.com
13. http://versastudio.com/guide/smashing-mag/

A Fun Approach To Creating More Successful Websites

BY JEREMY GIRARD ❧

As Web designers and developers, each project we work with has a unique set of goals and requirements. But one goal we have for all of our projects is that we want them to make an impression on people — we want the websites that we create to be memorable.

A fun experience is often an enjoyable one and an enjoyable experience is usually a memorable one. Therefore, it stands to reason that one of the ways to create a memorable experience is to make it a fun experience. In this chapter, we'll take a look at how adding a bit of "fun" into the mix can help us produce more engaging, and hopefully more successful, websites.

The Fun Theory

Some time ago, I was sent a link to a Volkswagen sponsored project called The Fun Theory[14]. This website featured a contest where users could redesign or rethink something they encounter in everyday life — adding some "fun" into it. The purpose was to see if they could get more people to use it simply because it was enjoyable to do so.

While there are a number of great videos on the site, the one that I love the most is called Piano Staircase[15]. In this video, an experiment takes place with a flight of stairs in a subway station. Beside the stairs is an escalator. As I am sure you can guess, far more people would use the escalator, rather than the stairs, during their daily commute.

---

14. http://thefuntheory.com/
15. http://www.thefuntheory.com/piano-staircase

Volkswagen's "The Fun Theory" website[16] *challenges people to redesign something they encounter in everyday life by adding "fun" into it, and to see if more people will then use it.*

One evening, while the station was closed, the steps were turned into giant piano keys that would make a sound when they were stepped on. As commuters exited the station the next day, they were greeted with this giant piano staircase and many of them opted to try it instead of using the escalator. In fact, 66% more people than normal used the stairs while the installation was in place — an amazing increase by anyone's standards.

Adding Fun To Our Websites

When I saw this video, the first thing I thought about was how applicable the lesson of adding fun is to the work we do as Web professionals.

By using fun to create an enjoyable user experience, we can offer people a delightful experience that they will not only remember, but one that they may tell others about as well.

Let's Define "Fun"

Perhaps I should back up a bit and explain what I mean by fun. I am not suggesting you turn your client's website into a circus production (unless, of course, your client is a circus). I am simply suggesting that changes and additions that add a bit of fun into the interactions or ele-

---

16. http://www.thefuntheory.com/piano-staircase

ments of a design can go a long way in helping the websites you develop become more enjoyable to use, and more memorable overall.

"Fun" is not the same as "silly". You can add a layer of delight and enjoyment to the user experience without making your client seem childish or unprofessional. The trick is knowing how much fun to add, where best to add it, and when to recognize that you've gone too far.

Let's look at some examples of websites that do a great job of using fun to create both enjoyable and memorable experiences for their users.

Improving On The Ordinary

There are many pages common to almost all websites. By taking a typical website page or experience (such as the "about us" page, or contact form), and making it fun and memorable, you can set that website apart by improving on the ordinary.

Take that aforementioned "about us" page, a fixture on pretty much any website. Mutant Labs[17], a UK based design and development firm, do a great job of adding a sense of fun and personality to what too often becomes nothing more than a boring company bio page.
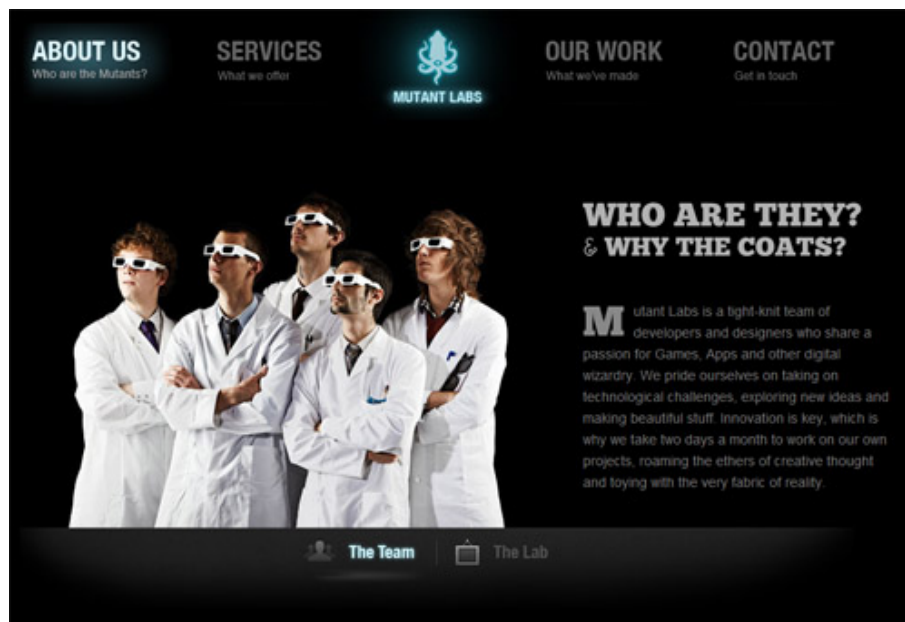
Mutant Labs[18] adds a fun sense of personality to the typical "about us" page. Scroll over the team members to see even more fun!

---

17. http://mutantlabs.com/about
18. http://mutantlabs.com/about

The website for Get Satisfaction[19] does a wonderful job of turning the typical "case studies" page into an interactive experience with their "Wheel of Satisfaction."
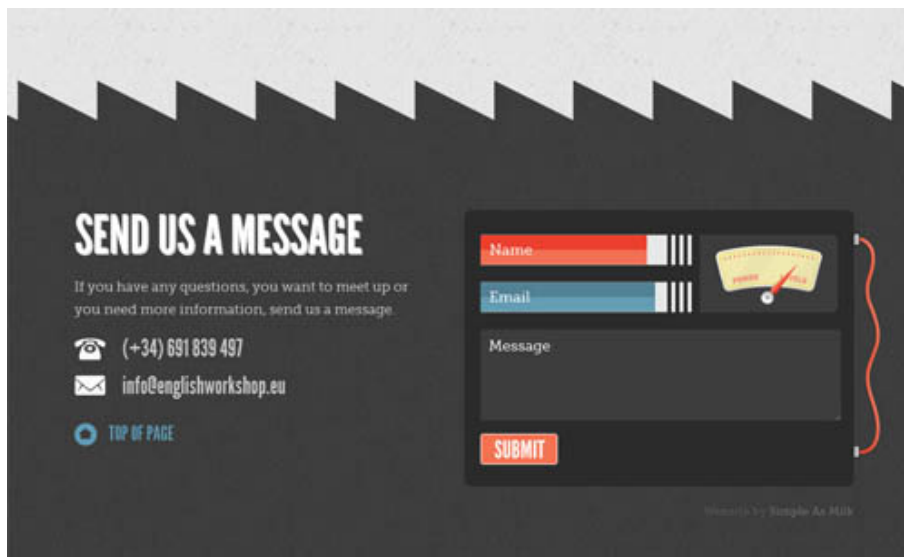

The "Wheel of Satisfaction[20]" is a fun twist on the typical case studies page.

How about the "contact us" page? When was the last time you built a site that *didn't* have one of those? English Workshop[21], "an organisation which provides English language learning opportunities", styles their simple contact form to look like a machine's control panel, tying it in nicely to the website's "workshop" theme.

19. http://getsatisfaction.com/success-stories/
20. http://getsatisfaction.com/success-stories/
21. http://www.englishworkshop.eu/

English Workshop's "contact us" form[22] works great alongside the rest of the design elements from the website's workshop theme.

Smashing Magazine's own contact page[23] is also an example of a fun approach. The page is fun from top to bottom, with a lighthearted, informal tone for the page's greeting ("Hello. Let's talk.") as well as questions, and cartoon representations of Smashing's management team.

By taking the common pages of a website, and finding ways to add fun to what would otherwise be a typical experience, you can instead create a unique and memorable impression upon your sites' visitors.

Frustration = Fun?

Another page typical to most websites is the "404 error" page. By adding something new to this page and showing some personality, you can help diffuse an otherwise frustrating situation. You can see some great examples of humorous and effective 404 error pages in a previous Smashing Magazine article[24].

In addition to a humorous, frustration-diffusing message, a good 404 error page can also include links to key pages of the website that users are most likely looking for. Done correctly, you can make your user smile, and help them find their way back to the content they will find valuable.

22. http://www.englishworkshop.eu/
23. http://www.smashingmagazine.com/contact/
24. http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2009/01/29/404-error-pages-one-more-time/

Practicing what I preach with a fun 404 error page on my personal website.[25]

Searching For Fun

While Google may be best known for their search results, the fun that they often have in delivering those results is an important part of the Google experience.

First, you have the whimsical Google "doodles" that appear in place of the company logo on specific days. These doodles range from simple graphics to fully interactive experiences, such as a playable Pac Man game[26], or the tribute to guitar legend Les Paul[27]. There are also a host of hidden gems that can be found on Google by searching for specific phrases or terms. Search for the word "askew" in a browser that supports the feature (Chrome, Safari, Firefox) and the screen will literally skew itself for you. Using Google Maps, you can search for walking directions from "The Shire" to "Mordor" to get a funny little warning that "one simply does not walk into Mordor." There are dozens of hidden gems[28] like this baked right into Google.

The reason Google is so effective in the fun they add is because they make that fun unobtrusive to the rest of the experience. Google puts the fun out there for you if you want it, but access to the service itself is never compromised. This is a critical key to successfully adding fun to a

---

25. http://www.pumpkin-king.com/404
26. http://www.google.com/pacman/
27. http://www.google.com/logos/2011/lespaul.html
28. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Google's_hoaxes

project — make sure it does not interfere with the normal features or purpose of the site itself.

An Over-The-Top Approach To Using Fun

One of the challenges with adding fun to websites is knowing when to stop. The right amount of fun can create a memorable experience, but too much can have the opposite effect, driving users away due to an over-the-top approach. Still, there are times when "too much" is the right amount, and when an over-the-top approach really works for both the brand and the website.

CaptainDash.com[29] uses fun illustrations and interactions throughout their website, including a comic book-like layout for their "What We Solve" section. The experience is enjoyable and unique, and the website screams personality. But even after exploring their website for a few minutes, I found it hard to explain exactly what the company does with any kind of certainty. This is one of the potential pitfalls of going all out with a fun experience — your website still needs to quickly answer the fundamental user question of "what does this company do?".

29. http://captaindash.com/
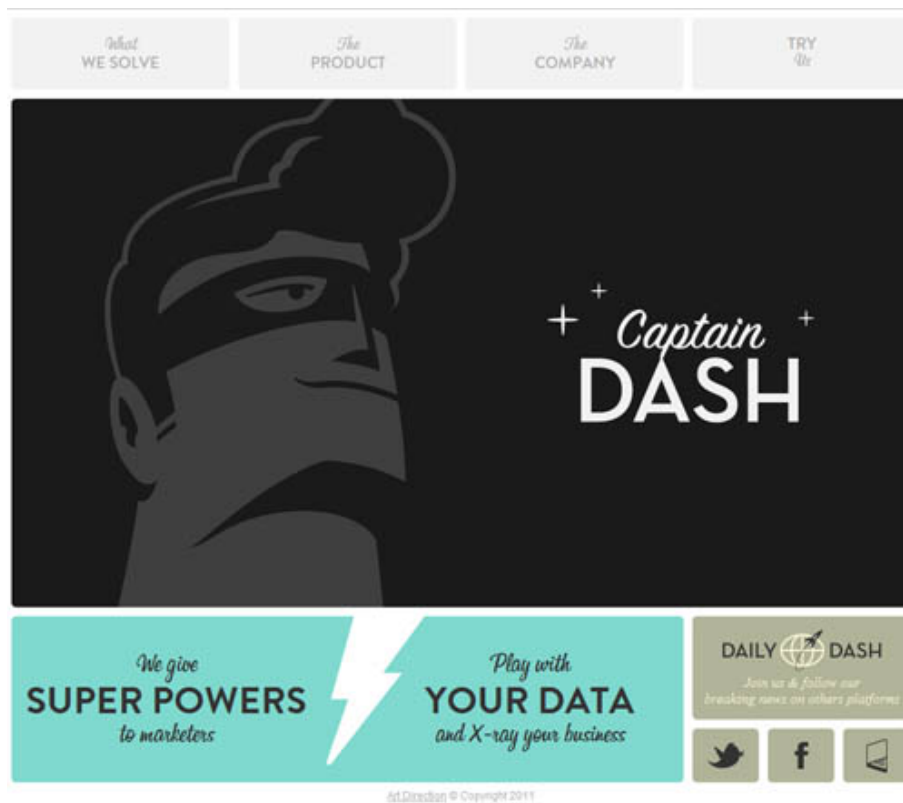
"Captain Dash[30]" features a fun experience, but the purpose of the company is tough to uncover with all that personality.

Meomi.com[31] is another site that goes all out in adding fun to their website experience. The website's entire design is filled with fun characters that move and respond as you scroll over them. The overall experience is one filled with discovery and delight as you explore. I am especially fond of the website's footer and what lurks behind those trees (go and see for yourself). I also love the fact that as busy as the site is, I quickly knew what it was about due to the tagline placed towards the top of the page — "A little design studio dedicated to play, delight, and goodliness." Mission accomplished!

30. http://captaindash.com/
31. http://www.meomi.com/

The experience on Meomi.com[32] is filled with delightful surprises for you to uncover as you explore the interface.

Another great example of a website that is from top-to-bottom fun (while still making it easy to discover what the website is all about) is Two Giraffes[33]. On the website's home page, a sign hangs upon a wall that reads: "We design fresh interfaces backed by serious code", clearly stating the company's offerings while staying true to the fun environment they have created for the entire website.

---

32. http://www.meomi.com/
33. http://twogiraffes.com/

A FUN APPROACH TO CREATING MORE SUCCESSFUL WEBSITES

"Two Giraffes[34]" does a great job of clearly stating what the company does while staying true to the fun environment that spans the entire website.

Using an over-the-top approach on a website can have its risks, but if done correctly, it can also have its rewards — creating an experience that is enjoyable and memorable from start to finish.

Making Your Message Memorable

The design of a great website will support that website's overall message or purpose. Therefore, we can strive to use a fun approach to create not only a memorable experience, but a memorable message.

The website for the Converge[35] conference boasts that it will "peel back the layers and examine the intersection between design, development and marketing." The website's design is immediately striking with its use of a cyborg Tyrannosaurus Rex, but the fun really begins when you scroll down the page; the dinosaur remains, but building on the website's "peel back" theme, you begin to get to the meat of the content — literally!

---

34. http://twogiraffes.com/
35. http://convergese.com/

Scroll down the page for the Converge conference's website[36] to get to the meat of the content — literally!

Seamco's[37] website states that they build "efficient bottling and packaging lines for liquid products." The website reinforces this message by integrating a wonderful animation of bottling line efficiency. From the top of the website's design (where the bottling begins) all the way to the bottom (where a delivery truck makes frequent trips to deliver cases of the product being added to it), the entire website is both fun and memorable in service of the website's main message.

---

36. http://convergese.com/
37. http://www.seamco.be/home
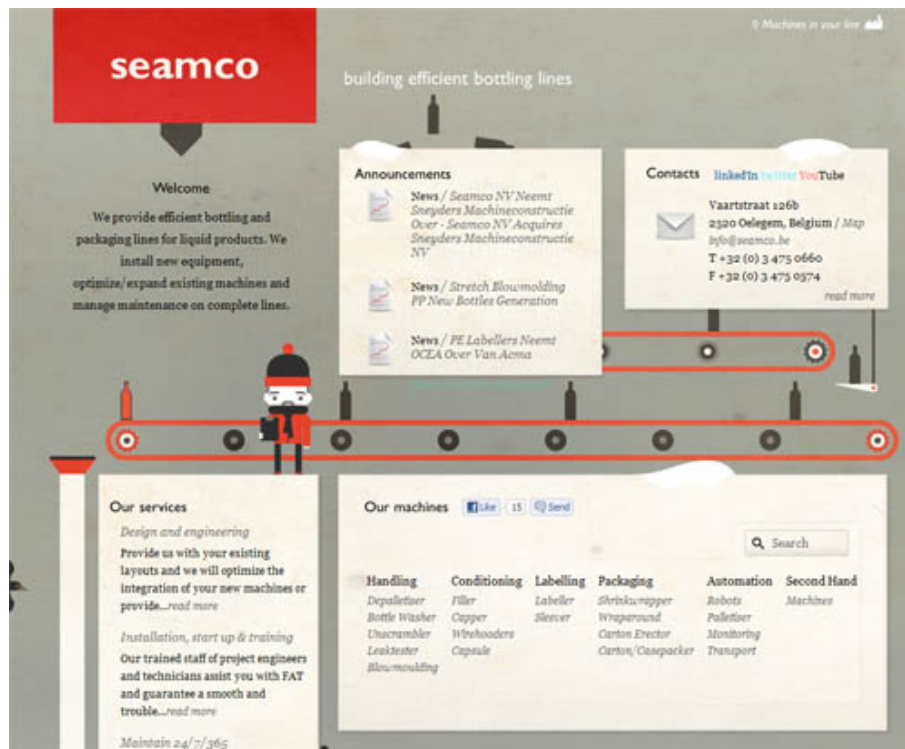
Seamco's website[38] *reinforces their main message through a fun animation that spans the entire design.*

Storytelling And Fun

Another way to get a website's message across is through storytelling — and a fun approach can help ensure that the story you tell is a memorable one.

The website for the Combine[39] conference uses the location of "America's heartland" in Indiana to tell a fun story that transpires as you start to scroll from the top of the website… a farm machine works in a field as a giant ear of corn is being pumped full of radioactivity, into the middle of the page — where the radioactive corn begins a rampage of destruction. *(Editor's note: Unfortunately, the design of this website as it is described here isn't available online anymore.)*

---

38. http://www.seamco.be/home
39. http://www.thecombine.org/

The website for the Combine conference used storytelling to tell the tale of a rampaging, radioactive ear of corn.

Another great website that uses storytelling is one that details the Bright Future of Car Sharing[40]. Presented with vertical navigation, you can use your keyboards' arrow keys to "drive" through the website's scenery and learn more about car sharing. Along the way, there are dozens of elements that you can scroll over or click on to learn more about, accessing extra content, while the website's message is told in an engaging and interactive way.

---

40. http://futureofcarsharing.com/

"The Bright Future of Car Sharing[41]*" as told through a fun, interactive website experience.*

Some Websites Cannot Be Fun... Or Can They?

When I talk to fellow Web designers about the benefits of adding fun to the websites they are creating, the argument I most often get against this practice is that the projects they are working on have no place for fun.
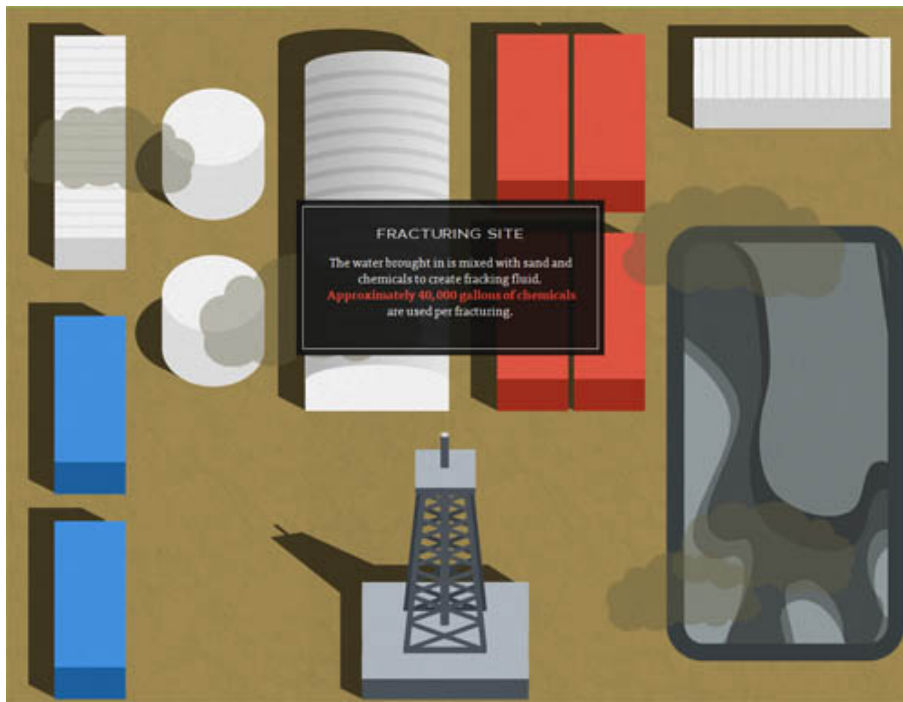
Yes, it's true that there are projects where adding "fun" is a tough sell, but sometimes even websites that don't instantly lend themselves to a fun approach can be made more effective by using the same principals covered in this chapter's previous examples.

SlaveryFootprint.org[42] is a website that "allows consumers to visualize how their consumption habits are linked to modern day slavery". It definitely doesn't sound like a place where "fun" would work, but if you visit the website and select the red "what?" arrow, the experience begins. Scroll down the page and illustrations of colorful, cartoonish hands add pieces of content to the page one block at a time as the website's message is told. That message ends with a prompt to "take the survey", and the same methods used for that initial message — cartoonish illustrations, a sense of anticipation, and fun interactivity — turn what would've been a simple Web form into a memorable and powerful experience.

41. http://futureofcarsharing.com/
42. http://slaveryfootprint.org/

"Slavery Footprint[43]" uses illustrations and fun interactions to make a point about a very serious topic.

Another good example of a serious topic presented online is the Dangers of Fracking[44]. It uses many of these same techniques and principals, including the "storytelling" approach, that was previously highlighted. The website uses illustrations and storytelling to detail the process and effect of hydraulic fracturing — essentially creating an interactive infographic in the process. The result is an experience that delivers this message in a much more effective way than any simple paragraphs or static graphics could ever do.

43. http://slaveryfootprint.org/
44. http://dangersoffracking.com/

By creating an interactive infographic, the "Dangers of Fracking[45]*" uses illustration and storytelling to get their message out in a memorable way.*

There are certainly websites whose sensitive subject matter will make it difficult to add fun into the mix. But as these next two examples show, you can use many of the same solutions that other "fun" websites use to create a memorable experience without jeopardizing the seriousness or importance of your message.

Designing For Emotion

In his excellent book Designing for Emotion[46], Aarron Walter illustrates the benefits (and potential pitfalls) of emotional design. The book covers designing for a range of emotions; including trust, hope, surprise, delight — even love. And many of the examples offered use a bit of fun to elicit these emotions.

45. http://dangersoffracking.com/
46. http://www.abookapart.com/products/designing-for-emotion
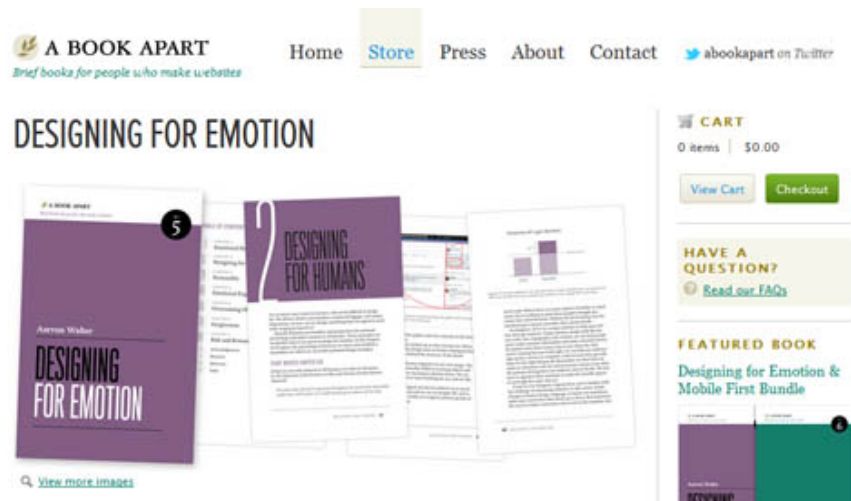
Many of the examples in Aarron Walter's "Designing for Emotion"[47] use a bit of fun to elicit the appropriate emotional response.

A selection from early on in the book provides an excellent call to action for using emotional design in the Web experiences we create:

> *"We've been designing usable interfaces, which is like a chef cooking edible food. Certainly we all want to eat edible foods with nutritional value, but we also crave flavor. Why do we settle for usable when we can make interfaces both usable and pleasurable?"*

Designing The Memorable

A Web experience that is simply "usable" is no more memorable than a meal that is merely edible. Just like a master chef strives to create a menu that is truly exceptional, so should we, as Web profession-als — endeavor to design and develop experiences and interfaces that are unforgettable. Hopefully this chapter has shown that one of the ways this can be achieved is by adding a bit of fun to the projects we are designing.

Whether you are firing up Photoshop to work on that new design, or building website templates with HTML and CSS, I encourage you to consider the examples and lessons shown in this chapter. You want to create amazing and memorable experiences? Try following a simple piece of advice: Have some fun. ❧

47. http://www.abookapart.com/products/designing-for-emotion

Defending The Generalists In The Web Design Industry

BY PAUL BOAG ❧

In recent years there has been a move away from generalist Web designers to specialists such as content strategists, user experience architects and front-end coders. Where once there was a single job, there are now many, with ever-narrower spheres of responsibility.

While my peers are becoming more specialized, I have stoically refused to do so, remaining a generalist. If anything, my interests have broadened, encompassing subjects such as marketing, psychology and business strategy.

This has drawn criticism from some who view generalists negatively, which is in line with some of what I am reading in the blogosphere. Where has this negativity come from, and is it justified?

Why Is Being A Generalist Considered Bad?

Part of the criticism is based on how complex the Web has become. Knowing everything about Web design was once possible, but is now unrealistic.

This is certainly a valid criticism. But the very fact that Web design has become so complex means that we need generalists to look beyond the silos of specialists.

The danger is that, without generalists, specialists become so wrapped up in their silos that they find it difficult to work with specialists in other disciplines. The generalist is needed to encourage cross-collaboration and to look beyond the silos at emerging developments on the Web. Still, I suspect this is only part of the cause of the "snobbery" against generalists.

DON'T CONFUSE BEING A GENERALIST WITH LACKING SKILLS

The perception is that generalists are common and relatively unskilled, because we all began as one when we learned Web design. But I would argue that such people are not true generalists.

A generalist is someone who is knowledgable across a range of subjects. This does not describe most Web designers out there and certain-

ly not those starting out. It is important not to confuse being a generalist with being unskilled.

Perhaps a more apt description is jack of all trades. But this too is problematic. The phrase "Jack of all trades, master of none" has negative connotations. However, as you will see, I am proud of my ability to apply my hand at many "trades." I don't see it as a bad thing.

SPECIALIZING ISN'T THE ONLY WAY TO WIN GREAT JOBS

Finally, I think there is a perception that specializing is a good way to differentiate oneself in a sea of generalists, and that it often leads to bigger and better jobs.

Certainly, specializing is one way to differentiate yourself. But not the only way. One could also rely on quality work, knowledge of certain sectors and even breadth of experience and knowledge.

As for specialists being more qualified to work on larger projects, this is not true either. Large projects involve big teams, and a generalist is often needed to bring together the different specialists and get them working together effectively.

Does this mean we should all reject specialization and become generalists? Not at all. But in many situations, a generalist is required.
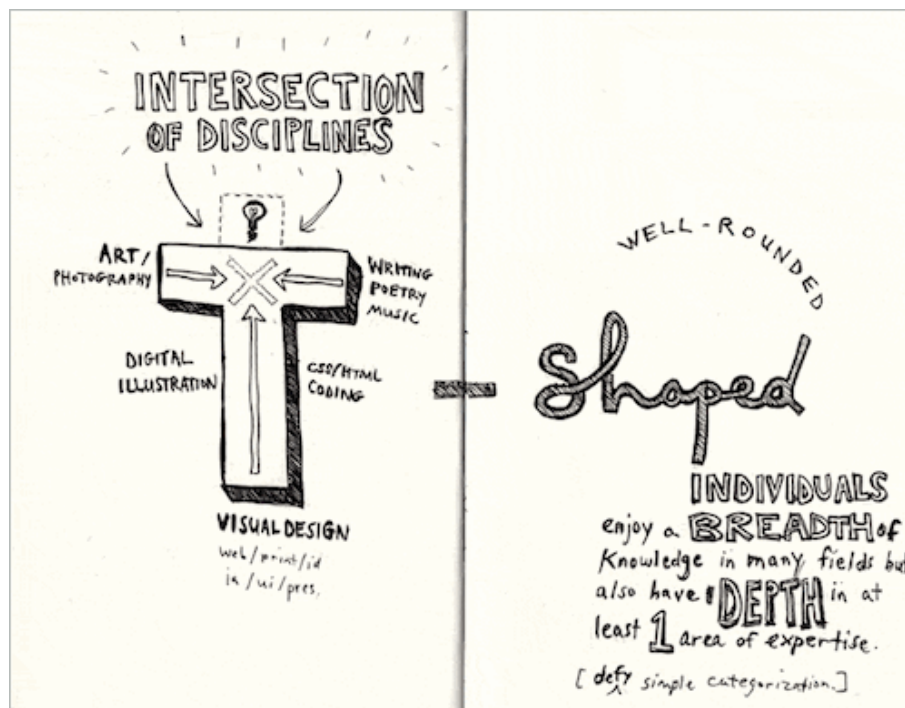
Not everybody agrees with Paul Boag. Anita Hart is convinced that well-rounded individuals have a depth in at least 1 area of expertise. Do you agree? Image source[48]

Should You Be A Generalist?

To be clear, nothing's wrong with specializing. My point is that, in certain circumstances, being a generalist has its advantages. Here are some circumstances that spring to mind:

- **You thrive on variety.**
  The Web is a great place for anyone with a short attention span. But the generalist has more opportunities than others to explore new developments, techniques and technologies. If you're driven to constantly learn things and face new challenges, then the constant variety of disciplines on the Web may well suit you.

- **Your Web team is small.**
  Small teams in large organizations, as well as small agencies, need generalists. Such teams require everyone to pitch in and do whatever needs to get done. Which in turn requires you to tend to many tasks.

- **You're a freelancer.**
  Working on your own often requires that you be a jack of all trades. Most clients will need you to help them with everything "Web-related," from SEO to copy. Specializing as a freelancer is possible but certainly not the norm.

- **You are responsible for R&D.**
  In larger organizations and agencies, someone needs to keep an eye on emerging technologies. While specialists will do this within their niches, some trends will emerge that don't fall into these silos. The generalist will be the one who identifies these new opportunities and assesses when to invest in them.

- **You own your own business.**
  As the owner of an agency myself, I can attest to the benefits of being a generalist. It not only enables me to stay informed on a range of topics and sell them to our clients, but helps me to understand what the people in my company do and to make sure the disciplines work well together.

While some of us must become generalists because of temperament or career choices, there are also good reasons to choose this path over another.

---

48. http://www.flickr.com/photos/anitakhart/4410481700/sizes/o/in/photostream/

Why Become A Generalist?

Becoming a generalist is in many ways a superb career path. For starters, it keeps your options open. A generalist is always seeking new areas to explore and so is ideally positioned to move into new fields, such as mobile or HTML5.

STAY AGILE, AND ADAPT TO CHANGES IN THE INDUSTRY

The danger is that, as a specialist, you become so blinkered by your area of expertise that you can't spot new opportunities or, worse still, can't anticipate the slow demise of your niche. Take those who know how to program in nothing but ColdFusion or (dare I say?) Flash. Am I saying that these technologies are dead? Not yet, but the signs are not in their favor. And when all your eggs are in one basket, adapting is hard.

THE POTENTIAL FOR MORE WORK

By being able to adapt quickly to new circumstances, a generalist rarely lacks work. What's more, they can create most products from start to finish, without having to rely on others. Not only do many generalists find this rewarding, but it also maximizes profitability, because they rarely need to outsource.

This aligns with client expectations, which are that you deliver most of their Web needs. Of course, there may be occasions when you need to turn to specialists. But a generalist should still be knowledgable enough to manage those projects, so that the client is not required to coordinate multiple contractors (which many clients hate).

But before you abandon the specialist path, it is only right to share the dangers of going the generalist route.

The Dangers of Being a Generalist

One more time: I am not suggesting that being a generalist is right for everyone, or that anything is wrong with specializing. Being a true generalist is no a garden of roses.

THE STRUGGLE TO SHOW YOUR VALUE

In my opinion, the biggest challenge to being a generalist is establishing yourself as an expert and standing out from the crowd. Generalists are often seen as a dime a dozen. But *true* generalists, ones with extensive knowledge of a broad range of subjects, are much rarer. But few see it that way. Clients understand that they have to pay more for high-

ly specialized skills, but do not recognize the need to pay as much for a broad skill set.

Also, if you care about such things, generalists are rarely the innovators. They don't get the glory of developing new CSS techniques or establishing new design styles. Generalists instead march behind the vanguard, selecting those elements worth adopting in the mainstream.

THE CONSTANT RACE TO LEARN

Generalists continually have to digest content from a massive variety of sources and decide what is of value and what to ignore. This is incredibly demanding, and more than once I have dismissed something only to play catch-up later when I discovered it was worth my attention.

If you are not a lifelong learner, then being a generalist is not for you. I spend a lot of time each day reading the blogs of specialists who innovate so that I can stay current. I also need to assimilate what I learn, which often involves trying these techniques for myself.

Of course, some of these new techniques may simply be beyond the skills of a generalist.

THE LIMITS OF THE GENERALIST

Falling into the trap of wanting to "have a go" at pretty much anything that crosses your path is easy for the generalist. While admirable, this quality may be a detriment. Generalists can waste hours trying to do what a specialist could do in minutes. Worse still, the result could be substandard and damaging to their reputation.

Generalists need to know their limits, whether this means knowing when to call in a specialist or simply accepting that they cannot be involved in certain tasks.

The Reason For This Chapter

I have already explained why I have written this chapter; it is important that there is a counter-balance to the ever-increasing drive towards specialization. But it's more than that. I am also keen to see a new-found respect for the generalists among us, a recognition that developing a broad understanding of the increasingly complex aspects of Web design takes just as much skill and effort as becoming an expert in one area.

Finally, this chapter is a call to action to those who consider themselves generalists to take their role seriously. Being truly effective gen-

eralists who can offer valuable services to their clients and colleagues will take commitment and a lot of work. ❧

Breaking Down Silos, Part 1: The Consequences Of Working In Isolation

BY RIAN VAN DER MERWE ❧

> *No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main…*
> — *John Donne*

If you've ever worked at a company of any size, you've experienced it. Isolation. That feeling of being utterly alone in what you do.

Some people love it: the determination that comes from being a lone ranger, boldly going where no one has gone before. Others hate it: the despair that comes from slaving over a design only to see it disappear down a black hole of development, whereupon it emerges onto a website months later, unrecognizable from the pixels you put on the page with such painful precision.

Image credit: Ibrahim Iujaz[49]

These are the perils of working in siloed environments, and it's where many of us find ourselves today. We're either terribly alone or terribly frustrated, depending on the particular variety of silo we find ourselves in. In this two-part series, I'll explore the consequences of working in

---

49. http://www.flickr.com/people/notsogoodphotography/

isolated environments, and how we can solve this problem by encouraging more collaborative cultures.

What Exactly Are We Talking About Here?

Silos in work environments usually come in two flavors:

1. **Lonely silos**
   Lonely silos are made up of workers with no real connection to the outside world. This often happens at start-ups where the focus is more on getting something out the door than on doing it right. I mean, who has time for proper UX design when "we're building [technology x] because [company y] hasn't built it and [people z] need it?" (as Kyle Neath recently put it[50]).

2. **Functional silos**
   Functional silos feature workers who may be part of fantastic design teams. They have great whiteboard sessions, help each other out, enjoy their pizza Fridays… And yet, they have no real seat at the table when it comes to business strategy. Design happens painfully slow because it has to be signed off by 10 different people. And even then, there's no guarantee that anything will be implemented the way the designers envisioned it.

Working in lonely silos and functional silos have two main consequences, both devastating to software development:

1. **No process**
   This usually happens in lonely silos. It's everyone for themselves. The company subscribes to the "release early, release often" approach, and so you won't get bogged down with a formal development process, guidelines for functional specs or any of the stuff that big lame corporations busy themselves with.

2. **Too much process**
   This usually occurs when functional silos get out of control. Organizations resort to putting hierarchies and processes in place to stop the "cowboy coding" madness. The science:art ratio in design shifts way too much to one side or the other. Functional specifications move into Microsoft Word templates that are 20 pages long before a single word of content is written. And sure enough, the cowboy madness stops. But it gets replaced with a different kind of madness: stagnation.

---

50. http://warpspire.com/posts/idea-businesses/

The Consequences Of Not Following A Design Or Development Process

When you work in an environment where silos result in no clear design or development process, the following often happens.

1. MVP MADNESS

We all know the concept of "Minimum Viable Product," but revisiting Eric Reis' definition[51] would be useful:

> *"The minimum viable product is that product which has just those features (and no more) that allow you to ship a product that resonates with early adopters; some of whom will pay you money or give you feedback."*

Problem is, that last section of the definition often gets ignored. You know, the part about people paying you money. So this MVP idea can be taken too far, and a product can be released before there is a minimum viable *understanding* of what the thing is supposed to do (or who it's supposed to be useful for). You could argue that the Color app[52] is an example of this MVP madness ("It's a photo app!" "No, it's a data-mining app[53]!" "Actually, it's a local group-messaging search/recommendations app[54]!")

Perhaps the best example of this culture is the Lifepath[55] sign-up page, which Dustin Curtis recently put up in what I'd like to believe is a deliberate and very effective attempt at MVP irony:
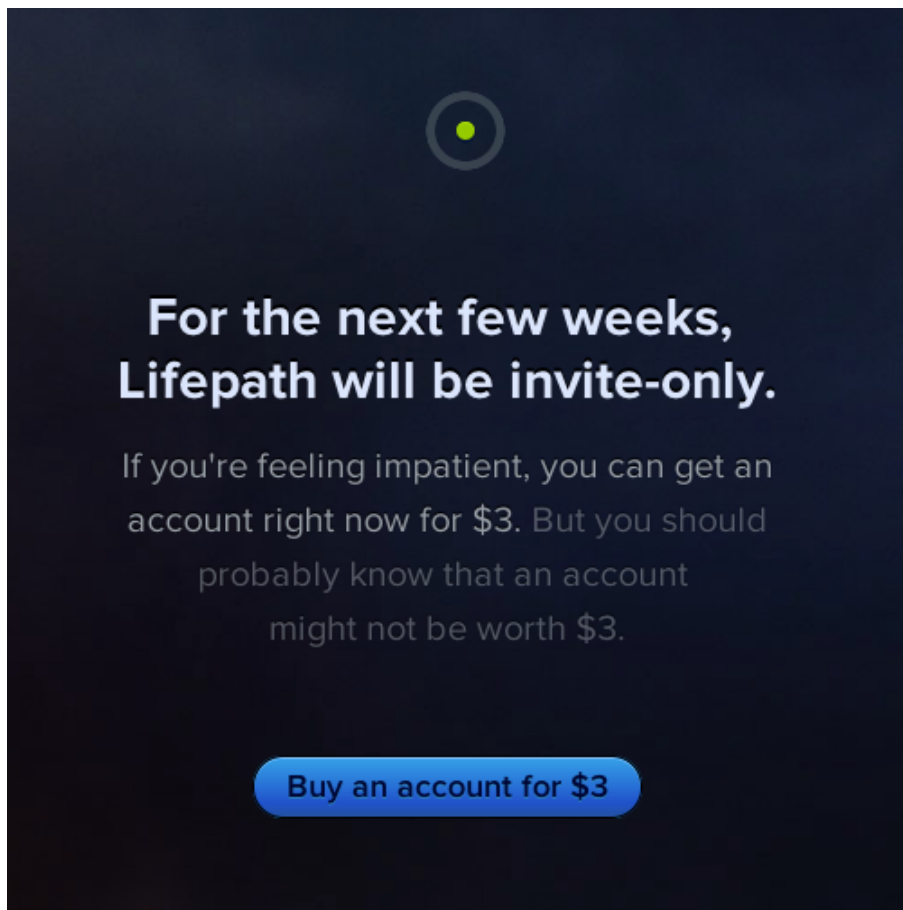
---

51. http://www.startuplessonslearned.com/2009/03/minimum-viable-product.html
52. http://www.color.com/
53. http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/color_ceo_the_tech_justifies_the_41_million.php
54. http://www.businessinsider.com/inside-colors-pivot-2011-6
55. http://www.lifepath.me

Lifepath[56] sign-up page

A lot of this problem would go away if we evolve MVP thinking into what Andrew Chen calls "Minimum Desirable Product[57]":

> *"Minimum Desirable Product is the simplest experience necessary to prove out a high-value, satisfying product experience for users."*

I think that definition would send a lot of MVPs back to the drawing board, and rightfully so.

2. NO SIGNIFICANT DESIGN FOCUS

The second consequence of a lack of process, particularly in start-ups, is that design can be the last thing on people's minds. When you hear start-ups giving an overview of their staff, they often mention developers, marketers, and business development managers, but no designers.

There can obviously be legitimate business strategy reasons for those hiring decisions, but where it *can* become harmful is when ideas

---

56. http://lifepath.me/
57. http://andrewchenblog.com/2009/12/07/minimum-desirable-product/

go from vision to code (and users) in one easy step, bypassing the principles of user-centered design completely. As Erika Hall puts it[58]:

> *"The floor of Silicon Valley is littered with the crumbling husks of great ideas — useful products and services that died in the shell before they hatched out of their impenetrable engineering-specified interfaces."*

3. ENDLESS CYCLES

A third consequence of no-process development is that you never really know when you're done. Not to make this about methodology, but this is one area where the "definition of done" concept in Scrum is extremely useful. If you don't know when you're ready to push something live, then the problems of MVP madness and lack of design are exacerbated.

Google Wave is a case in point. Listen to Douwe Osinga[59] as he gives two good examples of MVPs done right before moving on to the problem with Google Wave:

> *"Thinking big sounds great, but most big ideas start small and go from there. Google itself started from the notion that it would be interesting to look at back links for pages. Twitter started out as hardly more than a group SMS product that also works online. Facebook explicitly restricted themselves at first to one university.*
>
> *Wave is a case in point. Wave started with some fairly easy to understand ideas about online collaboration and communication. But in order to make it more general and universal, more ideas were added until the entire thing could only be explained in a 90 minute mind blowing demo that left people speechless but a little later wondering what the hell this was for."*

The Consequences Of Having Too Much Design/ Development Process

So that's what can happen in a no-process environment. But what happens at the other end of the continuum, where process is king of the world?

---

58. http://weblog.muledesign.com/2011/04/tart_up_your_startup.php
59. http://blog.douweosinga.com/2011/05/leaving-google-part-2.html

1. ORG-STRUCTURE DESIGN

When you can sketch out an organization's structure by looking at its home page, chances are it's hopelessly lost in functional silos. I experienced this first-hand while working at eBay. I would sometimes run into the product manager for the home page in the morning, and he'd have no idea why his page looked the way it did on that particular day. Each day was an adventure to see what had changed on the page that he "owned."

Don't believe me? Below is an example of the eBay home page from about two years ago, with the teams responsible for each section of the page overlaid (they've since gone through a redesign that fixed this issue):
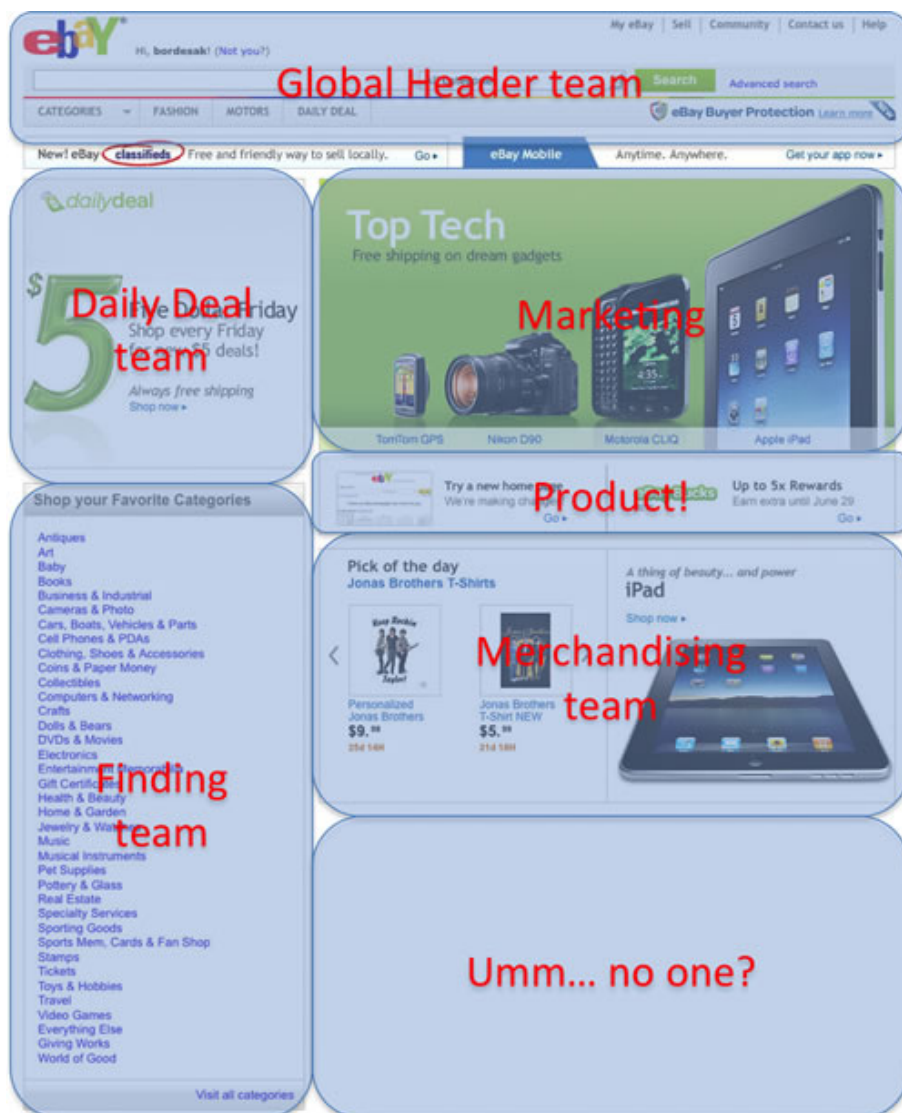
This is unfortunately one of the side effects of functional silos. You run the risk of losing any sense of holistic design direction on the website.

2. DESIGN MONKEYS

Another consequence of an over-reliance on process is that designers could become nothing more than monkeys, cranking out efficient, perfectly grid-aligned but completely uninspired designs on an assembly line. Wondering whether this is you? Here are some instructions you might recognize as a design monkey:

COULD YOU MAKE THE DESIGN "POP" A LITTLE MORE?

It needs to be a little more Web 2.0

It needs to be a little more Web 2.0

The font should definitely change back to Comic Sans

Don't get me wrong: I believe in style guides, and I believe in design constraints. But when an organization becomes overly reliant on design rules, creativity is often the first thing out the door. Yes, design is much more than art (we'll come back to this later), but it's certainly not pure science either. Without the right injection of art and creativity, science gets boring and forgotten pretty quickly.

3. TIRED DEVELOPERS

Once process takes over an organization, the acronyms start. And arguably, the most feared of them all is PRD: the product requirements document. This usually takes the form of a Word template, with a two-page table of contents. It includes a solution to every single eventuality the software might ever encounter. It sucks the soul out of product managers and the life out of developers.

To use an example from a previous company, we once had a 23-page PRD to make some changes to our SiteCatalyst JavaScript implementation. And then the project didn't happen. I shudder to think about the hours and hours of lost productivity that went into creating this document that never got used. People could have created things during that time. Instead, they sat in Microsoft Word.

The result? Tired developers. Developers who don't want to code anymore because coding becomes 70% deciphering Word documents, 20% going back and forth on things that aren't clear, and 10% actually coding.

How do you know that your developers are tired? Charles Miller quotes an ex-Google employee[60] as describing what it means when a

developer tells you that something is "non-trivial" sums it up pretty well:

> "It means impossible. Since no engineer is going to admit something is impossible, they use this word instead. When an engineer says something is 'non-trivial,' it's the equivalent of an airline pilot calmly telling you that you might encounter 'just a bit of turbulence' as he flies you into a cat 5 hurricane."

Tired developers use the word "non-trivial," or some variation thereof, a lot more than energized developers.

4. DISTRUST BETWEEN TEAMS

When people don't live and breathe each other's workflows, understanding the decisions they make is hard. And if you don't understand the reason for someone's decisions, distrust can creep in.

Functional silos that rely on too much process serve as fertile ground for distrust in relationships. A reliance on process can instill a false sense of security and the mistaken assumption that conversation and understanding are less important than proper documentation. This is particularly true in the complicated relationship between designers and developers. As Don Norman recently put it[61]:

> "Designers evoke great delight in their work. Engineers provide utilitarian value. My original training was that of an engineer and I, too, produce practical, usable things. The problem is that the very practical, functional things I produce are also boring and ugly. Good designers would never allow boring and ugly to describe their work: they strive to produce delight. But sometimes that delightful result is not very practical, difficult to use and not completely functional. Practical versus delightful: Which do you prefer?"

So, when designers and developers are not in the same room from the moment a project kicks off, or when design becomes prescriptive before thorough discussion has taken place and everyone has sweated the details together, the stage is set for the two worlds to collide. Breaking down these silos is the only way to design solutions that are practical *and* delightful.

60. http://fishbowl.pastiche.org/2007/07/17/understanding_engineers_feasibility/
61. http://www.core77.com/blog/columns/
    the_design_dilemma_dismay_vs_delight_19663.asp

5. DESIGN BY COMMITTEE

Not everyone can code, so they don't go to developers telling them that their HTML needs to be more semantic. But everyone thinks they're a designer, or at least has a gut feeling about design. They like certain colors or certain styles, and some people just really hate yellow. Because everyone has an emotional response to design and believes "it's just like art," they think they know enough about design to turn those personal preferences into feedback.

One of the first things we need to do to solve this problem is to teach people how to give better design feedback. Mike Monteiro gets to the crux of the issue in "Giving Better Design Feedback[62]":

> *"First rule of design feedback: what you're looking at is not art. It's not even close. It's a business tool in the making and should be looked at objectively like any other business tool you work with. The right question is not, 'Do I like it?' but 'Does this meet our goals?' If it's blue, don't ask yourself whether you like blue. Ask yourself if blue is going to help you sell sprockets. Better yet: ask your design team. You just wrote your first feedback question."*

And how do we respond practically to the problems of design by committee? Smashing Magazine's own article[63] sums it up best:

> *"The sensible answer is to listen, absorb, discuss, be able to defend any design decision with clarity and reason, know when to pick your battles and know when to let go."*

Here are four principles I use in my day-to-day work to make that statement a reality:

1. **Respond to every piece of feedback.**
   This is tiring, but essential. Regardless of how helpful it is, if someone took the time to give you feedback on a design, you need to respond to it.

2. **Note what feedback is being incorporated.**
   Be open to good feedback. Don't let pride get in the way of a design improvement. And let the person know what feedback is being incorporated.

3. **Explain why feedback is not being taken.**
   If a particular piece of feedback is not being implemented, don't just ig-

---

62. http://weblog.muledesign.com/2010/12/giving_better_feedback.php
63. http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2010/06/29/why-design-by-commitee-should-die/

nore it. Let the person know that you've thought about it, and explain the reason for not incorporating that feedback. They will be less likely to get upset at you if you explain clearly why you're taking the direction you're taking. And if you're not sure how to defend the decision...

4. **Use the user experience validation stack.**
    Read the post "Winning a User Experience Debate[64]" for more detail. But in short, first try to defend a decision based on user evidence — actual user testing on the product. If that's not available, go to Google and find user research that backs up the decision. In the absence of that, go back to design theory to explain your direction.

Summary, And Where We Go From Here

Ending a chapter on such a doom-and-gloom note feels a bit wrong. But maybe pausing here would be good so that we can all reflect on the issues that siloed development creates in our own organizations. As UX people, we're taught to understand the problem first before trying to solve it, right? So, let's do that. ❧

---

64. http://www.uxbooth.com/blog/winning-a-user-experience-debate/

MUD: Minimum Usable Design

BY PAUL SCRIVENS ☙

There is a paradox that fits my life. Doesn't matter what aspect of my life I am talking about because it always seems to apply. Even more so when I think about this paradox and the design of this website and other websites. I really hate this paradox.

> "To walk through the woods, you first need to walk halfway through. Then, once you're in the middle of it, you still need to walk half of the remaining distance, then half of the distance again, and then another half, and you can never successfully make it through the woods."

This example is based off of Zeno's paradoxes[65], which are even more mind-boggling than the one above.

No matter what stage of a design I am in, I am always halfway there. This is why you might find yourself always saying that you need two more weeks to finish up all the details. It will always be two more weeks no matter what, because all you did was get halfway from where you were to where you are trying to go. Using this mentality can wear you down, but if you twist it around a bit, it can be used as motivation to achieve a successful design.

A Totally Made Up Theory

Let's use our good ol' sparring partner Google[66] as an example. You are about to sit down and create the first home page in Google's history. If you had an infinite amount of time you could tackle any part of the design that you wanted without any worries. But unfortunately life doesn't give us non-deadlined projects. Because of this, you know the goal that you are striving to achieve — you know what it looks like once you leave the woods, so first, you just have to get halfway there.

If the very first half makes the design at least 50% usable then what would you design first? The logo? The footer? The obvious choice would be the search box and button. In fact, if you design that, then you are

65. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zeno's_paradoxes
66. http://google.com

probably over 50% of the way through with the design because the website is now usable. It's good to get that first 50% out of the way, and now you are halfway to your end goal. Some people like to call this working from the inside out.

Next step is to get halfway from where we are now to where we need to be. I think it's important that we have some kind of branding on the page so people know where to come back to next time they want to search. That means I put the logo on the page. Once I am done with that I'm 75% of the way to my goal. 75% of the way through and how many people in the world would be satisfied with using Google if it had nothing but a logo, search bar and one button on it? I'm betting more than 75%. But if getting 75% of the way towards our goal can please even 75% of our audience, we might be doing a good job.

If you continue on with this process of knocking out half of what you need to do, eventually you will get close enough to your goal where good enough is as good as you are going to get. I know people argue about what good enough means, but if you are 99% of the way to where you are trying to go, then good enough is good enough.

MUD

In the startup community there is a term called *minimum viable product*.

> "*A Minimum Viable Product has just those features (and no more)
> that allows the product to be deployed.*"
> — *Minimum Viable Product, from Wikipedia*[67]

I'm coining the term *Minimum Usable Design*, and that is when you reach your 50% mark for your design. If you can't use your design after you have reached 50% (or a person can't understand at least 50% of what is going on) then you haven't reached the 50% mark yet.

By no means does this imply that you should show your design to the public at the 50% mark, but you can use it as a way to gauge your progress. Sometimes you need to wait until you are 99% done before showing your work to a larger audience. There is nothing wrong with striving for perfection, but it depends on your design and audience. Apple[68] does *minimum viable product* with the limited features on their products, but make up for it with *maximum viable design* (a new term, crown me king).

---

67. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minimum_viable_product
68. http://apple.com/

An Example

Blog design is a very simplistic example, but lets run with it. On my website, Drawar[69], the main goal is to get people to read the content. If I can do that, I have achieved my number one goal, and it just so happens that this goal will keep the majority of my audience happy. Because of this, I want to make the content easy to get to, and so I need to know what design will help me get there.

MARCH 28, 2012

Designers, Think Why

Last week I came across **this post** by Mark Boulton talking about a designer's intent. The basic concept is that if you can make a statement of design intent that quickly explains the why of a particular design then you can truly achieve success. A lot of this though comes from the client or the actual company that you work for. If they don't understand why the company exists then it becomes hard to create a design that revolves around it.

Design is definitely about story-telling. It is also about solving problems. Lets not forget that design also means that we are showing empathy for the people that have to use our design. When you understand why a company exists or why a project is being done then the design isn't a guessing game. Aesthetics are definitely part of the design, but if the design doesn't do a good job of functioning then it serves no purpose.

The 50% mark. Not much, but it achieves the #1 goal.

With this design, anyone that comes to my website can read the content. That is 50% of my journey, but now I need to go the other half to reach another subset of people coming to my design. I decide next that there should be some branding on the website so that people can know where they are at and remember the website if they visit it again.

---

69. http://drawar.com

Now the design is 75% there.

Now when you visit the website you know where you are at, but notice that the additions didn't take away from the original MUD that I created. From here I can take another halfway point journey by adding links to other sections of the website, and also provide a bit of context about the website they are on.

87.5% of the way…

Again, the additions do not take away from the original 50%, so that is a good thing. Time for one more halfway journey before I push the website out, and that would be adding some revenue.

DRAWAR

Thinking about this thing
called design.

Edited by Paul Scrivens

Journal / Collections /
Community

Sponsor

litmus

Does your email look
beautiful everywhere? Find
out with Litmus. Try it free!
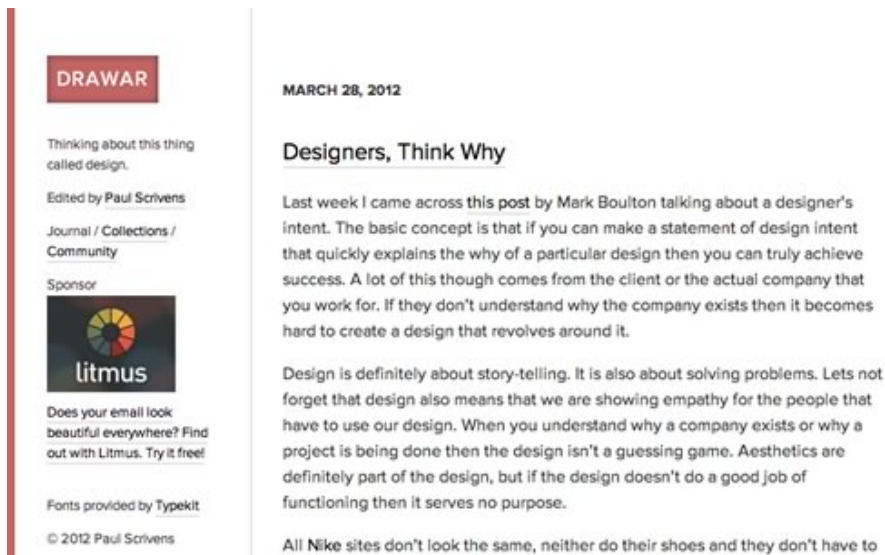
Fonts provided by Typekit

© 2012 Paul Scrivens

MARCH 28, 2012

Designers, Think Why

Last week I came across this post by Mark Boulton talking about a designer's intent. The basic concept is that if you can make a statement of design intent that quickly explains the why of a particular design then you can truly achieve success. A lot of this though comes from the client or the actual company that you work for. If they don't understand why the company exists then it becomes hard to create a design that revolves around it.

Design is definitely about story-telling. It is also about solving problems. Lets not forget that design also means that we are showing empathy for the people that have to use our design. When you understand why a company exists or why a project is being done then the design isn't a guessing game. Aesthetics are definitely part of the design, but if the design doesn't do a good job of functioning then it serves no purpose.

All Nike sites don't look the same, neither do their shoes and they don't have to

93.75% complete (well, at least to me).

Basically the design is finished, but there are additional things I could add to the design to make it more complete to some people. For example, search, social media widgets, and possibly a blogroll. I've set the goals of the design though, so I understand the milestones that I want to achieve.

Design Is Never Finished

Although I'm happy with the end result of the design, it doesn't mean it will work for everyone that visits. Someone will always want to get more out of a design, and that is why a design will never be able to leave the forest. Fortunately, the more halfway points you knock out in a design, the smaller the subset of people that are still wanting more out of it. Be careful though, because adding too much will take away from the original 50%, which was the main purpose of the design from the beginning.

And don't think that this only applies to "minimalistic" websites — that is just my style of design, but it applies just as much to the designs that add a lot of flare to their aesthetic. Tweetbot[70], for example, isn't any less of a usable design than other Twitter clients in my mind, because it adds a bit more flash to its design elements.

Always aim for the next halfway point and you will get closer and closer to the edge of the forest — but remember that you will never reach the end. Designs can always be improved upon, and therefore will always be unfinished. ❧

---

70. http://tapbots.com/software/tweetbot/

A Craft Of Consequences: Reader, Writer And Emotional Design

BY ROBIN RENDLE ❧

Before the very first page of a book has been read, you've already analyzed it in countless ways without even noticing. The paper stock, the thickness of the binding, the aroma, the color of the type and even the texture of the cover; the very character of the book is being dissected by the hand and eye at every moment.

In this brief second there is a dialogue between the reader and the object. This conversation is subtle and complex, but for most people it is entirely subconscious. This is because we rarely think about these things — we *feel* them instead.

Before this dialogue can take place however, the ideas of the author must be given shape. By examining the relationship between the form of the book and the information contained within, we can begin to understand how these visual and sensory components work, but it will also teach us how to create long-lasting emotional bonds that we'll want to keep forever.

Lost In Translation

I recently read *The Greatest Show on Earth*[71] by Richard Dawkins. His book explores the wonder of evolution and scientific discovery and also goes into explicit detail as to how these ideas better our society and affect our perspective of morality and philosophy. But its uncomfortable size and shape as well as its flimsy typesetting gives the book characteristics of apathy and exhaustion.

The object reveals much about the world in which it was made: a heartless, ignorant and illiterate world, filled with people that viewed the author and the reader as a stepping stone to the top of the New York Times bestseller list.

And yet, these aesthetic and ergonomic failures are more than skin deep as they interfere with the relationship between writer and reader. Dawkins' evidence seems less empirical, less established and somehow

---

71. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/
   The_Greatest_Show_on_Earth:_The_Evidence_for_Evolution

less wonderful, as the book miserably fails to explain the poetry of its content.
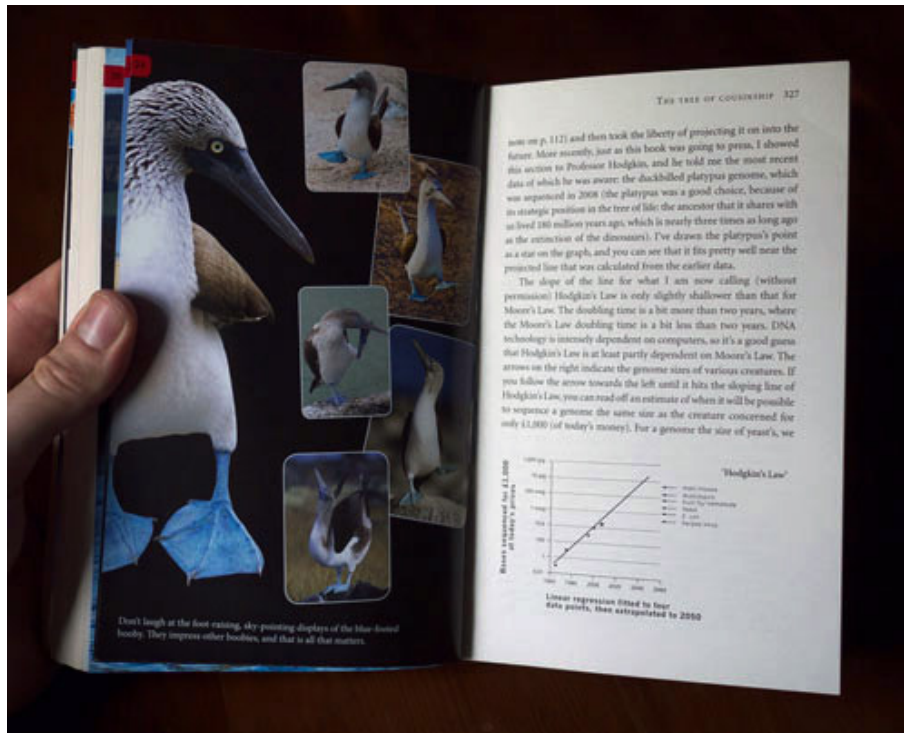
Notice how jarring and uncomfortable it is as these glossy, brightly colored pages sit next to ordinary blocks of text.

Dawkins' argument is damaged by these cluttered, noisy and mistreated illustrative pages. Whilst he describes the wonderful and unique beauty of life, his ideas feel ordinarily ugly. The images to the left of the spread, their jarring and chaotic arrangement, the tension built by their seemingly random position, fail to reflect the ideas of wonder, beauty and order that the writer so eloquently describes.
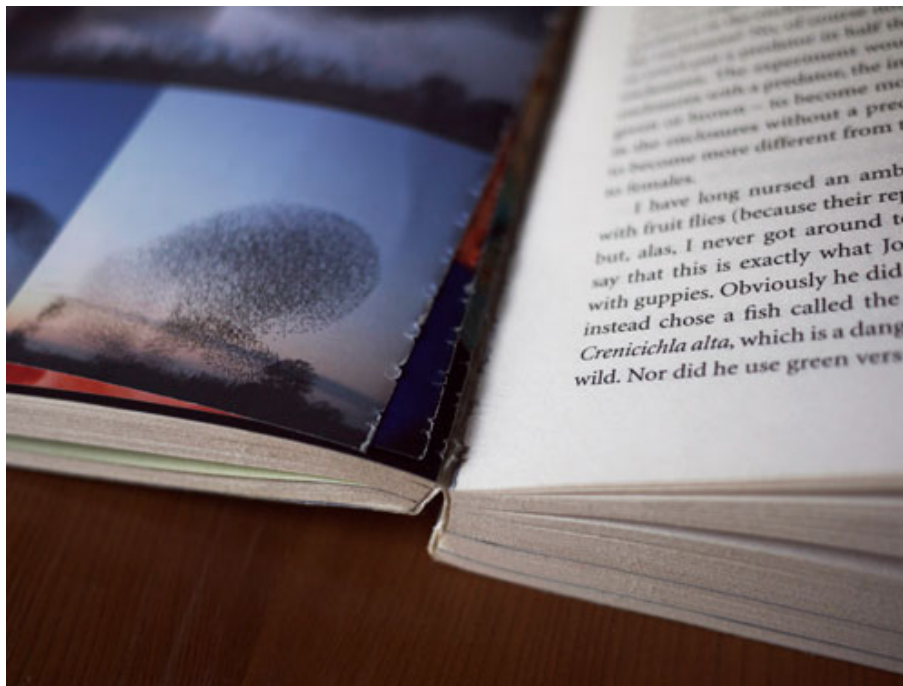
The ideas contained within have lasted centuries, yet this book has barely lasted a single reading.

Walk into any large, commercial bookstore and you'll see thousands of books treated in a similar way — each with layer upon layer of unnecessary information that conflicts with the intent of the author. Something crucial is destroyed in this journey as the object disrupts vital information on transit.

To understand why these books are not working, we must first examine how information passes from writer to reader.

The Journey

For centuries, the book was a tool that existed for a single purpose; to transfer information from one mind to another. Although much has changed[72], there will always be a problem with this form of communication, and in our reliance on systems to safely relay data.

In bookmaking these systems are traditionally enforced by a publisher, as they have complete control over the quality of the binding, the typographic details, the use of color and the overall physical identity of the idea. All of these visual and sensory elements combine to produce the system by which the idea is given form. However, as in the case of the majority of books out there, this system poisons and infects it.

---

72. http://craigmod.com/journal/post_artifact/

These systems comprise of an immense number of components, such as the combination of typefaces, the paper density, the use of color, the printing method, the measure, the width of margins, and other typographic details. But the problem with these systems is that they are incapable of reflecting the ideas of the writer with the form of the book. They act as a barrier that the information must travel through to be able to find the reader.


Cheap paper, bad typesetting and an awkward binding cause confusion and disrespect to the author's ideas. But if we understand how these elements work together we can make systems that provide useful signs to the reader, and also manage to safely transport the ideas of the writer at the same time.

Emotional Information

When a visual component accurately represents the ideas of the writer, it becomes a source of emotional information. This aids in the transferral of ideas, and promotes and persuades the reader that the content is worthy of their precious time.

It's more than just a pretty cover, visual pun or marketing gimmick that creates emotional information. It's everything from the size of the type to the texture of the page, because these components not only help to explain the content of the book but also continue to engage and stimulate the reader throughout.
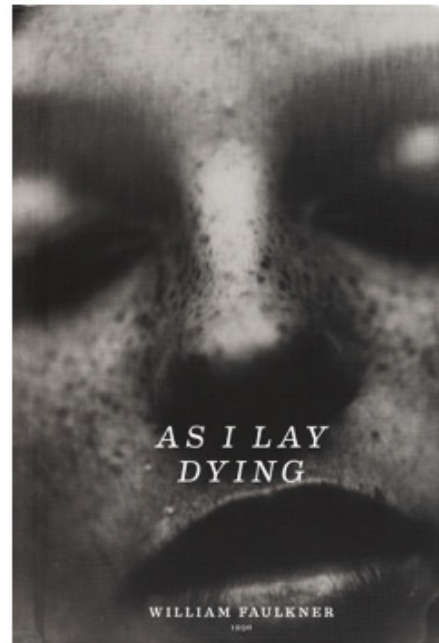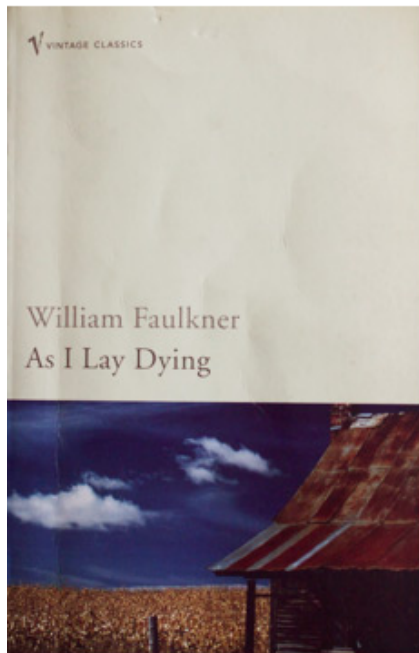
The Vintage Classics edition of "As I Lay Dying" is almost lifeless, whereas Trevor Baum's[73] redesign provides the reader with an emotional experience as they must carry this dying woman in their hands, much like the characters in the novel.

A system can bind the ideas of the writer to the form of the book with these carefully chosen elements, but it's when the form and the idea become inseparable that unique relationships begin to emerge.

Take for example *Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?* that was published by the Chin Music Press[74] back in 2008. The book is focused primarily on the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the impact it had on the music, economy and spirit of the city.

73. http://trevorbaum.com/faulkner-covers/
74. http://chinmusicpress.com/landing/doyouknow/

The physical elements of the book act as a rhetorical device, directing the reader with subtlety and charm.

Nineteenth century engravings flourish beside carefully set blocks of text and each page has been lavishly printed on high quality paper. These components, amongst many others, combine to create a distinct sense of pace that sets itself apart from legions of other books. The idea of the book and the form of the book become one — they merge into an emotional cornucopia that is impossible to ignore.

The texture of the page, the subtle typographic details and the distinctive illustrations implies a specific tone and atmosphere.

This is emotional information and it coerces the reader to take notice of the subject and to read each page with as much attention and focus as those that designed and published it.

Another book that provides the reader with emotional information is the *Book of war, mortification and love*. The author, Ruud Linssen, investigates why people suffer voluntarily whether it be for love, war, religion or art. The blend of fiction and non-fiction, and the haunting accounts of depression and loneliness are only reinforced by the physical elements of the object.

The text also acts as a specimen for the typeface Fakir[75]. This dark blackletter eloquently explains the subject and forewarns the reader of the book's ghostly nature. It is even printed with the author's own blood, the ink on the cover blends into the background as if the words are shaking with anxiety.

---

75. http://www.underware.nl/fonts/fakir/
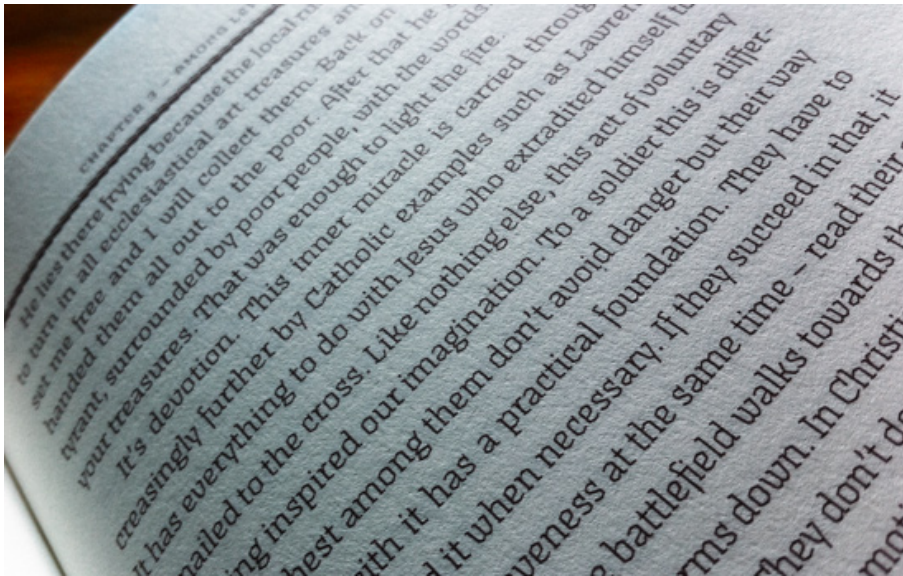
*Texture, ink, type: three dimensions of emotional data that captures the spirit of the writer's intent.*

It's these extra pieces of information, these tangible components of a unique sensory and visual language that must be pieced together in order to accurately reflect the author's ideas. It is the format, the texture, and the combination of the printed word and the weight of the object that ignites this special relationship, and aids in the transfer of information between writer and reader. Ideally, these extra pieces of information provide the reader with the unspoken history, idea and argument of the book. Without them, the conversation between the book and the reader would be less interactive and engaging.

Of course, not every book can feel like *Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?*, or *Book of war, mortification and love* — but then why should they? Each book should be treated as a unique problem requiring a distinct and innovative solution.

Emotionless Systems

This is the problem with the current state of ebooks. As e-readers split content numerically or into 'real' turning pages they impersonate the form of the book, whilst disregarding the unique nature of the writer's ideas. This gives us books that all feel and look the same.
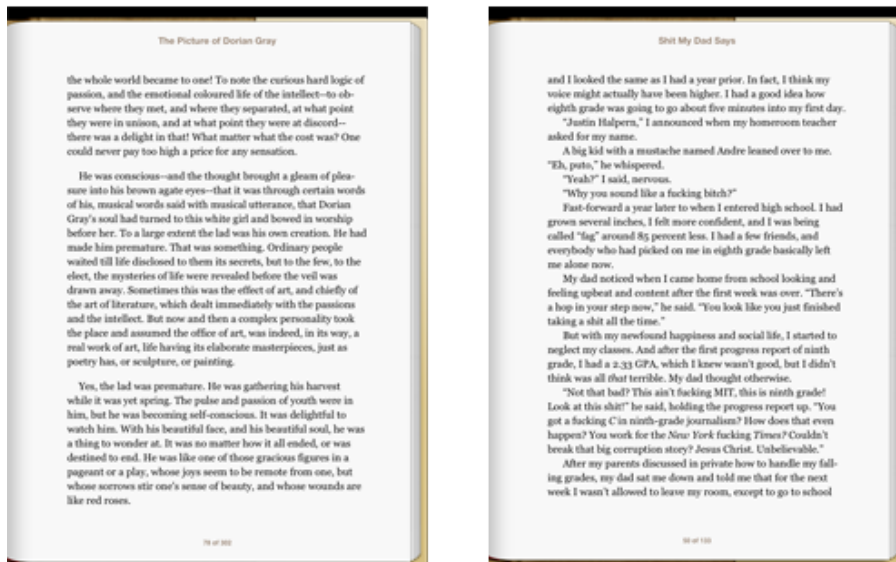
The Picture of Dorian Gray by Oscar Wilde and Shit My Dad Says by Justin Halpern look and feel the same, but are different in every meaningful way.

The system disregards the writer almost entirely; all ideas have the same graphic character, tone and appearance. But just as unique and brilliant writers follow a certain pattern and rhythm within their work, so too must the visual and sensory elements of a system. This indicates to the reader that the content is one of a kind and worthy of their precious time, but these systems are also capable of creating emotional experiences that can entertain, persuade, teach and inspire.

So the problems on screen are very similar to that of the problems on paper: the system is acting as a barrier into the author's ideas.

Why Should We Design Emotional Systems?

In a perfect world we would share ideas through a semipermeable membrane; we would absorb ideas via osmosis and send them around the world as casually as we breathe. Sadly, we cannot do this. Instead, we have systems set in place to communicate. The problem is that these systems are failing us. They are hurting us. They are making beautiful things boring and are getting in between us and the ideas that we need.

This is not about nostalgia or the glorification of a particular medium. This is about information, and how best to communicate the content as a visual and sensory device. These systems have an obligation to not only safely and quickly transfer data, but also to make us care.

Of course, this is subjective and very little of this chapter goes into the specifics as to how to create emotional experiences, but this is because each idea requires a different visual and sensory tone. Some

books require explosive typography and thick paper to *feel* revolutionary, others require a softer and more delicate tone to *feel* calm or charming.

The form of the book is merely a tool, a sometimes wonderfully beautiful and effective tool, but a tool nonetheless. It is the ideas within that give us wonder, and these tools must be built for their purpose if they are not to be thrown away, lost or forgotten.

We can embed within these systems a lasting piece of our culture if only we are willing to change the way we think. So instead of us asking the question, "How do these things *look*?" perhaps we should rather be asking, "How do these things *feel*?" ॐ

Further Reading

- The Crystal Goblet[76]
  The classic essay by Beatrice Warde on the art of printing, still applicable to book and Web design today.

- Designing for Emotion[77]
  The lead UX designer at MailChimp, Aaron Walter, discusses how emotion can be used in interfaces.

- On Book Design[78]
  Richard Hendel examines how and why books are designed in the way that they are.

76. http://www.typographia.org/1999/graphion/crystal-goblet.html
77. http://www.abookapart.com/products/designing-for-emotion
78. http://www.amazon.com/Book-Design-Mr-Richard-Hendel/dp/0300075707

Easier Is Better Than Better

BY PAUL SCRIVENS ❧

In his book, *The Paradox of Choice*, Barry Schwartz comes to an interesting conclusion involving human choice.

> *"People choose not on the basis of what's most important, but on what's easiest to evaluate."*

Common sense would dictate that if you were given a list of choices, you would choose the one that is most important to you, when in reality humans usually choose the one that is easiest for them to understand and evaluate. Very often we do so because we don't have the time to put in the research necessary to make an informed decision. Politicians are rarely elected based on the majority of people doing research on their background and the policies they support. They are elected for the fact that people can relate to the message they are spreading and because we have heard of them before.

When it comes to our own designs, we imagine people being able to make informed decisions on what the next step should be. However, they are already making 400+ decisions throughout the rest of the day that are likely more important than what they will deal with in our design.

Do you think most people realize there are benefits to driving a manual transmission car over an automatic? Do you think they care? Automatic is easier to pick up so why bother with any other choice? How often do we stay in relationships that we shouldn't, simply because it's easier to just deal with it than face the repercussions of having to confront the person?

Have you ever been to In 'N Out Burger[79]? I've heard great stories about this place and their mythical burgers and fries. The catch behind this place is that they have a very limited menu[80]. You order a Double Double, cheeseburger or hamburger. You can add fries, milkshake and beverage to that if you wish. That's all of your options (unless you know about the secret menu). Now, I've been there and tasted their food and it's good, but it is not much different than Wendy's. The appeal of the place is that your choices are limited. It's easy to order there because you don't have to decide which type of chicken sandwich you

---

79. http://www.in-n-out.com/
80. http://www.in-n-out.com/menu.aspx

feel is the best option for you. *In 'N Out* makes the fast food experience easy for you. Having it your way is not the way we want.

In 'N Out is known for their very limited menu. Too many choices are distracting and require more time for making a final decision what to order. Image source[81]

Woot.com[82] is an online store with a twist. Instead of browsing through hundreds or thousands of items, you are offered only one item a day. If you like it, you buy it and if you don't, you wait until tomorrow to see what is going to show up. The site is successful and yet the logic of it all seems backwards. However, if I'm running a store, does it really matter whether I'm selling 100 units of 1 item or 100 different items for 1 unit at a time? Woot makes the shopping experience easy by making our choice simply "yes" or "no".

How much less fun would Angry Birds be if you *had to select* the birds you could use before each level? Taking away that choice and letting us focus on *how to use* the birds we are given makes the game much more enjoyable.

---

81. http://www.flickr.com/photos/mesohungry/4525295937/
82. http://woot.com/

By not choosing which bird to play with in each level, one can focus more on how to use them. Image source[83]

How many of your friends choose to buy a computer for their home simply because they use the same one at work? Since they have been using it at work, it has become easy for them to use. Doesn't mean it is the better computer — it is simply the one that is easiest for them. Our selections don't have to be the best choices — they just have to be ones that we are okay with.

How often do you come across a site that offers you better features than their competitors, but they aren't as easy to use. There is no reason to switch over to a service that is harder to use even if they have more features. If the features aren't there to make my life easier then what good does the service do me?

Back when image hosting was cool, the sites that won were the ones that allowed you to upload an image without having to register or login. You simply uploaded your image and you were done. Imgur[84] is a great example of this and has now become one of the most popular image hosting sites in the world. That doesn't mean sites like Flickr[85] couldn't thrive — they just had to work much harder to achieve more users and show that going through the hassle of registering was indeed worth it.

---

83. http://www.flickr.com/photos/65999620@N00/5423823785/
84. http://imgur.com
85. http://flickr.com/

User Settings And Choice

In a recent article[86], Jared Spool did a study that found that only 5% of users changed their default settings in MS Word. Being a computer nerd, this surprised me because I like to dive into the settings of all of my applications to see what I can tweak. The large majority of people don't seem to want to tweak though — they just want to use the application:

> *"We embarked on a little experiment. We asked a ton of people to send us their settings file for Microsoft Word. At the time, MS Word stored all the settings in a file named something like* `config.ini`*, so we asked people to locate that file on their hard disk and email it to us. Several hundred folks did just that.*
>
> *We then wrote a program to analyze the files, counting up how many people had changed the 150+ settings in the applications and which settings they had changed.*
>
> *What we found was really interesting. Less than 5% of the users we surveyed had changed any settings at all. More than 95% had kept the settings in the exact configuration that the program installed in."*

It is great to provide the user with the ability to make changes, but settings aren't a must-have feature. Building a great product that just works should be priority number one and once you begin to understand what settings might be tweaked, should you then start to think about adding a settings panel.

Users assume you are giving them the settings that are best for them right off the bat. If you aren't, then they might view your product as a failure.

The Paradox Of Choice

The paradox of choice says that the more options available to an individual, the harder it becomes to make a selection. For example, if there are free samples of jam being given out at the store, you are more likely to get people to buy a jar of jam when only six selections are available as opposed to 24. More choices don't make the selection process easier for people, but having *no* choices takes away some of the freedom they believe they have.

---

86. http://www.uie.com/brainsparks/2011/09/14/do-users-change-their-settings/

According to Barry Schwartz, it is much easier to find your pair of crocs if there are fewer color options available. Image source[87]

When deciding on which of the new iPhones you should get, you can either get it in black or white and three different memory options. Add in multiple carriers though and the choice starts to become a little more complicated.

If a client tells you that you can do their design any way you choose, it is more difficult than having to do a design with constraints because your options are endless. We need constraints, limited choices, to be built into everything that we do. This makes decision making easier and the benefit of this is an easier design to use.

If somehow you can make the easiest product *and* the best product in the industry, you have yourself a winner. You have to consider how many choices we are given daily so it's in your best interest to limit the ones your customers have to make because there is a good chance it isn't the most important decision of the day for them.

What this means is that the design that is easiest to evaluate (less options to choose from) will win most of the time. Make your copy straight to the point. Don't waste your time on graphics that don't drive the point home. Funny t-shirts and bumper stickers are effective because they are easy to evaluate. I have a hard enough time picking my outfit in the morning — don't make me try to decide which one of the 250 default avatars I should use. ❧

---

87. http://www.flickr.com/photos/harrymia/1497582785/

Designing Engaging And Enjoyable Long-Form Reading Experiences

BY MARTHA ROTTER ❧

Finally, some good news from the media industry: digital subscriptions are growing. We're seeing positive reports from newspapers such as the New York Times and magazine publishers such as Conde Nast: announcements about increases in their digital content sales and paywall members.

When you have fantastic and original content, ensuring the best possible reading experience is critical to keeping and building your audience. The following practices will help you design your content in a way that improves the experience for readers.

Navigation Methods

We often think that having many methods for finding things is easier for users. Unfortunately, the result can be mess of unhelpful and unrelated links, menus, widgets and ads. Many news websites place lists of "most-read articles" or "articles that your Facebook friends are reading" on their websites because they can. Analytics will tell you whether these methods are useful for your particular website. If no one is clicking on them, why are they taking up valuable space?
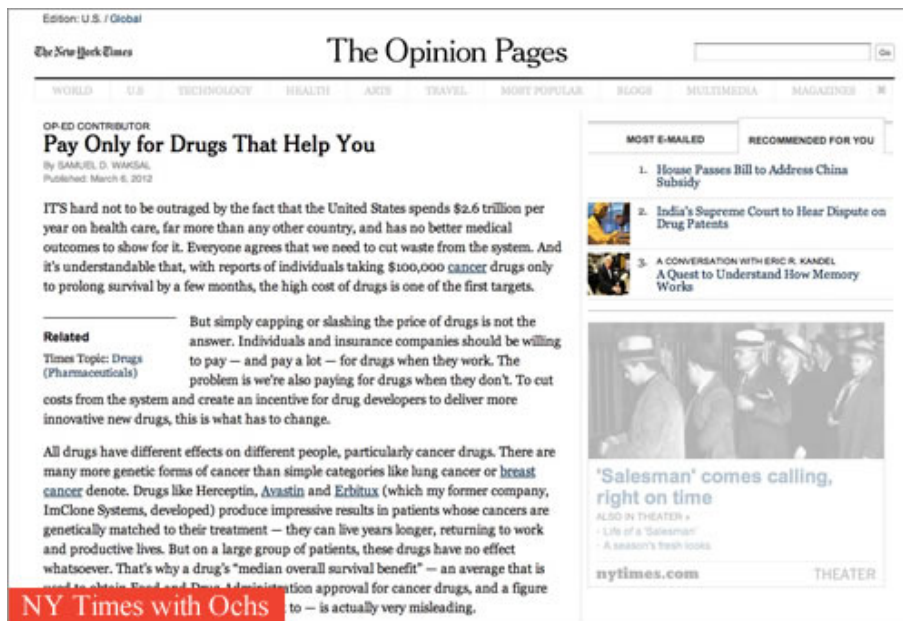
One way to quickly see the effect of slimmed-down navigation is to use Ochs[88], a Chrome browser extension specifically for the New York Times, written by Michael Donohoe[89]. Open the New York Times[90] in a different browser, then install Ochs and look at the website in Chrome. Ochs provides the massive benefit of a cleaner layout and clutter-free navigation. Things like reading tools and extra modules are removed from articles. The increased white space and removal of the New York Times' dense navigation bars are a breath of fresh air.

---

88. https://chrome.google.com/webstore/detail/lejiflopkadmkjajbalpkglfhmkjchol
89. http://nytochs.tumblr.com/
90. http://www.nytimes.com

The Ochs[91] *extension cleans up the UI of the New York Times.*

There is a difference between having a reasonable way to navigate a website versus having one-click access to all of the website's content. How do your users typically find what they want? Do they use the navigation links or jump straight to the search box?

Changing the navigation methods may be as straightforward as removing redundant menu bars or as involved as conducting user research to see which methods people use and don't use.

Another thing to consider when looking at navigation usage patterns is that people rarely click on things that appear hard to read or cluttered. If that's the case with your website, perhaps it's time to look at your typography and spacing.

Experimenting With Type And Spacing

Not every typeface was designed to be read on a digital screen. Typefaces can have a huge effect on both the appeal of content and its readability. The typefaces for headlines may be beautiful and attention-grabbing, but if the ones for the copy are difficult to read, you could be turning away readers.

Not everyone will read your content exactly as it was designed. Some people set their own default font size, while others change their screen's resolution. Still others use assistive technology, such as screen readers, to peruse content. During the course of a day, I read blogs on my iPad, pan and zoom through news on my mobile phone, edit docu-

---

91. https://chrome.google.com/webstore/detail/lejiflopkadmkjajbalpkglfhmkjchol

ments on an enormous desktop monitor and browse the Web from my television screen (at low resolution). For this same reason, tools such as Instapaper[92], Readability[93] and Evernote[94] are growing massively. The ability to control the format of what you read — and where you read it — is becoming increasingly useful.

The Boston Globe[95]'s recent overhaul of its website received a lot of well-deserved praise, and two of the nicest things about it are the use of white space and the typography. The fonts chosen are central to the Boston Globe's Web style, and they feel relevant to its almost 240-year-old print identity. Compare the new design to the original one, and the contrast is staggering. The Boston Globe's new look is a great case study for news websites and readability in general. Definitely have a look if you haven't yet.
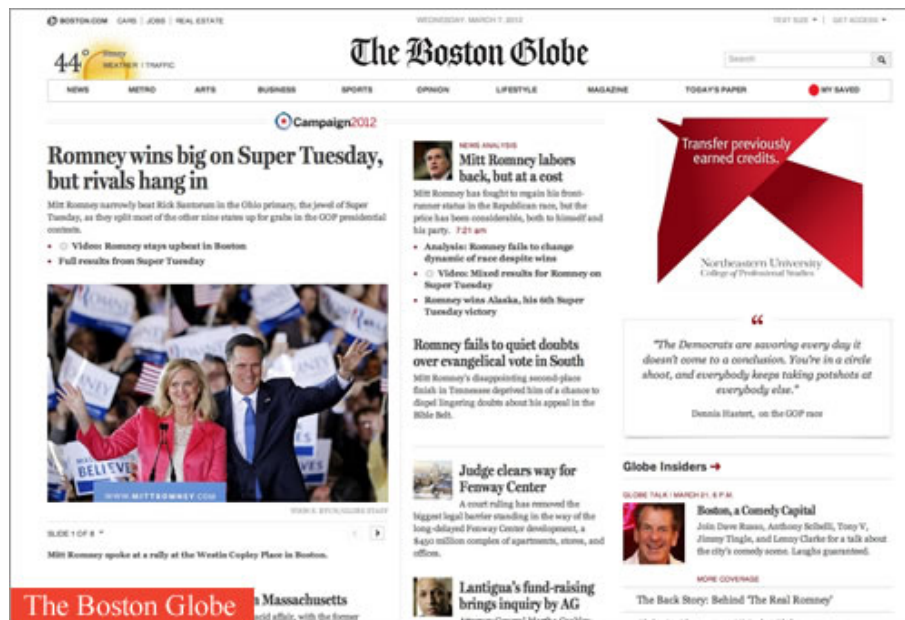
The Boston Globe's[96] new interface has carefully chosen fonts plus more white space.

While some fonts were created specifically for digital reading, there is no magical formula for selecting type. To find out what works, do some testing. User testing, A/B testing and even testing within your own team can yield insights. Have everyone on your team read through a handful of long-form content on various devices. If people can't make it through more than a few paragraphs, try different fonts, sizes or spacing. Or maybe rethink some of those distracting ads.

92. http://www.instapaper.com/
93. http://www.readability.com/
94. http://www.evernote.com/
95. http://bostonglobe.com/
96. http://bostonglobe.com/

Respectful Advertising

How often do you see people rush to turn the page of a magazine just to skip an ad? Probably rarely. But people do it on websites all the time, panicking to find the small "Close" icon on a pop-up ad, or flummoxed as to which browser tab is playing an audio ad. I hope the people who create these creepy auto-play ads will one day experience the terror of being alone at the office late at night as a rogue audio clip begins speaking to them.

As an avid reader of both print and digital magazines, I'm overwhelmed by the stark difference in advertisements between them. Print magazine ads regularly hold my interest and engage me — I do not tear out pages of magazines, nor do I cover the ads. Magazines select advertisements that are relevant to their audience and that are attractive and well designed. Advertisers usually do not spend big money on print ads only to create unattractive content for them.

For some reason, all of this goes out the window when it comes to online ads. Companies are told that no one notices ads unless they grab attention, and so they create loud, garish ads — ads that do nothing for the product and that most likely diminish the viewer's interest. It doesn't have to be this way.

The advertising network The Deck[97] prides itself on tasteful, targeted ads for an influential audience of creative professionals. Its ads are uniform in size and amount of text. The Deck does not pay for or run ads unless it has used the products themselves, so it vouches for all of its advertisers. The emphasis on small graphics forces advertisers to be creative, and advertisers get a return of 3% of all page views in The Deck's current network.

---

97. http://decknetwork.net/
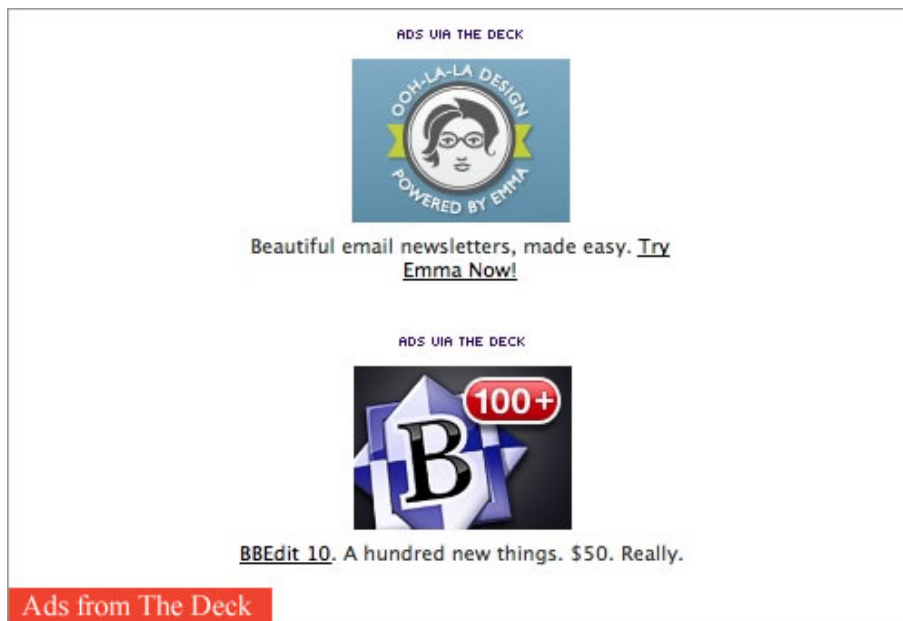
The Deck's[98] ads are tasteful and subtle.

Both advertisers and audiences have something to gain when ads are relevant and attractive. The growing shift towards responsive and respectful advertising has been written about at length by people such as Mark Boulton[99] and Roger Black[100] (see the related links at the end of this chapter). It's worth reading their takes on these new Web ads, and you might even want to have an internal discussion at your company about how the advertising on your website could be made more valuable for everyone.

Moreover, if the ads on your website are respectful and relevant, people might check out the advertisers' products, increasing both visited metrics and click-through rates, thus allowing you to charge more for advertising. So, do dive into your website's analytics.

Check Your Analytics

We want to do the right thing: build websites that are responsive and that adapt to devices. But we have to be reasonable, too. What is achievable given your budget and time frame? Analytics are one of the best ways to hone in on what to prioritize. Even a simple free tool like Google Analytics can yield important insight into who is viewing your website and how. Google Analytics can also track readers' paths

---

98. http://decknetwork.net/
99. http://www.markboulton.co.uk/
100. http://rogerblack.com/

through the website, showing you what content and sections are being avoided or ignored.

The Financial Times[101] keeps a close eye on its visitor analytics. It has over 1 million registered users. In November, it announced that its Web app (which launched in June 2011) was replacing its native mobile app. The Financial Times also released data indicating the types of devices that are being used to access its website and the times of day. And it recently launched a native Android app — perhaps because the number of people accessing its website on Android devices is growing.

The Financial Times[102] ditched the App Store for its own Web apps.

If you notice that most of your traffic is coming from people on tablets, you can optimize for that experience first. Management at your company may be pushing hard for a native app, but you should determine a couple of things before writing the design specifications for a native app:

1. Does the audience for such an app exist, or is one growing?

2. Is that audience not getting a good enough experience from your website.

If your current audience barely has any iOS users but has a significant chunk of Android users, why not start there instead? Additionally, what

---

101. http://www.ft.com/
102. http://www.ft.com/

are those Android users doing on your website? Are they sticking around and enjoying your mobile experience, or do they bounce quickly? The latter could indicate that the experience on your website isn't ideal. But if you want to know for sure, ask them.

Has Anyone Asked Your Users?

It saddens me how often content and experience decisions are made without consulting the people who those decisions will affect. Facebook users are familiar with the pandemonium that occurs every time a new interface goes live — people often struggle to find what was once familiar and obvious.

The Sunday Times[103]' iPad app was updated in August based on user feedback. Users requested to be able to download all sections with the click of a button. The Sunday Times added the ability to download all or individual sections, improved the functionality for deleting sections and editions, and bundled sections more usefully. These changes were the result of direct comments and feedback from users.

The Sunday Times[104] listened to users and changed its downloading options.

Short in-person interviews or widespread surveys are fast and easy ways to get feedback directly from readers about what they like and

---

103. http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/
104. http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/

don't like about your content. Find out about their reading habits. Learn when and where they read articles — the answers may surprise you. Perhaps the section you were considering cutting has a growing audience. Maybe a feature that gets very good engagement in print doesn't translate so well online and needs to be rethought.

And if users tell you they're frustrated by trying to read anything on your website, consider offering them a quiet room.

"A Quiet Room"

Walking from the cacophony of New York's Times Square into a tiny, quiet office can bring a feeling of relief. All of a sudden, no one is in your face trying to get you to buy something or take a tour or give them money. You can just relax and focus.

Finding a website or app that lets you read and enjoy its content is just like this. The experience is not stressful, and you can take your time and enjoy the writing, which seems to have been created just for you. As a designer, you can create this "quiet room" for readers, a place where they can fully absorb the content without having to close pop-ups or be confronted by an animation that screams that they are the 1,238,901st visitor that day. A quiet room is why applications like Instapaper and Readability get effusive praise.

A List Apart[105] does a good job of avoiding clutter and letting the reader focus. Articles have minimal sidebar navigation and only a couple of small, tasteful advertisements. The majority of the page has a simple format: easy-to-read text (peppered with images), a conclusion that points you to related material, and a chance to discuss the article.

---

105. http://www.alistapart.com/
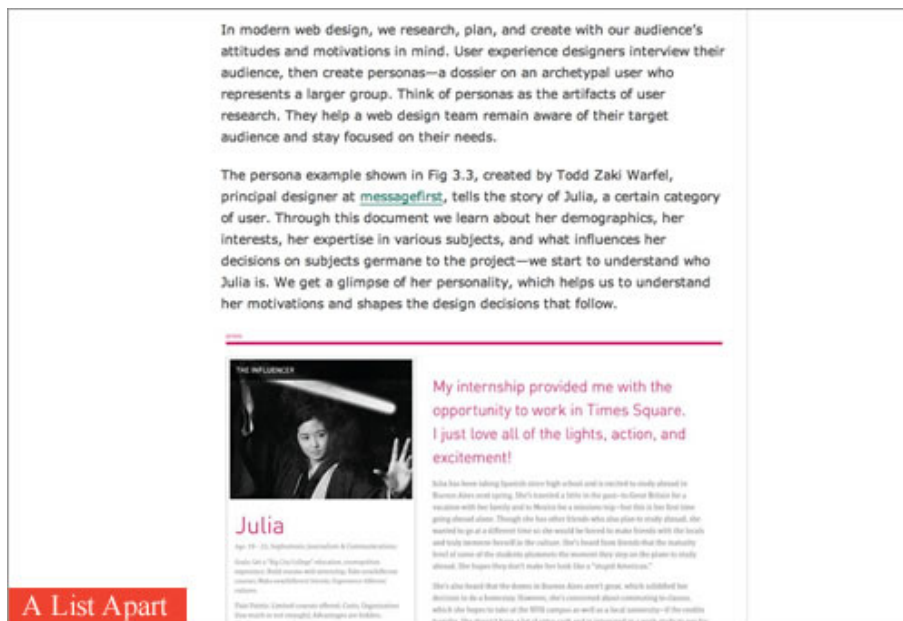
A List Apart[106] *creates room for readers to enjoy the content.*

When Doesn't This Work?

These approaches will not work for every group of content or every website. Some content is meant to be skimmed for quick comprehension. Other websites contain no narrative content. And many websites rely too much on advertising revenue to be able to change their ad strategy.

If your content changes rapidly, is short and to the point, contains little analysis or has any combination of these, then it's likely not a good fit for this approach. But if you have done your research and you have content that is well written and that your audience likes to get lost in, then perhaps some of the ideas mentioned above are worth a try.

Regardless of the length and type of your content, here's a useful exercise: go through each of the issues covered above and think of one thing you could change to make your content more readable. Some of the revisions might be long term and big picture, but you might be surprised by the easy opportunities to make a big impact. Give your readers a reason to enjoy your website as it is, instead of a reason to reformat the content and turn the page as fast as possible. ❧

Resources

• "Business Class: Freemium for News?[107]," Oliver Reichenstein

---

106. http://www.alistapart.com/

- "'What Font Should I Use?': Five Principles for Choosing and Using Typefaces[108]," Dan Mayer, Smashing Magazine

- "Responsive Advertising[109]," Mark Boulton

- "The Holy Grail," Part 1[110] and Part 2[111], Roger Black

- "So, You Need a Typeface?[112]" (flowchart), Julian Hansen, Behance Network

- Interview with the BostonGlobe.com redesign team,[113] Fonts In Use

- "The Pummeling Pages[114]," Brent Simmons

- "Please Let This Not Be the Future of Reading on the Web[115]," Rian van der Merwe, Elezea

---

107. http://www.informationarchitects.jp/en/business-class-news/
108. http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2010/12/14/what-font-should-i-use-five-principles-for-choosing-and-using-typefaces/
109. http://www.markboulton.co.uk/journal/comments/responsive-advertising
110. http://rogerblack.com/blog/post/the_holy_grail_part_i
111. http://rogerblack.com/blog/post/the_holy_grail_part_2
112. http://www.behance.net/Gallery/So-you-need-a-typeface/486723
113. http://fontsinuse.com/bostonglobe-com/
114. http://inessential.com/2011/11/22/the_pummeling_pages
115. http://www.elezea.com/2011/11/future-of-web-reading/

Symptoms Of An Epidemic: Web Design Trends

BY ESPEN BRUNBORG ❧

Since Elliot Jay Stocks so poignantly told us to destroy the Web 2.0 look[116], we've witnessed a de-shinification of the Web, with fewer glass buttons, beveled edges, reflections, special-offer badges, vulgar gradients with vibrant colors and diagonal background patterns. The transformation has been welcomed with relief by all but the most hardened gloss-enthusiasts. However, design and aesthetics work in mysterious ways, and no sooner does one Web design trend leave us before another appears.

The Symptoms

So, exactly what is this new epidemic? Well, let's start by looking at some of the most common symptoms, many of which you have probably noticed. They are easy to spot, and as with many other conditions, they often appear in conjunction with each other. (This is why the contagion spreads so effectively — seemingly independent symptoms grow more infectious when combined with others.)

Please note: The following list appears in no particular order and does not indicate the level of infectiousness or severity, which seem to be stable across the board. Note also that the instances given often exhibit more than one symptom, making classification more difficult.

STITCHING

Stitching appears gradually, often as a result of the designer playing too long with borders and lines, particularly of the dotted variety. A full-blown stitch is evidenced by the subtle shift from dots to dashes, augmented by drop shadows and other effects to give the impression of 3-D. The purpose of the stitch is somewhat elusive, but it seems to thrive in environments where certain textures are applied, most notably fabric and leather, but also generic graininess.

---

116. http://elliotjaystocks.com/blog/destroy-the-web-20-look-future-of-web-design-new-york/

While determining the exact cause of stitching is difficult, scientists are certain that it belongs to a larger strain of the infection known as "Skeuomorphism."

Clockwise from top: The Journal of Min Tran[117]; Dribbble shot by Mason Yarnell[118]; Dribbble shot by Liam McCabe[119].

ZIGZAG BORDERS

Borders are common elements of Web design, and as such, they are difficult to avoid; luckily, they are usually harmless and often have a positive effect on the layout. However, for some reason, a particular type of border — the zigzag — has grown exponentially in the last few years and is now threatening the natural habitat of more benign border specimens. Exactly why this is happening is unknown, although some researchers claim that the pattern created by the repeating opposing diagonals has such an alluring effect on designers and clients alike that straight borders have somewhat lost their appeal.

117. http://www.mintran.com/
118. http://dribbble.com/shots/287806-Social-Wine-iPhone-App-Tab-Bar-Tabbar
119. http://dribbble.com/shots/231084-Detailed-price-tag

Clockwise from top: You Know Who[120]; Dribbble shot by Christopher Paul[121]; Dribbble shot by Meagan Fisher[122].

FORKED RIBBONS

Like borders, ribbons have long existed in various forms. What we're seeing now, though, is the near dominance of a particular style of ribbon, easily identified by a fork at one or both ends. Some ribbons are also folded over twice, creating a faux effect of depth and reinforcing the diagonal lines in the fork. Whether the fork is related to the zigzag effect is unknown, but it seems that diagonal lines are the key to the ribbon's survival, along with its ability to evoke memories of times past.

The danger of the ribbon lies mainly in its ability to exist independent of other symptoms (although it thrives in the company of vintage typography), meaning that it could date your design long after the epidemic ends, even if the symptom itself appears dormant. In many ways, this is reminiscent of the "special offers" badge of the Web 2.0 look.

120. http://www.youknowwhodesign.com/
121. http://dribbble.com/shots/177176-Dash-marketing-page-WIP-
122. http://dribbble.com/shots/340100-Resuming-work-on-that-thing-I-started

Clockwise from top: Ryan O'Rourke[123]; Cabedge[124]; Jake Przespo[125]

TEXTURES

In the age of all things digital, it's a conundrum that textures should dominate our illustrations and backgrounds, and yet they are indeed one of the most common symptoms on our list. Manifested by subtle grain, dirt and scratches, paper-esque surfaces and fold marks, they seem to embrace the spirit of the handmade. But ironically, they're often the complete opposite: computer-generated effects or Photoshop brushes.

Possible explanations for the widespread use of textures include a yearning for tactile media (especially considering the emergence of touchscreens) or envy towards print designers, who have a much richer palette of materials and surfaces to play with.

123. http://rourkery.com/
124. http://cabedge.com/
125. http://jakeprzespo.com/

Clockwise from top: Gerren Lamson[126]; Zero[127]; Amazee Labs[128].

LETTERPRESS

A Smashing Magazine article from 2009[129] outlined letterpress as one of the emerging trends of the year and, boy, were they right. The simple effect has gone from strength to strength and is now a household technique for sprucing up typography online. A relatively harmless symptom, letterpress might also have infected designers through other digital interfaces, such as operating systems and games, as early as the turn of the millennium, indicating a very long incubation period.
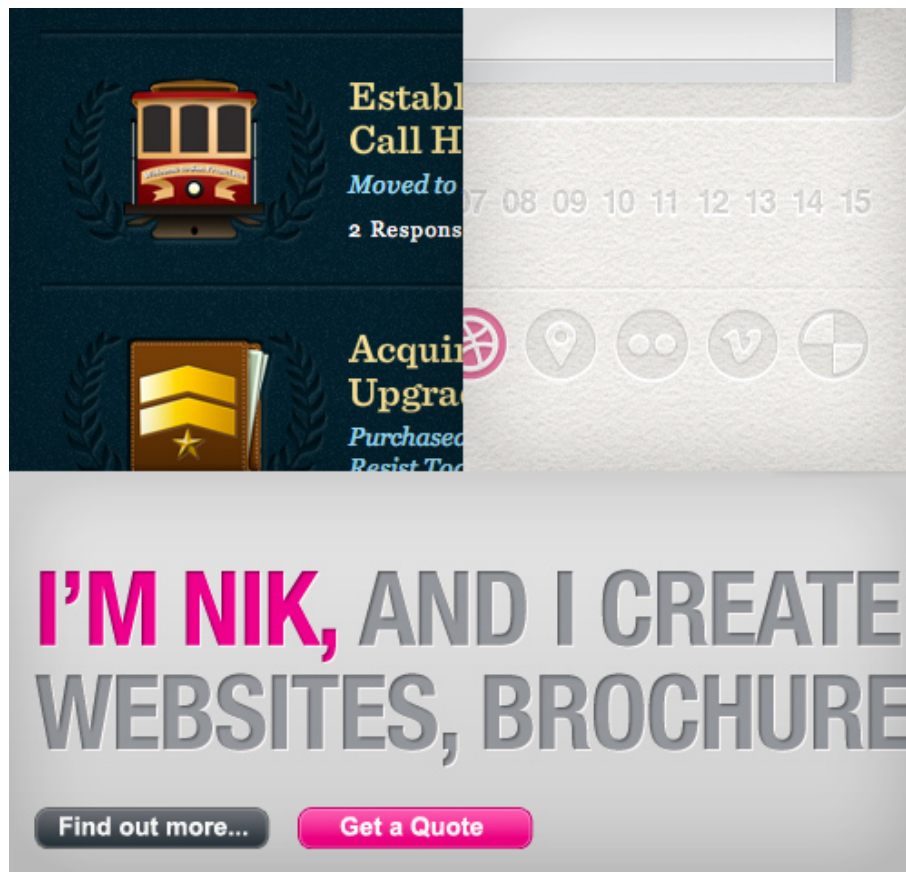
Scientists disagree over whether the incubation period is due to the infection needing a critical mass before emerging from dormancy or whether the infection simply needed the right conditions — CSS3 text shadows, to be specific — for symptoms to appear.

126. http://gerrenlamson.com/
127. http://www.getzeroapp.com/
128. http://www.amazeelabs.com/en
129. http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2009/01/14/web-design-trends-for-2009/

Clockwise from top: Billy Tamplin[130]; Dribbble shot by Phillip Marriot[131]; Remix[132].
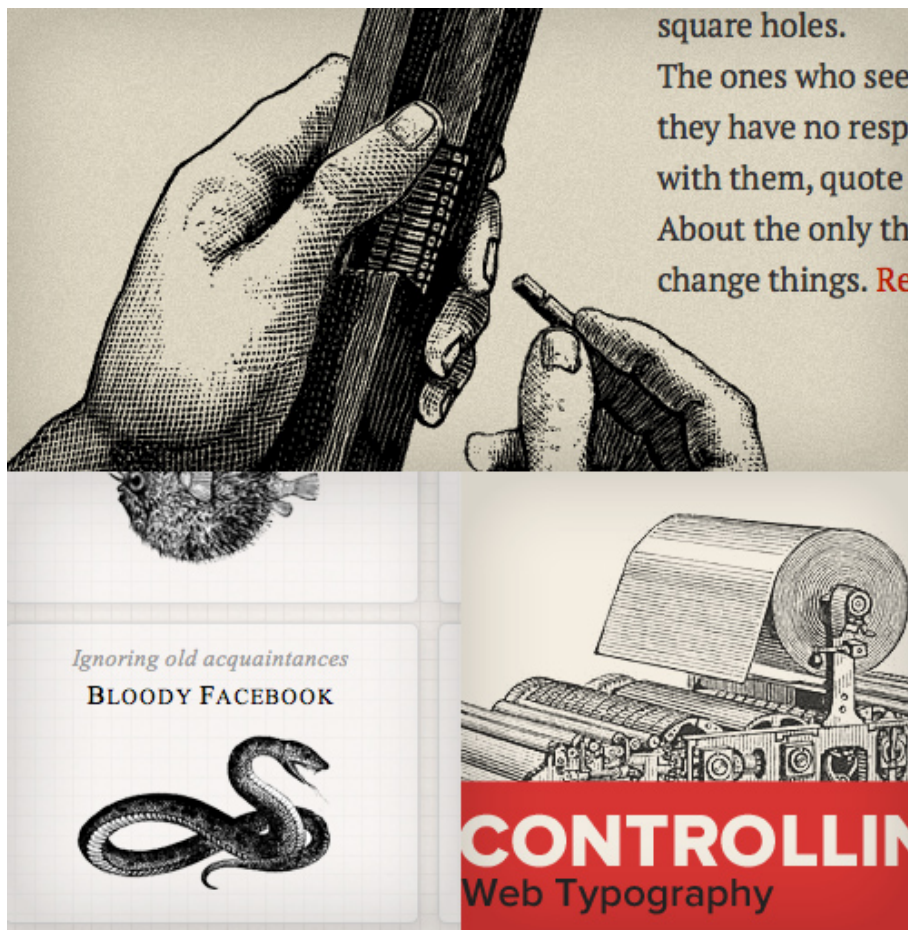
19TH-CENTURY ILLUSTRATION

After being released from copyright quarantine, this symptom, favoured by fashionable ladies and gentlemen, was nearly eliminated during the last epidemic due to its inability to cope well with gloss and shine. But in this new vintage-friendly environment, it has found its way back into our visual repertoire. For better or worse, the 19th-century illustration will most likely hang around for a while, emerging stronger from time to time like a flu virus.

130. http://www.billytamplin.com/
131. http://dribbble.com/shots/34910-Portfolio-Footer-Icons
132. http://www.remixcreative.net/

Clockwise from top: Killian Muster[133]; Dribbble shot by Trent Walton[134]; Simon Collison[135].

MUTED TONES

After a long period of vibrancy, the average online color scheme seems to have been somewhat desaturated across the board. We're seeing widespread use of browns, earthy greens and mustards and a general leaning towards "impure" colors, although this is generally thought to be a minor symptom of the epidemic. Some scientists will even argue that muted tones are, in fact, not a symptom themselves but rather a side effect of other symptoms, in the way that sweating is a natural response to a fever.

---

133. http://kilianmuster.com/
134. http://dribbble.com/shots/310952-Controlling-Web-Typography
135. http://colly.com/

Clockwise from top: Dribble shot by Dave Ruiz[136]*; Cognition*[137]*; Web Standards Sherpa*[138].

JUSTIFIED OR CENTERED TYPOGRAPHY (JCT)

This symptom is nothing new; in fact, it was pretty much the standard for the first 500 years of typography, until Tschichold and the New Typography showed up and quarantined it on the grounds that it was old fashioned, difficult to read and inefficient. Although we're not sure at this point, this link with history might be what has made JCT reappear so vigorously under the umbrella of vintage symptoms. We do know that overall reading habits among humans have not changed in recent years (most Westerners still read left to right), and there is no plausible argument that JCT improves legibility; so, whatever the cause of the outbreak, we know it's rooted in subjective emotion rather than rational thought.

---

136. http://dribbble.com/shots/53700-Sexy-Websites
137. http://cognition.happycog.com/
138. http://webstandardssherpa.com/

Clockwise from top: Grip Limited[139]*; Tommy*[140]*; Visual Republic*[141].

CIRCULAR SCRIPT LOGOTYPES (SCL)

A circle is a basic shape and, in isolation, is no more a symptom of an epidemic than a triangle. However, if you repeat enough triangles in a line, you get a zigzag. Similarly, if you include a circle in your logotype, you end up with a circular logotype. And if that logotype happens to be set in a script font, you'll get — that's right! — a Circular Script Logotype (SCL). Not that SCL is lethal or anything, but it is relatively contagious and can be highly detrimental when enough hosts have been infected.

---

139. http://www.griplimited.com/
140. http://www.thisistommy.com/
141. http://visualrepublic.net/

Clockwise from top: Trent Walton[142]; Mercy[143]; Dribbble shot by James Seymor-Lock[144].

SKEUOMORPHIC FEATURES

Skeuomorphic features — i.e. ornamentation or design features on an object that are copied from the object's form in another medium — are rife, particularly in mobile applications, and this symptom is one of the defining indicators of the epidemic. Possibly a mutant cancerous strain of mildly skeuomorphic features such as stitches and letterpress, it can sometimes grow to overtake an entire interface, bloating it with redundant visual references to physical objects and materials. However, due to the labor involved in preparing the graphics and the heavy reliance on image resources, some researchers argue that we're unlikely to see full-blown skeuomorphism dominate our desktop browsers any time soon.

In fact, most scientists regard the phenomenon as a curiosity and predict that some virtual metaphors for physical attributes will prove

---

142. http://trentwalton.com/
143. http://www.mercyonline.co.uk/
144. http://dribbble.com/shots/99105-Typography-Badge

useful (as tabs have) and some won't. Interestingly, while Apple has embraced and continues to pioneer the technique, Google seems to some degree to resist the urge to mimic physical reality in its interfaces. Perhaps it has developed a vaccine?

Clockwise from top: iBooks[145]*; Dribbble shot by skorky*[146]*; Dribbble shot by Igor Shkarin*[147]*.*

How Did It Start?

Pinpointing the epicentre of a design epidemic (read: trend) is always hard, especially given the myriad of symptoms and the contagious nature of the Internet. Identifying Patient Zero is virtually impossible, and, to be pragmatic, doing so would serve no purpose. What we *can* say is that we're most likely experiencing a reaction to the Web 2.0 aesthetic — a craving for textured surfaces and retro imagery, something tactile and natural-looking, as an antidote to the shiny impersonality of

---

145. http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/ibooks/id364709193?mt=8
146. http://dribbble.com/shots/300521-Leather-Switch
147. http://dribbble.com/shots/344104-Volume-update

the past — and that this is both healthy and necessary for pushing the design industry forward[148]. Whatever the sources of trends, they often start with applying smart design to solve a particular problem or, indeed, to counter another trend.

Let's say that everyone used sans-serif fonts, strong contrasting colors and crisp white backgrounds as a rule. Imagine, in this environment, if a designer went against the grain by using Clarendon or some other warm serif to infuse some personality into their website (which happens to be selling "Grandma's homemade jam"), and then complemented the personality of their font selection with earthy colors and some brown paper textures. The result would inevitably stand out from the crowd: beautiful, emotional, *different*.

Incidentally, this aesthetic inspires another designer who happens to be working on a website with a global audience, exposing the new approach to a whole generation of designers who, in turn, apply it at will (often without considering the context). A trend is born. And yet, paradoxically, the potency of the epidemic is under constant threat. The more people get infected, the less differentiated the symptoms appear; and once the infection reaches a critical mass, the symptoms begin to work against themselves. Infusing personality into your visuals is meaningless if everything looks the same.

Is It Dangerous?

In today's open collaborative world, avoiding an epidemic of this scale is difficult; so, in a sense, everyone is affected to some degree. The symptoms listed above are not restricted to small-scale up-and-coming designers, but affect even the elite of the design community. This means that even though some symptoms are harmless — like a light fever or a runny nose from a flu infection — the viral onslaught of trendy features puts constant pressure on our immune system to protect our creativity, and staying vigilant is important to maintaining a healthy dose of original thought.

If you're displaying a handful of symptoms, it's really nothing to worry about — catching a cold that's going around is not hard, but recovering from it is also easy. If, on the other hand, you display most or all of these symptoms, then there's reason to be extra cautious in your next project. Using all of a trend's identifiers as cornerstones of your work might make your portfolio look oh so contemporary, but in a way this practice is no different than passing off the work of your favorite

148. http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2011/03/21/dear-web-design-community-where-have-you-gone/

designer, artist or musician as your own. Granted, symptoms with no identifiable origin are not protected by copyright, but that's beside the point — you should be worried not about legal implications, but rather about the creative integrity of your output. The danger is not only that your work will be seen as a passing fad, a popular aesthetic that will look dated in a couple of years' time, but that you will lose the respect of your peers when they catch on to you.

While nothing is original[149], we all need to respect the difference between inspiration and imitation[150]. As Jean Luc Goddard said, "It's not where you take things from — it's where you take them to." And if you don't take them anywhere, what's the point?

Worse perhaps than the loss of respect and integrity is the effect that epidemics have on clients and, in turn, the design community as a whole. The more designers are infected and the more symptoms they show of the same disease, the less your clients will believe that you're capable of solving real business problems. Eventually they'll exclude you from the early stages (where all the real design thinking takes place) and employ your services merely to skin their wireframes, in the process reducing the whole profession to an army of decorators.

What Can You Do About It?

Now that we've seen how detrimental trends can be, how does one avoid them? Is this even possible? Trends, by definition, are popular, and arguably nothing is wrong with tapping into that popularity to increase the exposure of your product. Convincing a client to accept a design that is off-trend can be difficult, and you run the risk of alienating the audience by going completely against the trend just for the sake of it. On the other hand, blindly following others is never a good idea, and you could severely stifle your creativity, integrity and client base by accepting what's "in" as a given and copying it without purpose.

So, what's the right thing to do? Trends are intrinsic to our society, whether in politics, culture, design or even religion, and as the consensus sways in one direction or another, so will your opinion (or "taste") — to some degree, at least. Alas, avoiding trends altogether seems an impossible and pointless undertaking, but that doesn't leave you powerless. In fact, you can do a host of things to combat the lemming syndrome.

149. http://www.todayandtomorrow.net/2009/01/21/nothing-is-original/
150. http://www.jessicahische.is/thinkingthoughtsoninspiration

ASK WHY

Always question your design decisions (and make sure they are your own), and keep asking the magic question, Why am I doing this? Am I doing this simply because it looks cool or because it suits the message I'm trying to communicate? Why am I using this ribbon? Does the zigzag border add to or detract from the personality of the website? What does this leather texture have to do with the finance app I'm designing? The moment you stop asking questions, you fall prey to the epidemic.

PUT SOME EFFORT IN

In his article "The Dying Art of Design[151]" Francisco Inchauste asserts, among other things, that inspiration requires perspiration, and I couldn't agree more. I was lucky enough to attend a college where no computers were allowed in the first year, which meant we had to use physical tools to express ourselves — tracing letters by hand, drawing our photography, stocking up on Pantone pens (remember those?), abusing the copier. Not only did our creativity grow, but we learned an important lesson: good design is not effortless, and the best results come from your own experimentation.

TRY SOMETHING DIFFERENT

Remember that being distinctive is, for the most part, a good thing. Most great artists in history, regardless of their field, stood out enough for the world to take notice. Who painted melting clocks before Dali? Who would have thought to build a huge wall on stage before Pink Floyd? While mimicking what's popular might be comfortable and might secure short-term victories, long-term success requires a unique, memorable approach.

DIVERSIFY YOUR INSPIRATION

In order to remain creative, staying curious and looking for inspiration all around you is crucial, not just in the latest showcase of fashionable WordPress themes. Read a book, perform a scientific experiment, listen to music you haven't heard before, walk through a new neighborhood, or experience a foreign culture. Widening your horizons beyond your favorite websites and finding more than one source of inspiration is critical to making original, lasting designs.

---

151. http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2010/04/08/the-dying-art-of-design/

FOCUS ON THE BASICS

Finally and most importantly, study the underlying principles of design in order to understand what is and isn't defined by style. Grid systems, contrast, legibility, juxtaposing imagery, well-written copy — these are the key components of successful design, yet they are entirely independent of fads and styles.

At the end of the day, design is not so much about style as it is about communication, and all style, imagery and typography should be inspired by the content, functionality and personality of the product, not by what simply looks cool at the moment.

No matter how cool[152] something looks, it too shall pass. ❧

---

152. http://retinart.net/creativity/tomorrows-cool/

About The Authors

Ben Seigel

Ben Seigel is the Principal of Versa Studio[153], a Web design and development firm in Madison, Wisconsin.

Espen Brunborg

Espen Brunborg is Head of Design at Primate[154], a Web agency driven by an overwhelming passion for the Web industry and a slightly unsettling love for monkeys, and is an advocate of content-led design, simplicity and typographic principles. He writes about his design convictions at 8 Gram Gorilla[155] and his tweets[156] are occasionally worth reading.

Jeremy Girard

Jeremy was born with six toes on each foot. The extra toes were removed before he was a year old, robbing him of any super-powers and ending his crime-fighting career before it even began. Unable to battle the forces of evil, he instead works as the Director of Marketing and Head of Web Design/Development for the Providence, Rhode Island based Envision Technology Advisors. He also teaches website design and front-end development at the University of Rhode Island. His portfolio and blog, at Pumpkin-King.com, is where he writes about all things Web design[157]. Twitter: @jeremymgirard[158].

Martha Rotter

Martha Rotter[159] is Co-Founder and CTO of Woopie[160], a tool to create beautiful digital publications that work on every platform and device. She speaks regularly at technology and education conferences. Martha writes on the Woopie blog[161] about the future of digital publishing and

153. http://versastudio.com/
154. http://primate.co.uk/
155. http://8gramgorilla.com/
156. https://twitter.com/#!/ebrunborg/
157. http://www.pumpkin-king.com/
158. http://www.twitter.com/jeremymgirard
159. http://martharotter.com/
160. http://woop.ie

on her own blog[162] about digital media, technology and data. Outside of work, Martha works with technology-focused community organizations including OpenCoffee Dublin and Age Action.

Paul Boag

Paul Boag has been working with the Web since 1994. He is now co-founder of the Web design agency Headscape[163], where he works closely with clients to establish their Web strategy. Paul is a prolific writer having written the Website Owners Manual[164], Building Websites for Return on Investment[165], Client Centric Web Design[166] and numerous articles for publications such as .net magazine, Smashing Magazine and the Web Designers Depot. Paul also speaks extensively on various aspects of Web design both at conferences across the world and on his award winning Web design podcast boagworld[167]. Website: boagworld[168]. Twitter: @boagworld[169]. You can also find Paul on Google+[170].

Paul Scrivens

Paul Scrivens is a passionate designer who runs Drawar[171] and innovation consulting at Emersian[172]. He loves design. He loves learning. He loves being wrong. That last one was a lie. Be sure to follow him on Twitter @scrivs[173] and @drawar[174].

Rian van der Merwe

Rian is passionate about designing and building software that people love to use. After spending several years working in Silicon Valley, he is currently Director of User Experience at consultancy Flow Interactive[175] in South Africa. He also blogs[176] and tweets[177] regularly about

161. http://blog.woop.ie/
162. http://martharotter.com/blog
163. http://headscape.co.uk/
164. http://boagworld.com/websiteownersmanual
165. http://boagworld.com/books
166. http://boagworld.com/books/clientcentric/
167. http://boagworld.com/podcast/
168. http://www.boagworld.com
169. http://www.twitter.com/boagworld
170. https://plus.google.com/104773474799178830141/posts?rel=authorGoogle+
171. http://www.drawar.com
172. http://emersian.com
173. http://twitter.com/scrivs
174. http://www.twitter.com/drawar
175. http://www.userexperience.co.za/

User Experience and Product Management. You can also find Rian on Google+[178].

Robin Rendle

Robin is a writer and designer. You can follow him on Twitter @robin-rendle[179] or visit his website[180].

176. http://www.elezea.com/
177. http://twitter.com/rianvdm
178. https://plus.google.com/109476442444769469197/
179. https://twitter.com/robinrendle
180. http://www.robinrendle.com

About Smashing Magazine

Smashing Magazine[181] is an online magazine dedicated to Web designers and developers worldwide. Its rigorous quality control and thorough editorial work has gathered a devoted community exceeding half a million subscribers, followers and fans. Each and every published article is carefully prepared, edited, reviewed and curated according to the high quality standards set in Smashing Magazine's own publishing policy[182].

Smashing Magazine publishes articles on a daily basis with topics ranging from business, visual design, typography, front-end as well as back-end development, all the way to usability and user experience design. The magazine is — and always has been — a professional and independent online publication neither controlled nor influenced by any third parties, delivering content in the best interest of its readers. These guidelines are continually revised and updated to assure that the quality of the published content is never compromised.

About Smashing Media GmbH

Smashing Media GmbH[183] is one of the world's leading online publishing companies in the field of Web design. Founded in 2009 by Sven Lennartz and Vitaly Friedman, the company's headquarters is situated in southern Germany, in the sunny city of Freiburg im Breisgau. Smashing Media's lead publication, Smashing Magazine, has gained worldwide attention since its emergence back in 2006, and is supported by the vast, global Smashing community and readership. Smashing Magazine had proven to be a trustworthy online source containing high quality articles on progressive design and coding techniques as well as recent developments in the Web design industry.

181. http://www.smashingmagazine.com
182. http://www.smashingmagazine.com/publishing-policy/
183. http://www.smashing-media.com