A FRAMEWORK FOR EVALUATING THE DESIGN OF WEB SITE DOCUMENTS

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Abstract

The essay presents a framework for the evaluation of Web document design. The paper presents a conception for determining a well formed web site document. The framework is described in terms of properties of HTML (HyperText Markup Language) documents. This framework consists of the qualitative dimensions of style characteristics, comparison or the quantification of design, informational structures, color, typography, document maintenance, and informational flow and informational focus that can be used to evaluate documents of a web site. The essay argues that the qualitative dimensions show up in design attributes such as consistency, navigational aids, graphical focus, integrity, harmony, psychological and cultural impacts, as well as other design attributes. These can be used to determine a well designed site, as well as well formed documents.

Keywords : evaluating web design, evaluating web documents, evaluative framework for web design, web design

Introduction

A web site is always an informing system. For the viewer, a web site consists of its display, or screens, and its functionalities. For a client, a web site consists of its purpose as that purpose shows up in the displays and functionalities. For the designer, a web site is made up of documents which are informational structures, consisting of other informational objects formed by the tags, that represent the goals of a client. A web site's displays and functionalities are presentations of a client's requirements.

A document exits as a file and as a source of the display viewed by an audience. As a source, a document is a method of using a computer system (the WWW) to provide information and functionality. The document is the plan, the layout of the content on the screen.

The purpose of any document and its display of a web site is informational and performative. The structure of a well-designed web site should be implicit and transparent, invisible, and not interfere with the information or functionality presented. Good design results in focused and straight-forward web documents. Good design demonstrates an awareness of how, when, where, and by whom the information may be used. Good design uses style characteristics, comparativeness, and informational structures to create clear and focused documents. Finally, good design always creates a desire to respond.

Documents and their displays are informational structures. They are verbal and visual events that structure experience for the information seeker. A web site is an informing structure, an information system, that is active and dynamic. It creates a behavioral event. Well designed web documents focus attention on the informational content. It is the informational content, the details, reflected in the images, text and major themes of the web documents that makes a web site valuable. Good visual design of the document communicates a perspective to other people and persuades them to make up their minds and act. The documents and their displays are structures designed to convey clearly the desired information to various audiences and to motivate them to seek further information. A web document and its display is an informational event. Good communication requires good design.

Style Characteristics

The style characteristics of good design for a web document are elegance, simplicity, clarity, integrity, and harmony. A designer will naturally develop a style through the consistent use of graphics, text, and layout throughout the web documents. The style of a web site and its documents also conveys and represents an identity, corporate or personal.

Elegance is the perception of a pleasing and appropriate presentation of information. Documents and their displays are visual events that should be well-formed graphical and textual compositions. Text must be used appropriately. Images should support text and thus the intended message.

Simplicity is a way of being elegant and focused on content. Busy displays are not perceptually pleasing; while they may be emotional, they are not good design psychology. They are perceptually confusing and are a way of hiding informational focus Keeping displays simple controls the focus of the documents and of the information seeker. The web documents should focus explicitly on the content and the objectives of the site. The style characteristic of simplicity should help keep the focus of the site and, as a user moves into the site, actually sharpen the focus of the user on the information presented.

The style characteristic of clarity is the perception of sensibility and reasonableness in communication. The information is expressed in a straight-forward manner. The site and each web document should be sensible (they are meaningful at first glance: an aspect of their iconicity). Keeping the focus of the document on the subject matter of the site is clarity.

Integrity, another style characteristic, is a viewer's perception of the informational focus of the web documents. The web site presents a holistic attitude, indicating that the site is complete. This attitude contributes to the sensibility of informational presentation. The entire web site should be recognizable as a coherent place. This style characteristic is concerned with the informational flow across the web site and to which each document contributes. The style characteristics of elegance and clarity would also affect decisions regarding this issue.

The style characteristic of harmony is the perception of equilibrium within and among web documents. Content, that is, text and images, ought to be balanced. The appropriate use of color and typography contributes to the sense of harmony. Balance means being physically and

conceptually symmetrical as much as possible when displayed on the screen. Balancing text and images allows them to share the burden of representing the informational content.

Comparison

Presenting information in a way that the viewer may make comparisons is called quantifying a visual composition. By using the word visual, we do not necessarily mean the use of images. Quantification of a document means to allow the audience to make judgments, by making comparisons and contrasts (8, pp. 29-37).

There are several design strategies for providing documents with the quality of comparison. These are visual multiples, visual parallelisms, and visual confections. Visual multiples are integrative images of space and time. Use of multiple images allow the web designer to organize informationally effective and significant differences that surprise the viewer. They enhance the presentation of information on the web site. Visual multiples are used to maintain comparative and analytical details of web documents arranged for effective persuasion (8, pp. 105-111).

Visual parallelism is another quantitative design strategy. Parallelisms are the building blocks of a web site's visual narrative. Visual parallelisms tell a story. Visual parallels allow for common perspectives and shared views. They permit the designer to build visually powerful expressions of identity (8, pp. 82-93, p. 103). Visual parallelisms construct relationships of conceptual links. Parallelisms are visual conceptual maps. They integrate multiple images representing similar but distinctive informational layers of a web site. Parallelisms allow for a better handling of complex and multiple informational streams. The use of parallel techniques and devices allows a just-notable difference (8, p. 73) to be highlighted, emphasizing the informational content of a document.

For quantitative web document design, confections are syntheses of text and image into a unified explanatory visual event (8, p. 121). Web documents are themselves visual confections. Visual nouns (any image that is visually static) and visual verbs (images that represent action or change) intersect as a visual event. Visual confections describe and explain, contrast and compare; they construct, as one image, visual representations of an informational situation. Structuring the information space, they create one identity, corporate or personal, from the various personae. Confections are the ultimate rhetorical device of the informational designer (8, p. 151).

Informational Structures

Another aspect of the qualitative perspective of a well designed web site and its documents consists of a set of informational structures. These forms of informational presentation are the frame, the list, the table, the paragraph, the image, and the hyperlinks to other documents in the web site. When used in a coherent and sensible manner, they produce well formed web sites and documents.

The informational structures articulate differences in significance and in complexity. The list and table informational structures give simple form to complex narratives. The paragraph structure is

textual and narrative. The image structure is a visual informational structure that articulates simple to complex graphical representations of information.

A frame is an informing structure that is a presentation of thematic information. The frame informational structure is the most important during the design process. It is also the most abstract. A frame is a categorical organization of informational content. A frame is a theme or topic, or a motif. The frame informational structure groups and segments the subject matter of a proposed web site systematically. The layout of topics, motifs, or refrains within frames can be organized and structured using the informational structures of list, paragraph, table, and image. These structures allow for the arrangement of thematic material.

Lists of things are common everywhere; in a list, items are grouped together because they are viewed as members of a group (set or category). Lists are important informational structures that summarize states-of-affairs. They are abstract structures that focus the viewer's attention on content. Lists always point to narratives that give in detail the informational content of the web document.

A paragraph is a basic textual building block. A sentence or a group of sentences usually make up a paragraph. Paragraphs are expansive structures that allow for the inclusion of explanatory and descriptive detail. A paragraph is a common informational structure and is basic to seeing a web site and its documents as a narrative or story.

The two dimensional table is another very common way of representing information. Tables are informational structures that allow us to order and categorize content, in the form of images and text, of a document effectively. Another way of thinking about this informational structure is as a grid or a matrix. This structure also is often used as a container for other informing structures. A table is a way of abstracting informational content and a way of formatting the informational display. This informational form can be implicit or explicit.

The image is a structure that presents information visually. The informational content of an image is most important and should be carefully considered when placing images in a document. Color and shape are used to express information simply and clearly. Color and shape are the building blocks of any image. Images are informational structures that demand a viewer's attention.

A final informational structure is the hyperlink that is used to reference more information about a given topic or theme, or list item, or image. The hyperlink is a relational informational structure. They are crucial in determining and creating the informational flow of a web site.

Color

The appropriate use of color in any web document is an instrument of good design. Color ought to support the informational display and not detract from it, nor should color negatively impact the audience. Color is used to support and emphasize the text and images; color should help the viewer see the information and not obscure it (10, pp. 214-216). The colors should not distract from the content (3, p. 26). Color is a means of getting a viewer's attention and causing the

informational content to stand out. Color helps organize content into levels of significance. The misuse of color can create visual puzzles (2, p. 33; 9, p. 154). Colors are used to create contrasts, a sense of harmony, and draw the viewer's attention to differences so that comparisons can be made (2, pp. 48-49). There are warm and cool colors, soft and hard, high and low impact on the eye (and consequently the brain and the nervous system). Some colors dominate and intimidate; others invite and welcome.

Typography

Legibility of the informative content on a screen is a significant consideration for choosing the appropriate font face (1, p. 17). The decision to use a particular font face, or font family, should be made in the context of the background color, screen layout, and informational flow of the display. An important task is to match the font face to the message (not necessarily the words) which is being presented. Picking an appropriate font is an essential part of communicating visually. An appropriate font is one which is an invitation to the viewer to continue looking at the presented material (1, pp. 20-24). Good design with the proper font sets up a relationship between the font, the message, and other components, such as images or color, of a display (1, p. 24, p. 194; 3, p. 29).

Document Maintenance

This dimension is not so much about the display and how informational content shows up, but about the source of the formatting of the display: the physical document. Web sites developed for long-term presence will have to be maintained periodically. Badly formed document physical layout and structure will slow down the process of updating or redevelopment. A document ought to be structured for easy readability and easy maintenance by future designers or redesigners. A well formed document allows quick and easy content and format changes.

Informational Flow

The screen or display is of necessity a quick read (1, p. 193). Informational flow is about layout and arrangement of text and image. Every displayed web document is a visual confection. This dimension should always be worked in conjunction with the informational structures and, of course, color and font face. Depending on the particular language used, flow may be from left to right, right to left, top to bottom. Textual and image flow is normally conventional to a particular culture and language, but an unexpected direction and placement may be a matter of emphasis or attention-getting. Flow is about text and image working together to inform effectively.

Informational Focus

The most important thing to remember is that the viewer is looking at the site for information. Thus, there are two ideas about communicating that are at work in web document design. The first is that there is an informative point to every screen. The second is that every screen tries to engage the viewer in a conversation interesting enough that the viewer will come back to the site (6, 42). The informational content ought to be presented in a chrisp and straight-forward way,

since viewing information on a screen is about 25% slower than reading information on paper (7, p. 101; 5, p. 32).

A web site's documents ought to narrow a viewer's attention (7, p. 108, p. 111). So, there are three basic ideas about creating document content. First, there is the orienting characteristic in terms of the viewer needing to know where he or she is, and needing to know where to go in the site (6, p. 42). Second, because the viewer is after information in a visual medium, content material must be molded by abstracting longer texts into quickly read segments, catching the viewer's attention, and organizing the informative content through themes or motifs (categories). And third, every site, if not every screen, ought to prepare the viewer to do something (doing something here is not necessarily a physical reaction to the site) (6, pp. 42-43).

Indicators of the Qualitative Dimensions

The ideas about the qualitative dimensions of good design raise issues related to how we might determine that a web document is well designed according to these qualitative dimensions; that is, we must be concerned with how these dimensions show up on a screen. There are several indicators of the qualitative dimension of style characteristics that can be used to determine if a document is well designed.

Consistency is a good indicator of a well formed and elegant web site. The web site, and its documents, need to be consistent in presentation style, but consistency does not mean sameness. A web site and document has its own harmony and melody. There are always variable elements that can be used to enliven yet give a sense of consistency. Text fonts should be consistent in size in relation to their function on the screen. Image size and use need to be carefully thought out in relation to the text. The colors used should work to the advantage of the information allowing viewers to easily read the content. A persistent arrangement of the headers and footers of a document will contribute to a sense of consistency.

Clear and useful navigational references are another indicator of good design. The visitor to the site should be able to know where he or she is no matter how they arrived there. Navigational elements help with making a web site consistent and focused. The style characteristics of elegance and integrity would show up in this manner.

Web documents demonstrate the qualitative dimension of comparison when they provide answers to inquiries. A well designed and quantified web document or web site anticipates such questions as: ? Whose site is this? Where am I? How do I navigate through this site? What is this web site about? What goods and services are available? How much do they cost? How do I order? Who can I email? Who will answer my questions? The provision of email opportunities, guest books, and FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) are ways this dimension shows up on a web site.

Conclusion

The qualitative dimension of a web site and its documents show up in the informational displays produced by the documents and is a consequence of good design practices. The web site and its

documents represents an conception of visual and verbal literacy. This conception may be construed as a figure of speech of the total design elements and processes. Successful design incorporates this conception as a destination. It is a confluence of ideas among designer, client, and audience. Well designed web documents should have a sense of universality that stretches to the global, not the incoherence of an ego-driven design that isolates. The documents should incorporate the practicalities of a limited sphere but at the same time have the ability to focus the user's thoughts and actions beyond the screen. The documents should be intuitive and interactive, coaxing or influencing the viewer's sensibilities along the web site's designed destination, or end in view. Successful design has at its essence an aura of results, the mapping of a process of communication between designer and viewer through the judicious use of pictorial and verbal content.

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